

BLACKNESS WRITES BACK: CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN-AMERICAN RE-
VISIONS OF GOTHIC RACIAL IDEOLOGIES

By

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To my friends and family, wherever you are

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The following analysis discusses how and why contemporary African-American writers re-appropriate Gothic tropes to engage the racial discourses encoded within white American Gothic texts. These writers also read discourses of sexual and gender oppression through and against race in their text to suggest that these multiple oppressions overlap and contribute to each other. Furthermore, in re-appropriating the genre's tropes, Contemporary African-American authors critique the genre and negate the oppressive ideologies inscribed within the form by re-inscribing the genre with Black cultural experiences. Indeed, the genre's tropes, once re-written, prove useful for articulating the peculiar complexities and terrors of being African-American.

I posit two specific ways contemporary black authors critique and re-appropriate the Gothic genre. The first method is by merely inverting the tropes racial allusions. In such inversion black/ night/ wilderness, for instance, becomes connotative of goodness while white/ daylight/ "civilization" connotes evil. The second method is through

revising the tropes to take the horror out of the Gothic supernatural and resituate it in African American's lived experiences. Authors accomplish this by creating characters that have mild and/ or humorous responses to Gothic supernatural events. By making the typical supernatural terrors of the genre relatively inane, black authors emphasize the horror of African-American reality.

Although this project primarily focuses upon Gloria Naylor, Randall Kenan, and Toni Morrison, the conclusions it draws from their work are applicable to numerous other black writers, such as Alice Walker, who resort to Gothic tropes even within non-gothic texts. I illustrate how black writers repeatedly destabilize concepts of history and identity. Consequently the project also challenges traditional notions of identity and history and reveals them as incomplete and constructed narratives. Lastly, this project evaluates how politics and discourses of otherness silences and erases the histories of marginalized groups. The histories of these groups are inevitably sacrificed in order to maintain the dominant culture's narrative. Through my analysis of the various black texts, I posit such dominating and oppressing history as problematic; I furthermore suggest that the dominant culture actually suffers from its suppression of Others' histories.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE GOTHIC: OLD AND NEW, WHITE AND BLACK

The recent trend in research on American Gothic literature has been to look at the racial ideologies espoused therein. Criticism on the genre's conventions as inscriptions of the hermeneutics of race abounds, and the shape-shifting face of the racial Other repeatedly surfaces in the fiction and interpretation. Whereas earlier critics such as Leslie Fiedler and Harry Levin focused upon white male paranoia over and reaction to transgressed boundaries, recent critics have begun to emphasize how this paranoia reaffirms the racial and sexual boundaries as social constructs used to sustain white patriarchal dominance. Both generations of critics mark how the genre's plots often illustrate a transgression of boundaries even as the text seeks to reinforce the very categories it marks as frighteningly unstable. Critics argue that gothic tropes of haunted landscapes and people, mistaken identities and family secrets, pursued/ tormented heroines and "dark," raping villains in a diseased and decaying world refer to fears of racial transgression and contamination. In the American Gothic, the trope of the unspeakable is a silent meditation upon both sexual and racial transgressions as miscegenated monsters threaten to destabilize constructions of race and sexuality.

Critics have also viewed both the European and Anglo-American gothic as an illustration of how the past comes to bear upon the present. Historical wrongs surface in (familial) curses and hauntings. Even in American literature, where supernatural occurrences are often explained away as misperception by the gothic tale's conclusion,¹ upbringing is often brought to bear upon the character responsible for the flights of fancy.

History remains present in such explanations, even when it is individualized into a familial narrative to explain a particular character's mental processes. Robert Martin, furthermore, notes the extent to which even these "individualized" narratives repeat social narratives and histories. Referring to *The House of the Seven Gables* as his principal text in an examination of familial roles in Hawthorne's tales, Martin concludes that the text conceals "a racial history of slavery which at least in part shifts the novel's theme away from family guilt to national guilt or uses the family as a synecdoche of the nation" (Martin, Robert 130). As issues of slavery and abolition grew increasingly weighty in the American mind, the gothic became the tool of racialized discourse, the genre's vocabulary disguising discussions of what Toni Morrison has called the "Africanist presence." Recorded within the genre's motifs and plots were racial definitions and fears, questions and re-visions of racial difference, and re-writings of historical events such as slave uprisings and white slaughter of Native Americans.

Yet very little has been said on the way in which the racial Other appropriates the genre to write to/ against the ideologies of the gothic. Justin Edwards is one of a few theorists who notes how the gothic's innate instability as a genre was adopted by early and late African-American writers to de-scribe the racial ideologies that the gothic often served. His text, *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic*, explains how the question of passing became a gothic trope formulated first by nineteenth-century white American writers to speak to the terrors of miscegenation. The trope was reformulated by black writers to assert racial mixing as a destabilizing force, allowing them to redefine race as a fluid, socially imagined category rather than a scientifically fixed fact.

Edwards' text does not deal with writers after Reconstruction, even as he notes in his conclusion that further re-appropriation of the gothic occurred in twentieth century black texts. It is here, with contemporary African-American literature, that I propose to analyze strategies of gothic re-vision. *Blackness Writes Back* examines the manner in which contemporary Black texts go beyond merely inverting the color scheme of the gothic trope—blackened evil that torments and is defeated by good whiteness—to destabilizing the entire notion of categories and boundaries.

I illustrate how contemporary Black literature returns to the idealized revolutionary power of the Gothic as a de-centering principle, first formulated in John Ruskin's "The Nature of the Gothic" and elaborated upon in Geoffrey Harpham's *On the Grotesque*.² In revising the genre contemporary African-American writers also critique and complicate the identities white Gothic writers imposed upon them. The texts engage the poststructuralist concepts of writing and identity espoused by Trinh T. Minh-ha: "Writing necessarily refers to writing. [. . .] A writing *for* the people, *by* the people, and *from* the people is, literally, a multipolar reflecting reflection [. . .] I write to show myself showing people who show me my own showing" (Minh-ha 22). Black gothic, as a "multipolar reflecting reflection"³, reveals the archetypal depictions of racial, sexual, and gendered others as constructions useful in the production of white patriarchal dominance. These authors also destabilize and defy any singular projections of their own identity as it inevitably shifts and changes among the various interacting social categories and hierarchies.

I must note that I use a "Queer of Color" critique as the basis of my elaboration upon the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender in these texts. A "Queer of Color"

critique, according to Roderick Ferguson's description in *Aberrations in Black*, defines racist practice's articulation of itself as gender and sexual regulation (Ferguson 3).

Through examining the numerous instances in which nation has been and is a "domain determined by racial difference and gender and sexual conformity," Ferguson concludes that gender and sexual transgressions frequently signify racial difference, and vice versa, in dominant narrative. Similarly, Siobhan Somerville's text *Queering the Color Line* historicizes the increased policing of racial boundaries that occurred alongside emerging categories of sexual identity to conclude that "homosexuality as the condition, and therefore the identity, of particular bodies was . . . a historical production" extensively intertwined with the production of race (Somerville 3). Thus this project assumes that many of the racist ideologies responsible for the oppression of black bodies lend themselves to sexism and homophobia; more importantly, instances of sexism and homophobia recall and re-inflict assaults upon the black body, regardless of the community that perpetrates it, because dominant (white patriarchal) narrative constructs these other transgressions against and through race.⁴

A Brief History of Otherness and the Gothic in America

Historicizing the gothic shows us that it most often registers and draws on racial fears and strifes for some of its darkest images. Indeed, Toni Morrison notes that the discourse of slavery and freedom, and consequently a racial discourse as well, was so abundant during the nineteenth century that "[i]t would have been an isolato indeed who was unaware of the most explosive issue in the nation What did happen frequently was an effort to talk about these matters with a vocabulary designed to disguise the subject" (*Playing* 50)⁵. In Europe the gothic gave voice to somewhat fanatical and repetitious evocations of racial difference and conflict, terror and disgust. It was a genre

giving voice to racist ideologies and fears (Malchow 3).⁶ Indeed, between 1790 and 1830, the growing concerns and debates over slavery occurred contemporaneously with the rise of the gothic novel (Goddu 73). It was during this period that such paintings as *A Negro Overpowering a Buffalo* and *The Negro Revenged*, as well as poems like “The Dying Negro” became abundant, illustrating underlying fears of the racial “Other” as powerful, vengeful and destructive⁷. Notably, both the need to delineate race and disguise its discourse influenced the Gothic genre’s anxiety over and portrayal of queerness. As Somerville explains, towards the end of the nineteenth century

the formation of notions of heterosexuality and homosexuality emerged in the U.S. through (and not merely parallel to) a discourse saturated with assumptions about the racialization of bodies. These assumptions and the heightened surveillance of bodies in a racially segregated culture demanded a specific kind of logic, which . . . gave coherence to the new concepts of homo-and heterosexuality. (4)

Thus in both the culture and its fiction, the racist logic that first racialized distinctions between “slave” and “free,” and later refigured them in exclusively racial terms of “black” and “white,” also provided the impulse and logic between sexual distinctions.

Americans during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century turned to the Gothic as a discourse through which to contemplate issues of colonization, subjugation, and the place of the racial other. The genre’s plots and tropes reflected the increasingly frequent debates on slavery that were accompanied by questions on the place of the Black in America. Indeed, though many in the northern United States agreed that slavery should be abolished, few clearly agreed upon what to do with Blacks if they were freed. Questions arose over whether such a group could join “civilized” society or if such a mingling of the races lead to the degradation and eventual destruction of white society. Old rumors of the brutality and savageness of the slaves, and Native Americans,⁸ in addition to the recent bloody uprisings such as that led by Nat Turner in 1831, did not

bode well and only fueled white fear of racial intermingling. Such fear was only augmented by notions that white and black relations would inevitably degrade, if not destroy, whites, as proven by Nat Turner's "savage" attack. Thus Leslie Fiedler concludes that "[i]t is, indeed, to be expected that our first eminent Southern author discovered that the proper subject for the American gothic is the black man, from whose shadow we have not yet emerged" (Fiedler 397).

A great part of the racial concern came from paranoia over maintaining distinct social boundaries. As Malchow notes, "the hunger for systematic and verifiable knowledge that typifies the mid-century philosophe . . . [led to] an inevitable compulsion to rank not only cultures but also types of people" (Malchow 10). Such compulsion led to an obsessive need to ensure the maintenance of boundaries once they were established. Morrison cites, among her list of "understandably human fears," Americans' fear of boundarylessness (36). Such obsessions supported the preponderance of segregationist laws, which survived for nearly a century after abolition. There was a surplus of laws forbidding intermarriage between "any white person with any negro, Indian, or mulatto" under penalty of a fine, for both the couple and the presiding minister, or even servitude.

Transgression of boundaries proved particularly disruptive. Racial transgression embodied in "half-breeds," in the form of various miscegenated monsters such as vampires, proved particularly threatening and terrifying. Indeed, both the "half-breed" and the vampire, for instance, are insidious because of their ability to mask their presence among an unsuspecting white population and pollute and infect the surrounding people (Malchow 168). The image of the vampire as "half-breed" illustrates the fear of what much of white society feared would happen once racial boundaries were transgressed—

whiteness would be irrevocably contaminated and inevitably consumed and destroyed. In the white world outside of fiction, infection and consumption were viewed in a number of ways. Fear of contamination was often perceived in terms of psychological and moral deficiencies, in addition to blood contamination as illustrated through the creation of “half-breeds.” For example, in *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 & 1832* Thomas Dew states that in response to increasing black presence, whites would either have to withdraw from Virginia or suffer degeneration: “the blacks, by closer intercourse, would bring the whites down to their level. In the contact between the civilized and uncivilized man, all history and experience show, that the former will be sure to sink to the level of the latter. In these cases it is always easier to descend than ascend, and nothing will prevent the facilis descensus but slavery” (Dew 101).

Likewise, research in the 1880s often attributed degeneracy in whites to racial contamination, noting that often degenerates had a relative who was of mixed blood (Newitz 2). Yet the proximity of blacks did not end with the idea of the black as contaminant but continued with the idea of the black as violent monster.

Images of violence were often coined in gothic terms. Thomas Dew’s description of the “violent negro” strikingly resembles the description of the Frankenstein monster. Elaborating upon the growing threat the slave poses to his master/ creator, Dew describes the slave as “a human form with all the physical capabilities of man, and with the thews and sinews of a giant;” like Frankenstein to his monster, the slave master fails to “impart to [his slave] a perception of right and wrong [and] finds too late that he has only created a more than mortal power of doing mischief, and himself recoils from the monster which he has made” (Dew 105). Black “monsters” were feared as inevitably destructive to

white patriarchal society, consuming an invaluable commodity—white women. Indeed, the horror of the “black rapist” was a story frequently told in periodicals and magazines, reducing free-roaming blacks to the level of barbarous beasts and feral fiends from which no woman was safe. In an anonymous editorial from the 1860 pamphlet *Cotton is King*, one reader complains of the frequent attacks by free blacks on white women, using such terms to describe the blacks as “wild beasts of the forest” and “inhuman”, and concluding his narrative by noting that the stories are so horrific that he cannot hear them without shuddering (“Social” 240).

Mid-nineteenth century newspapers frequently gave accounts of black violence and slave rebellion using gothic terms and tropes. Indeed, in 1831 Nat Turner became infamous for his rebellion, and his story was often told in tones of a gothic narrative.

Thomas Dew’s account of the event exemplifies the appropriation of the tropes:

It is well known that during the last summer, in the county of Southampton in Virginia, a few slaves, led on by Nat Turner, rose in the night, and murdered in the most inhuman and shocking manner, between sixty and seventy of the unsuspecting whites of that county. The news, of course, was rapidly diffused, and with it consternation and dismay were spread throughout the State, destroying for a time all feeling of security and confidence; and even when subsequent development had proved, that the conspiracy had been originated by a fanatical negro preacher . . . still the excitement remained, still repose of the commonwealth was disturbed,—for the ghastly horrors of the Southampton tragedy could not immediately be banished from the mind—and Rumor, too, with her thousand tongues, was busily engaged in spreading tales of disaffection, plots, insurrections, and even massacres (Dew 6)

Even within this description there are aspects of contamination anxieties in the form of both rumors which contaminate white peace of mind, as well as, within the same sentence, the possible spread of rebellious and murderous ideologies to other slaves. Likewise his description of Turner as “inhuman” and “fanatical,” the originator of “ghastly horrors” against innocent and “unsuspecting” whites, has undertones of the

gothic monster that attacks without cause or warning. Newspapers of the period published similar descriptions of the event, turning the rebels into savage beasts and describing the rebellion with prose that had a particularly fictional and gothic quality. Lesley Ginsberg concedes that periodicals, such as the *Enquirer*, “participate[d] in the production of a cultural convention: the creation of a national gothic narrative whose conspicuously fictive framework masks the real horror of race war” (100). Thus factual and political accounts often trail into a narrative robust with gothic imagery.

American Gothic texts inevitably represented and echoed national fears of racial miscegenation, contamination, and destruction. White male writers figuratively and literally represented the enslaved black body in their texts as a manner of meditating upon black monstrosity, civility, and threat. In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* for instance, Poe depicts stereotypical images of slaves and slave rebellion. The Too-Wits occupy the Island of the Tsalal, which is located in the Southern most region of the world. Likewise, the geography of the island marks it as a symbolic representation of the American South; Pym identifies the island by a ledge that “bear[s] a strong resemblance to corded bales of cotton” (Poe 160). The natives of this Southern land are extremely black⁹ and seemingly ignorant, simplistic, and savage. Yet the novel reveals the Too-Wits’ ignorance as a mere mask because they stage an attack upon Pym’s unsuspecting white companions. Lastly, the relationship between the islanders and the white crew of the *Jane Guy* suggests that this attack represents more than the hidden threat the loosed black body poses; the Too-Wits’ betrayal is actually a kind of slave uprising. In both *Benito Cereno* and “The Bell-Tower” Melville similarly imagines the enslaved body as duplicitous and deadly. Yet according to Harry Levin, Melville revises the relationship

between slave and master to posit the black as a Frankenstein monster that destroys its enslaver/ creator. Levin concludes that in Melville black rebellion and revenge is justifiable (190). Nonetheless, regardless of whether or not black violence is rightful, authors repeatedly represent the consequences of integrated society as disastrous.

The genre's typical discourses of death, impurity, and genetic contamination were complicated by anxieties about passing. In the literature, images of blackness and whiteness are effective sources of anxiety when authors match them with depictions of an unstable color line where the border separating black from white isn't policed (*Gothic Passages* 3). Consequently, authors often turn to images of hybridity to contemplate the significance and consequence of miscegenation. Poe, for instance, positions the questionable and sometimes admirable qualities of Peters, a hybrid, against the vulnerability of his white protagonists and the extreme viciousness of the black savages. The horror of Peters, his disturbing features, is a product of his hybridity. His strength and brutality engender bloody violence, and his "demonic" body resembles the features of the Too-Wits, who are marked by racial hatred. Yet Peters's hybridity also offers an alternative to the natives' perfect black savagery. He is at times noble, and repeatedly saves Pym from mutineering whites and the malevolent savages. His miscegenated body lauds the transformative powers of hybridization even as he signifies a racial threat. Furthermore, Justin Edwards' discussion of Babo's performative hybridity in *Benito Cereno* emphasizes how hybridity, particularly as it leads to passing, poses a threat in nineteenth century American Gothic narratives. As both slave and revolutionary, Babo's body and intentions are unreadable; consequently he poses an insidious threat to Delano

who ignores Babo because of his performance according to racial constructions and definitions (*Gothic Passages* 18).

The American gothic also helped to stimulate white construction of their own racial identity and being. Though writers suggested that the black body loosed among society would inevitably destroy innocent white bodies, the dark “monsters” in gothic tales also projected Anglo writers’ fears and guilts about their own being. The very real blackness of the enslaved population, signified by the gothic’s monsters, projected and defined national and individual white identity and being. Morrison’s theory of the “not-free, not-me” specifically explains the dialectic between white-hero and black-monster in Anglo identity formation: “. . . in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me” (*Playing* 38).¹⁰ The black body proves fertile ground for identity formation not only in his corporeal black being but also in his enslaved social position. Morrison begins her assertion on the function of the black body to Anglo identity by noting that the enslaved Africanist presence “enriched the country’s creative possibilities” (38). The systematic use of the black body in a defining dialectic also appears in literature. The literary black body acts as an extension of the definitions of Anglo being derived from the daily interactions and presence of the “not-free, not-me,” as well as a continued meditation upon and challenge to that being.

Otherness in the Gothic signifies racial difference as well as homosexuality and feminine threat, even as race marks these other transgressions. The Gothic genre similarly masks discourses of and anxiety over sexuality and gender. Eve Sedgwick’s chapter on the homosocial and the gothic in *Between Men* is particularly useful to this

discussion. Focusing upon the genre's origins in Europe, Sedgwick notes that the gothic in England during the late eighteenth and nineteenth century was a form important to and for working out terms of male homosexuality "at a time when styles of homosexuality, and even its visibility and distinctness, were markers of division and tension between classes as much as between genders" (Sedgwick 89). Homophobia appeared in Gothic novels as paranoid plots, cementing the terms between male homosexuality and homophobia. The gothic trope of the unspeakable particularly alludes to the question of sexuality between men. According to Neill Matheson, "the unspeakable" functioned as part of a network of euphemisms stemming from the sensationalization of Oscar Wilde's trials; such euphemisms helped create a productive space for allusions to homosexuality even as they "force[d] sexuality further into hiding" (Matheson 712). The unspeakable and "unrepresentable," to use Matheson's lexicon, masks not only discourses of homosexuality but the terror and anxiety of the private made public.

Matheson's interrogation of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* as a refiguration of the Wilde trial proves helpful in explaining the complex function of the Gothic euphemism. He contends that despite Henry James's interest in figures such as Oscar Wilde and John Addington Symonds, "he settles on the Gothic, euphemistic vagueness of horrors" to discuss issues of (homo)sexuality in his personal letters (Matheson 713). *The Turn of the Screw* participates in the production of horror and euphemisms surrounding sexuality in part because of James's own "puzzlement [about] the not yet fully chrystallized definition of homosexuality" (713) and because of "the horror of 'exposure'" (726). When read against Sedgwick's explanation of the "unspeakable" as an increasingly popularized Gothic trope, Matheson's discussion of James implies that

nineteenth century gothic manuscripts textually crumble at the point of homosexual encounter in part because of the tenuous lexicon and definitions surrounding the issue.¹¹ The unspeakable/ unnamable/ unrepresentable also references the nineteenth century's "characteristic construction of the private as a monstrous 'secret'" particularly when the private masks nonnormative sexuality (719).

American Gothic literature's anxieties and need to (over)determine homosexuality as difference began well before Henry James and Wilde's trials. Although homosexuality was not yet clearly recognized and delineate as "identifying category," anxieties over the blurred borders of homosocial/ sexual frequently appear in early nineteenth century American literature. Scott Derrick's discussion of the homosexual/ social in Hawthorne is particularly insightful on the subject. Explaining that although invoking the terms "homosexual" and "homophobic" in pre-Civil War U.S. culture proves problematic, he discusses *The Scarlet Letter* as a Gothic text that clearly illustrates the prehistory of the terms that European and U.S. society would soon elaborate upon in the 1890s (309-10). Consequently, he suggests that the Gothic literature of the early and mid-nineteenth century predicts and contributes to the discourses of sexuality that would attempt to concretely define, and demonize, homosexuality at the turn of the century.

In the literature and social theory of Hawthorne's period, homosexuality was linked to a number of transgressive sexualities resulting from erotic excess.¹² Homosexuality and homophobia in Hawthorne are therefore responses to social mandates against disruptive sexuality. The homophobia of his text consequently "must be understood as part of a broader erotophobia" in which the separate categories of heterosexuality, masturbation, and homosexuality exist along blurred borders leading to the same set of

consequences (Derrick 315). Health writers of the nineteenth century contended that masturbation could lead to homosexuality (314). Again Matheson's discussion of James helps explain how contagion also becomes aligned with issues of excessive and transgressive sexuality. Explaining that Miles's expulsion, though never completely explained, is nonetheless legible to nineteenth-century readers, Matheson observes that the audience would implicitly register "anxieties about schools as places where boys were exposed to the contagion of masturbation" in connection to Miles's expulsion; Miles, "already corrupted, threatens to infect other children" and so must be exiled (Matheson 725).¹³ Hawthorne's repeated blurring of the homosexual/ social, horrible/ domestic, and rape/ desire participates in the culture's attempt to define and iterate recognizable borders of (un)acceptable sexuality, particularly as homosocial activity between men could slip into sexual transgression and excess.

In the American context, race significantly contributes to the blurring between homosocial/ homosexual in the Gothic.¹⁴ Derrick's discussion proves shortsighted in its discussion of Chillingworth as homosexual/ social predator. Derrick does not make any conjectures about the impact of the racial Other upon male interaction, yet the manner of Chillingworth's first appearance among the Puritans suggests that his encounter with and time among racial Others significantly altered his behavior. Chillingworth's corrupting experiences among the "savages" only further supports the notion of sexuality as an area of behavior that becomes aberrant in the absence of reason.¹⁵ While Dimmesdale's passive unconsciousness blurs the line between desire and victimization (Derrick 312), both the novel and Derrick fully and unquestionably recognize Chillingworth as aberrant aggressor/ rapist. Similarly in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Pym's and

Augustus's homosocial bonding becomes harmless and innocent, despite its overtones of homosexuality, in contrast to the sexual threat Peters poses.¹⁶ The shift in Peters's behavior and personality once he is figuratively castrated emphasizes that Peters represents a homosexual threat in the pre-castration moments.

Race similarly differentiates between types of women in American Gothic texts. There are only two types of women in the gothic text: the dark lady/ temptress whose passion dooms and/ or destroys the masculine hero, and the fair, virtuous (usually blonde) heroine. The explicitly destructive temptresses of nineteenth century American gothic texts are also marked as racially miscegenated. Women in Hawthorne's texts particularly exemplify this tradition. The descriptions of Beatrice in "Rappuccini's Daughter," for instance, portray her as both seductive and racially exotic. The text repeatedly juxtaposes her against images of Indian princesses and tropical environments. Levin similarly notes that Miriam in *The Marble Faun* resembles an English Jewess; her emblem is the serpent's coil and she feels an affinity with a voluptuous statue of Cleopatra. Her contrast is Hilda, "the fair young American girl in white" whose emblems are the doves she feeds at the Virgin's shrine near her home. In her essay on slavery's impact upon Poe's representation of blacks and women, Joan Dayan similarly explains that "Poe does not explicitly connect the idea of race to that of gender, yet he suggests such a coupling in his fiction and poetry" (Dayan 260). The implicit connection consistently manifests itself in female characters like Ligia and Madeline Usher who threaten and/ or destroy Poe's male protagonists and who also seem to be renditions of the tragic mulatta or octoroon mistress (260-62). Like many male writers of their time, Hawthorne and Poe reiterate the

genre's racial binaries in the bodies of women, and poses otherness/ seduction against whiteness/ purity (Levin 103).

The temptress' "dark" features generally signal her as a sexual and social threat, the anxieties she represents reference discourses of womanhood and anxiety over women's bodies in general. Even the saintly heroines of American Gothic texts were threats to masculinity. Dayan explains that according to the period's prevailing ideology any woman could become the troubling "fallen" temptress because "[w]omen can be granted 'spirit' by men only because men delimit ceremonies of subordination that include women, blacks, dogs, and children. Just as slaves earn benefits when they labor and obey, women deserve gallantry as long as they are inert or inactive vessels. But if these privileged women interact with their maker, get too close to the men who act on them, men could be threatened with the foul contamination they feared" (Dayan 259). Dayan's portrayal of gender dynamics suggests that women were much like the Frankenstein monster/ slave of Dew's nightmares. Consequently, the pre-pubescent female was increasingly posited as safer than even the dead woman who, as seen in Poe, could still be the center of sexual licentiousness. The "Good Good Girl" was an "asexual goddess of the nursery" who had to die because there was no other escape from the shift into destructive womanhood (Fiedler 266). If she grew up she would likely suffer a sexual death with the loss of her virginity, and so become the corrupted or fallen woman.¹⁷ Male gothic texts therefore illustrated a general mistrust of women, both dark and fair; "dark" features merely externally manifested women's latent destructive drive. Thus Dayan concludes that Poe's texts imply women "would always remain on the side of the

body, no matter how white, how rarified or ethereal, or how black, earthy, and substantial. They can be hags or beauties, furies or angels” (Dayan 262).

The poem “The Wishing Tree” published in *Antheneum* (1831), a magazine that focused upon gothic manuscripts, illustrates the latent threat men saw within women. Mary is a traditional heroine seeking salvation from her poverty and, consequently, access to the Cult of True Womanhood. Although her aspirations seem to support masculine domination, the poem reveals anxiety over the power Mary manifests in achieving her goal. The whole poem is concerned with women’s duality and deception—a question of what seems to be, through the spells and deceptions of the fairies, in contrast to what is in the unadorned reality. The spells and illusions of the fairies do not become problematic until they falter, revealing reality in their lapse. This, the writer implies, is the real problem because though many women present such illusions, they never falter in their deceptions:

And Fairies, dear Sprites, seem ever to me
 To invest with spells all womankind;
 [. . .]
 Which maketh folk say that Love is blind
 And I think it but honest, the rest of your lives,
 That you keep up the spell, tho’ you should be wives.
 (“The Wishing Tree” 438-43)

Although the author seems to support women’s continued deceptions, the lines seem playful; consequently we must question whether he does not, in truth, frown upon such deception and recognize it as a source of disruption and anxiety.

These ideologies about and definitions of women continue to persist well into modern American culture. Indeed, Faulkner, writing nearly a century after publication of

“The Wishing Tree,” also represents anxieties over the female body in *Sanctuary*.

Temple Drake, the novel’s apparent heroine, is the image of all the Fair Ladies. Yet, according to Fiedler, she is also a denial of the archetype of the ethereal virgin (Fiedler 281); Temple eventually becomes the rapist whose sexual appetite destroys two men.

She is the good and wicked sister at the same time, and reveals the Fair Maiden as a mere mask for the Dark Lady (281). Although Fiedler’s analysis of Temple certainly proves useful here, he fails to note Faulkner’s representation of the Dark Lady. The text poses Ruby, a rundown prostitute nurturing a dying and bastard child, as Temple’s counter.

Yet Ruby seemingly proves the more virtuous of the two women because of her faithfulness to her common-law husband throughout his trial and death. However, Faulkner does not posit Ruby, and thus women typically construed as fallen seductresses in typical Gothic texts, as the actual virtuous heroine whose love redeems. Even as Faulkner juxtaposes her against Temple, as well as other prostitutes appearing throughout the novel, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes that she was once like Temple.

Consequently, as admirable as she seems during the events of the story, the text reminds us that she too has destroyed and still can destroy men. Ruby therefore complicates Fiedler’s observation about the Fair Maiden’s mask to remind us that it does not go both ways—the Dark Lady does not mask the Fair Maiden.

The American Gothic hides its discourses of these various social anxieties through the use of tropes that specifically deal with issues of perception. (Un)readable bodies in Gothic texts reference anxiety over the transgressive racial and sexual other “passing” in dominant white patriarchal society. Spectacle/ spectatorship and misperception consequently play vital roles in Gothic literature; the texts inevitably bring the (in)ability

to visually identify and categorize bodies to bear upon the construction of being and identity. In a project devoted to the exploration of the function of spectacle/spectatorship in gothic literature, Rebecca Martin notes that the reader's source of pleasure in the gothic lies in the spectacle the texts provide. Defining spectacle as "scenes of suffering framed and set apart from the text," Martin concludes that the reader's engagement, as both aggressor and victim, with the gothic spectacle is "shown to be a controlling factor in the reader's closure" ("The Spectacle"). Susan Donaldson contends that issues of spectacle and vision are at the heart of the gothic (569). Furthermore, spectacle proves a convention that adds to the construction of identity and challenges such constructions within gothic texts.¹⁸ In white American texts Morrison's "not-me" figure gains life and space to become the surrogate of whiteness through the construction of the spectacle.

Misperception is linked to the issue of spectatorship in gothic narratives. By the early nineteenth century, misperception played a particularly large role in American gothic literature. The horrors plaguing gothic characters revealed themselves at the closure of many texts as ocular and psychological deceptions projected by dis(-)eased psyches. Geoffrey Harpham explains how misperception creates the Gothic's grotesque bodies and beings by deforming an image. The image is not materially deformed or manipulated. Rather the beholder deforms the image by "slotting it into the wrong category, or even by applying the wrong kind of conceptual scheme altogether" (Harpham 12). The image itself does not necessarily require a gruesome physical exterior. Rather the image's apparent transgression of categorical boundaries and

hierarchies, and the horror and disturbance resulting from the reader's misperception of that image qualify it as grotesque and gothic.¹⁹

The trope of the grotesque and ambiguous also augments the terror of racial and sexual transgression in the Gothic. Grotesque ambiguity appears in slave narratives in figurations of hybridity, reaffirming Geoffrey Harpham's definition of grotesque ambiguity as "the meaningful result of compressed forms in a single representation without enabling us to settle on a univocal meaning" (Harpham 65). This unsettling of the univocal impulse is particularly important in narratives that would challenge and problematize definitions and boundaries, as gothic tales typically do even if they later reaffirm the problematized boundaries. The univocal gesture "masks the ambivalent impulse. 'Grotesque' always designates an unsuccessful masking, a dis-covery or revelation" (68). Furthermore Harpham defines grotesqueness in the language of hybridity as essentially borderless "non-things" that defy orders and systems. The non-things themselves are not utterly alien, but are a collage of the familiar yet seemingly incompatible and embody the refutation of hierarchy.

The African-American Gothic

Contemporary African-American authors dismantle the Gothic genre's discourses of racial, sexual, and gendered terror; they do not perfectly mimic the genre conventions as they traditionally appear. Indeed, these authors signify upon the Gothic by consistently introducing difference into their representations and parodies of the genre's tropes. Consequently, while conventions and mechanisms of monstrosity and terror appear throughout texts such as *Linden Hills* and *Meridian*, the minute variations black authors apply to these mechanisms signal a shift from and comment upon the discourses traditionally encoded therein. Furthermore, by signifying upon these tropes,

contemporary black authors appropriate and refigure them as vehicles useful for the expression of the particularities, complexities, and terrors of African-American existence.

The Gothic genre is ideally revolutionary even as its tropes can re-inscribe dominant, white, patriarchal history and its accompanying fears. Robert Martin, for instance, notes that the often politically conservative form of the gothic gives expression to the anxieties of a dominant class threatened with violent dissolution. However, the genre also provides a space for the culturally repressed, allowing them to voice and act out their resistance to dominant culture. African-American writers adapt the genre with particularly striking results, producing texts “where the voice of the dead slave can act out as a means of insisting on the presence of history” (“Haunted” 130). Writing a century before Martin, Ruskin posits the philosophy and rhetoric of the gothic as revolutionary. His enumeration of the six fundamental elements of the gothic mind and product acts to disturb class boundaries and distinctions, often blurring the boundary between elite intellectual and lowly laborer. Indeed, the gothic spirit arises from the newly freed worker, not the static philosopher (“Of The Nature” 192).

In Ruskin’s definition of the genre’s six fundamental elements, each aspect becomes theoretical rather than tangible or material: savageness, changefulness, naturalism, grotesqueness, rigidity, and redundance (“Of the Nature” 184).²⁰ Scholars later conflate the two principles most conducive to the gothic’s revolutionary principles—changefulness and grotesqueness—into theories of the grotesque. Furthermore, ambiguities, complexities, and paradoxes that scholars define as fundamental to the grotesque mark Ruskin’s definition of the gothic and, interestingly, characterize Ruskin’s own text. The complexities of his text are intentional as Ruskin

repeatedly argues that ambiguity and paradox are necessary in the gothic as art form and as social comment and tool because these elements mark the uncertainties and fallacies in social definitions and constructions that often tend towards oppression. Likewise, the Gothic's tendency towards imperfection and incompleteness argues against static rules and definitions of narrative and identity. Gothic imperfection is, to Ruskin, divine testament to the fact that nothing can exist in perfection, especially when constructed by imperfect beings, but must naturally be ever changeful. It is a concept useful to the ideology of narratives, especially history when understood as a socially constructed interpretation and memory/ recognition of events. The Gothic, in the chaos and the questions and fears it engenders, also becomes a method of revolutionary thinking about identity and narrative.

Harpham's text expands upon Ruskin's principle of the grotesque in the Gothic and examines the grotesque as it appears in Gothic literature. Harpham notes how the grotesque as visual ornament got its power from its ability/ tendency to usurp the center and fill the entirety of the artistic space, though as ornament it was merely intended as border and frame for the centered subject.²¹ The grotesque ornament called into question the definitions of center and margin through its refusal to recognize hierarchies. Linguistically, the grotesque is the indefinable and thus unutterable, the moment where language fails to know an object/ subject, the word for the "paralysis of language" (Harpham 6). In gothic literature, the grotesque often makes its appearance as that which is unspeakable/ unspoken. The idea that the grotesque occurs in the interval of emergent narratives of comprehension and, in terms of temporal dynamics, occupies the space where the past meets the present proves vital to the gothic notion of the unspoken. The

gothic concern with revelation and comprehension of the uncanny appears in the numerous narrative gaps that withhold knowledge of the past, preventing the characters, impaled upon the present, from adequately reading the complicating signs.²² Modern Black writers recognize and wield the combination of these principles—the gothic power to disrupt narratives of history, and the grotesque insistence upon and recognition of innate narrative gaps and incompleteness—in African-American reformulations of history and the identities inscribed in and by history.

Black literature embraces the grotesque effect/ power on numerous levels, within and without the text. It begins by re-writing the notion of the uncanny. For Freud and most early American writers, the uncanny was that which was repressed and/ or hidden come to light, and recognition of the repressed as terrifying as both alien and familiar. The racialized being/ Other, in this system of the uncanny, becomes for the Anglo-American writer a projection of their dark self—perhaps even functioning as a kind of literary Doppelganger. The gothic “cannot function without a proximity of Otherness imagined as its imminent return” (Savoy 6). In gothic literature, beginning with its earliest authors and continuing into today’s texts, the mission isn’t the representation of the (Other) object through imitation, but the “means of self-representation through authorship: the expression of subjectivity” (Nelson 20). The genre is a method for defining self not only through repression and projection of the darker “self” onto a darker body, but through the authorial and cultural power such literary projections exemplify.

In contemporary Black literature, revelation and recognition of the “dark” secret proves vital to progress. Likewise the notion of the repressed savage/ primitive has already been historically inscribed upon the Black body. Consequently, the notion of the

returned repressed as that which is primal fails to inspire trepidation; characters accept savage and grotesque “monsters” as part of (hidden) nature, and flee the cruelty and insanity of the “civilized” world. Texts such as *Beloved* and *A Visitation of Spirits* speak calmly about moments typically marked as terrible. *Beloved*, for instance, speaks of moments of bestiality performed by male slaves as if they were normal behavior.²³ Black texts, instead, replace the notion of the uncanny as the returned/ revealed repressed/ hidden object with the process of repression and moment of hiding. They look at the institutions that marked them as the savage, look at the reasons for the hiding and the historical moment of silencing. What becomes uncanny here are the motives, method, and process behind the Anglo-American trope of uncanniness. Not incidentally, in this exploration of uncanniness the literature finds itself caught in this interval because of a problematic history, itself marred by silences and gaps.

The contemporary black literature under study here furthermore concerns itself with the utter destabilization and denial of racial and sexual categories. For instance, Randall Kenan de-centers dominant Southern history by impressing upon his readers the notion of its construction, presenting documents and academic tools and texts such as footnoted studies and anthropological excerpts from diaries—methods conventionally understood to convey agreed-upon fact and historical truth—that are no more (not) true than the oral history and horror story that he wraps most of his text around. The African-American writers’ search for identity and destabilization of problematic if not debilitating racial categories involves the destabilization of history, in great part because the history that informs contemporary constructions of identity “invents the gothic” (Goddu 132). Overall, the gothic trope proves particularly useful for contemporary black writers in re-

imagining history and identity because politicized notions of identity such as the queer other, the black rapist, and the fainting and helpless woman pervade the genre, while the genre proves a likewise capable means for these writers to contest and deconstruct such inscribed identities and histories.

Some critics, such as Barbara Christian, hesitate to read African-American literature, especially contemporary texts, through and against the American Gothic tradition. These critics view such a reading as Eurocentric and insist that black texts must be read through African (American) forms and traditions unique to the black experience. Such a reading denies and ignores the complexity of African-American existence. Indeed, the contention that blacks use forms emblematic of their culture and experience only reaffirms the need to recognize black use of gothic tropes. In the same essay in which Christian defines Gothic readings of black texts as Eurocentric, she also exclaims that “Black experience in America of course originates in slavery, which is to say that it begins with the behavior of white people” (Christian 22). Her recognition necessitates the realization that both black experience and the elaboration of that experience are complex projects requiring recourse to and engagement with genres and forms outside of the traditions unique to and extending from African tradition. Jacqueline de Weever notes that African-American narratives are inevitably blended because the blending of traditions produces a text that speaks to the fragmented ontology of the New World personality (22).

My project necessitates the discussion of black appropriation of the Gothic based upon Alice Walker’s theory of re-appropriation in “Giving the Party: Who Do You Think.” Like Walker’s argument on black women re-appropriating the Mammy figure, I

argue that the African-American appropriation of the Gothic attacks and negates the oppressive ideologies inscribed within the form by re-inscribing the genre with Black cultural experience. Such (re-)appropriation illustrates an insistence upon engaging both the oppressive discourses as well as the vehicles of that discourse. Furthermore, in revising Gothic genre and structures, black writers insist upon access to the genre, form, and the exclusionary discourses therein espoused. They create a form capable of speaking back to oppressive discourses in a double, triple, and quadruple voice: western myth, black (female) experience, and queer narrative (de Weever 14). Consequently, dismissing the Gothic as Eurocentric and because it has traditionally been loaded with problematic racial ideology only further silences the voices and bodies misrepresented in the genre.

Speaking back against and through the genre is particularly important given that the slave body is one of the first “othered” bodies to suffer erasure and distortion within the genre’s discourses. Such erasure inevitably forestalls the possibility of trauma and recovery. Ron Eyerman’s discussion of slavery as collective trauma and memory in *Cultural Trauma* is useful here because his theory emphasizes the stakes of “forgetting” slavery. Eyerman explains that slavery, as “trauma,” serves as a collective memory and “primal scene” capable of uniting Black Americans despite there (lack of) experience with slavery or their (lack of) emotional and or theoretical connection to Africa (Eyerman 1). The experience of trauma is a process that involves both loss and recovery; the “victim” first undergoes a latent period of forgetting that buffers the actual experience and the painful reflection upon the event that produces the actual trauma (3). Contemporary black use of the Gothic calls attention to the mechanisms that culturally

ensnare us within “forgetfulness” while attempting to represent the horror of the initial event through revisions of the tropes, consequently throwing us into the moment of recognition and understanding that constitutes trauma.

The Gothic trope of haunting is especially useful to African-American gothic texts. These texts posit the pervasiveness of slavery’s horrors to suggest that the end of institutionalized slavery did not necessarily bring about psychological or emotional freedom. As gothic texts, they repeatedly imagine and (re-)figure the emotional and psychological scars of slavery as various kinds of specters, even if the text itself does not position slavery as its narrative beginning. These texts consistently pose the haunting by slavery’s terrifying specters against the mediating (ghostly) ancestral presence and/ or body. The resultant confrontation between the two proves vital for contesting the power of the dominant culture.

Reading Karla Holloway’s concept of the ancestral body within black women’s literature through and against Ron Eyerman’s theory of trauma illuminates my understanding of haunting as it is re-written in contemporary black texts. In *Moorings and Metaphors* Holloway argues for a reading of the ancestral figure as an enabling metaphor in black women’s revisions of cultural mythologies (Holloway 2), and argues that these ancestral figures allow black women writers to move through “myth, time, and dimension” (8). Holloway notably clarifies that these figures’ abilities to retrieve and recover are limited, in contrast to the figures’ use and ability in African women’s literature: “Retrieval for Africans means an overthrow of power and a reinvestment in self-determination. For the African-American, retrieval is not possible. Instead, recovery means an act of spiritual memory rather than physical possession” (20).

The experience of trauma, as read in Eyerman, contributes to this construction of ancestral body as figuration of recovery. The ancestral body and/ or voice is inevitably a part of trauma since, ideally, recovery is a part and consequence of the reflective acts that constitute trauma.²⁴ Trauma's ability to unite a group suggests an insistence upon recovering and re-affirming (stolen) identity and subjectivity. This project reads haunting in black texts as the specter (of racist ideology) that attempts to impede just this sort of experience of trauma and recovery. The haunting specter is the ghost that competes with the ancestral body and (attempts to) overthrow(s) it(s voice) by figuring the ancestor as unrecoverable loss, body, and voice. The (ideology's) specter haunts and calls attention to the loss of the ancestor even as it perpetuates the erasure of the ancestral body.²⁵

Ellen Goldner's discussion of the Other as specter proves particularly useful to my argument on hauntings in African-American texts. Although she specifically argues for a re-reading of tormented black bodies as ghosts rather than ancestors, Goldner's implicit observation that African-American writers disrupt traditional (and meta)narrative structures proves noteworthy. In "Other(ed) Ghosts: Gothicism and the Bonds of Reason in Melville, Chestnutt, and Morrison," she posits four reasons why slaves and black ancestors figured as ghost, rather than ancestors, dismantle dominant discourse. Her principles that are the most significant to my argument are, firstly, that the hauntings preserve the dead amid the living, and the past amid the present (Goldner 62). These ghosts insist upon repositioning that history as ever present, pertinent and intrusive, particularly as it is manifested in ideology. Secondly, Goldner's observation that hauntings in black texts defy the concept of linear time. This defiance of linear time also supports my contention about the authors' re-vision of trauma in black culture. Lastly,

Goldner explains that such texts defy the Western “dream of control” (62). Such defiance represents the extent to which discourses of domination and nation are incomplete. In presenting narratives haunted by various “ghosts” and “demons” African-American writers revise constructions of history, specifically against and counter to dominant history, and subvert discourses of power in their re-visions and representation of trauma. These haunted texts consequently become haunts.

In addition to Goldner’s elaboration upon the place of haunting in black literature, several other recent texts have proven particularly influential in this project’s discussions: Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1992), Teresa Goddu’s *Gothic America* (1997), and Justin Edwards’ *Gothic Passages* (2003). Furthermore, both Goddu’s and Edwards’ text, as well as this project, base their discussion of the racial other in American Gothic Literature upon Morrison’s theory of the “not-free, not me.” Consequently, each of the texts, including this one, recognizes that white American Gothic narratives represent racial, gendered, and sexual difference in terms of otherness generally construed as monstrosity and terror. Goddu primarily focuses upon the white American Gothic and concludes with a chapter on Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and an epilogue observing the need for investigation into African-American Gothic. Edwards answers her call with an insightful collection that privileges African-American Gothic literature; however he limits his discussion to antebellum and postbellum texts that focus upon issues of passing. Goldner’s article examines the impact of slavery upon both white and black writers, particularly as the writers use gothic haunting to depict the terrors of dealing with slavery. Her essay, however, largely focuses upon the gothic trope of haunting and thus fails to observe the slave narrators’ recourse to the spectrum of gothic

tropes; Goldner consequently ignores the complex way slavery contributed to slave writers' and contemporary black writers' revision of the gothic genre.

My project departs from Goldner's, Goddu's, and Edwards' analysis of race in (African) American Gothic literature principally because of its focus upon contemporary texts but also, and because it recognizes race beyond an isolated function. In other words, this project discusses race as an integral part in the authors' portrayal of sexual and gendered othering. I repeatedly show how the creation and marginalization of sexual Otherness among the black community excuses and mimics the racist oppression African-Americans have historically suffered. Each text illustrates the way oppressions interact, overlap with, and enable each other. For instance, *Linden Hills* demonstrates how class hierarchy among African-Americans enables colorism and the usurpation of female agency. Similarly *Beloved* suggests that patriarchal and matriarchal ideals of family repeat slavery's oppressive concepts of possession. I analogize black marginalization of queer, classed, and gendered bodies to white racist treatment of blacks to argue that ignoring and/ or excusing and/ or perpetuating any kind of oppression proves problematic because it implies that oppression is excusable and, therefore, acceptable. Additionally, this project expands upon contemporary authors' recognition of the interaction between oppressions to note how the authors also manipulate the genre to subvert its marginalizing tendencies and to make the genre uniquely their own.

Contemporary African-American critique and appropriation of the Gothic typically begins with inversion and revisions. Current writers invert the tropes' racial allusions so that, for instance, black/ night/ wilderness become connotative of goodness and humanity while white/ daylight/ society prove connotative of destruction and malevolence.

Contemporary texts build upon the revision of the Gothic begun in the slave narratives to explain how inversion of the tropes is a start but not liberating; mere inversion fails to attack and dismantle, for instance, the gender and sexual dynamics espoused within the Gothic. Colorism remains a stark principle within the slave narratives, consequently suggesting that the ideology supporting racism has not actually been subverted within the narratives themselves—the polarities have merely been switched. Even as they invert the tropes, authors such as Gloria Naylor imply that mere inversion is not enough to appropriate the genre and subvert the oppressive ideologies within its discourses. Consequently, black authors often revise the sense of horror and terror within the Gothic and resituate it within African-Americans’ lived experiences. Characters will often have a mild or humorous reaction to Gothic supernatural events and terrors, yet shudder in horror at the memory of a past event.²⁶ Naylor, Kenan, and Morrison make the genre’s usual supernatural terrors relatively inane and emphasize the trauma of African-American existence in comparison. Once rewritten and re-inscribed, Gothic tropes prove useful for articulating the peculiar complexities and terrors of being an African-American, and hyphenated American in general.

The implications of this project are three-fold. Through theorizing and problematizing the inversion of the Gothic, I first and foremost define the problem of assimilation. My exploration of Naylor, for instance, reveals that inverting polarities provides only a temporary reprieve for the marginalized and othered group that must gravitate inward toward “normalcy.” Inevitably, such inversion reproduces the same oppression the marginalized sought to evade by changing the terms; indeed, even though now a member of the “dominant” group, people under the new inverted hierarchy still

must assimilate to certain static, and therefore oppressive, ideals. Furthermore, the authors repeatedly reveal that assimilation, regardless of the ideal or image or culture it assimilates to, inevitably becomes monstrous by replacing humane individuals with unfeeling automatons. For instance the image of black middle-class success to which all Linden Hills residents aspire also stifles their humanity to each other until their lives become little more than a series of numbing, calculated rituals. The texts under study in this project inevitably emphasize that concepts of the center must be defied and preferably dismantled.

This study also seeks to challenge conservative concepts of history and identity, both of which are traditionally and conservatively defined in singular terms. My discussion of the novels complicates the idea of a unified, singular history to indicate the oppressive destructiveness of such notions of history. I repeatedly emphasize each author's portrayal of a fluid, shifting identity and therefore position the texts in the poststructuralist deconstruction of identity in which, as Minh-ha explains,

‘I’ is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. ‘I’ is, itself, *infinite layers*. Its complexity can hardly be conveyed through such typographic conventions as I, i, or I/ i. [. . .] Whether I accept it or not, the natures of *I, i, you, s/he, We, we, they*, and, *wo/man* constantly overlap. They all display a necessary ambivalence, for the line dividing *I* and *Not-I, Us* and *them*, or *him* and *her* is not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like it to be. (Minh-ha 94)

The concept of stable, singular self proves a construction that allows individuals to remain members of the dominant group and helps them evade silencing and erasure. Yet, as Joshua Gamson explains in his article on the question of (building a) collective identity in Queer politics, such static identity inevitably proves oppressive. Lesbian and gay political groups resist stable identity because “sexual identity are historical and social

products, not natural or intrapsychic ones. It is socially produced binaries (gay/ straight, man/ woman) that are the basis of oppression; fluid, unstable experiences of self become fixed primarily for the service of social control” (Gamson 391). Gamson further notes that while collective identity can prove politically useful, it is most subversive when it is defined as “a continual process of recomposition rather than a given and as a dynamic, *emergent* aspect of collective action” (392). In this model non-static collective identity empowers fluid individual identity as the individual moves among and through various groups.²⁷

African-American gothic texts similarly reveal “stable” identity as fictitious and problematic as the social position and historical narrative to which they provide access. The narratives repeatedly posit grotesque individuals who defy fixed identity and categorization as useful models for the future. The texts likewise suggest that survival of black community depends upon its ability to redefine its identity as “situational and changeable” (Gamson 392). I lastly propose how opposing voices, such as the queer voice among a fundamental Southern black community or women’s narratives among a stifling patriarchy, are typically sacrificed to the metanarrative of history. By revealing the process of history’s scapegoating voices of otherness, I demystify and unmask the Other hidden behind the Gothic’s figurations of monstrosity. Consequently, in evaluating the politics and discourses of Otherness inherent in the Gothic and constructions of history in general, I seek to expand the lost “60 million and more” to whom Morrison dedicates *Beloved* to include countless, unnamed and unknown others. Indeed, the “60 million” are continuously sacrificed to history and the ideals of cultural and racial progress and unity.

The Aims and Intent of *Blackness Writes Back*

I begin my study with an exploration of slave narratives as they re-appropriate the racialized gothic tropes. The principal texts for this chapter are Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1850), Hannah Crafts' *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (1855-1860),²⁸ Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), William Wells Brown's *Narrative of William W. Brown* (1849), and William Craft's *Running 1000 Miles for Freedom* (1860). I turn to these narratives not only because they provide an early example of gothic re-visions, but also because so much of contemporary Black literature turns back to these narratives, presenting itself as slave narrative or as marred by the silenced slave voice. In the majority of American slave narratives, the South becomes the haunted landscape, its darkness troubled by the wails and screams of the tortured, through which a now white villain pursues and torments a black heroine and her dark hero. Such inversion of the typical gothic color scheme—where the “good guys” are always (in) white—begins these narratives’ disturbance of the gothic genre’s more fundamental ideologies.

These slave narratives address a sense of grotesqueness in their deconstruction of identities inscribed under and through slavery. The notion that we are forever pressing to become one more than the other, innate in the slave’s flight from captivity and ascribed bestiality to freedom and humanity, is in itself a feature of the gothic grotesque, the point where language fails to firmly fix us and we are neither master/ human nor slave/ beast. While the narratives question monolithic notions of identity, destabilizing identity also proves troubling to slaves’ stability of “being.” Most important in their destabilized definition of being is their redefinition of freedom as geographically located and fixed north of the Mason-Dixon line or the U.S. Canada border. Consequently numerous

“fundamental” boundaries—between black/ white, victim/ oppressor, free/ slave, north/ south, being/ beast—are shown to be fluid, repeating white American gothic fear of transgression and miscegenation but to different ends. Instead of using nightmares of fluctuating and transgressed boundaries as reason to make those boundaries all the more rigid, slave narrators inevitably depict race as a construct whose social definitions complicate and destroy both black and white “being.”

The second chapter explores in detail Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* (1986) as it extends the principles discussed in the first chapter and examines them in the narrative of an alienated community of successful African-Americans. The textual ties between slavery, memory, land/ geography, individual and social identity prove exceedingly complex and critical. Indeed, in Naylor’s text, the past proves ever present and powerful in the future, and the lack of a slave name—its story of rebellion and/ or ruin—or the return of slavery’s horrors in an unexpectedly “white” heir prove impediments if not utterly destructive to entire towns/ communities. In the process of re-envisioning Black community and identity, Naylor’s text exemplifies gothic grotesqueness by de-centering (hi)stories of male dominance and marking identities as fluid. This chapter also begins my discussion of the problem of inversion. Indeed, in Naylor’s nightmarish world, moving down the hill toward the valley is progress, yet the further down the hill residents move, the less human they become. Naylor emphasizes the extent to which inversion reproduces oppression by intensifying the attacks on women’s bodies as the protagonists progress down the hill. I consequently suggest that Naylor uses gothic tropes to portray the self-inflicted horrors to which African-Americans subject themselves in what proves to be a backwards strive for success. In trying to evade poverty and racist attacks, the

blacks of Linden Hills inevitably become cannibalistic monsters who sacrifice and consume their own women, and who successfully impede acts of heroism in their hellish world.

The third chapter is a study of Randall Kenan's Gothic texts *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" (1992), which is a parody of gothic conventions. This section examines how Kenan's texts incorporate and complicate black community and singular narratives of racial struggle. Like Naylor, Kenan's texts focus upon the self-inflicted damage black community suffers in the desire to position itself as the center;²⁹ Kenan insists that the wounds are an inevitable result of a static collective identity that requires divergent identities and narratives, specifically those of the queer body, to be suppressed, if not utterly exiled. Lastly, I explain how Kenan's peculiar use of haunting becomes a method to subvert historical metanarrative. Kenan's novel and story posit history as a destabilized and constructed narrative. Indeed, several voices haunt each text, yet Kenan suggests that neither text can be complete without them. "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" implies that the texts and (hi)stories inevitably remain incomplete because they cannot and do not incorporate all of the participants' voices; for example, the (hi)story Zeke narrates excludes women's and white's voices while (dominant) scholarly (hi)story excludes the folk narrative Zeke tells. Yet neither (hi)story can or should pretend to be complete or the absolute version because neither can ever adequately represent everyone('s narrative). (Hi)story, in Kenan, is but an incomplete version of a story of which there are multiple other, incomplete versions.

I end my discussion of the African-American gothic essentially where it begins—with re-visions of slavery and the gothic. The fourth and final chapter explores the neo-

slave narrative, specifically Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988). In her explanation of her goals in writing *Beloved*, Morrison explains that it is her job "to rip the veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate.'" The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic" ("The Site" 46). Morrison uses gothic tropes in "ripping the veil" and in adding the marginalized voice to the history that has hitherto excluded it. She therefore stresses two important concepts. The first is that the lives of slaves were inherently gothic and unspeakable. She appropriates the trope of the unspeakable to emphasize the horror of slavery's various attacks upon the slave's gendered and sexual body, as opposed to the sexual anxiety and marginalization to which the gothic typically alludes. The second is that the genre is useful for intruding upon dominant, marginalizing history.

My last chapter is specifically concerned with what lies behind the veil of silence in slave narratives. *Beloved* implies that the absolute horror of slavery lay not just in its dehumanization of individuals, but how this dehumanization inevitably impacted and disrupted the African-American family beyond slavery itself. Slavery becomes the terrifying haunting specter in this text precisely because it continues to destroy black bodies and futures indefinitely. Morrison reveals the loss of family as the primary issue for slaves and their infinite descendants, all of whom, the text warns, can be re-ensnared by slavery at any given moment lest they beware. Furthermore, slavery's attack upon black futures occurs in the form of insidious infanticide that is physical, psychological, and emotional. In *Beloved*, the haunted house proves the dominant trope for the black family because of how its members have been warped and tormented—mothers destroy

their children in the act of nurturing, fathers abandon their families to raping racists, and children prepare for patricide in order to protect themselves. Lastly, Morrison insinuates that continuing to privilege and mimic patriarchal familial structures will only reproduce the oppressions suffered under slavery and, therefore, aggravate the haunting. Salvation, consequently, lies in constructing a familial system that is not based upon gendered dominance.

Writing on Charles Johnson's complex ideology of identity, Ashraf Rushdy explains that the slave narrative "is a form that has sedimented meanings inscribed into the structures themselves The form, in other words, is not an empty vehicle, but a repository of evolving historical significance that affects and is affected by the uses to which it is put by subsequent writers" (183). Such ancestry as it accumulates within the layers of narratives, secreting "the relationship between the history of form *and* the form of history" (Rushdy 183), proves vital in contemporary black formulations of identity and being. Morrison's extensive use of explicit gothic images and occurrences—from the presence of ghosts to temporal shifts between slavery and the present—illustrates her recognition of a complex identity that has roots in European and early American forms and Black culture and rebellion. As the slave narratives themselves represented deconstructions of numerous boundaries in their discourse on being—"me"/ "not-me" becoming a troubling blur—so too do their ancestors continue the denial of stable categories in their discussion of historical and social constructions and identities.

Notes

¹ Donald Ringe's *American Gothic* discusses the enlightened and logical explanations and endings of American gothic texts at length.

² Although his voluminous text has architecture for its subject, his discussion of the gothic form assumes particularly theoretical and philosophical tones, so vaporous in its definition and discussion as to expand

well beyond the parameters of architecture alone. Ruskin often has recourse to discussions of and examples from literature, painting, sculpture, glassblowing, and beadwork throughout his text, consequently presenting a definition of the gothic as it pertains to all forms of art.

³ Although I am aware that W.E.B Du Bois' theory of double consciousness functions similarly, I specifically use Minh-ha because the notion of double consciousness privileges binary opposition based solely on race; this project concerns itself with multiple intersections of otherness beyond race. Furthermore, Minh-ha's metaphor of the mirror best exemplifies the complicated relationship between the black writer re-visioning the gothic genre and the dominant culture that first wielded it, in contrast to Du Bois' non-reflective veil.

⁴ I am not, however, privileging race here. Indeed, we can also suggest that racist assaults inflict injury against the gendered and queer body for the very same reasons.

⁵ Morrison also specifies that "American gothic's blackness needs to be historicized not only in terms of slavery but also in terms of the racial fantasies that haunt it" (Goddu 75).

⁶ I begin a brief discussion here of European gothic based upon Leslie Fiedler's enumeration of its relevance: "To discuss literature in the United States without reference to contemporary developments in Europe, seems to me as futile as discussing it without consideration of the way in which the very concept of literature and the theme of love were re-born together in the West at the end of the Middle Ages" (11).

⁷ H.L. Malchow describes each in his discussion of Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

In 1811 the abolitionist artist George Dawe exhibited at the British Institution a larger-than-life painting, *A Negro Overpowering a Buffalo*, which depicted a massive black body tensed with brute strength. A few years earlier, Henri Fuseli, also an abolitionist, had given the public a towering, elemental, and heroic black in his *The Negro Revenged*. If Dawe's message was oblique, Fuseli's was direct, suggested perhaps by lines from Thomas Day's poem "The Dying Negro": "For Afric triumphs!—his avenging rage/ No tears can soften, no blood assuage." A black male, larger than the white woman clinging to him, erect rather than kneeling, calls down the wrath of God on a foundering slave ship. (21)

⁸ Thus American concerns were not limited to questions of blackness and slavery; indeed, the gothic equally obsessed over ambiguous white-American relationships with Native Americans (Martin 129). Not far off from the horror stories of slave rebellion told in the newspapers were the stories often told about Native Americans:

Which of us has not listened with sensations of horror to nursery stories that are told of the Indian and his Cruelties? In our infant mind, he stood for the Moloch of our country. We have been made to hear his yell; and our eyes have been presented his tall, gaunt form, with the skins of beasts dangling round his limbs, and his eyes like fire, eager to find some new victim on which to fasten himself, and glut his appetite for blood . . . (qtd. In Goddu 57)

Such descriptions are gothic in themselves, invoking the same kind of dark images and terrifying behavior—the dark and savage brute, the cannibal seeking to devour the helpless victim—that makes up the gothic tales. Furthermore, the horror of the Native Americans in such tales also belie general racial fears—that contact with the "Other" will inevitably lead to consumption and destruction.

⁹ The Too-Wits are of "the ordinary stature of Europeans, but of a more muscular and brawny frame, their complexion a jet black, with thick and long woolly hair" (Poe 163). Even their teeth are black, and "their lips [. . .] are thick and clumsy" (172).

¹⁰ Morrison also specifies that "American gothic's blackness needs to be historicized not only in terms of slavery but also in terms of the racial fantasies that haunt it" (Goddu 75). Although Morrison's text speaks to several genres of writing by American authors, she posits the gothic as one of the notable genres of racial discourse. Morrison discusses Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and Ernest Hemingway *To Have and To Have Not* at length. However, the argument of each text is supported by illustrations of the theories

as they appear in other genres and texts. Thus Morrison finds recourse to link her discussion of Hemingway to William Styron's neo-slave narrative *Confessions of Nat Turner*. She likewise devotes a chapter to the discussion of one of the most canonized figures in gothic literature, Edgar Allan Poe. The composition of her book suggests the relative import of the gothic to theories of racial discourse. Morrison's text is composed of an introduction and three chapters, of which her discussion of Poe falls second. It thus appears that Poe, and by extension the gothic, is literally central to her text and argument.

¹¹ Elaborating upon Eve Sedgwick's discussion of the discursive changes occurring at the end of the nineteenth century, Matheson observes that the Oscar "Wilde trials represented [. . .] an extraordinary public moment in the process [. . .] of trying to come to terms with same-sex sexuality, to invent language for its designation, control, and prosecution but also for more sympathetic representation and even resistance" (712).

¹² Derrick observes that the dangerous and transgressive activities include "masturbation or excessive masturbation; non-procreative sexuality outside of the containing frame of the family; often excessive sexuality even within marriage" and that "the key to male health was the mind's capacity to understand and subdue the body" (313).

¹³ Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* seems to play on this concept of "school boy contagion." Horace recognizes and names Gideon's queerness at school and it is directly a result of scholastic interaction that Horace realizes his own homosexuality; his science project with Gideon eventually leads to their romantic and sexual relationship.

¹⁴ Sedgwick notes that the unspeakable in the Gothic acts "as an electrified barrier between generations, between classes, [and] between sexual choices" (95-6).

¹⁵ Referencing Sylvester Graham, Derrick notes that according to nineteenth century thought "the alienation of reason from the body [. . .] constitutes the body as a living volcano of a problem; but however fallen our condition, reason can also save us: we are also fortunately 'endowed with rational powers to *ascertain* those constitutional laws, and moral powers to *prevent* that excess" (Derrick 314).

¹⁶ Peters, for instance, saves Augustus from the mutiny and keeps him in his chambers, much like a pet. During the mutiny, while Pym is still trapped below, Peters will often visit Augustus in his chambers sometimes holding strange conversations with him and at other times leering at Augustus.

¹⁷ The only other alternative is that she would become a nun or old maid, and so a comic figure in American nineteenth century culture.

¹⁸ Donaldson's essay situates Welty's use of women as spectacles against Faulkner's use of them, explaining that in Faulkner women become spectacles in their punishments. As such, women perform the function of gender identity (de)construction as the characters are punished for their failure to function as idealized women. At the same time, the failure of the punishments, and thus the women's re-appropriation of the spectacle she provides, illustrate the extent to which gender identity is disrupted in Faulkner's mind (572). In contrast, Welty's characters are used as disruptions of dominant categorization of identity from the first, her characters purposely creating spectacles of themselves.

¹⁹ Misperception translates into misreading as vital texts are inevitably misperceived in gothic plots. Mark Hennelly best explains how this translation occurs in "Framing the Gothic: From Pillar to Post-Structuralism." The gothic plot establishes the relationship between misperception and misreading as the narratives' illegible and misread manuscripts parallel the winding and confusing dark labyrinths and passages leading nowhere (Hennelly 81). Hennelly specifically references Anne Radcliffe's *The Italian or the Confessional of the Black Penitents* as his example, positing that in Ellena's attempts " 'to read Vivaldi's billet,' the contents of which could save her from conventual confinement, the dying light and growing darkness replicate the reader's own anxieties in attempting to interpret the text's equally dark 'passages' of braille . . . " (81). The characters' blind, stumbling wanderings through dark walkways to false freedom and their encounters with misread or illegible texts repeat the anxiety and disturbance that Harpham notes results from the misperceived being. On another theoretical level, in the relationship between actual reader and the read story, the gothic destabilizes the subject, the signifier, and the signified through

slips of the tongue, tricks of the eye, which ensure that what we see is always haunted by something else, by that which has not quite been seen, in history or in text—[the] Gothic itself, we might say, consists of a series of texts which are always dependent on other texts, texts which they are not, texts which are ceaselessly invoked while no less ceaselessly misread, models of meconnaissance in the form of lost manuscripts, of misheard messages. (Hennelly70)

Here misperception and misreading again cross lines, and the gothic itself becomes the essence of misperception vis-a-vis its haunting and misread texts.

²⁰ Ruskin posits grotesqueness as one of the six basic elements of the gothic, finding it necessary to devote a separate chapter to its enumeration. See Ruskin's "Of the True Ideal—Thirdly Grotesque." *Modern Painters* 3. London: George Allen, 1892.

²¹ Harpham's numerous examples reference Ruskin's architectural examination of the grotesque sculpture ornamenting a gothic cathedral—an argument on de-centering principles as divine and enduring, generations of sculptors succeeding one another in work with "unwearied enthusiasm . . . the cathedral front at last lost in the tapestry of its traceries, like a rock among the thickets and herbage of spring" ("The Nature" 245).

²² An excellent example of this moment would be Beatrice Rappaccini in Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale "Rappaccini's Daughter." She is the grotesque creature as the literally unknowable object; her body/ being is likewise incomprehensible because of forestalled historical information. Since she is poisonous, no creature can approach her without protection or previous preparation. Thus she is locked off from the world, looked upon from a distance. Indeed, the text marks her fluid identity as being of both man and plant, as she often appears closer kin to the poisonous vegetation than to humans. It is not until the moment of historical intervention, until her creation and existence as a hybrid being is revealed that we and the hero can finally read and define her.

²³ Paul D, reminiscing on Halle and Sethe's marriage and consummation, remarks that the "jump from a calf to a girl wasn't all that mighty" (Morrison 26).

²⁴ Sethe's re-membling of her "ma'am" in *Beloved* serves as a perfect example of the connection between trauma and ancestral recovery. *Beloved* forces Sethe out of forgetfulness and into trauma by insisting that Sethe talk about her mother. Sethe, silenced by the pain of trauma, literalizes the accompanying re-membling of the ancestor by folding and refolding sheets in a pattern that signifies the (now recovered) mark upon her mother's (forgotten and/ or lost) body.

²⁵ Consider, for instance, the consistent historic habit of representing slaves as dehumanized non-beings, despite their sympathetic plights, instead of as distinct(ly) resistant individuals. This determination to defy erasure and loss also explains why Toni Morrison focuses on Margaret Garner for *Beloved*, although cases of infanticide as slave resistance were fairly common, and recent projects such as the film *Unchained Memories*.

²⁶ An excellent example of this is Sethe's reaction to the baby ghost while it's still incorporeal in *Beloved*. While she attempts to calmly engage the ghost, Sethe suppresses and flees memories of her slave life, using the terminology of haunting and horror to describe Sweet Home's ability to attack and consume her, and any passing victim, outside of its temporal line.

²⁷ Citing Joanne Nagel's example of a Native American whose ethnic identity is "situational and changeable," Gamson explains that a Native American may be "mixed-blood" on his reservation, "Pine Ridge" on another reservation, "Sioux" on the U.S. census, and "Native American" among non-Indians (Gamson 392).

²⁸ Gates could give no precise date for the manuscript's creation but estimated the original document was written between these years.

²⁹ Both Linden Hills and Tims Creek begin as communities meant as an act of defiance of white, racist power. However, in their attempt to position themselves as dominant center and marginalize whiteness,

both communities develop collective identities that are based upon the same systems of oppression, dominance, and marginalization that they racially struggle against.

CHAPTER 2
HAUNTED LANDS AND GOTHIC VOICES: SLAVE NARRATIVE RE-WRITINGS
OF GOTHIC MOTIFS

I seldom gave way to imaginary terror. I found enough in the stern realities of life to disquiet and perplex, without going beyond the boundaries of time to meet new sources of apprehension.

—Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*

As Hannah Crafts astutely notes in her own slave narrative, the writing slave's life was extraordinary and innately gothic, needing no fictionalizing to augment market appeal. Yet the genre also bound the slave writer to the problem of presenting and defining her being to and among her Anglo audience. In a society whose definitions of humanity and being were based upon Enlightenment ideals, slave narrators had to create their selves through a mastery of language against notions that the lack of a collective African-American history only proved their inhumanity. Thus Henry Louis Gates notes that the recording of the ex-slave voice was instrumental to his transformation from brute animal to human being, from Africans to Europeans (*The Slave's* xvi). At the same time, the need to make the text speak was also "the process by which the slave marked his distance from the master" (xvii). The conflict between these two stances—the desire to transition into European being and the desire to mark a distance/ difference from their masters—defines a fundamental gothic attribute of the slave narratives. Indeed, amidst (popular) gothic plots and landscapes, two ideologies haunt gothic discourse: the rhetoric of the unspoken, and grotesque ambiguity. Can/ should/ how does the black writer speak

a soul tortured in the horrors of slavery? Publicly marking pro-slavery “beings” as monstrous yet members of humankind, how does the black writer imagine his own being?

Complicated by her experiences in slavery, the slave writer, in writing the self and the rhetorical strategies involved therein, marks herself as the Enlightenment ideal of intellectually-based being. Yet telling the narrative re-marks the writer as the bodily-based (non)-being—both monster and human, primitive and civilized in the narrative moment. Innate within the slave’s flight from captivity and bestiality to freedom and being is the notion that the narrator is forever pressing to become one more than the other. This flight likewise marks a moment of gothic grotesqueness as the point where language fails to know him and he is neither master/ being nor slave/ beast. Textual complications of freedom as geographically defined further complicate already ambiguous definitions of being for the ex-slave. After all, what is it to achieve a being geographically based upon a place from whence you can be dragged back into captivity?

This chapter seeks to examine the ways that slave narratives write to and through the gothic form. The gothic functions as a site of contestation over black “being” within the various slave narratives under examination. Each narrative uses gothic elements such as gloomy settings, tortured heroes, “dark” villains, and cursed people to write back to the ideologies inscribed upon black bodies in Anglo American gothic fiction. Pursuing the gothic motifs of torture and entrapment, slave narrators invert the theme of boundary transgression to point back at the white (slave-owning) society that first marked them as emblematic of these threats. The gothic likewise proves useful in slave narrators’ meditation upon and mediation of black definitions of being. The gothic trope of grotesque ambiguity proves particularly useful for these first two goals. Grotesque

ambiguity is instrumental to the slave narrators' in complicating monolithic notions of racialized identity. Lastly, the slave narrators' use of the gothic alters the gothic genre itself. The writing slaves expand the gothic trope of the unspoken/ unspeakable beyond its typical nineteenth century reference to racial and sexual transgression into an exploration of the unknowable soul and an unfathomable social system.

I begin with a brief discussion of critical theories about methods of reading slave narratives. I then follow with an intertextual exploration of three slave narratives—*The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb*, *The Narrative of William W. Brown*, and William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles For Freedom*.¹ Yet despite their formulaic tales and determinations to prove their claim that they are not fictionalizing or performing an act of “poiesis” but are exercising a “clear-glass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty” (Olney 150), these ex-slave writers, among many others, manage to inscribe gothic formulations within their narrative beyond mere plot. Indeed, while the very life of a slave is also inevitably a gothic existence,² these writers have recourse to gothic ideological tropes, exercising them as rhetorical asides upon an already gothic plot. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the fourth text under consideration in this chapter, further shows how easily the slave narrative transitions, typologically and ideologically, into the gothic novelistic mode. The concluding text, Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, completes this transition to the gothic as a hybrid narrative. Largely fictionalized with numerous rhetorical and plot flairs, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is nonetheless based upon the real life and incidents of a very real slave.

Theorizing the Slave's Narrative: A Brief Introduction

The gothic's conventions gave Anglo American writers a method of containing both racial bodies and the terror they evoked. Teresa Goddu explains this methodology

of containment. Citing an article from *The Constitutional Whig* recounting the Turner rebellion,³ Goddu concludes that the writer symbolizes and thus contains the terror of Turner's rebellion, turning it into an imagined instead of experienced event, "read as an effect instead of as a reality This displacement of event by effect also tends to relocate the horror of slavery from the slave's experience to the white viewer's response" (134). Excluding slaves' bodies from his description, the writer of the piece also effectively absents slaves from the socio-historical reality of and leading to the event. A threat to stable and organized life, the black body is utterly erased, his experience fictionalized through gothic conventions in order to effectively contain him thereafter.

The American gothic's historical erasure and entrapment of the black body represents a peculiar threat for the black writer. In the gothic, the black body is both overtly present and utterly erased. At once the gothic erases the black body from its texts, signifying it instead with various monsters and "dark" villains. Yet like Hawthorne's Aminidab in "The Birthmark," the black figure remains present in descriptions of hulking, darkened and servile characters. The body is reformed in such cases to loom horrifically over white heroes and damsels. The black figure becomes trapped within these significations. Yet the bodily marks of slavery and racial experience are removed in the literary reformation of the black body; the lashes are erased from the monster's back. The slave's true body—the history written in his scars and the violations encoded in his complexion—is erased from the fictionalized body. This threat is particularly evident in the gothic genre but also illustrative and problematic of any monolithic representation of black figures based first and foremost upon corporeal schema. Thus the slave writer representing himself as the tormented and pursued gothic

hero suffers from theoretical threats to (entrap him in) the body. The very evidence of his torment, his brutalized and beaten body, re-replaces his true body within the gothic yet threatens to trap him in its representation.

Use as a tool providing contrast to and structure for white being in gothic literature proves problematic for the black (writing) slave as he constructs and presents his own being within the medium. He is the “‘blank darkness,’ [the] conveniently bound and violently silenced black bod[y]” to which Anglo artists transfer internal conflicts (*Playing* 38). The slaves’ corporeal schematization in literature underwrote a very real historico-racial schema that ordered their being. In this discussion I use Frantz Fanon’s ideology of “being” as it links corporeal schema and historio-racial schema. “Being” for the colonized black entity, according to Fanon, is the meeting of the self with the external, white world. “Being” is the crumbling corporeal schema overpowered by the historico-racial schema composed of “elements” provided by “the white man, who had woven [him] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (Fanon 111). For the slave writer, this corporeal schema crumbles early in his life, as the very definition of the corporeal schema depends upon “a *slow* composition of . . . self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world . . . [that] does not impose itself on” a body (Fanon 111). The white world necessarily and physically imposes itself upon the slave writer’s body, marking the erasure of his “metaphysics”⁴ on his body.

From the beginning of life, the slave’s “being” is “over-determined from without” (116). Anglo American gothic literature further complicates the writing slave’s “being” while capitalizing upon it as conducive to constructions of white being. For the black writer attempting to create a sense of being amongst a white society that codifies its being

against his enslavement and body, defining himself against the “not-free, not-me” dialectic becomes imperative. This proves particularly difficult when writers begin to question and redefine notions of freedom. The “freed” writer often concludes on notes of uncertainty about the actuality of freedom, consequently re-defining the types of “being” available to him along lines similar to categories Gloria Naylor posits: “There were only two types of Negroes then . . . those who were slaves and those who weren’t slaves. She knew enough never to call him free” (*Bailey’s* 167). “Being” for the slave writer proves a contestation between the self, the impositions of the white world, and Enlightenment constructions of being. Consequently, slave narratives often explore the tensions, powers, and problems of racial (slavery, blackness), social (gender, class) and intellectual (freedom, literacy) ideals. The gothic genre’s conventions proves particularly suitable in slaves’ meditations on being as a number of its cosmetic and theoretical elements intersect with the definitions slaves question in their re-visions of “being.”

Principal to slave constructions of being are the Gothic’s tropes of freedom and spectacle. “The terror of possession, the iconography of imprisonment” is foremost amongst gothic focus (Goddu 133). Freedom, constructed and presented against imprisonment and capture, proves one of the basic existential concerns of the gothic genre (Hennelly 665-66). In the relationship between freedom and constructing being, the notion of the “not-free” accompanies the contrasting “not-me.” In slave narratives then, meditations upon freedom become meditations upon the slave’s ability to escape a gothic existence and define himself against the “not-free, not-me” construction white gothic literature has positioned him in. Slaves make freedom a tangible reality early in their texts, attaching freedom to a location--the North--and marking it as the absence of

systematized marks--whips, chains. As the slave narratives progress, slaves scrutinize the reality and tangibility of freedom, the gothic entrapment-escape cycle proving endless in many of the texts. The consequence is a text whose "happily ever after" comes with a gloomy uncertainty and a writer/ hero whose being within freedom remains problematic.

The ideology of spectatorship also intersects with broader gothic narratives and slave narratives. In the slave narratives, spectacle occurs in the moment of intense suffering and torment, both the beaten slave and the beating itself providing objects against which a reader may define himself. This moment of spectacle/ spectatorship becomes so intensely powerful in its construction of identity that slave writers sought to actively define themselves against the moment. The frontispiece portraits that accompany the slave narratives are tactics of this defiance. The writer's countenance attempts to contradict associations with the degradation and humiliations of slavery, to disassociate the slave author from the scenes of brutality—the rapings, the beatings, and the humiliations—that his narrative presents (Casmier-Paz 107). The moments of spectacle/ spectatorship within the narratives become gothic sites of contestation over identity as the writer's presentation of, engagement in, and intertextual spectatorship of whipped spectacles complicate his identity and collapse voyeuristic boundaries between master and slave.

Slaves also challenge and construct being through using the gothic's theoretical ideologies of grotesque ambiguity and the rhetoric of the unspeakable. To modify Harpham's definition of the term grotesque with "slave" essentially alters the definition by changing the term "non-things" to "non-beings." Consequently, the grotesque-hybrid slave comes to embody a disordered system because of the inscription of being, through

white ancestors and light/ unreadable skin, on his body. He embodies the clash of two social orders that, while materially co-existing within a regimented and bound system, should not physically co-exist within the individual body. Thus the hybrid body, as collapse and refutation of systems and hierarchies, becomes a source of paranoia for white writers. The anxieties surrounding the collapse of hierarchies complicate gothic discourses of death, impurity, and genetic contamination (Edwards 7). However, anxieties are textually resolved once writers re-mark the hybrid body as racial other, through language or bodily signifiers, circumventing the hybrid's ability to float through boundaries and removing it to its own category as aberrant contaminant.

The hybrid body functions in slave narratives as the embodiment of grotesque ambivalence applied to racialized ideologies. The hybrid unmask ambivalence over racial boundaries and categories, revealing the instability of the ideologies and realities constructing racial categories. The destabilization of such categories proves imperative to constructions of slave being as the slave writers begin deconstructing one of the methods through which the imposing white world orders and contains blacks. Furthermore hybrid bodies signify upon slave writers' already unreadable "selves." Slave writers become the ultimate hybrid figures in the conflict between their social and bodily inscriptions, and between their mental and self-definitions. Consequently in the slave narratives, even the marked bodies prove unreadable hybrids.

The concept of grotesque ambivalence lends itself to the rhetoric of the unspoken, prevalent throughout the gothic genre. The grotesque as the unnamable challenge to order and hierarchy, and as the unmasking of ambivalent impulses also implies the presence of unspoken ideologies and fears hidden within the covered impulse. If naming

results from univocal gestures, then unspeakableness is its implied opposite resulting from the ambivalent gesture. Consequently the unspoken, even as it may specifically refer to two different but united problems, and hybridity, often goes hand-in-hand in slave narratives as slaves' exploration of being through hybridity leads them to the unknowable and unspoken.

The unspoken in slave narratives refers to the transgressive sexuality and miscegenation that has been historically imposed upon black being. As I will extensively discuss later on, slave writers' alludes to miscegenation repeats the gothic genre's fear of sexual transgression. Yet the unspeakable, though knowable, miscegenated body references an alternative sense of the unspoken within slave narratives. Sexual transgression impedes black self-definitions of being, especially in relation to masculine being. Slaves write this disrupted and scarred being as unspoken. Indeed, so much of the slave narratives emphasize complications of being--their re-definitions of freedom, the problematic spectacle/ spectator categories, their position as ideological hybrids--that being comes to occupy too many categorical gaps to be named. For instance the slaves' either white faces or newly established residence in "free" lands ascribes them to one category as liberated beings; at the same time, they remain "*thing(s)* render(able) back to slavery" (Jacobs 358) while anywhere on American soil. Thus the slaves' use of gothic conventions brings them to the point of the unknowable, the narratives of their lives proving that their being falls outside of narrative. Slave being is the unspoken point where language fails.

The Slaves' Narrative: Gothic Challenges and Changes

Slaves were haunted by fears much like the fear of ghosts, only slaves' fears were real and well-founded (Peabody 23). Consequently slave narratives read like, and

arguably are, gothic tales with one major difference: “the scenery is not staged but real” (Goddu 135). Secondly, using it allows Black authors access and inclusion within a politicized and coded discourse used to code and exclude them. The gothic is thus both dangerous and useful to Black writers “as a mode that can remember and combat, but can also erase, the horrors of racial history” (Goddu 132). Lastly, use of the genre also became a method of re-appropriation. Morrison, for instance, notes that romantic/ gothic Africanisms helped white men persuade themselves that the savagery is “out there.” The lashes dealt the slave “are not one’s own savagery; repeated and dangerous breaks from freedom are ‘puzzling’ confirmations of black irrationality; the combination of . . . beatitudes and a life of regularized violence is civilized; and . . . the rawness remains external” (*Playing* 45). Slave narratives place the lash firmly in the hands of cruel white masters and re-place savagery squarely in white “civilized” hearts.

Slave narratives prove fundamentally gothic first and foremost in the setting. The slave narratives are wrought with descriptions of screams heard for miles, wicked masters who derive pleasure from the sound, and blood-soaked soil tilled by ruined hands. Invocations of hell, “with all its terrors of torment” complete the descriptions, using the metaphorical to better imagine the reality: “such ‘weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth,’ which was then the idea that I had of the infernal regions from oral instruction. And I doubt whether there can be a better picture of it drawn, than may be sketched from” slavery (Bibb 92). Graphic descriptions emphasize the horror of slave reality, and tales of direful housing and contaminated food, “covered with flies and fly blows, and even worms crawling over it, when we were compelled to eat it” (93), establish the slave narratives as an apt competitor in gothic literature. Fictional descriptions of torture and

torment, committed by villains and savages, become real and regular in the narratives. The threat to “skin” a slave becomes quite possible in light of lashings and various other weapons of “punishment.” Bodies of the murdered and self-slaughtered litter the landscape. Slave narratives, in fact, frequently recount, among slavery’s infanticidal threats, the common recourse to suicide among slaves. William Wells Brown, for instance, recalls a woman separated from her husband and children who, “in the agony of her soul,” drowns herself (39). William Craft explains how slavery drives both slave and master to suicide. The daughter of a slave owner, wrongfully denied her freedom, jumps to her death to the pavement below to escape being used for “base purposes” (Craft 21). The death of a slave trader follows only a few pages later. The slave trader “like Judas, went and hanged himself” after the late woman’s brothers escape (25).

Henry Bibb particularly describes slavery in gothic terms of impending doom and gloom. Meditating at once upon the fundamental existential problems of humanity—suffering, misfortune, death—Bibb augments the terrors of slavery by contrasting these essential human sufferings with the extremes of slavery where men are forced to endure “a living death” (63). The slave is undeniably human and must face trials as all men do. Unlike other men, however, the slave “is denied the consolation of struggling against external difficulties He is bound in chains hand and foot; and his sufferings are aggravated a hundred fold, by the terrible thought, that he is not allowed to struggle against misfortune . . . which he sees impending over him” (Bibb 18). His entrapment amplifies and makes him vulnerable to the doom that all mankind faces and fights. In other words, the slave’s chains in life bind him to hell on earth and in death.⁵

Bibb's metaphysical invocations also illustrate narrative use of metaphor to complete the image of hellish settings and realities. The southern realm of clanking chains, captives, and lacerated backs (29) indeed becomes literal hell in Bibb's text, "one of the darkest corners of the earth" where Bibb is doomed to "linger out [his] existence" (114). This southern shadow realm of torment contrasts against the heavenly light of northern freedom, and hell proves more than Bibb can endure (114). The contrast between light/ freedom and dark/ slavery provides one of the most telling metaphors for Bibb's torment. Caught after nearly escaping into freedom, Bibb is "permitted to gaze on the beauties of nature, on free soil" on his trip back to bondage: "things looked uncommonly pleasant: The green trees and wild flowers of the forest; the ripening harvest fields waving in the gentle breezes of *Heaven* . . . I was conscious of what must be my fate; a wretched victim for *Slavery* without limit . . . to be worked under the flesh devouring lash during life . . ." (emphasis added 66). Bibb here constructs slavery, not hell, as the alternative to Heaven, further emphasizing slavery's torments by concluding his description of it as limitless and devouring. His initial invocation of Heaven connects the scene to the spiritual; his comment that slavery is "limitless" implies its connection to the eternal. Bibb's passage invokes the spiritual, the eternal, and suffering to imply that his meditation upon his fate in slavery becomes a metaphysical contemplation. Slavery is, at the least, another form/ realm of hell, but quite possibly something even worse.

Jacobs' description of the punishment and death of a slave in a cotton gin especially echoes gothic setting and description. A slave owner punishes a runaway slave by whipping and then screwing him into a cotton gin. The cotton gin allows the slave only enough room to turn on his side and not to lie on his back. On the second day of his

punishment, the slave serving him bread and water finds the bread gone but the water untouched. Five nights later, the servant informs the informed of the still untouched water and a foul stench arising from the gin. Unscrewing the gin to examine the situation, the overseer discovers the slave's "dead body . . . partly eaten by rats and vermin. [And p]erhaps the rats that had devoured his bread had gnawed him before life was extinct" (Jacobs 379-80). Jacobs' escape is reminiscent of this torture and death, as she describes the small space where she was to spend several years: "Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but rats and mice The air was stifling and the darkness total I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the room. The rats and mice ran over my bed" (437-8). The explicitly gruesome scene repeats the gothic trope of premature burial. Thus Jacobs exclaims against mistaken sentiments of slavery's goodness that she could tell them of "a blighted young creature shut up in a living grave for years" (466). Such horrific torments and "escape" are the norm in slavery, and Jacobs sandwiches her depiction of the slave's tormented death in the cotton gin between other extensive accounts of torture/ punishment.

Descriptions of slavery as a haunting institution are especially relevant in their suggestion of the over-reaching effects of the institution. Frederick Douglass recalls how slavery appears as a tormenting specter: "Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thought of my wretched condition" (Douglass 74). Douglass projects the effects and appearance of slavery upon a more definable and tangible object. Yet the

institution, not the vessels, causes the appearance and feeling of a haunting phantom that plagues the soul. In a reversal Jacobs makes a similar comment about the appearance of the land on her return to America from England. As she approaches the land where she will once again be defined as property, she notes that “from the distance spectres seemed to rise up on the shores” (Jacobs 499). Later generations of Black writers repeatedly return to this notion of slavery as a haunted and haunting institution, marking slavery as the inescapable, tumultuous past impeding their progress.

In her essay “Toward the Gothic: Terrorism and Homosexual Panic” Eve Sedgwick remarks that the gothic trope of the unspoken/ unspeakable is often an evasive discourse on transgressive sexuality. Although she focuses on “homosexual panic” as represented in/ by gothic modes, she includes a long list of what constitutes “transgressive sexuality,” including rape and, arguably, miscegenation through imagined black men’s rape of white women. Furthermore, her essay argues that homosexuality is but a symptom of other transgressions, through sexuality, of non-sexualized boundaries, such as class and racial distinctions. The sexual transgression of racial boundaries becomes particularly important in light of the role women’s bodies play in slave narratives, as well as the role hybrid bodies play in nineteenth century gothic literature. In Anglo American literature, the implicit presence of racial figures in characters marked as the result of racial miscegenation underscores their explicit absence. The literary pattern of the hypersexualized, passionate brunette and the fair, pure blonde repeats not only men’s gothic ambivalence towards the role of women but the mark of racial and sexual transgressions, the brunette inevitably noted as the ancestor of a racially othered figure (Fiedler 203-5). The woman marked by such transgression inevitably provides a

temptation towards destruction, illustrating the necessity of preventing the conception of such creatures through maintenance of social boundaries.

Justin Edwards suggests that the explicitly racialized yet hybrid body proves an equally problematic figure in its ability to haunt and infect white culture via miscegenation. Using Ellen Craft as his principle example, he explains how her “physically white” hybrid body impedes racial readings. Furthermore, her very body invokes the gothic discourse of rape and abuse, and suggests the constructedness of racial difference (Edwards 37). Particularly traumatic for the white writer then is Ellen’s ability to infect white space and, her body having been properly read, its deconstructions of racial definitions. Yet for the ex-slave male writer,⁶ women’s bodies serve not so much to meditate upon racial difference as to define being and humanity, and the role histories of miscegenation have in those definitions. Women’s bodies become methods of exploring the male self, and impositions upon and violations of the black woman’s body stand as the ultimate transgression of the U.S. social order (Barrett 432).

The discussion of women’s sexualized bodies in slave narratives frequently appear alongside signs of hybridity. Indeed, writers almost always note the woman’s “fair” complexion as the cause of the lascivious master’s offending advances. William Wells Brown, for instance, recalls the haunting image of a beautiful slave girl on board his master’s boat, bound for the New Orleans market:⁷

[she had] perfectly white skin, with straight hair and blue eyes. But it was not the whiteness of her skin that created such a sensation among those who gazed upon her—it was her almost unparalleled beautyShe was not in chains There was general anxiety among the passengers and crew to learn the history of the girl. Her master kept her close by [his] side, and it would have been considered impudent for any of the passengers to have spoken to her, and the crew were not allowed to have any conversation with them the history of the beautiful girl remained a mystery. (Brown 33)

Two matters remain unspoken and relevant in this excerpt. First she is implicitly the sexual pet of her master. Brown's extensive comment upon her beauty, the special treatment she receives from her master, and the consequent regard and exclusion she receives from both passengers and crewmen point to this fact. The text itself points to a second doubly unspoken fact, marked first as the girl's unknown history. But within this question lies another: the girl's historical racial relations. Her body marks her as the result of miscegenation and her present position notes the continuance of the transgression; yet the space between the temporal moments of her birth and her adult being remains unknown and unsaid. What relation has she had to other slaves, to slave men in particular?

Brown emphasizes the importance of this last question later in his narrative as he notes how slavery forces husbands and wives beyond the bounds of normalized sexuality: "There has never yet been a case where a slave has been tried for bigamy And in fact some masters, when they have sold the husband from the wife, compel her to take another" (87-8). Henry Bibb notes a similar threat to him through his master's impositions on his wife, also a mulatto. Malinda's master agrees to let them marry "on one condition, which [Bibb] consider[ed] too vulgar to be written in this book" (Bibb 40). The women in both texts thus inscribe and repeat the history of miscegenation and the problematic definitions of black manhood that go with that history. Thus William Craft exclaims, "Oh! If there is any one thing under the wide canopy of heaven, horrible enough to stir a man's soul, and make his very blood boil, it is the thought of his dear wife, his unprotected sister, or his young and virtuous daughters, struggling to save themselves from falling prey to such demons" (8). Implicit in this sentence is Craft's

horror at being impotent in such situations; outraged at the situation, as slaves men can do nothing to prevent the rape of women, to prevent masters from breaking their wedding vows, to act completely as fathers to their daughters. The underlying question in the explicit outrage and implicit impotence of all these examples returns to the ambiguous definition of male slave identity.

William Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles For Freedom*⁸ exemplifies black men's ambiguous identity and sexuality as it results from and relates to women's bodies. Ellen Craft's recourse to cross-dressing to effect their escape raises numerous gender issues for both Ellen and her husband and returns us to Sedgwick's argument on the trope of the unspoken as a gothic discourse upon homosexuality in particular. Ellen's dress as a white, male slave owner marks race, gender and, through association, sexuality as a construction. Indeed, normative sexuality already exists as questionable for the slave through slave masters' frequent transgressions of it. Peculiar in this case is Craft's relation to his gender-bending wife as he initially insists upon and helps maintain Ellen's performance as a man. The linguistic shifts in Craft's writing as Ellen moves between gender identities signals William's changing and unstable position (Edwards 47). Craft transitions from using the referent pronouns s/he and her/ him depending upon his wife's disguise at the moment. At the same time, Craft's narrative recounts Ellen's pronoun shifts, referring to William as "boy" according to the conventions of slavery.

Craft's definition as husband presents one problem. Already questionable within the slave regime, his husbandly duties become particularly blurry to his wife, who becomes his male master. The incident likewise upsets the gender hierarchy as Craft becomes subservient to his wife. A brief exchange between Craft and one of the

numerous southern gentlemen the couple encounters illustrates this upheaval: “ ‘Boy, do you belong to that gentlemen?’ I quickly replied, ‘Yes, sir’ (which was quite correct)” (Craft 56). In a pun on the term “belong” Craft illustrates his wit in dealing with his situation. At the same time, the term “belong” remains ambiguous as a term defining his relationship to his wife. At that moment, who belongs to whom? A slave, can Ellen really ever “belong” to William? The issue would be less ambiguous if a similar comment establishing Ellen as “belonging” to William were given, confirming a sense of mutual debt in the relationship. Such a statement never occurs, however, and ownership appears one-sided to establish a particular hierarchy. Craft repeats this upheaval a few passages later in another verbal encounter when a slave-owner requests William “be attentive to [his] good master. [He] promised that [he] would do so, and ha[s] ever since endeavored to keep [his] pledge” (59). The amusing twist again makes the husband-wife relationship ambiguous, as it seems Ellen is master both in their escape and their freedom.

Definitions of sexuality underscore questions of husbandry. Edwards notes that a reaction to “fear[s] concerning his own sexuality” prompts Craft’s concluding (obsessive) affirmations of his wife’s womanhood: “by referring to his wife as ‘him’ and ‘he,’ Craft calls attention to the unstable ground upon which his sexual identity rests. His wife becomes a man, while he is positioned into the position of boy” (Edwards 48). Thus Craft’s narratively ambiguous marking of his wife’s body, via fluctuating pronouns, repeats Sedgwick’s theory of homosexuality as the unspoken within gothic discourses. Indeed, Craft never explicitly engages questions of sexuality in his text. Yet his linguistic shifts indicate “an inversion whereby the dominant role is played by the woman in

disguise [in which] Ellen's gender performance replicates the relationship between the Greek man-boy pair" (48). His narrative structuring accomplishes a similar feat. Shortly after promising to remain attentive to his "master," Craft recounts a humorous incident in which two ladies fall in love with the disguised Ellen. Craft's clever conclusion that "they fell in love with the wrong chap" (Craft 60), in addition to his aforementioned dedication to his "master," registers his own desire for the "chap." Thus again Craft's wit and humor masks his own unstable and ambiguous identity in relation to his wife/ "master."

Slave narratives, however, heavily hint at sexual transgression and sometimes speak of the rape of black women. Brown, shortly after his recollection of the beautiful, mysterious slave girl, recounts the fate of another woman suffering the "base offers," threats and bribes of her master. Lamenting her inevitable fate, Brown notes that Cynthia indeed becomes her master's mistress and has two children from him (Brown 45-6). Likewise, William Craft very nearly names the ruin of women's virtue, noting his amazement that "[a]ny man with money . . . can buy a beautiful and virtuous girl and force her to live with him in criminal connexion" (Craft 16). He then recounts the tale of two slave women sold to a wretched trader "for [his] own use" (21), not "for the field . . . but for another purpose" (22).⁹ While the texts will define the rape and seduction of women as too base to be spoken, the texts do inevitably and repeatedly speak the transgressions. Indeed, as Bibb illustrates, the sexual threat is even named by its consequence, adultery. Thus, its position as the unspoken within slave narratives remains questionable. Slave narratives occupy themselves with presenting the bodily and social horrors of the institution, and make no amends for frequent, detailed descriptions of

abuse, as well as the masters' pleasure at dispensing it. Rather, narrative uses of women's bodies point to the unspoken question of black being and slavery's destruction of identity. The extent to which certain authors go to resolve the issue reinforces its paramount significance within the slave narratives.¹⁰

Morrison, in defining the unspoken as the linguistic response to or representation of the Africanist presence, concludes that in white American gothic literature the unspoken is "an escape through language that mystifies what it cannot bring itself to articulate but still attempts to register" (*Playing* 66). Such a mystification of the black being occurs throughout the slave narratives. Furthermore, narratives attempt to register but never articulate the scarred self, mutilated in external impositions upon and definitions of their being. Indeed, after experiencing events that conflict with their imagination of that humane and victimized self, the writers will often begin to register their horror at various torments only to conclude that language fails them. Brown, for instance, says that his journey to New Orleans leaves him "at a loss for language" (Brown 39); again, on coming within sight of "the land of whips" after his first escape, he exclaims "I cannot describe my feelings" (73). Bibb more generally and frequently uses the rhetoric of the unspeakable to mystify the torments of slavery upon the soul. In fact, slave narratives speak (of) slavery as a "word too obnoxious to speak" (Bibb 18) at length; the inexpressible horrors of slavery (15) find some expression in the numerous detailed descriptions of treatment. "The deep feeling of [the] soul" (15) and the mutilations of slave self never find language, perhaps because the sense of monolithic identity never completely develops within the slave narratives. In a country where the slave body, the "not-free," provides the racially marked contrast of the "not-me," how can freed yet still

racially marked writers create such a unified, essentialized self? The typical conclusion of slave narratives exemplifies this conflict—a recount of an instance in which freedom proved fleeting for another slave. For a group that defines being in part through freedom, recognitions of freedom as constructed and fragile also become recognitions of the instability of being and identity.

At best the slave narrator constructs a hybrid identity through the course of his tale, not savage, for instance, but still questing for true “civilization,” not the illiterate, bodily-defined creature but still the inscribed, mentally confined body.¹¹ For the ex-slave narrator this sense of hybridity comes to play upon his identity in a fundamental way, as the clash of social systems within his consciousness, complicated by his body. While such a complication of identity leaves slave narratives open-ended regarding the question of being, it does again register the disruption of hierarchies within slave consciousness, represented as critiques and mystifications of the various systems. Lastly, an understanding of slave being and identity in the context of hybridity as a grotesque concept returns us to the question of the unspeakable/ unspoken.

The slave’s own contribution to slavery, implicitly recognized in the narratives, greatly complicates slave identity. After repeatedly describing the victimization of their and others’ bodies, the narrators inevitably reach a point where they mourn their own contribution to this victimization. For instance, Henry Bibb follows his account of seeing the large bruise his mistress inflicts upon his infant daughter’s cheek by repenting, “[i]f ever there was any one *act* of my life while a slave, that I have to lament over it is of that of being a father . . . of slaves” (Bibb 44). Bibb laments this “act” not only because he can do nothing to stop the brutalization of his child, but because he, as her progenitor, is

half the cause of her existence in slavery. Bibb, in the act of fathering a child, has both provided slavery with another piece of chattel and exposed a helpless creature to a ruinous, tormenting institution. In fact, he narratively prophecies his problematic stance and contribution as father upon marrying Malinda. Having misread the “slave code,” he states he “knew not that [he] was propagating victims for this kind of torture and cruelty” (36). Furthermore, Bibb’s vow to “be free or die” (33) registers his recognition of the value of liberty and the destructive force of slavery. Indeed, death, not slavery, is the only viable alternative to freedom for Bibb. Yet he willingly adds another life to the institution he so utterly disdains.¹² This internalized ambivalence—of wanting to have and love a family versus adding to slavery’s victims—precludes Bibb’s final conflictual position on forever leaving his wife and daughter in the grips of slavery.

Several instances recall the power and threat of the grotesque, in which divisions of invasion collapse and the invader and invaded become synonymous (Harpham 106). In the description of an incident much repeated in slavery, Bibb recounts how slaves are forced to lash other slaves. He recalls how a master forces a black slave driver to strip and beat his own wife for “not doing just as the master had ordered” (Bibb 112). Such moments require particular interrogation because the relationship between black women’s (violated) bodies and black masculine identity is already an unstable and conflicted one. However, unlike the previous instances in which the male viewer could at least sympathize with his victimized wife and better fancy himself the victim in his impotence, this flogging husband participates in his wife’s victimization. The tortured becomes a method of torture, if not the torturer, at the moment of whipping. Similarly commenting upon slaves’ betrayals of women’s bodies, Jacobs explains, “[s]ome poor

creatures have been so brutalized by the lash that they will sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters. Do you think this proves the black man to belong to an inferior order of beings? What would *you* be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slave ancestors? I admit that the black man *is* inferior” (375). The slave here becomes betrayer and betrayed in a collapse constituent of slavery.

Brown’s narrative especially repeats these moments of collapse between slave/ victim and master/ offender. In fact, he not only recalls instances in which he was forced to add to the agony of already whipped slaves (Brown 23) but also notes how he participates, first-hand, in slave trade. Hired out to a slave-trader, Brown is responsible for cosmetically preparing slaves for the market (42). His assistance gains his master higher offers for the slaves, and he consequently becomes invaluable in the economy as he facilitates the movement of stock. Yet as a slave himself, he cannot ignore the problem of selling individuals he racially identifies with. His linguistic shifts, indicating the growing distance he places between himself and the slave parcels, may be a result of this conflict. The first of these shifts occurs alongside his recollection of his first contribution to the trade. Having “blackened” the beard of an older slave to make him look younger, Brown’s use of the pronoun referents “us/ we” and “they/ them” becomes vague. “We/ us” at first refer to the entire shipload of people, only once becoming the referents for Brown *and* the slaves before settling as the terms for Brown and the traders. “They/ them,” in contrast, always and only refer to the slaves (42). In the entire chapter, Brown never once uses “they/ them” as referents to slave masters and traders alone, but always uses them in a manner that includes himself in the reference. Consequently the

shifts ally him with the white masters and traders even as he repents and despairs his role in the trade.¹³

The issue of spectatorship and spectacle remains implicit in Brown's narration of blackening the beards of older slaves, among numerous other instances. Complications between the spectator-spectacle relationship present another aspect of the gothic and grotesque. The complications result not only in a transgression of boundaries, but also recalls moments of unnamable hybrid being de-constructing the two categories. In another voyeuristic moment that transgresses borders between spectator-spectacle, Brown actively and willfully betrays a free man into slavery's cruelties. Having been sent to the jailor with a note to be whipped, Brown tricks a free black man into taking the note to prison for him. Brown then stands nearby to "see how [his] friend looked when he came out" (Brown 54). Although Brown later laments his behavior, excusing himself as the creation of an institution that breeds "lying and mean" victims (57), the betrayal has interesting consequences for Brown, both as indirect wielder of the lash and as voyeur. As Brown sends the man off to receive Brown's beating, he repeats the problematic behavior of the drivers ordered to lash other slaves.¹⁴ His voyeurism also becomes another manner in which Brown contributes to slavery. As Goddu explains in relation to Frederick Douglass' voyeuristic act, inter-textual spectatorship reveals the voyeurism of the narrative's readers, who watch and (can) do nothing. Douglass' narrative critiques reader spectatorship even as his narrative, and slave narratives in general, invites voyeuristic behavior (Goddu 137). Brown's spectatorship expands the critique from passive behavior, watching, to aggressive behavior, engendering. Brown's spectatorship can occur only after he has created a spectacle to view, suggesting that all acts of

voyeurism participate in similar acts of creation. His position as cosmetologist on the slave-trading ship repeats this problem. His eye creates the spectacle that will be sold.

At the same time Brown, as a racially marked body, remains aware of the spectacle he provides and the consequences of being spectacle. Hence he runs from slavery where being the marked body, the object of literal viewing—especially on the slave block—occurs alongside other brutal acts of spectatorship. Bibb, for instance, in describing the evils of slave masters marks their cruelty with terms of voyeurism: “I have often heard Garrison say that he had rather paddle a female than eat when he was hungry—that it was music for him to hear them scream, and *to see* their blood run” (Bibb 104 emphasis added). The widespread habit of making examples out of runaway slaves by creating their whipping/ punishment as an act of public display repeats this idea. The slave master creates a specific kind of spectacle for a specific viewing audience. Likewise, the eccentricities of these kinds of punishments¹⁵ point to their invitations to voyeurism. Hence the issue of spectatorship has particularly violent and physical meanings for the slaves.

Making the slave into the spectacle for entertainment purposes also denies him humanity. As the publicly whipped runaway slave he specifically becomes a tool, though not necessarily a beast. However, slave narratives persistently recount slavery’s challenges to and denial of their humanity, and this too becomes reinforced in issues of slave as spectacle and entertainment. Slaves’ denial and re-definitions of their place as spectacle become exceedingly complex as they define/ betray themselves as beasts even as they insist upon their humanity. Bibb describes such a complex betrayal in his explanation of the Sabbath among the slaves. Those slaves who claim no religion resort

to amusing themselves in the woods, gambling, drinking, and fighting. Slave holders encourage such amusement, seeing in it an opportunity to “have a little sport . . . among the slaves” (Bibb 122). After tiring of the more harmless entertainment of slave songs and dancing, which the slaveholders pay for in liquor, they encourage the slaves into combative sports. It is here, in the slaves’ drunken combat, that Bibb marks them as particularly bestial, “butting each other like sheep”:

This is urged on by giving them whiskey; making bets on them; laying chips on one slave’s head, and daring another to tip it off with his hand; and if he tipped it off, it would be called an insult and cause a fight The blows are made by kicking, knocking, and butting their heads; they grab each other by their ears, and jam their heads together like sheep. If they are likely to hurt each other very bad, their masters would rap them with their walking canes, and make them stop. (122)

Bibb twice uses the term “sheep” to describe the behavior of his peers in this passage. To mark them thus not only defines them as animals, but also defines them as willing participants, following and doing as they are led. Only instead of leading with a staff, the masters/ herders here use their walking sticks.

The above moment also marks them as figurative hybrids; the slaves are defined as men yet presented here as beasts. Importantly, this behavior occurs independent of the master’s presence. The religiously neglected and neglectful slaves, Bibb implies, behave as beasts on the Sabbath even without their masters. Though the spectacle becomes especially complete in the presence of a viewer, it does not need the voyeur to give it reason or definition. It is, to an extent, self-inflicted.

Narratives become as concerned with readable bodies as white gothic literature is in its speculation on hybrid figures. Consequently, even as the slave is the object of visual play, so too do slave narratives insist upon the slaves’ reverse gaze at their masters.

Jacobs prides herself in reading bodies, noting “I had felt, seen, and heard enough, to read

the characters . . . of those around me” (353). Likewise, misread bodies in slave narratives pose a source of conflict, but for different reasons. In typical gothic literature the threat of the hybrid lay in miscegenation. For the slaves, daily faced with miscegenated realities in the repeated white rapings of black bodies and enslaved in an institution they mark as degenerative, the horror of misread bodies lay in the real threat such misreadings pose to their lives. Thus Jacobs privileges clearly readable bodies over those that masquerade themselves to the detriment of slaves. Remembering one free colored man who tries to pass for white, she explains how his body, though readable, becomes an object of disgust in his attempts at masking: “Every body knew he had the blood of a slave father in his veins; but for the sake of passing himself off as white, he was ready to kiss the slaveholders’ feet. How I despised him! As for the constable, he wore no false colors. The duties of his office were despicable, but he was superior to his companion, inasmuch as he did not pretend to be what he was not” (442). Though the free black man’s behavior does not differ from that of the constable, his (failed) attempts at passing make him despicable because they come as a danger to other blacks.

In a disastrous mistake, Bibb initially misreads the body of his owner, Francis Whitfield. Already predisposed to convince Whitfield to purchase him because of Whitfield’s position as Deacon of a Baptist church, Whitfield’s external appearance initially satisfies Bibb. Bibb, however, soon deems Whitfield “one of the basest hypocrites”: “He *looked* like a saint—talked like the best of slave holding Christians, and acted like the devil at home” (Bibb 110 emphasis added). Bibb’s misreading has dire consequences; he exposes himself and his family to a master who keeps his slaves “poor, ragged, stupid, and half-starved” and employs one of the cruelest overseers in the county

(110). Brown recalls a similar instance in which a slave family's misreading jeopardizes their freedom and life. Here, the family misreads a black, rather than white, body. The family, newly escaped to Canada, takes into their home and confidences an ex-slave woman they assume to be their friend. Yet this woman betrays them to slave catchers who cross into Canada, kidnap the family, and attempt to drag them back into slavery (Brown 109-17). In such instances, characters misread presumably clearly readable bodies—Bibb misreads the Bible toting, literate, classed white male, while the family in Brown's narrative misreads the black ex-slave. Yet the bodies prove disastrously unreadable.

At the same time, the misreading of bodies also adds to the slaves' constructions and complications of being, impeding monolithic notions of and associated with literacy, civilization, order, humanity, and Christianity. From many of these misreadings come the critiques of society slave narratives inevitably make, and their concluding ambivalence toward it and their place within it. In Brown, the complication is clearly an issue of constructing identity of and among racially marked and similar bodies. Ellen Craft commits a similar misreading upon meeting a Quaker with a complexion near her own. She mistakes the white gentleman for a quadroon, reversing the typical gothic misreadings of hybridity (Craft 83). In fact, considering her method of escape, Ellen's misreading falls at an interesting moment. She has, by this point, dropped her disguise. The horror for Ellen comes at realizing that bodies can be mistaken even when under no false pretenses or costume. She already doubts the readability of white bodies, drawing an overarching conclusion of their trustworthiness even in abolitionist states.¹⁶ The

horror of misreading passable black or white ones adds to her horror and mistrust in reading white bodies. Fortunately her misreading is of no great consequence.

Jacobs' text illustrates the extent to which misreadings occur, and to what different consequences, on both an individual and social level. She notes innocuous misreadings that principally arise from overarching social definitions and ideologies. For instance, the woman who purchases and frees her grandmother "could neither read nor write; and when the bill of sale was made out, she signed it with a cross. But what consequence was that . . ." (Jacobs 347). Upon later encountering a slave owning neighbor from her home, Jacobs' first impulse is to run. Soon she marvels "[t]hat man was a miracle. He possessed a goodly number of slaves, and yet was not quite deaf to that mystic clock, whose ticking is rarely heard in the slaveholder's breast" (358). Both cases illustrate innocuous misreadings that nevertheless challenge Jacobs' socially inscribed definitions of being. In the former, the generosity of a white woman who, like any slave, cannot sign her self underwrites literacy as the necessary mark of being. The second incident shakes the myth of inhumanity and monstrosity as regionalized to a certain class and locale.

Brutal misreadings on the social scale counter these individualized and harmless misreadings. In fact, the general misreading of southern women's sensitivity follows on the heels of Jacobs' depiction of the illiterate woman who frees her grandmother. Jacobs uses Mrs. Flint as an example of the incongruity: she, "like many southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had not strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till the blood trickled from every stroke of the lash" (Jacobs 347). Likewise, Jacobs explains the problematic misreading Northerners are likely to carry away from their visits

to the South. Her aunt Nancy's funeral specifically gives rise to Jacobs' monologue against this kind of reading. Mrs. Flint's presence again marks the continual misreading of Southern women's bodies. As Jacobs explains, "Northern travelers, passing through the place, might have described this tribute of respect to the humble dead as a beautiful feature in the 'patriarchal institution:' a touching proof of the attachment between slaveholders and their servants; and tenderhearted Mrs. Flint would have confirmed this impression, with handkerchief at her eyes. *We* could have told them a different story" (466). The consequence of such Northern misreadings of Southern women's sensitivity and slavery as a kind patriarchal institution is that it discourages action against slavery. Jacobs implies the misreading actually renders the Northern heart insensitive to the slaves' plight. She concludes her passage on the mistaken readings of the funeral with the declaration that slaves "could give them a chapter of wrongs and sufferings, that would have touched their hearts, if they *had* any hearts to feel for the colored people" (466).

Similarly, Bibb recounts instances in which the apparent beauty of slavery's surrounding environment proves misleading and grotesquely incongruous with the horrors of the institution. The slaves were required to meet the overseer each morning, before daylight, with pine torches lighting their way; "[t]hese lights looked beautiful at a distance" (Bibb 114-15). Yet the beauty of the spectacle masks the horrors of the reality as the early meetings by this beautiful light were also times when overseers attended to the floggings they left undone from the previous day. Thus at a distance, an observer might witness the beauty of the spectacle without its attendant horrors, without "the sound of the slave driver's lash on the backs of the slaves, and of their heart-rending

shrieks” (115). Misreading here proves not only dangerous to the individual families but lethal on a broad social scale, since misreading allows those that should help the slaves to instead ignore the torment and deaths of slaves, described at length in every slave narrative.

I return to innocuous misreadings of white bodies that nevertheless challenge slave constructions of identities. Bibb misreads the “profligate and black-legs” who buys him from Whitfield. The black-legs who are expected to be uncaring and uncivilized, among the lowest classes because of their disruption of reputable society and order, prove more sympathetic and civilized than Deacon Whitfield. The black-legs blush and shudder in disgust at the treatment Whitfield inflicts upon Matilda, some “threatening, some weeping, some swearing and others declaring vengeance against such treatment being inflicted upon a human being” (Bibb 148). Where Ellen’s misreadings of whites advise her to mistrust them all, Bibb’s misreading here impedes his definitions of being according to class and stature.¹⁷

While slave narratives explicitly challenge the notion that blackness signifies savagery, they often participate in and accept dominant (oppressive) readings of other racial minorities. Such readings prove problematic for the slave writer, since the hegemonic ideologies of and against these other racial minorities are the same ideologies slaves attempt to counter in their narratives. The philosophy producing the oppressive readings of Indians, for instance, is the same philosophy that governs the problematic definitions of blackness. Consequently, moments in which slaves mark their misreadings of other colored races provide important challenges to their (imposed) understanding of the dialectic between race, humanity, and being.

Bibb illustrates this misreading, and consequential complication and de-construction, of the racial other's body and being. Bibb's half-Indian master proves one of the most civil people he encounters, and is kind and particularly trusting for a slave owner. Yet Bibb's Indian master proves to be the rule, rather than the exception among Native Americans:

The Indians allow their slaves enough to eat and wear. They have no overseers to whip nor drive them. If a slave offends his master, he sometimes, in a heat of passion, undertakes to chastise him; but it is as often the case as otherwise, that the slave gets the better of the fight, and even flogs his master; for which there is no law to punish him; but when the fight is over that is the last of it. So far as religious instruction is concerned, they have it on terms of equality, the bond and the free; they have no respect of persons, they have neither slave laws nor negro pews. Neither do they separate husbands and wives, nor parents and children . . . if I must be a slave, I had by far, rather be a slave to an Indian . . . (Bibb 152-3).

The Native Americans particularly disrupt Bibb's constructions of civilization and kindness, as witnessed by the paragraph that directly follows his praise of their slave holding behavior. Within a breath of the last sentence, Bibb notes that the Indians are uneducated heathens with the degrading habit of drunkenness (153). Bibb repeats the nationalized gothic image of the Indian as savage, marking his peril "in passing through various half civilized tribes," and whose "hands were almost invariably filled with bows and arrows, tomahawks, guns, butcher knives, and all the various implements of death which are used by them. And what made them look still more frightful, their faces were painted red, their heads muffled with bird feathers, bushes, coon tails, and owl heads" (158). The image here serves two purposes. At once it provides an image of savagery with which Bibb can contrast his own image of himself as civilized, and at the same time it impedes constructions of humanity as based upon civility. If an uneducated "savage" is

more civil than a literate Christian, what then is civilization and what is it to be a “civilized” being?

Bibb’s image as civilized self has been set up at least twice in moments depicting Bibb in slavery and in running. Accounts of his civility contrasted against (white) savagery also mark the racial constructions of black savagery as a projection of white imagination, the projection of whiteness in blackface. Furthermore such re-marking accounts erase the blackness from gothic monsters, positing the civilized slave as the hero, not the beastly villain. Bibb’s critique of the Indians’ “heathen” behavior serves as one of these marks of self as civilized. His civility allows him to see their savagery. Interestingly enough, his experience on another, crueller plantation also influences his readings of the Indians because, just as his experience of brutality at white hands allows him to appreciate the gentleness of Indian masters, so too does his understanding of white civilization affect his understanding of savagery. Yet white masters inevitably provide contradictory messages and make formulations of boundary-structured definitions and dichotomies—civil/ educated/ Christian/ kind against savage/ illiterate/ heathen/ brutal—difficult if not impossible. The other image of Bibb’s civility occurs in a moment of misreading at the hands of Whitfield. Having just been purchased, Whitfield attempts to train Bibb as a driver, instructing him to lash a slave. Upon Bibb’s refusal, Whitfield takes the lash up and never again calls on Bibb to flog a slave. Bibb concludes it is because Whitfield “saw that [he] was not savage enough” (114). Just as Bibb’s critique marks the boundaries between civilized slave and savage Indians, so too does this moment mark Bibb’s civility in contrast to Whitfield’s unexpected savagery.

Ultimately, concerns over ambiguous being surface in the form of critiques of freedom and the consequent questions of being in that freedom. From concerns over the (un)readable body arise equally troubling issues of the linguistically inscribed body. To the inscribed body the utterance of racial identity can change a life regardless of the body's geographic location at the moment of utterance. In Craft's text it occurs as generally unfathomed laws that make "the crime of freedom unpardonable" (38). He wonders at the opinion of the Supreme Court deeming men of African descent ineligible for citizenship, holding such "aliens" liable to the law yet unprotected by it. Free to call themselves "men" but never "citizens," (ex-)slaves are susceptible to "robbery, rape, and murder [which] are not crimes when committed by a white upon a coloured person" (39). Likewise all of the narratives under discussion here, among numerous others, rail against the injustice of the Fugitive Slave Act in which "northerners consent to act the part of bloodhounds, and hunt the poor fugitive back into his den, 'full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness'" (Jacobs 368). Jacobs' epitaph for the south as a den of death and decay only re-emphasizes the gothic's preoccupation with entrapment and freedom. In typical gothic texts dank and dark settings signify upon the gothic hero(ine)'s entrapment and provide a tangible contrast to freedom, the genre's primary metaphysical concern. Jacobs' emphasis on the decay likewise signifies upon slavery as exemplary of the horror of entrapment and returns us to freedom as its marked contrast.

Slave narratives repeatedly recognize that freedom can only be a linguistic construction as long as their humanity and identity is (mis)read through race. Slave writers find increasing difficulty in saying who is better off: the slave who is "allowed to ride in a filthy box, behind white people," or the ex-slave in the Free States who has the

“privilege” of paying to ride in that same “filthy box” (Jacobs 481). The law has made it possible to be a “slave in New York, as subject to slave laws as [they] had been in a Slave State. Strange incongruity in a State called free” (506). Freedom is an idea, a namable thing but not necessarily a material reality. For slaves, recognizing freedom is an arbitrary concept proves as threatening as white recognition of race as constructed. Equivalent to definitions of race that destabilize identity, such a definition of freedom equally destabilizes to slaves’ constructed being and material reality. Freedom as a linguistic construction can be redefined at random according to the whim of the speaker. Freedom’s susceptibility to redefinition when taken alongside the power and problem of uttering race can prove disastrous to ex-slave existence, significantly shifting their existences even outside the Slave States.

Jacobs’ account of a peculiar event in her son’s life serves as an excellent illustration of the threat to being posed by destabilized freedom. Her son, an extremely light-complexioned child, easily passes for white. Jacobs sends him off to learn a trade while she travels to England, “and for several months every thing worked well. He was liked by the master, and was a favorite with his fellow apprentices; but one day they accidentally discovered a fact they had never before suspected—that he was colored! This at once transformed him into a different *being*” (Jacobs 499). The passage illustrates how the utterance of race in a “free” state alters being, even as notions of being are connected to freedom. Supposedly one can become a (hu)man when one becomes free; yet here that being is instantly transformed into some other unnamed yet despised thing. Thus as slaves were ruled by the lash, so too are blacks ruled by the (un)uttered word.

What stands at risk in the incomprehensible laws that allow abolitionist states to collude in slavery is not only the slaves' freedom, but their being as governed by ideologies of that freedom. Slave narratives repeatedly look to the north, to the locale of freedom, as the place where the categories contributing to their being—gender roles, class hierarchies, intellectual identity—become normalized. In the free north, slaves dream of being the “husband,” the “gentlewoman,” the “citizen;” only in freedom can they truly gain access to such positions. If freedom is an arbitrary idea for the black body, however, then the positions that body would have access to within freedom prove likewise indefinite. Consequently, as the slaves discuss the instability and uncertainty of freedom as a reality, they also implicitly refer to the instability of the roles, relationships, and positions that lend to the construction of their being. Brown perhaps responds oddly in recognition of this complicated identity in freedom, noting that when “asked how I felt upon finding myself regarded as a man by a white family . . . I cannot say that I have ever answered the question yet” (Brown 101).

The Bondswoman's Narrative: Fictionalizing the Slave's Narrative

Hannah Crafts' *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, written between 1855 and 1860, realizes the possibilities of the slave narrative as a gothic work to the fullest extent. The work is part fact and part fiction, as Henry Louis Gates explains in his detailed introduction. Changes of names and additions of overtly fabricated storylines mask the true story of a yet-to-be-named slave woman's escape from slavery. While the text reads much like a sentimental gothic romance, Gates was nevertheless able to trace the life and escape of a slave woman through Crafts' details of dates, events, and places; even her name changes only thinly veiled facts. The novel is rather “an unusual amalgam of conventions from gothic novels, sentimental novels, and the slave narratives”

(*Bondswoman's* xxi). Of special importance in my argument is what the novel says about the relation between the gothic, the slave, and the slave narrative. Indeed, though the novel uses gothic conventions as well as presents several gothic, ghostly stories, it repeatedly emphasizes the idea that life holds horror enough for the slave to make their tale gothic without embellishment. The novel likewise continues slave narrative concerns with ambiguous bodies, apparent in mistaken identities and infant switching, and complications of/ threats to being.

Crafts weaves several gothic tales throughout the course of her text. Importantly, all of these tales derive from the relationships and torments of slavery. Nonetheless, in each tale Crafts explicitly follows Gothic tropes from landscaping to “dark” villains to actual curses. Villainous slave traders pursue the heroines through haunted cabins where a beautiful girl has been murdered (69) and drive the heroines to the brink of insanity, imagining invisible beings who seek to devour flesh and crush bones (67). At capture, the two women suffer in dungeons of “Egyptian darkness” where huge rats nibble at their cheeks as they sleep (78, 79). All the while a “dark,” twisted Hawthornian villain pursues the heroines, who encounter horrific tales complementary to their own.

The first of these hauntings invokes a curse, a theme prevalent in the text. It likewise invokes the typical gothic landscape of a crumbling and ruinous castle/ abbey/ apartment, symbolic of ruined authority (Fiedler 112). Crafts’ initial adventure occurs in one such ruined and deserted apartment amidst a plantation. Remarking on the gothic characteristics of the text, Gates notes that “Lindendale seems to be exceedingly aristocratic and antique for a New World setting” (*Bondswoman's* 245). The apartment is dreary and solemn, a silent room in a large house in which “many generations have

passed to the grave” (Crafts 15). The atmosphere invites meditations upon the dead and imaginings of “the echo of a stealthy tread behind us . . . a shadow flitting past through the gloom. There is a sound, but it does not seem of mortality” (15). The apartment houses portraits of the De Vincent family, reaching back to their first ancestor on American soil, Sir Clifford.¹⁸ This ancestor proclaimed that his succeeding heirs should each commission similar portraits of themselves with their wives to be hung in line with his. The heir that failed to follow his mandate would be cursed. Crafts’ master dissents from custom, and she looks on his solitary portrait with a sense of prophecy, imagining that the portrait’s expression changes before her eyes (17). Clifford is the “ruined” authority here both in his inability to gain obedience from later generations and in his corruption as a slave owner. Crafts does not tell, and need not reveal at this point in the tale, the extent of Clifford’s brutality. His position as a slave owner provides reason enough for curse and ruin.

Sir Clifford’s curse suffers competition in the ruin of the plantation. Yet both curses begin with him: one a benediction issued from his lips about the behavior of his ancestors and the other, perhaps more powerful, a curse against his family issued from a slave he tortures to death. I suggest that the latter curse’s infamy among the slaves and its seemingly tangible presence in the linden tree marks Rose’s curse as the more potent of the two curses. Depicting the setting as prophetic of the impending disaster, Crafts exclaims that in the laughing or shrieking wind that “had something expressively ominous in its tone” the linden tree “lost its huge branches and swayed and creaked distractedly, and we all knew that was said to forebode calamity to the family” (Crafts 20). The creaking of this tree heralds De Vincent’s final misfortune when he would

seem about to break Sir Clifford's curse and obey the mandate. Sir Clifford plants the tree. An exceptionally cruel master, Clifford sits within sight and hearing of the agonies from his tormented slaves, pausing in his discussions "to give directions to the executioner, or order some mitigation of the torture only to prolong it" (21). Having been irritated by an old slave woman's dog, Clifford orders her to kill it. The woman, Rose, cannot kill it, having sworn to her daughter—the original owner of the dog, sold away to Alabama—to protect it. Clifford has both the woman and the dog gibbeted alive to the linden tree.

The curse of slavery's horrors proves most powerful and authentic in the text. Crafts particularly details her description of Clifford's victims as their frames waste away. Suspended from the tree without food or water, Rose's "features assumed a collapsed and corpse-like hue and appearance, her eyes seemed starting from their sockets, and her protruding tongue refused to articulate sound" (23). On the fifth night of their torment a huge tempest rises; throughout the night "the wail of a woman the howling of a dog, and the creaking of the linden branches could be heard" (24). The dog is dead the next morning, and Clifford offers to release Rose. Rose refuses, declaring

"I will hang here till I die as a curse to this house, and I will come here after I am dead to prove its bane. In sunshine and shadow, by day and by night I will brood over this tree, and weigh down its branches, and when death, or sickness, or misfortune is to befall the family ye may listen for ye will assuredly hear the creaking of its limbs" and with one deep prolonged wail her spirit departed. (25)

This story spreads around the plantation; and the linden tree's creaking branches fill "bosoms with supernatural dread" (25). Furthermore, though Crafts explains her reaction to the portraits and story of Sir Clifford's mandate as reasonable results of setting and mental disposition, she never explains away the linden tree's creaking and relation to the misfortune that befalls the plantation. Indeed, the tree's foreboding creaking correctly

and timely prophecies impending doom. Thus a curse descending from a social wrong replaces/ overrides the typical gothic curse descending from a familial wrong.

The form of the plantation's destruction also suggests that Rose's is the stronger of the two curses. The master weds a beautiful woman who hides her mulatto race. As the bride passes under Sir Clifford's portrait in her bridal robes, the image "regards her with its dull leaden stare[, s]he turns away" (Crafts 28-9). On the night of the wedding festivities, held in the hall of portraits, the wind moans amid the linden tree's "horrible dull creaking that forboded misfortune to the house" (29). Sir Clifford's portrait crashes from the wall immediately after De Vincent promises to cut down the linden tree, and rid the plantation of its horrific noise. Although the scene recalls one from *The Castle of Otranto*, it functions quite differently as a social metaphor. Donald Ringe, in charting the American appropriation of European gothic, specifically notes that in *The Castle of Otranto* the "hackneyed" events were intimately connected with the "restoration of order to a world in which a usurper has broken the natural line of descent and seized possessions that are not rightfully his"; the ghosts and supernatural events serve to "reveal the truth of the usurpation, to identify the legitimate heir, and to help him restore his rightful position in society" (19). Sir Clifford's crashing portrait certainly repeats the supernatural rebellion against an unlawful presence/ marriage in the ancestral line. After all, considering Clifford's treatment of his slaves, he would undoubtedly roll over in his grave should his ancestor marry a person of slave stock.

At the same time, the creaking of the tree that precedes the portrait's crash, and contends with it for Hannah's attention,¹⁹ points to a different kind of dispossession: the dispossession of a tortured group. Though Rose's curse promises to enact the ruin of the

family, the method in which this ruin occurs speaks volumes to issues of social injustice. No slave uprising burns the plantation to the ground; no slave ever lifts a hand against the plantation's master. The very institution under which the family prospers dooms the family to suffering. Furthermore, the destruction's passive aggressive form presses the fact that this is not an individual offense. The only villain in this plot is Trappe, a pawn and representative of the slave system, prospering from its rules and information. As a nonviolent harbinger of destruction, Trappe likewise repeats the text's message of systematic social ruin. The greater wrong, the true curse, lies in the institution and its constructed boundaries, not in the individuals that make it up. The rest—slave, mistress, and master—are victims.

The scene also suggests that erasing slave memory and the institution's tortures from history proves disastrous. Sir Clifford is brought down, as it were, at the moment of the oath to cut down the tree, removing the physical memory of Rose's torture and death from the plantation. Sir Clifford's fallen and destroyed portrait, a lost memento of ancestral history, coincides with the promise of other historical destruction. The event thus implies the link between the two histories, and to destroy one suggests the destruction and loss of the other. As the crashing picture amid the linden's creaks warns of destruction to the household, the words surrounding the event warn of the loss of memory. Modern black writers take up this theme in their haunted works as well.

Crafts repeatedly refers to the trope of the "curse" to describe the trappings of race/blackness. A mulatto, Crafts is a hybrid, largely unreadable body. Her "complexion was almost white, and the obnoxious descent could not be readily traced, though it gave a rotundity to [her] person, a wave and curl to [her] hair, and perhaps led [her] to fancy

pictorial illustrations and flaming colors” (Crafts 6). Yet this description occurs only after she has learned “what a curse was attached to [her] race” (5-6). The role of language becomes important in the contrast here between unreadable body and spoken curse. Indeed, a curse is nothing but a construction of words that nevertheless has power to affect and ruin the life it fixes upon. Again language holds sway over the material body, and the term “black,” “mixed,” or “African” become totems maliciously equivalent to disruptive and unutterable voodoo terminology. Her unreadable body does not impede the “curse.” Crafts’ entire text functions as an itemization of the particulars of the “curse;” she pauses to explain an event or person plagued by doom, dark clouds and shadows. When describing a slave wedding, she recalls, “I gazed at them and wondered if they were really so happy—wondered if no dark shadows of coming evil never haunted their minds” (120). Foreboding weather soon follows this foresight of trouble,²⁰ signaling the fulfillment of the “curse:”

The night had been beautiful and balmy, and the fine moonlight lay like a mantle of soft resplendence over the scene, but a cloud had suddenly risen, and just as the bride, conspicuous in her snowy robes joined the group of dancers, it swept over the moon extinguishing her light, and a burst of thunder announced the approaching tempest. Suddenly and without further warning the winds arose, clouds obscured the firmament, and there was darkness and lightening, and rain, where only a few minutes before had been youth, and beauty, and love, and light, and joyousness. (120)

The sudden shift in weather equals the shift the racial curse causes in each slave’s life as he move from children to adulthood. She mourns that the slave children she watches, in the “sunshine period of their lives,” will soon witness the doom that is their fate (11). The curse especially blights new beginnings for the slave, a constant threat to their futures rather than a momentary torment.

The “shadow” especially haunts and curses her mistress. In a story that begins with child-swapping and mistaken identity, Crafts explicates the constructedness of race as it torments an innocent woman and destroys a family. Her mistress’ slave mother switches her at birth for a dead white child. Her mistress’ father raises the woman as an elite white woman until he dies. At this point Trappe enters with evidence of her mistress’ true identity and blackmails her into silence until he finds a situation in which the information will prove financially beneficial to him. From hence forward a shadow doubly haunts the mistress—the shadow of race cast upon her in Trappe’s utterance, and by Trappe himself. Serving in the manner of a Hawthornian villain,²¹ Trappe’s body also serves as the physical marker of her invisible race. Crafts describes him at each appearance in terms of blackness. He has “great black eyes” (28), dresses in “seedy black” (37), and always follows “close behind like her shadow” (28). He literally becomes the racial shadow both in his bodily contrast of blackness to her whiteness, and in his ability to utter race and thus “change” her.

In her mistress, we witness racial difference as a curse that extends beyond the enslaved to destroy the enslaver. Having discovered that his new bride is Black, De Vincent commits suicide. Yet De Vincent cannot be taken as a casualty of passing or border transgressions; the context in which Crafts hears of her master’s death implies that his suicide derived from the same cause as their suffering. De Vincent commits suicide only after speaking with Trappe (72-73). Her mistress has gone crazy at this point from Trappe’s, acting as her haunting shadow, constant pursuit. She dies during a conversation with Trappe (99). The description of her mistress’ death marks the linguistic construction and marking of race, not the act of passing, as destructive.

Speechless as Trappe describes her fate, she screams mid-conversation and blood bubbles from her lips (99). Only blood answers the racially spoken and described word in this scene. The matter of “blood” proves her downfall; “blood” as spoken, as used in linguistic utterance to confine the material body, becomes deadly. Thus a man who is a linguistic signifier, the man who speaks race/ curse, plagues and destroys De Vincent and his mulatto wife.

Even as Crafts illustrates the destructive conflict between unreadable bodies and linguistic markings of race, she also repeats slave narrative concerns with reading bodies. She proclaims, “[i]nstead of books I studied faces” (Crafts 27), yet cannot read the “shadow” that haunts her mistress. While her misreading of her mistress’ shadow does not greatly vex Crafts in relation to her mistress’ body, her reading of Trappe’s and other treacherous bodies proves vital. In the midst of much company, Trappe captures Crafts’ attention. She notes his “great black eyes so keen and piercing that you shrank involuntarily from their gaze” (28). Watching the interaction between her master and her new mistress, she also astutely notes that he follows the mistress like her shadow. Indeed, Crafts soon recognizes Trappe’s particular evil as his ability to invoke the “shadow” on those who might otherwise pass.

In a similar emphasis on reading bodies, Crafts foresees and prepares for betrayal from one of the slaves on the Wheeler plantation. Upon first meeting Maria, Crafts sees at “once that [she] had to deal with a wary, powerful, and unscrupulous enemy. She was a dark mulatto, very quick-motioned with black snaky eyes, and hair of the same color” (203). Though Maria is adept at concealing her plans and thought from others, “her words the fairest when she contemplated the greatest injury,” Crafts can at all points see

beyond Maria's smooth countenance (203). Furthermore, while Maria nearly proves Crafts downfall, her scheming jeopardizing Crafts' womanly virtue, Crafts' ability to read Maria and her plotting saves her twice over. First and foremost, it allows Craft to be cautious in word and action around Maria. Secondly, Maria's plotting and Crafts' advanced refusal of victimization causes Crafts to flee the overtly perilous institution of slavery. Crafts' reading skills here consequently prove her salvation.

At the same time, the marker of Trappe's evil also illustrates the conflicts of black writers using the gothic trope. Crafts essentially writes Trappe as a figure of blackness. As Levin contends about American gothic literature in general, blackness' problematic place refers to the question of using blackness to signify inner corruption and depravity. This blackness problematically manifests itself physically until only blackness defines Trappe, his race as white implicitly unspoken throughout the majority of the text. As a villain, one of two figures of terror in the text, Trappe becomes black. This blackening becomes literal in the case of the second villain and threat, Mrs. Wheeler. Blackness even characterizes the mulatto Maria, a description that Gates notes is rare for black writers (*Bondswomans* xix).²² Furthermore, this innate blackness initially registers beneath Trappe's skin and manifests itself only as others read and define his blackness. The registering of an innate blackness becomes problematic for Crafts. Her text centers on the disastrous boundaries constructed upon rules and ideologies marking race through bloodline—innate and beneath the skin of the “whitest” of slaves. Indeed, the connection between Crafts' reading and definition of Trappe's blackness and its physical manifestation repeats the white gothic patterning of hybridity. Once “found out,” Trappe

becomes categorized and physically marked. This innate blackness destroys Crafts' master and would-be mistress.

There occurs one incident of widespread misreading in the text. This event proves to be a humorous episode even as it again marks Crafts' problematic use of blackness manifested on the skin. Crafts' last mistress, Mrs. Wheeler, applies a fine, white beauty powder to her skin in preparation for a social event. Mrs. Wheeler returns home later that night with an entirely black face. So changed is her appearance that her own husband fails to recognize her and mistakes her for a black woman. It turns out that the powder she'd applied earlier was the widespread joke and revenge of a chemist betrayed by a vain woman. The powder, when exposed to fumes from smelling bottles, turns black. Mrs. Wheeler becomes the talk of the town; sermons are preached against vanity and conclude in wonder "that the presumptuous lady had not been turned irrevocably black" (Crafts 169). The incident points to the construction of race, marking racial divisions of blackness and whiteness as misconstrued. The whitest powder turns the face black, surpassing illustrations of the mutability of the boundary between the two races to say that no boundary exists at all. Whiteness and blackness become interchangeable, racial fads to be taken up at will as the morning gossip shows: ". . . it was even broached among milliners that black for the time being should be fashionable style" (169).

Mrs. Wheeler's blackening also captures the sentiment of the hybrid figure in literature. Where white gothic writers feared the Black creature that passed among them in white face, Black writers fought the bodily inscriptions and misreadings of/ in racial ideology. Lynn Casmier-Paz's analyses of slave portraiture notes the portraiture's use as an illustration of the ex-slaves' class status and their established membership among the

literate elite. Portraits were meant as “the likenesses of fellow American citizens, and not a beaten, raped, humiliated, and subservient class of servile human beings. *These people look like us*, and therefore are *amongst us*” (Casmier-Paz 107 emphasis added). Mrs. Wheeler’s mishap comments on the extent to which the reverse inevitably proved true for the ex-slave. The slave, internally no different from the elite class, is separated because he does not “look like us;” moving “amongst us,” he is not one “of us.” The event undermines the last sentiment. Mrs. Wheeler, temporarily back by accident and misfortune, belongs to the segregating elite class. Yet the misreading of her skin unjustly deprives her of the rights and privileges of her being, hidden beneath a mask. Likewise, as a white creature whose “blackness” others discover, Mrs. Wheeler repeats the text’s first storyline of the literal hybrid figure. The notoriety extending from the incident causes the Wheelers to flee the city and return to their plantation, where she pledges Crafts to strict silence not to reveal the incident. Mrs. Wheeler then becomes the fleeing hybrid, leaving the region where her blackness is discovered and known to others where she has not been so inscribed. Wheeler flees the artificial shadow cast upon her, just as Crafts’ first mistress flees her inscribed shadow.

At the same time, the event complicates Crafts’ characterizations of race. Wheeler here repeats Trappe’s blackening. In this instance the connection between moral depravity and blackness becomes visibly viable on a large scale, since any woman who falls prey to the sin of vanity will develop black skin. Thus moral or spiritual corruption becomes associated with blackness again. This complication typifies Crafts’ characterization of the different degrees of blackness. Gates notes that Crafts includes especially stark descriptions of the class and color distinctions between house and field

slaves, the “severity of her characterizations . . . unusually extreme, compared with similar distinctions drawn in the slave narratives” (“Annotations” 274). Crafts actually expresses a degree of disdain towards the darker field slaves as she recalls Mrs. Wheeler sending her from the house to work in the fields as punishment. She laments, “most horrible of all doomed to association with the vile, foul, filthy inhabitants of the huts, and condemned to receive one of them as my husband my soul actually revolted with horror unspeakable” (Crafts 205). Her horror stems in part from her perception of the disparity between herself as a mulatto house servant and the “degraded” field hands. The notion of wedding such a black hand inevitably causes her to flee slavery. The distinctions of class that coincide with color gradations add to the complications of representing/ characterizing blackness already present in ex-slave use of the gothic form.

Challenges of Form

The very form of narrative encumbers slaves’ attempts to achieve a definition of being—of the civil verses the savage self, the man verses the slave. First and foremost are the problems of the modes and forms at play within the slaves’ narratives. Gothic tropes, while a tool useful for re-defining slavery and self, were also inevitably inscribed by a racialized vocabulary. The gothic form could point to the inconsistencies and phobias within social definitions, marking race as constructed, but its language also re-inscribed those constructions. Furthermore the rules guiding the structure of the slave narratives remind the writers that even as they meant to establish a sense of intellectually-defined being through or in the act of writing they were nevertheless bodily confined. As an assertion of existence, slave narratives begin with a statement of the author’s birth. However, only slave narratives require such assertions of existence and identity; it is not a beginning required of/ present in other autobiographies (Olney 155).

Language itself proves to be a minefield for the slave writer. He can arrive at a sense of being only through language, but “conception of the preeminent form of being is conditioned by white, Christian standards” and written within the language that frees her/him (qtd. in Baker 249). Language likewise determines the matter of identity, the utterance of race changing the reading of their skins (Edwards 76). Yet through language the ex-slave writer can create a “liberated” self against imposed signs such as “nigger,” culturally read as subhuman agency and labor (Baker 247). Language both liberates, in its power to re-order, manipulate and define the self, and imprisons, with its “unstated history of consequences [and] known history of future intentions” (qtd. in Baker 249). These difficulties of form and language further complicate the writer’s notion of being, even in “freedom” and the moment of writing. Consequently, Brown reflects that “while I am seated here . . . writing this narrative, I am a slave . . .” (Brown 103). Such a concluding reflection on identity reinstates the hybrid self as the written slave and writing man, conflictually embodied in one person.²³

Bibb illustrates the manner in which language contributes to complicated and hybrid definitions. In an ingenious rhetorical moment, Bibb explains the illogic of punishing a slave for running away with a master’s mule: “I well knew that I was regarded as property, and so was the ass; and I thought if one piece of property took off on another, there could be no law violated in the act; no more sin committed in this than if one jackass had rode off on another” (Bibb 122). The complications here become multifold. In Bibb’s illustration of his rhetorical powers, he fits himself into Enlightenment-based definitions of humanity and displays of wit. Furthermore, as he uses this rhetoric to point out the flaws in the laws of the society based upon such values,

he also marks them as falling short of Enlightenment ideals. Bibb can just as easily argue against society's, and its constituents', imperfections were they to attempt to deny his being based upon some other of his flaws.

At the same time, the passage re-marks him as beast of burden, and self-knowingly so. He is but a second "jackass." Though he indicates that such a definition is a matter of thought rather than tangible reality, the extent to which all definitions are language-based complicates it. In a language-ordered reality, in which access to certain linguistic and literate skills and illustrations of mental prowess provides the basis for being, saying a thing, defining it within a certain category becomes nearly equivalent to materially forcing it into that group. Furthermore, Bibb's equation of himself with the "jackass" in this moment jeopardizes the reality of his freedom. After all, can a "jackass" ever really be a free being, even if it performs tricks?²⁴ Jacobs, implicitly repeating the man/ beast dichotomy, seems to answer in the negative: "while the Free States sustain a law which hurls fugitives back into slavery, how can the slaves resolve to become men" (375).

Slave narratives repeatedly illustrate the difficulty of shaking evilly defined mantles, using terms that describe them and their behavior as animals. Consequently, narrators will not only describe slaves' habitations as pen-like but also note that they "herd down" together. Narrators will in fact mark their own beastly behavior; defining such behavior as a consequence of slavery does not entirely remove the bestial mark.

The problematic re-marking of the black body in slave narratives reflects the larger issue of corporeal representation and entrapment in the gothic genre. The particular dilemma for ex-slave narrators is to represent and make their body appear in and through a medium that affords its users the ability to do away with the body. To accomplish their

tasks, ex-slaves must make their bodies appear within a discourse that historically erases it. Yet their turn to literacy underscores a desire to present the mind and intellect as eradicable markers of self and being, removed from existence “mediated by physical and sensational imperatives attributed to ‘the most contracted of spaces, the small circle of living matter’” (Barrett 422). The very act of writing reminds ex-slaves that to be racially marked²⁵ is to be a body, fixed in a particular, historically constructed kind of space. At once slaves conceive of literacy as empowerment and transformation of identity to those previously excluded from it. Textually, illiteracy marks a lack of language and legal status to maintain stable selves, reducing protagonists to the level of nonbeings. Narratives function as lettered utterances and assertions of identity and freedom, underwritings of being (Edwards 41). The empowerment and transformation literacy allows remains ambiguous however (Barrett 418). The narrative descriptions of repeated physical brutality, of horrors inscribed upon and within slaves’ skins, of racial biases encountered in and impeding freedom, register that blacks must first and foremost deal with their bodily existences.

Henry Bibb again proves a useful illustration of this conflict in his note on a publication recounting racial discrimination. When Bibb suffers an offense at the hands of a ship’s proprietor, the proprietor unceremoniously orders Bibb to leave the breakfast table, after a personal invitation from the same man. Bibb confronts the proprietor about his behavior, to which the proprietor responds he only issued Bibb the initial invitation under the mistaken idea that Bibb was white. Bibb informs the man that such treatment insults him and he will inform the world of it. Upon reaching Cincinnati, Bibb publishes a statement of the affair in the *Daily Herald* (Bibb 182-85).

Bibb marks his literacy, and its assumed power, at the beginning of the account, noting that upon boarding the ship one of the board crew gave him “a card of the boat, upon which was printed, that no pains would be spared to render all passengers comfortable who might favor them with their patronage to Cincinnati” (Bibb 182). Yet his literacy here does not and cannot erase the entrapment of his racial marking. Nor does his publication in the paper define him outside of his body. Although Bibb writes the published essay as a complaint of wrongs against an intellectually/ literate defined being, his complaint inevitably establishes those wrongs upon a racial and embodied basis. Thus Bibb must re-inscribe the very corporeal readings he hopes to erase.

Yet the gothic trope’s usefulness in describing and theorizing the horrors and conflicts of slavery far outweighs the limitations of the language and ideology ordering the Gothic. The slave never really has to imagine the terrors and complexities bound in the gothic tale. Life provides horrors enough for slaves. Crafts’ frequent recourse to conventionalized gothic tropes suggests the extent to which the gothic functions as more than a manner of narrating horror in slave narratives. It becomes a method of meditating upon being and self. Questions of identity haunt gothic discourses in general. The obsession can be more specifically connected to the problem of determining racial identity when one drop made you black (Edwards xxv).

The gothic mode’s discourse upon race and being proves so mutable that Crafts marks the mode as liberating early in her text. In the hall of portraits, filled with haunting presentiments and “superstitious awe” Crafts experiences a transformation of self: “. . . I seemed suddenly to have grown old, to have entered a new world of thoughts, and feelings and sentiments. I was not a slave with these pictured memorials of the past.

They could not enforce drudgery As their companion I could think and speculate. In their presence my mind seemed to run riotous and exult in its freedom as a rational being” (Crafts 17). Beyond the shudder of recalling the family curse attached to the portrait tradition, Crafts can experience freedom and being amidst the gothic setting. The gothic rhetoric of grotesque figures and transgressed boundaries, of revealing and complicating socially constructed definitions liberates her in this moment. Crafts’ transgression of social boundaries in this moment also points back to the manner in which slavery itself transgresses temporal boundaries. Long dead ancestors continue to haunt society beyond their time and lives. Slavery here becomes an institution haunted by ancestors who reach beyond the grave to “enforce drudgery” alongside their current descendants. Haunted by the dead and built upon torment, slavery proves the fitting setting for any gothic novel. The lives, struggles, and complexities of the beings suffering within the institution reinforce the gothic as a mode of reality.

Notes

¹ I have specifically chosen these narratives because they are widely held to be written by the ex-slaves firsthand. While the intervention of white editors inevitably adds complications to determining the authenticity of racially defined texts, I hope to circumvent some of those complications by using texts not dictated to a ghost-writer who might then further manipulate the tale. James Olney particularly discusses this complication at some length in “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” printed in *The Slave’s Narrative*. I also choose antebellum narratives, rather than narratives composed during/ after Reconstruction, because “the nature of the narratives, and their total rhetorical strategies and import, changed once slavery no longer existed,” the terms of opposition shifting from slave/ free to black/ white (*The Slave’s* xiii).

² The murders/ suicides, rapings, entrapment and escape cycles, torture (brutal whippings), and familial secrets (illegitimate births) that make up numerous gothic plots constitute real, daily existence under slavery.

³ The excerpt of her analysis is the following:

In retracing on Tuesday morning the route pursued by the banditti, consisting of a distance of 20 miles, my imagination was struck with more horror, than the most dreadful carnage in a field of battle could have produced. The massacre before me, being principally of helpless women and children In future years, the bloody road, will give rise to many a sorrowful legend; and the trampling of hoofs, in fancy, visit many an excited imagination. (qtd in Goddu 135).

⁴ Fanon defines the colonials' "metaphysics" as his customs and sources. The colonizing world erases his metaphysics "because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him" (Fanon 110).

⁵ Bibb repeatedly notes throughout his narrative the impediments to slaves receiving religious instruction, thus implying their spiritual doom in the hereafter.

⁶ I explicitly define this discussion of women's bodies as witnessed or written by male slaves because the narrative presentation and function of the female body in slave narratives greatly differs between genders. Lindon Barrett notably demonstrates how male narrators reinscribe (in terms of gender) the dynamics they challenge (in terms of race) by voiding women of language and circulating their bodies in symbolic and textual systems meant to challenge such "corporealization" (Barrett 432). Consequently, a distancing similar to that of white narrators to the slave object occurs narratively between black men and women.

⁷ Slave narratives repeatedly note that being sold/ sent to New Orleans is the equivalent of death for a slave woman as she is inevitably bound to be bought there as sexual chattel.

⁸ For a detailed argument on the complication of Ellen's gender and racial identity/ hybridity, see Justin Edwards' chapter "Passing and Abjection in William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles For Freedom*."

⁹ This tale also becomes an instance of incest as well, as a listener, having understood the trader's sexual intentions, exclaims "Oh, but she is your cousin" (Craft 22).

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of narrative reclamations of identity, see Edwards' chapter on Ellen and William Craft and Goddu's chapter on Harriet Jacobs. The first discusses William Craft's obsessive reassertions of his wife's femininity as a reflection upon his own identity; the later notes Jacobs' own concern with establishing a sense of her self and history with her daughter.

¹¹ The sense of hybrid identity here is something like a precursor to notions of double consciousness. Where double consciousness asks what is it to be black *and* American, hybrid identities are still formulating what it is to *be* black, to *be* American, to *be* civilized, to *be* literate, to *be*.

¹² This comes in contrast to William and Ellen Craft, who "had seen so many other children separated from their parents in this cruel manner, that the mere thought of [their] ever becoming the [parents] of a child, to linger out a miserable existence under the wretched system of American slavery, appeared to fill [their] very soul with horror" (Craft 27). Consequently Ellen at first refuses to marry William until they are free, relinquishing eventually but still refusing to have a child while in slavery.

¹³ As an introduction to this moment of induction to the cosmetic nature of slave-trading, Brown says "I was heart-sick at seeing my fellow-creatures bought and sold" (41).

¹⁴ In an interesting variation of this phenomena, Brown recalls how several slaves were ordered to restrain a powerful slave for a whipping. The overseer is, in fact, only able to accomplish his task by having his white friends help to hold and beat the resisting slave (18-19).

¹⁵ One particularly eccentric punishment was tying whipped slaves to trees and leaving them to hang there until (nearly) dead—an event that occurs in both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Bondswoman's Narrative*. Similarly, Jacobs recalls a neighboring slave owner who tied slaves up, and placed a fire and cooking bacon above the slave in such a way that the fat dripped upon and scalded the slave's skin as it cooked (Jacobs 377).

¹⁶ Ellen tells her husband, upon discovering the Quaker is white, "I have no doubt whatever in white people, they are only trying to get us back into slavery" (Craft 84).

¹⁷ Lynn Casmier-Paz's essay "Slave Narrative and the Rhetoric of Author Portraiture" discusses the slave portraits at the beginning of each narrative as an illustration of the ideological connection between being and class/ literacy/ stature.

¹⁸ Gates also comments that this scene is reminiscent of the role portraiture plays in Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (*Bondswoman's* 245).

¹⁹ Crafts' writing places the two directly in connection with each other in a single moment/ line: ". . . through the mingled sounds of joyous music and rain and wind I saw the haughty countenance of Sir Clifford's pictured semblance, and heard the ominous creaking of the linden tree" (29).

²⁰ Gates notes that Crafts' frequent recourse to shifting weather is also a standard convention of gothic novels (*Bondswoman's* 255).

²¹ Gates specifically identifies Trappe as the "elder person" of the woods, who is possibly the devil, in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (*Bondswoman's* 247).

²² Gates explains that "black writers assumed the humanity of black characters as the default, as the baseline of characterization in their texts" in contrasts to white writers of the 1850s. Whites tended to introduce blacks awkwardly, characterizing blacks by race first and foremost. Blackness is always marked "white characters receive virtually no racial identification" (*Bondswoman's* xix).

²³ Houston Baker reflects that all ex-slave narrators occupy a similar hybridity: "Language, like other social institutions, is public . . . the nature of the autobiographer's situation seemed to force him to move to a public version of the self—one molded by the values of white America" (251). In the moment of writing, the autobiographer then occupies two selves: a private self and a public self. Though Baker contends that the narrative is a move to a public self, its presentation of individual histories and trials marks it an attempt at writing a the private self as well. Thus the resultant narrative is also bound between these two spaces.

²⁴ This complication is reinforced by the problem of the Fugitive Slave law, which many narratives inevitably mention and cry out against.

²⁵ Lindon Barrett specifically contends that slavery proves fixing. However, the narratives repeatedly illustrate the manner in which slavery follows them into freedom via readings of their body.

CHAPTER 3
MONSTROUS WIVES AND HORRIBLE HUSBANDS: NAYLOR'S USE AND
CRITIQUE OF GOTHIC CONVENTIONS IN *LINDEN HILLS*

Gloria Naylor's novel *Linden Hills* (1986) explores the horrors that come when the oppressed emulate the systems and ideologies of their oppressors. Her text particularly addresses how the Gothic motif symbolically portrays the middle-class "throwing off or throwing under [. . .] whereby all that class climbers strive to free themselves of [. . .] is projected onto spectral or monstrous others, which seem to reside more in the past or on the margins than in the present or at the center of society" (Hogle 216). Naylor's critique of the Gothic and its historical relation to the Black body occurs in a middle-class Black community's striving for economic success and power. In their determination to distance themselves an oppressive history, the well-to-do Blacks perpetuate oppression by developing an exclusionary patriarchal narrative of success that projects the "undesirable" aspects of their race, culture, and history onto economically underprivileged Blacks who literally live on the margins of Linden Hills. The "successful" Black community of Linden Hills is thus self-negating, and its suppression of Black histories and voice manifests itself particularly in women's stifled voices and bodies. The supreme terror of the text is the cultural loss that results from accepting oppressive gender and sexual ideals.

Linden Hills is a horror story centered around what seems to be an elite, successful, all-black neighborhood. Yet two outsiders' journey through the neighborhood reveals the decay and emptiness that contaminates and consumes the community. The protagonists,

Willie and Lester, discover that beneath Linden Hills' glittering success lies a spiritual and cultural void, and that the people residing there are inhuman automatons who serve the will of a single, demonic, seemingly ageless man. Naylor specifically explains that her text is "about the stripping away of your soul when you move toward some sort of assimilation. That happens to any hyphenated American when you lose that which makes you uniquely you" (Backtalk 229). The novel notably defines Linden Hills' problematic behavior and ideals as a pursuit of elusive power through means that are, in fact, little more than "counterfeit white capitalism that drains black people of their origins, their color, and [. . .] their poetry and multiplicity" (Hogle 219).

Critics frequently remark upon the novel's adherence to the gothic form and its signification upon the tropes. Naylor's villain, Luther Nedeed, is a mysterious and anachronistic mortician often described as better placed in the nineteenth century. The neighborhood of Linden Hills winds and rambles, replacing the Gothic's sprawling mansion and its unusual occurrences and haunting noises. Willa, the novel's heroine, is not only a variation of the "stock 'mad woman in the attic' character" but also frequently compared to Poe's vengeful heroine Madeline Usher (Wilson 80). Charles Wilson, in fact, suggests an intertextual reading between Poe's Gothic tale "The Fall of the House of Usher" and *Linden Hills*. Nor is Naylor's familiarity with the Gothic surprising. She frequently comments upon reading authors such as Faulkner, the Brontës, Melville, Poe, and Hawthorne as a child (Kelley xii). As an adult, she still enjoys contemporary gothic writers such as Stephen King and Anne Rice (Backtalk 243). Her text includes a wide range of elements from gothic characters and setting to murderous behavior, madness,

hidden manuscripts, and prophetic dreams. She even symbolically evokes cannibalism and monstrous people to round out her Gothic story.

Several critical studies specifically examine Naylor's extensive modeling of *Linden Hills* upon Dante's *Inferno*. Catherine Ward's "*Linden Hills: A Modern Inferno*," for instance, examines the ways in which Naylor appropriates Dante's vision of hell to communicate the absolute horror of Black cultural loss. Similarly, in "Gothic and Intertextual Constructions in *Linden Hills*," Keith Sandiford uses Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of multiple, competing voices to illustrate the complexity of reading *Linden Hills* as a gothic novel. Susan Willis' *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* illustrates how Naylor's novel also connects the cultural privileging of white materialism to the cultural commodification of Black women's bodies. This commodification in turn suggests cultural loss because of the maternal Black narrative silenced through the subjection of women's bodies. However, while a number of critics have observed women's subjugated position among the destructively materialist neighborhood, few have marked and explained the Nedeed wives' sufferings as emblematic of Linden Hills' peculiar problem.

This chapter specifically interrogates the Nedeed wives' suffering from three different angles, specifically as they correlate to Naylor's critique and revision of the Gothic to express the particular problem of Black cultural loss. The chapter begins by discussing Naylor's indictment of the nineteenth century American Gothic genre for its manipulation and suppression of women's bodies. Secondly, this essay interrogates how Naylor appropriates the patriarchal and Gothic misuse of women's bodies to emblemize the process and horror of Black cultural loss, specifically as that loss speaks to a silenced

maternal history. Lastly, and perhaps most notably, this essay examines the heroine's reclamation of women's alternative histories. Her consequent rejection of oppressive patriarchal definitions and narratives suggests a solution to the Black cultural loss that plagues Linden Hills' materialistic residents.

Throughout her text Naylor manipulates gothic tropes, first to illustrate the oppressive and problematic gender and sexual ideologies often attached to the gothic genre. In her text, the tropes point back at themselves to show how they reinstitute the very arbitrary boundaries they seemingly transgress and destroy. Naylor thus suggests that the Gothic creates its monsters to reinforce the necessity of rigidly policed racial and gender borders, instead of reflecting any naturalized horror. Women in *Linden Hills* particularly emphasize the degree to which the Gothic's stabilizing gender ideologies prove oppressive; indeed they are the very heroines that the romantic gothic hero must save from a monstrous villain in a nightmarish world. The novel critiques the commodification and dehumanization of women's bodies in traditional American Gothic texts.

Naylor illustrates that what is truly horrific are racially subjugated groups who have reproduced, rather than fought, their victimization by accepting and imitating oppressive gender and sexual ideologies. *Linden Hills* critiques black communities that refuse to imagine women's positions beyond that of reproduction in heterosexual relationships. The connection suggests "[t]hat the search for success, with the attendant results of fragmentation [. . .] also engenders domestic abuse of women" (Wilson 77). Significantly, Naylor uses the Nedeed wives' various oppressions and torments as the metaphors and emblems of the residents' spiral toward cultural loss. The wives'

destruction suggests that the residents' transformation into cultureless zombies is a three stage process utilizing psychological and spiritual enslavement, the institution of problematic materialist ideologies, and gradual effacement of historical connections and cultural markers.

Lastly *Linden Hills* uses gothic tropes to posit a solution to the conflict between cultural identity and economic success. Her heroine's journey exemplifies Naylor's solution and plays upon the Gothic's trope of the hidden manuscript. Imprisoned in the basement, Willa "recovers a history which deconstructs the myth of marriage, a myth which creates women as ghostly absences and naturalizes their namelessness" (*"Reconstructing"* 223). Willa's recovery of history is a large portion of Naylor's solution. The process and consequences of the recovery also provide significant elements of Naylor's remedy. In order to recover alternative, silenced histories, the text suggests that Willa must defy the oppressive racial, sexual, and gender categories that define stabilized, hierarchal society and narrative. The recovery of marginalized, stifled histories allows Willa to reclaim identities that patriarchal discourse marks as monstrous, unrecognizable and, thus, unnamable. Reclaiming these identities inevitably leads to self-defining and naming them. Willa is then able to situate herself within dominant narratives and deconstruct them by signifying upon them. In doing so, she not only represents the existence and legitimacy of alternative narratives, but also retrieves what is valuable from the master narrative for her own history. Such a reconnection and re-imagining leads to re-imagining male-female relationships beyond heterosexual (re)production.

Gothic Anxieties and Suppression of the Margin(alized)

Nedeed serves as the text's prime figuration of the Gothic and its problematic ideologies. Nedeed is, quite simply, the most gothic of all the characters in the text.¹ Luther Nedeed functions as the villain that imperils and inevitably destroys people throughout the novel. Lester notably inscribes the last Nedeed as gothic, noting that he speaks as if he came "straight out of a gothic novel" (*Linden* 86).² Nedeed's gothic qualities prove inherited. The first Luther Nedeed's short, squat, frog-like body stops white "men from treating him like a nigger" (3). His eyes are uncanny, and "soon stopped [white men] from even thinking the word. It was said that his protruding eyes could change color at will, and over the course of his life, they would be assigned every color except red. [. . .] no man ever had the moral stamina to do more than glance at his face, because those huge, bottomless globes could spell out a starrer's midnight thoughts" (3). Nedeed's spectatorship causes the same discomfort in his object as Luther I's eyes caused others. Nedeed's eyes "take a slow age [. . .] to move over Willie's body. No, it was more like moving through his body, well beneath the tissues that covered his internal organs" (214). The problem of Nedeed's disturbing spectatorship suggests that his villainy is deeply rooted and familial. Indeed, the nature of his conception, like his forefathers', seemingly ensured that Nedeed would be as villainous as each Luther before him.

The Luthers' very method of copulation and treatment of their wives during the reproductive act marks their "dedication to evil" (Fowler 70). Each Luther plans the conception of his son so that the child will be born during the "sign of the goat." Many of the devil's physical aspects derive from the Capricorn's emblem; likewise greed, deception, wealth, dryness, and coldness are all associated with this sign (70). Sexual

intercourse itself is similarly calculated and inhuman between the Luthers and their wives. Willa complains that Luther “would come at night. Enter and leave her body with the same quiet precision that she saw when he balanced his accounts, read his newspaper, or dissected his steak” (*Linden* 148). The reproductive encounter significantly dehumanizes the wife. The gothic intertext develops in “their gradual, patriarchal accumulation of power, and monomaniacal obsession with exclusively male progeny. These signifiers of monomania—concern for name, lineage, and political continuity—point to that qualitative conditions of crisis and anxiety that constitute the psychological substructure of the gothic” (Sandiford 197).

Naylor’s critique of Nedeed and the Gothic manifests itself in the results of Nedeed’s actions, and in her description of the spiritual and psychological state of Nedeed’s tenants. The consequences of Nedeed’s patriarchal obsession—imprisoning his wife in his basement-morgue, driving her to thoughts of suicide,³ and passively killing his infant son by neglecting him—illustrate the behavioral and narrative consequences of the genre’s anxiety. The genre’s creation of monstrous women and distressed damsels, Naylor suggests, serves not to challenge the oppressive norm but to stabilize hegemonic structures by suggesting that Other bodies threaten hierarchy and order. These bodies must either be contained—by making them monstrous and quarantining them, or silencing and confining them within a pre-defined category—or destroyed.

Alternative voices and bodies must be silenced in Nedeed’s world because they will disrupt Nedeed’s binary racial opposition, which valorizes “black” instead of “white” in an attempt to create a space of absolute difference through absolute blackness. However, the space remains problematic and ineffectual because the Nedeeds still

“naturalize and essentialize the rhetorical figure of race” as much as the white racists they are defying (Bouvier 142). Consequently the Nedeeds repeat the same oppressive behaviors as those of the racist group they seek to escape and defy, vilifying, for instance, the hybrid’s body as monstrous Other. Hence boundary anxiety causes the death of Sinclair, Nedeed’s hybrid son, and Willa’s imprisonment and demise. The text (and genre) also typically refuses to name Winston’s sexuality, turning both his unnamed and unrecognized relationship and his heterosexual marriage into grotesque spectacles. The ideology that enforces boundaries and the nameless Other outside of the demarcated, acceptable space becomes the overarching destructive ideology for Linden Hills, *Linden Hills*, and, Naylor suggests, the gothic genre.

The miscegenated body of Nedeed’s son, Sinclair, also evokes boundary anxieties and represents a disruption of racial and gender hierarchy. His body speaks against patriarchal and racial dominance. Although Willa has a dull brown complexion and Nedeed is “dark” like every Luther before him, Sinclair’s skin has a white complexion; he has “[t]he same squat bowlegs, the same protruding eyes and puffed lips, but a ghostly presence that mocked everything his fathers had built. [. . .] [Nedeed] looked at this whiteness and saw the destruction of five generations” (*Linden* 18). The child’s body is so disruptive to Nedeed’s patriarchal narrative that he leaves the child unnamed for his entire life and treats him as a monster, banishing the unrecognized “bastard”⁴ to the basement along with its transgressive mother.⁵ The acceptable Nedeed body is always a son who is “short, squat, dark, and [has] an immobile face. [. . .] [who grows] up to carry his father’s first name, broad chest, and bowlegs” (4). These bodies are figures of contestation between black and white because each octoroon mother serves as a figure of

whiteness directly opposing her husband's dark form. Each son, therefore, replicates the victory of blackness over whiteness that Luther I intends *Linden Hills* to illustrate. That Sinclair's body is white not only marks a moment of loss in this war, but also acts as a signifier of Nedeed's own, internalized whiteness, both literally in his lineage and figuratively in his values and behavior.

The child's body records maternal presence despite consistent patriarchal attempts to stifle its presence. Each octoroon wife is "brought to Tupelo Drive to fade against the whitewashed boards of the Nedeed home after conceiving and giving over a son to the stamp and will of the father" (*Linden* 18). Each wife's pale body is meant as a machine for producing and replicating black, patriarchal power; the presence of a white heir acts as "the machine's" stamp upon that patriarchal power. Sinclair's body thus illustrates a disruption of gender hierarchy, the maternal genes superseding the paternal genes. The maternal stain upon Sinclair's body proves especially important because women's experience, as demonstrated in Willa's reliving of "herstory," are a great threat to the "men's kingdom" (Christian 115). Nedeed's ponderings over the mistake of his son's body illustrates the power inherent in his son's complexion and the matriarchal history attached to it. Sinclair is a product solely of matrilineal authority, which Nedeed conceptualizes as a "deep flaw" responsible for the treachery of his son's white body.

In his refusal to name the child Nedeed marks his son's miscegenated body as monstrous. Nedeed cannot give his child his name because "[t]o accept her child was to deny himself [. . . when] the boy wasn't a Nedeed" (*Linden* 286, 288). The white son remains nameless to Nedeed because to give him the family name would contradict the premises on which his family and *Linden Hills* is based, but to give him another name

would introduce difference into the family history (Bouvier 148). Sinclair's unnamable body is thus undefinable, and implicitly unnatural; there is no place for him in language or space and he is, at the least, utterly othered.

Yet Nedeed's quarantining of Sinclair's chaotic and disruptive body makes Nedeed equally monstrous in the process. Sinclair dies while he is locked in the basement, making Nedeed's resolution an infanticidal act. Likewise Nedeed's unemotional contemplation of the child's death proves cruel and inhuman. He concludes that his marriage to Willa "wasn't irretrievable; it's just that the child had died. Luther frowned and sipped slowly. He had truly never meant for it all to get so out of hand" (*Linden* 287). Nedeed's sense of regret in this moment is minimal and quickly eclipsed by his growing anger at the predicament he believes Willa has placed him in. He never, in fact, mourns the loss of the child nor marks the horror of his actions, which were directly responsible for Sinclair's death.

Nedeed's emotional distance from his wife, even in the face of their mutual loss, marks women's problematic position throughout Gothic Romances. Indeed, *Linden Hills* repeatedly illustrates the immobilizing position women occupy in traditional American Gothic texts; women are the ultimate, destructive Other, yet they are also the object of desire and rescue. Likewise, women's "sexual domination and oppression [. . .] by both white and black men [serve] as a model for all other exploitive systems" in the text (Christol 356). Xavier Donnell's mixed desire for Roxanne Tilson powerfully illustrates this duality. He is in love with her and yet thinks of her in terms couched in fear. That she poses as both a destructive force and a romantic power in his life becomes evident in Xavier's conversation with Maxwell, who defines the attraction as a damning drain on

Xavier (*Linden* 110). Through Willa, Naylor also illustrates the Gothic's ideology about women, usually divided between the figures of a fair maiden and a dark seductress in classic gothic texts. In Willa's single body, Naylor proves that these two character tropes are but two sides of the same woman. Consequently, Nedeed disdains his wife as a contaminating, and flawed monster but also desires her for her potential maternal role. Having "allowed a whore into his home" Nedeed vows to "turn her into a wife" (*Linden* 19). The process through which he removes Willa's transgressive aspects to replace them with acceptable behaviors make her into a gothic heroine.

Nedeed's behavior exemplifies the Gothic's containment of female bodies; bound between two ideological categories, women suffer complete silencing and effacement. The genre typically manipulates women's bodies to fit within the confines of one of the two categories. Keith Sandiford's analysis of Priscilla McGuire's photo album illustrates the Gothic's manipulation and anxiety over women's transgressive bodies: ⁶

The heavy dark Nedeed hand laid repressively on her shoulder, combined with the heavy dark shadow cast by her son, unites gothic and intertextual signs. The hand functions as a proprietary signifier to oppress and exclude. Spanning her reproductive and vocal organs, the shadow achieves the exclusionary design of the Nedeed text to muzzle "other" voices, even as it asserts typical gothic control over Priscilla's sexual, procreative and discursive possibilities, damning them up forever. [. . .] Hand and shadow are thus metaphors for the continuing gothic discourse on control of sexuality and procreation, yea, dread of female sexuality. (Sandiford 206).

Lastly, as Willa's fate evidences, those who deny the binary roles and insist upon alternative possibilities are inevitably and utterly destroyed. Willa emerges from the basement a different woman, but not the "wife" Nedeed envisions. Her integration of the wives' histories suggest she has created a distinctly different image of domesticity that Nedeed cannot comprehend. Nedeed's consequent destruction in their ensuing battle suggests women's transgressive power to interrupt and disturb gothic narratives.

However, Willa's destruction likewise suggests the inability of classic Gothic tropes and ideologies to conceive of and integrate alternative models of womanhood; such strange women are destroyed even as their presence dismantles the text that destroys them.

Yet women, silenced and oppressed throughout the Gothic, are nonetheless necessary to its power and survival. *Linden Hills* critiques how patriarchal genres inscribe their ideologies upon subjected female bodies and turns women into phantoms. Willa's absence, for instance, proves a tangible presence that disturbs Nedeed; he feels her absence "at the base of his burning throat" (*Linden* 67). Willie likewise tastes Willa's absence in the cake Nedeed brings to the Parker funeral (147). Her absence is in fact quite intrusive (66), and "[a]n absence that is a present, tangible, is a ghost" (Homans 160). Furthermore Willa's presence proves equally ghostly; she is "a shadow floating through the carpeted rooms" (*Linden* 19). The wedding photo Willa finds in Luwana's album best exemplifies women's bodies as ghostly presences. Willa stares at the figure, "[a]ll in white. [. . .] [and] shuddered at the ghostly image" (118). The heroines of these texts, confined within patriarchal ideology, lose their semblance of womanhood and become mere manipulated ghosts.

The form and substance of the Nedeed wives' wedding rings also exemplify women's artificial roles. Luwana complains in her diary about her "strange ring" of pale metal that "is barely visible against [her] skin. [. . .] in the full sunlight, it is as if [she] wear[s] no ring at all" (*Linden* 118). Willa, though darker than all of the other Nedeed wives, wears a wedding ring that achieves the same effect. The ring is a "red gold with a deep antique finish that almost matched the color of the finger it had been slipped on. [. . .] She couldn't see her wedding ring in the shadow that her body cast on her hand" (118).

The women are never intended to act as women or wives, as the seemingly absent ring suggests. Likewise, their objectification becomes complete when the emblem of their possession is seemingly lost within the color of their flesh. Nonetheless the survival of patriarchal ideologies literally depends upon their bodies; objectified women's bodies produce the necessary Nedeed heirs. On a wider scale, "these enslaved women fuel the machine for making middle-class black people into phantoms, and then they themselves become part of the production" (Homans 160).

The control of women's sexuality is one aspect of the overall manipulation of their bodies. Naylor presents the manipulation of women's bodies in consistently horrific terms. That Nedeed is usually the perpetrator of these manipulations again connects these literal treatments to the figurative genre exploitations women suffer. As a mortician, Nedeed is responsible for the frequent remaking of bodies; however, the text discusses only his reworking of female bodies. Nedeed's "gentleness and care" only "turns what [is] under [his] hands into a woman" (*Linden* 185). Significantly, the first moment that Naylor shows Nedeed preparing a body is also a sexualized moment. Suspecting Nedeed of having an affair, Willa follows him to his morgue:

He had to undress those bodies, move his hands slowly over the skin to check for the flow of the formaldehyde. Those weren't breast, thighs, hips; they were points of saturation. [. . .] He wasn't seeing ears, mouths, nostrils, and vaginas; they were openings that had to be cleared of foreign matter. And the room was cold. He trembled so because the room must be kept at the point of freezing. [. . .] His lingering carefulness. [. . .] The precision made him perspire, made him bend over and concentrate that closely. It could all be explained (175)

The morbid sexual tension in her husband's work is evident even in her denial of it. Her over-concern with explaining her husband's movements emphasizes the witnessed scene as a gruesome explanation for his sexual absence. In these moments of contact and control over the female body, Nedeed's slow touch on naked skin, his trembling body,

and intense interest become signs of sexual excitement.⁷ Yet what Willa next witnesses exceeds the implications of necrophilia, which she can and does deny. Only “the sight of him lifting a fish head out of a plastic bag and turning it gently in his hands before inserting it in the spread of the body before him” threatens to send her screaming and vomiting (175). The disturbing sexual distortion of a prone female body, its manipulation into Nedeed’s vision of womanhood, prove nightmarish and traumatic. Yet the sight is reasonably disturbing; it literally manifests what Nedeed figuratively attempts to do to Willa.

Nedeed’s largest project is the remaking of Willa from a “whore” into a “wife,” an extension of his power as a mortician. The correlation between his powerful role as a mortician and his role and imagined duty as a Nedeed explains his choice of place for Willa’s re-shaping: the basement-morgue that proves an ideal location for Willa’s transformation into a “replication machine” because it still contains vestiges of the materials his forefathers used to turn “the dead into renewed images of themselves” (Homans 157). Yet Willa is not the first wife to undergo re-shaping at her husband’s hands. Evelyn Creton binges and purges to remake her body into a grotesque image that no one would recognize but nevertheless mirrors the horror of her life. Evelyn shrinks herself as much as possible to fit the ghostly presence her husband has assigned her: “After eighty years the woman was a pile of bones; the flesh on her thighs, hips, and breasts fallen away, so that the stiff corsets, high-necked collars, and heavy skirts she was buried in were no longer enough to mask the empty cavities that had been. [. . .] the real Evelyn Creton” (*Linden* 188). Though she is not a literal ghost, she looks like the walking dead.

Willa recalls the fact that she too has been guilty of acting as accomplice in Nedeed's manipulation of her body before her imprisonment in the basement-morgue. Willa recalls how she tried to compete with "the cream-and-ivory women who slept in that canopied bed" before her, falling to sleep with "her face coated with bleaching cream while she dreamed of being Evelyn Creton" (*Linden* 150). She likewise remembers the self-manipulations she committed to regain her husband's affections. She takes biannual trips to New York to buy expensive beauty aids that promised magic and change (149). Her list of herbs, scents, makeup and accessories competes with Evelyn's, though Willa "didn't have the time or desperation for recording, like Evelyn Creton" the recipes to concoct the potions herself (149). Willa's indictment of herself in her own victimization is an important statement about the Nedeed's and the neighborhood's other victims. Each victim partially becomes an accomplice in her/ his own confinement and/ or destruction.

The Gothic inevitably silences women's voices in its objectification of them. The Nedeed wives, when reduced to replication machines, also lose their voices. Each wife symbolically marks her silencing by recording in alternative texts each respective Luther's suppression of her maternal narrative. For instance Priscilla's photos indict her husband's and son's collaboration to silence her voice; the father's hand is possessively situated on Priscilla's shoulder and is matched by the son's growing, consuming shadow that Willa defines as a deepening veil.⁸ The veil inevitably blankets Priscilla's neck and gradually draws closer to her mouth (*Linden* 208). Thus her impending silence is doubly marked, firstly by the shadow's strangulation of her throat and the vocal chords therein, and secondly by its meticulous march towards her mouth, where Nedeed's shadow will

figuratively mark the complete loss of her voice by erasing her mouth with his shadow's darkness.

Evelyn Creton's eating disorder, like Priscilla's photos, also marks her silencing. She cooks massive amounts of food, altering the recipes each time, in hopes of repairing the distance and coldness she feels from her husband after she bears his son (*Linden* 148). Indeed the cooking itself accompanies confusion over what amount and combination of speech will return her husband's affections:

Evelyn Creton kept mixing and measuring page after page, month after month. A little more of this, a little less of that. [. . .] If she hung in there long enough, he would change. [. . .] You talk more, you talk less—and you're patient. You cling, you rage—and you're patient. You just shut up for weeks on end—and you're patient. (148)

In this instance, words equate with the ingredients in Evelyn's recipes. When no change occurs and Nedeed fails to release Evelyn from her bound position, Evelyn resorts to eating. Her resolve to keep her mouth constantly full with food, continually in the act of chewing, marks her attempt to fill the empty narrative space. As words replace food in the previous passage, in the end food replaces words.

Luwana Packerville is the first to emblemize the problem of silence that curses the Nedeed wives. As the first, she is also the most literal in her notation of her silence. Realizing that she is not really a wife/ mother/ person to her husband or son, she resolves to mark the number of times her husband and son actually require communication with her. Her husband's unvarying question at dinner—"Has your day gone well, Mrs. Nedeed"—only requires a nod of her head and no further information (*Linden* 124). Luwana goes a full year without truly speaking to her family; she speaks a total of 665 times during the year and always to answer the Luthers' greetings in the mornings and evenings. She records the number of times by tattooing herself, using her silver hat pin to

“carve a line on [her] chest and stomach, which [she] then rub[s] with black ink until the bleeding stops, for each time [she] is called upon to speak throughout the year. Once the wound has healed, the mark is permanently affixed there” (124). Her body is thus literally marked and marred by her silencing.

The manner of her marking as well as the number of marks signifies the horror of such silencing. Similarly, the last time she predicts she will be called upon to speak will be the 666th time. The body that she fears has been used as a vessel for evil, apparent in her son’s birth “during the Sign of the Goat” (*Linden* 19), has now been irrevocably marked by the number that Christian myth designates as a sign of the devil. Her method of marking Luther I’s narrative dominance only further records her body as his possession; indeed, each Luther is born under signs designating absolute evil in Christian mythology. The occasion of this last moment of communication also signifies Luwana’s utter objectification and position as a replication machine. Luther I only requires her to speak, minimally, for the sake of his son. Once the son is absent, Luwana becomes of no use to him, and she is consequently doomed to silence.

Through the Nedeed’s ostracization of their wives, Naylor indicts the Gothic’s vilification of women who defy the confinements of such silencing, “idealized” roles. Each wife, upon discovering her husband’s motives and use for her, decries and defies her victimization, seeking to regain some agency in the definition and use of her stifled body. Yet in each case the text seemingly marks them as destructive madwomen through Willa, who initially reads their texts according to traditional patriarchal definitions of women. Thus after reading Luwana and Evelyn’s hidden narrative, Willa attempts to distance herself from them, exclaiming “[s]he wasn’t like these other women; she had

coped and they were crazy. [. . .] That's why Luther never talked about them: there wasn't a normal one in the bunch. But there was nothing wrong with her. [. . .] If there was any sickness, it was in this house, in the air. It was left over from the breaths of those women who had come before her" (*Linden* 204). Willa's vilification of the women explains and excuses the imposing silence that essentially erases them outside of their reproductive roles from the patriarchal Nedeed narrative. Indeed, she repeats Luther I's inscription of Luwana as contaminating and destructive. Fearing that Luwana will poison him and his son, Luther I refuses to eat anything Luwana prepares and hires a servant to do all of the cooking in the house (119). Evelyn's experimentation with folk remedies for her husband's dissipated passion likewise marks her as mad and destructive. The additives she sneaks into his food—shame-root, snakeroot, amaranth seeds, dove's hearts, her genital hair, and virgin's menstrual blood (147)—mark her as a poisoner at best.⁹

Through Willa's final violent reaction to the wives' texts, Naylor illustrates the problem of women reading each other according to the Gothic's patriarchal traditions. In this single moment Naylor vilifies Willa even as Willa marks the other wives as villainous. For an instant, Willa goes on a destructive rampage in the basement, fueled by her anger at the previous wives' madness:

She grabbed up the other book and began ripping out the pages. Goddamned insane—all of them. She balled up handfuls of the delicate pages as she relentlessly tore away. [. . .] sick. Every last one, sick. The taste of blood spurred her on and she stumbled to the corner, kicking aside the cookbooks littering the floor. [. . .]

She overturned boxes, pulling out dresses and scarfs, ripping easily through the rotting material. Shoes were thrown against the wall. Blouses, feathered hats, and beaded bags lost their buttons, trimmings, and sequins. Dried flowers spilled out of diaries as she mutilated the pages. Shredded paper floated down around her feet in pastel heaps. [. . .] The pleasure of destruction mingled with the anger in her blood (*Linden* 205)

Willa's rampage is a whirlwind of violence and anger. She is fueled by the taste of blood that is both hers and, figuratively, the previous wives. Each wife inscribes their bodies and its disfigurement upon the pages that Willa shreds. Indeed, the objects she destroys are the only remaining testimonials of the wives' lives. As much as Luwana carves her silence upon her body, so too does she record the marking of that body in her book. Thus the book becomes some extension of her body. Willa's violence then is an attack not just upon the books but upon the wives' already abused bodies.

Willa appears most monstrous in her resemblance to Madeline Usher, a character traditionally defined as an archetypal mad and destructive woman in the gothic tradition. Poe's short story concludes when Madeline returns from her tomb, where she has been buried alive, to destroy her twin brother. Madeline is as much her brother's destroyer as she is his victim. Like Madeline, Willa returns from her entombment and destroys Nedeed and the Nedeed dynasty. Willa's body is hideously distorted when she first appears. She has been reduced to a walking skeleton, "her hair tangled and matted, her sunken cheeks streaked with dirt. Her breasts and stomach were hidden behind a small body wrapped in sheer white lace. The wrinkled dress was caked under the arms with dried perspiration, the sagging pantyhouse torn at the knees and spotted with urine" (*Linden* 299). As in Poe's story, Nedeed's guests escape the ensuing destruction and are ejected from the home before Willa and Nedeed's struggle begins. Likewise, Willa's apparent attack upon Nedeed results in their mutual destruction as she drags their three bodies—hers, Nedeed's and Sinclair's—into the fireplace where they catch fire before spreading the flames to the rest of the house (300). In their final moments, Willa appears

insane and deaf to Nedeed's pleas and shrieks. She is unable to register that her family is on fire but merely comprehends Nedeed's struggles as another attempt to imprison her.

Yet Naylor's description of Willa's assault and fiery death indicts the Gothic for its manipulation of women's bodies into monstrous forms. The first moment of her appearance is after she has returned from the basement-morgue where Nedeed has imprisoned her, intending to transform her into a proper woman and wife. The process of the transformation inevitably wreaks havoc upon Willa's appearance, but the reason she proves so horrific is that she emerges as something that Nedeed cannot conceptualize; Willa rediscovers and renames her self apart from Nedeed and his definitions. When she emerges, her body literalizes the otherness that Nedeed inscribed upon her. Her new-found determination and independence defy Nedeed's understanding because "[h]e had never encountered the eyes of [. . .] the wingless queen [ant] who cannot fly from danger, blindly dragging her bloated egg sac as long as at least one leg is left uncrushed; so the dilated pupils in front of him registered insanity" (*Linden* 300). Likewise Willa's behavior after she escapes the basement-morgue parodies ideal female behavior—she emerges not to escape or seek vengeance but to clean the house. With her baby in her arms, Willa immediately resumes her household duties: "*Accustomed* to working quietly so she wouldn't disturb any activity in the next room, she moved through the kitchen, leaving every surface wiped clean. Finally, satisfied that there was nothing else to do there, she straightened up and headed for the den" (emphasis added *Linden* 298). The passage implies that Willa has always attempted to act as the ideal housewife that Nedeed tries to forcefully transform her into.

Critics often cite Willa's cleaning frenzy at the novel's end as highly ambiguous; "[o]n the one hand, she appears to challenge the place to which bourgeois society would consign housewives; on the other hand, Naylor's rendering of the woman's psychology during the cleaning of the Nedeed home suggests that Willa is still operating within a socially prescribed context. [. . .] Willa is either unable or unwilling to abandon externally imposed definitions of domesticity" (Montgomery 62). Yet Willa's behavior points to the problem of women's defined roles. Externally defined, these roles prove confining and psychologically destructive to their subject. Montgomery's comment likewise points to the narrowness and rigidity of such definitions. The roles allow no room for compromise; Willa cannot be both domestic wife and self-defined woman. Nedeed's response refuses to recognize Willa for even her partial compliance to the ideal; consequently, she remains a monster to him. Likewise, Montgomery's observation refuses to recognize Willa's definition of herself in part through her domesticity. Yet in an interview Naylor explains that being a housewife is how Willa inevitably defines part of her identity. Even as Willa spends her time in the basement rediscovering and reclaiming women's alternative voices and identities, she nonetheless proclaims her domesticity as part of her identity to Naylor: "That's what I am. I'm happy to be a housewife" (Rowell 183).¹⁰

Part of Willa's claim that she enjoys her domesticity lies in her recognition that the transformation from Willa Prescott to Willa Nedeed had been her choice. Furthermore, as Willa Nedeed she "was a good mother and a good wife. For six years she [had] claim[ed] that identity without any reservations" (*Linden* 279). Most importantly, she recognizes her role in losing that part of her identity¹¹ and thus her power to reclaim it.

Consequently her moment of meditation concludes with her acknowledgement that “whenever she was good and ready, she could walk back up[stairs]” and reclaim that part of her “identity that was rightfully hers, that she had worked hard to achieve” (280). What is different, however, about Willa’s reclaimed domesticity is her agency. Nedeed does not and cannot force her into assuming a domestic role. Rather Willa concludes that although “[m]any women wouldn’t have chosen it, but she did” (280). Only after reaching this conclusion can Willa rise, rested and determined, to leave her prison and “begin keeping house” (289).

The text’s indictment of Nedeed’s and Willie’s reaction to the fire further illustrates the problem of patriarchal constructions of self-defined women as horrific. The destruction usually attributed to women and their inevitable deaths victimize these female monsters. The passage describing Willa’s and Nedeed’s deaths begins with an indictment of Nedeed: “Luther Nedeed made two mistakes that cost him his life: he thought Willa was leaving the house, and he read the determination in her eyes as madness” (*Linden* 299-300). Here Naylor only illustrates Nedeed’s and by extension the Gothic’s, inability to conceptualize a woman who defies restricting categorization as the idealized female role. Willa dies because Nedeed cannot readily identify a perfect wife in Willa’s figure and behavior. Furthermore, Willa’s attack upon Nedeed is an act of self-defense and motherly protection. She believes he is trying to take Sinclair’s body from her and drag her back to her prison:

As she brushed past him, he sprang up, grabbed her tightly behind the shoulders, pulling her away from the door. He was trying to force her down into the chair. But that leather chair was back toward the kitchen, and [. . .] the twelve concrete steps leading to the morgue. She had cleaned those rooms. Every cell in her body strained against his hands and he found himself being pulled toward the hall.

Then he reached for the child. The moment his fingers [. . .] [made] a fraction of space between it and Willa, her arms loosened for one to shoot out around his neck, the other his waist, and the three were welded together. [. . .] There was no place in her universe to make sense out of the words, “My God, we’re on fire.” No meaning to his struggle except that is was pushing her back into the kitchen. And now no path to the clutter by the door except through the lighted tree. (300)

Their ultimate destruction and her moment of insanity is in fact a defiance of further victimization.

The destruction likewise calls attention to the imposed idealized role. She destroys them all even as she is fulfilling her domestic duties. In this moment Naylor shows how women’s bodies are inevitably manipulated into horrendous figures of destruction in the Gothic through the very act of trying to confine them within idealized female roles. The corpse that emerges emphasizes the horror of women’s manipulated bodies. Instead of emerging with three individual bodies, the firemen emerge with one massive, charred bulk (303). The convergence of the bodies “suggests that the loss of women’s identities and their growing perception of this process lie at the heart of the ‘real hell’ in *Linden Hills*” (Havely 218). A history of silenced and manipulated (women’s) voices inevitably accomplishes and accompanies women’s lost identities.

Linden Hills frequently refers to the Gothic’s anxieties about homosexuality, typically masked in the trope of the unspeakable. Linden Hills’ residents similarly privilege heterosexuality. As a community that esteems material production they likewise encourage unions for their (re)productive potential. Indeed, the mandate for heterosexual union and (re)production is written into the tenants’ leases. Yet privileging heteronormative interaction proves problematic and destructive for all involved and is particularly apparent in the unhappy wedding of a gay man and a straight woman.

The extended scene of the limo ride to the wedding, punctuated by flashbacks, marks the relationship between David and Winston as quarantined within the realm of the unspoken/ unspeakable. The drawn out silence between the men in the limo and their flashbacks to previous arguments iterates their sexuality as unspeakable. Amidst the group's silence, the groom recalls a climatic argument between him and David, in which Winston reveals his decision to wed a woman; the argument emphasizes the sense of the unnamable and thus unspeakable haunting their relationship. As he contemplates how much David means to him, Winston mourns that though "this man gave him his center [. . .] the world gave him no words—and ultimately no way—with which to cherish that" (*Linden* 80). Winston consequently exclaims to an angry David, "[h]ow am I going to live with you when *they* haven't even made up the right words for what we are to each other" (emphasis added 80). More specifically, the oppressive silence can be traced back to Nedeed and his neighborhood. Indeed, Winston hopes to move into Linden Hills and knows he cannot do so as a homosexual. Nedeed likewise uses the relationship's namelessness as a method of control, implicitly threatening in his anonymous letter to name, and consequently show, Winston's homosexual relationship as something monstrous.

David's response to Winston's plea seems to dismiss the quality of unspeakableness that pervades the Gothic's attitude towards transgressive sexuality. His reply illustrates how the world has already mislabeled them with problematic names: "Oh, they've made up plenty of words and you can read them on any public bathroom wall. And that's what you can't face. You want the world to turn inside out and *make up* a nice, neat title that you can put on your desk. And that's not about to happen" (*Linden*

80). Even as David's reply notes the presence of names for their relationship, it likewise notes the silencing power of these names. The implicitly horrific names refer to a sexuality quarantined to the transgressive space of men's bathrooms. Lastly, David's litany actually reinforces homosexuality as unspeakable—its "names" remain hidden from the light of identifiable and respected discourses. Neither Nedeed nor Linden Hills nor the rest of the world will ever give homosexuality a name that "you can put on your desk."

Winston Alcott does not so much choose to marry as much as Needed, aware of his resident's homosexuality, blackmails him into it.¹² Yet the consequent heterosexual relationship proves more unnatural and disturbing than the love affair between the two men. The homosexual lovers rigidly sit next to each other on the drive to Winston's wedding, tightening their bodies to resist the motion that naturally pulls them towards each other during the car's maneuvers around curves (*Linden* 75). The description of Winston in his attire also resonates with tones of discomfort and unnaturalness: "Winston Alcott smoothed the sleeve on his tuxedo and pulled at the cuff needlessly—it was *perfectly straight*. It was as *straight* as his shoes were polished as the top hat on his lap was brushed as the striped ascot was knotted, as *straight* as his walking cane" (emphasis added 74). Naylor puns on the term "straight," using it both as slang for heterosexuality and as a descriptor for neatness. Yet straightness here marks discomfort. Winston's unnatural state contaminates the rest of the groom's party, who are as uncomfortable as Winston. A tone of fear likewise marks the groups' discomfort, and their "stilted movements" not only signify their uncomfortable outfits, but also mark them as "people who were afraid of the clothes they wore" (74). The wedding attire is a fearful costume

that marks the heterosexual ceremony and union as an uncomfortable and fearful disguise for Winston's natural homosexuality.

Winston's wedding, and by association marriage, turns into a horrific, morbid spectacle. Nedeed, for instance, remarks as he drives the groom's party to the chapel that he has "seen happier faces at [his] funerals" (*Linden* 74). The humorous response Winston attempts proves as morbid: "Even on the corpses, Mr. Nedeed" (74). Nedeed continues the funeral analogy further, marking Winston's quip as "an interesting analogy": "I guess every young man feels a bit like that on his wedding day. You're burying one way of life for another. But if you'll suffer me a further metaphor, after every death is a resurrection, Winston—hopefully, one to paradise" (74). Murderous emotions resulting from Winston's forced heterosexuality accompany the funeral metaphor in this scene. Seemingly alone in despair on his way to the wedding ceremony, Winston concludes that he cannot say anything to David that can make him share Winston's pain. To make David hurt as he did, Winston "would have to sink his teeth into David's throat and tear the jugular vein, smash his head against the car window until it was splintered and smeared with blood" (75-6). Forcefully containing Winston's desires within a rigid definition makes homosexuality monstrous and heterosexuality unnatural.

Nedeed's extended metaphor and Winston's violent emotions counter and shatter the typical jubilation attached to weddings. The atmosphere at the reception repeats the unnatural and morbid tone Nedeed early inscribes upon the festivities. Willie, noting that something is missing from the wedding, soon defines the problem: the wedding lacks spontaneity and life (*Linden* 83). Indeed, shortly after the bride enters and the guest

begin to feast, Willie exclaims that “they might look like birds of paradise, but they sure eat like vultures” (84). Although the guest-vultures literally consume food, they also figuratively feast upon Winston and his dead love affair. The narrative structure of the text suggests as much because the last image before the groom’s party arrives at the church is of Winston and David arguing. Near the argument’s conclusion, Winston pleads with David to remain secret lovers, crying “I’ve accepted that I can’t live without you” (80). During the reception David recites a passage from queer poet Walt Whitman that Willie interprets as David’s last and final goodbye to the love affair. Winston’s reaction to the poem repeatedly references images of death and dying: “Winston was having trouble breathing. [. . .] no one could see that he was drowning. And when he finally raised his glass to return the salute. [. . .] [his mouth] looked like it was shaping itself to drink poison” (90). Implicitly Winston has been figuratively dying throughout his wedding and, in this moment, reaches his demise. The guest and the wedding itself have become grotesque spectacles marred by morbid tensions and tones. The marriage itself promises to be fruitless, as the unfortunate bride has essentially wed a dead man.

The Lost History of Women’s Experiences

Linden Hills significantly illustrates how the Gothic’s anxieties over racial, sexual, and gender difference inevitably result in a version of history that presents itself as a metanarrative whose language and structure erases the absence of alternative bodies and voices. Justine Tally, for instance, explains how white American literature is used to construct history and context for whites by positing “history-lessness” and “context-lessness” for blacks (358). Nedeed creates and maintains such a historyless space in *Linden Hills*. The history in and of “*Linden Hills* is a timeless anti-history where little changes” (Bouvier 142). The populace values its shared and pervasive anti-history

because to “step outside Linden Hills [is to] step into history—someone else’s history about what you couldn’t ever do,” while Nedeeds’ alternative history seems to speak to black accomplishment and power (*Linden* 16).

In reality the history of Blacks’ patriarchal empowerment and success belongs to the Nedeeds’s alone. In escaping a history of black failure, the characters seek to be colorless and successful in corporate America. Yet the absence of color in corporate America is whiteness, since hierarchal thinking makes absolute neutrality impossible (Homans 166). Although Braithwaite,¹³ the local historian, posits an objective model of history, this history proves quite similar to the Nedeeds’. Braithwaite’s history only re-affirms the Nedeeds’ myth. Furthermore, Naylor’s choice to name the local historian after the poet W. S. Braithwaite (1878-1962) particularly emphasizes the problem of his kind of “objective history.” Indeed the actual Braithwaite rejected his Blackness by “compet[ing] with white writers on their own terms” (*Reconstructing* 228). W.S. Braithwaite held strongly to the notion that poetry should express beauty, not political or social content, explaining that it was “impossible ‘to express the Negro in verse,’ by which he meant that he [. . .] would not employ the *shallow* pattern of dialect poetry” (Butcher 51 *emphasis added*). Naylor indicts the fictional Braithwaite for a similar cultural rejection because he attempts to write Black history in white terms. Consequently both Braithwaite’s and Nedeeds’s models of history prove emblematic of the historical metanarrative underlying Gothic texts because both the mythic model and the objective model of history are particularly authorized white, male accounts that deny female subjects and efface the cultural past (*Reconstructing* 215).

The novel's structure likewise replicates Nedeed's history and its disruption. The patriarchal history denies difference and time, as the undated prologue anticipates. The novel's time and chronology begins only when Sinclair's body disrupts the Nedeed mythic history. His body is the entrance of female identity and difference into patriarchal narrative, and female difference contradicts the mythic master narrative (*"Reconstructing"* 216). Likewise, Willa's narrative repeatedly disrupts Lester's and Willie's male, linear narrative with her undated, unsequenced flashbacks. She illustrates the power of women's narratives to disrupt narratives even structured around patriarchal forms in her narrative's denial of chronology and linearity. Therefore, Nedeed must deny women's voices, literally burying them and their product when he imprisons Willa and lets Sinclair die.

As in the Gothic, an aura of the unspeakable pervades these alternative, subversive groups in Naylor's text. Namelessness, for instance, pervades the deceased Nedeed wives. Nedeed never calls Willa nor any of her forebearers by their name; when called upon to speak Priscilla's name "[h]e actually had to pause a moment in order to remember his mother's first name, because everyone—including his father—had called her nothing but Mrs. Nedeed" (*Linden* 18). When he speaks of Willa, he refers to her by a number of pronouns, including the particularly problematic term "it." In refusing to recognize his son, Nedeed also refuses to name him, referring to Sinclair also as "it" numerous times. The pronoun, in denying gender, also denies any sense of specificity particularly when it lacks a referent. Nedeed illustrates the silencing that women suffer from such unnamings in his encounter with Laurel Dumont. Nedeed tells Laurel she is no longer a Dumont; she lost the name when she divorced her husband. Laurel realizes as

she argues with Nedeed that he has essentially proclaimed that she does not exist, that Laurel had never lived in her house—Mrs. Dumont had (*Linden* 245). In Linden Hills Laurel is unrecognized as a single woman, and ejected from the neighborhood and its anti-history. Such erasure proves devastating for Laurel, who cannot imagine an alternative narrative and consequently kills herself.

Willa's growing discovery of women's history provides the most significant illustration of Linden Hills' and Nedeed's disturbing domination. As Willa reads and connects to Evelyn's narrative, Willa realizes that her minute place in her marriage and society is "unnatural." The revelation is recent; already trapped in an self-alienating marriage, she has been further imprisoned in the basement-morgue for weeks "[y]et she never thought the word *unnatural*. It hung in the air around her now, sending up the smell of mildew and dust from the pages in her lap" (*Linden* 149). Her discovery of the word heightens her awareness of the neglectful and troubling relationship that imprisons her. Yet Nedeed defines and controls the rest of Linden Hills as much as he does Willa, and so the word also applies to the rest of the occupants who have (been) manipulated themselves to fit in the frozen neighborhood. The fact that Willa becomes aware of the disturbance and is able to name it only after she has read a fair portion of an alternative history indicates the relationship between Linden Hills' anti-history and the residents' disconnection from the natural world. As long as they solely access the pervading anti-history, they will remain unable to see and name the aberrant world they are trapped within, and will remain contrived, inhumane beings themselves.

In her prison Willa recovers a number of unnamed and silenced women's narratives. Yet in Linden Hills each wife has been denied name and voice; their

narratives exist only in the basement-morgue that they have been banished to. Their narratives' imprisonment within the morgue exemplifies the extent to which the women "are granted neither value nor life. They have no recorded history: they do not exist in the twelve-volume history of the area by Dr. Braithwaite. [. . .] [the women have been] kept in the netherworld, erased, blotted out of the Book of Names" (Christol 356).

Especially problematic is what erasing women's history does to the women themselves—those that live it and those that (would) read it. Both Luwana and Priscilla suggest their inability to recognize their silenced voices even as they attempt to narrate their denied histories. Luwana exclaims in a letter to herself, "the true horror is that I am becoming, my sister, a stranger to myself. You would not recognize the girl you once knew in Tupelo" (*Linden* 123). Her cry implies that the Luwana she recognizes can be found only in her letters, which also function as the history she secretly records. Priscilla likewise implies a recognition of her lost identity in the very inability to identify her face. Her body is faceless in the last picture of her in her photo album. Instead she has "scrawled across the empty hole in lilac-colored ink [. . .] the word *me*" (249). There is no face for her to look back upon, no way besides a pronoun to identify herself in this photo history. When Laurel commits suicide, she likewise becomes faceless and consequently unidentifiable.

Laurel's and Priscilla's faceless bodies point to the second problem of erased women's narratives. In denying present women voices, future women have no voice to connect to and therefore easily lose their own voices. For instance, Willa realizes that Evelyn "must have been hard-pressed for the language to explain" the strange ingredients she bought (*Linden* 188). Evelyn's lack of language to explain her need also connotes a

lack of language to explain her pain and her self. Willa suffers a similar voicelessness before she begins reading the narratives. As Willa sits howling in the basement over her loss, the sound carries throughout and beyond Linden Hills yet no one can identify it or even a human, voice nor decipher the pain and loss it expresses. Willa is at first unable to achieve the kind of meaningful speech that could save her. The connection between words and history becomes even more complex and vital later, when Nedeed warns Willa that he is turning on her only water source. Willa does not move to capture the fluid because “[t]here was no meaning to those patterns of empty noises. The words didn’t connect inside of her to any history” (71). Willa has not read any of the basement’s hidden documents, and there is no history for words to connect to. Having nothing to be rooted in, the words say nothing and, consequently, Willa again cannot speak back to them.

Willie’s and Lester’s reaction to Willa’s devastated appearance indicts the silencing of alternative narratives. Unaware of the history of women’s abuse in the Nedeed legacy, Willie’s and Lester’s confusion about what to do is described in extreme terms. Willa’s destroyed body and Nedeed’s horrifically calm answer “[s]uspend[s] [the men] in a world where reality caved in” (*Linden* 299). Nedeed’s control of narrative stalls Lester’s and Willie’s present reality, much as his mythic history erases change and subversion. Ejected from the world where their awareness of historical struggle and change helps them conceptualize and order their present, Willie and Lester stand silenced and dumbfounded:

Where were the guidelines with which to judge what they had left behind the door? They stood there frozen in a space of time without a formula that lost innocence or future wisdom could have given them. There would have been no question of

smashing in that door if their world were still governed by the rules of cowboys and Indians, knights and dragons—black and white. (299)

The two men cannot fathom the scene of domestic abuse they have left behind because the narratives of such extreme abuse on Nedeeds' peculiar economic and social level remain buried in the basement-morgue. Access to the documents that Willa has spent the last weeks deciphering would not only help the men comprehend the horror they have witnessed, but also allow them to conceptualize a suitable and swift response. The documents would challenge the men's sense of and belief in the "black and white rules" by exposing a world and history that reveal such simplistic oppositions and binaries as fictional.

The consequent disconnection from black history, which the residents define as a history of loss in their acceptance of the Nedeeds' anti-history, transforms them into monstrous beings. Distanced from both their cultural narratives and the alternative, subversive voices articulated and imagined within these narratives, Linden Hills residents blindly conform to rigid gender and sexual boundaries and hierarchies that make them less human the more they conform, and lead them to perpetuate oppression. For instance Nedeed and his tenants collaborate with the Wayne County Citizens Alliance, a board "full of some of the most despicable racists on this side of the continent," to stop a housing project from being built on his land (137). The housing project would undoubtedly resemble those already across Wayne Putney Avenue, housing economically underprivileged black families. Yet Linden Hills residents, some of whose ancestors came from a similar class of people, willingly collaborate with their era's equivalent of the Klu Klux Klan to continue segregating themselves from an undesirable class of people and internalizing the very oppression they seek to deny.

Aside from its silencing and oppressive qualities, the Nedeed mythic history also dooms those that ascribe to it because of the narrative's failure to signify upon dominant white history. The Nedeeds' history literally repeats each generation without any difference from the previous generations and their problematic ideologies. Teresa Goddu explains how this literal repetition translates to a failure to signify against white ideologies and histories. Nedeed's repetition of his forefathers' bodies and narratives indicates his repetition of white culture without any signal difference. Nedeed borrows racist white culture's terms and fails to signify against an oppressive white paradigm. Nedeed and the community "lose their signifying powers to transform the white man's world "into a liberating black space because they have chosen to build over and not on their history ("Reconstructing" 217). Most importantly, Linden Hills loses the power to disrupt dominant narratives, accepting instead "the white man's myth—and a whitewashed version of their own history" (217). Consequently, Nedeed and the community fail to dismantle the oppressive and binding hierarchy inherent in the system of binary oppositions. Instead, they are wound more deeply in it, inevitably becoming reinscribed within the system and history of failure¹⁴ they seek to elude.

Maxwell Smyth emblemizes the characters' cultural disconnection and their resulting monstrously artificial being. He reduces race to a negligible technicality that can be erased in order to succeed. He concludes early in life that "he doubled the odds of finishing first if he didn't carry the weight of that milligram of pigment in his skin. There was no feasible reason why it should have slowed him down" (*Linden* 102). Maxwell defines "finishing first" in purely capitalist terms. Yet his initial conceptualization of how he could erase his race also recognizes that race is not a scientific, ahistorical

problem; rather he describes it as “a handicap [that] had been set centuries before it was his turn at the gate” (102). Thus he recognizes race as a social construct, whose troubling rules and boundaries had been (re)defined for centuries. Yet he does not recognize the significance of the particular history attached to his pigment, and his ancestors’ struggle against the oppressive Other that wrote the rules Maxwell now seeks to use to “turn a consequence into an inconsequence” in his favor (103). Maxwell only recognizes the rules themselves.

Maxwell’s materialist ideology and cultural disconnection manifest themselves poignantly in his reading of a black woman’s body. Maxwell uses a picture of a black woman in *Penthouse* as an example that black women are indeed progressing in society. The black centerfold has a dark complexion and an afro. She wears leopard strips, and each photo poses her “pull[ing] against an iron chain that was wrapped around her clenched fists. Each page offered the reader a different view of her perfectly formed pelvis, hips, and hints of her manicured pubic hair” (*Linden* 115). Maxwell exclaims that the pictures are a testament to black women’s success because the last photo in the eighteen page layout is of the model with the chain in her hand and its white male holder, in safari attire and bifocals, at her feet (115). The picture doubly marks the model as an object of possession. First she is marked as a voyeuristic object that is possessed by anyone who purchases the magazine. Secondly the chain wrapped around her marks her as a literal possession.

Maxwell focuses solely upon the last picture as an image of triumph, and ignores the extent to which the Black model remains an object of consumption even to the white voyeur and opponent within the photo. The smudged print Maxwell’s thumb leaves on

the last picture emphasizes the Black model's constant position as an object under masculine control. Throughout the photo spread the model remains a masculine construct, posed to fit men's subjective fantasies. In the last image "the woman might have subdued the white male, but she is still under Maxwell's thumbprint" (*"Reconstructing"* 228). Nor does he accept Lester's alternative interpretation of the photo as a comment upon race, exclaiming "[t]hey're trying to tell you that black people still belong in the jungle" (*Linden* 115). Maxwell is blind to the problematic racial and gender implications of the photo text largely because he implicitly subscribes to them himself, and because the materialist ideology he subscribes to privileges consumption, focusing on the consumer rather than on the consumed.

Maxwell's reading of the model's Black body only re-emphasizes the extent to which he has made his blackness disappear over time. Unfortunately Maxwell still fails to "reach the finish line as a man" (*Linden* 103). Thus in erasing his blackness, he also erases that which makes him human. Likewise, the cultural and capitalist hierarchies all of the residents seek to ascend by perpetuating, though seemingly inverting, Eurocentric racial boundaries only dehumanize the people in their progress. They all transform into the real monsters of gothic imaginings.

Distorted Realities and Masked, Monstrous Beings

The residents' lack of consciousness about the damnation of their souls in their search for success provides the central irony and horror of the text (Fowler 65). Occupants of Linden Hills act as unwitting accomplices to their victimization and mutation into inhuman beings. The three successively horrific fates of Willa's forbearers act as controlling metaphors for the transformation and fate of Linden Hills residents as they make their way down the hill toward Nedeed. The residents and wives suffer

(spiritual) enslavement followed by obsessive (material) consumption and ending in (cultural) erasure and effacement.¹⁵ Furthermore, the residents sacrifice and destroy a large part of themselves, becoming strange and awful creatures, and never really access the success and happiness they've sacrificed for.

Residents mimic problematic, spiritually and psychologically enslaving ideologies in their search for success. Their spiritual and psychological enslavement begins with a problematic education that replaces Black spiritual and cultural values with elitist ideologies and alienating histories. The novel shows how loss on a number of fronts inevitably accompanies black Americans' upward progress through white America's society. One of Naylor's goals in is to show how black Americans

first lose family ties, because if you work for a big corporation, you may have grown up in Detroit but may end up living in Houston. Then there are the community ties. You can create a whole different type of community around you [. . .] but you lose the ties with your spiritual or religious values. You forget what it means to be an African American. (Carabi 41-2)

Like Luwana Packerville, the various stages of enslavement occur alongside various disconnections. Luwana, a slave whom Luther I purchases for a wife in Tupelo, Mississippi, first suffers a disconnection from the family she has known in her fellow slaves and mistress.¹⁶ Furthermore, Luther I does not actually allow her to create a new family with him; though she has a child, she has no rights to him because Luther I never manumits her (*Linden* 117). He still has the documents that record his purchase of her; she remains the slave of Luther I and his son.

Luwana's psyche inevitably fractures under Luther I's reign, and she becomes disconnected from her past self. Although Luwana remains in contact with her historical identity, it no longer acts as an ingrained part of her being. Such a rupture between Luwana's past and present self anticipates the future residents' rupture between their

historical past and anti-historical present. Yet even Luwana's slight connection to her past self begins to fade as she writes to this other self less and less. As she cries to her other self, "the true horror is that I am becoming, sister, a stranger to myself" (*Linden* 123). Already detached from her historical self, the separation threatens to become utter estrangement when the present self transforms into something entirely new and alien. Lastly, Luwana's diary in her Bible attests to the spiritual disconnection inhabitants inevitably suffer. Although her Bible acts as a place where Luwana can re-inscribe and record her silenced voice, the opening page, that also records Luwana's final documented thought, yields a disturbing message from a previously spiritual woman: "There can be no God" (93). Literally still a slave to her husband, Luwana's psychological enslavement occurs through familial, historical, and spiritual attacks that the Linden Hills populace likewise later suffer.

Familial disconnections prove pervasive among the Linden Hills occupants. Most remarkable about Linden Hills is the startling lack of families in the neighborhood—none of the tenants in Linden Hills have young children. Although the specifics of the leases imply reproduction and family,¹⁷ Naylor never portrays a complete family. The Tilson household bears the closest semblance to a family, but it is dysfunctional and incomplete. Though they still live at home, the children are grown adults and they argue constantly. Similarly, Lester's mother criticizes him openly and often, and his father is dead. Of the other couples encountered during Willie's and Lester's journey, Chester Parker has a recently deceased wife and no kids; nor have the Dumonts, their marriage also recently ended, managed to produce heirs. Furthermore, the marriage between Winston and Cassandra promises to yield no children since Winston is gay. The one household that

produces a complete family is also a picture of dysfunction—the wife is locked in the basement-morgue with her child, whom her husband has let die of neglect. Furthermore, coupling for the Nedeeds never actually produces a family but instead results in an ostracized wife/ mother and a replica, rather than a son, of each Luther.

The disintegration of deep-rooted familial connections throughout Linden Hills accompanies the residents' spiritual demise. The characters' spiritual loss both illustrates and results from their enslavement to problematic materialist ideologies. For the characters, attending church proves more of a ritual than an act of communion and spiritual uplift. The mourners' reaction to Reverend Hollis' funeral sermon indicates their spiritual and communal disconnection. The atmosphere of the funeral indicts the residents' spiritlessness. Instead of seeking to console Chester Parker or even connect with each other in the face of mortality, "[t]he mourners sat [in the chapel] with the stilted patience that accompanies the beginning of a business meeting. [. . .] This time the agenda was death and they had simply come to pay their respects. But like all debts, if the process was too lengthy and complicated, the feelings of obligation would turn to resentment" (*Linden* 179). Reverend Hollis, seeking to jolt the mourners from their stupor, gives a wild, impromptu sermon pleading with the listeners to spiritually redeem themselves before they are called to judgment. Yet to even gather the courage to present such a thunderous sermon, Hollis has to look past the numbing faces in the first twenty-two rows and fill "the empty pews with thirty-year-old ghosts. In the balcony he saw the damp bodies swaying, hands up, and heads lifted," while in the front pews the people sit in stunned silence (180).

Though Hollis' sermon disturbs the mourners, it fails to reach them spiritually. They take solace in Nedeed's monotone voice and droning words as he reads the eulogy immediately following Hollis' sermon. In contrast to Hollis' sermon, Nedeed's message recounts material facts and achievements. His eulogy of Lycentia lacks all elements of spiritual or inner life, and peaks with a list of her economic and social successes. When he finishes, "the silent applause for this performance [is] deafening" (*Linden* 184). The impact and scope of the Nedeed metanarrative take on particularly spiritual connotations in this incident; it is the only "gospel [the people] wanted to hear under [the chapel's] gold-leafed ceiling" (184). Nedeed encourages spiritual disconnection. His forefathers ridiculed the spiritually faithful who prayed and sang and tried to "make [their] peace with that white god who lived beyond the sky," whereas the Nedeeds would "deal with the white god who would one day *own* that sky" (8). The previous Luther's ridicule of faith turns to an utter absence in Nedeed who concludes that the white god his fathers had "shaken their fists at" did not exist and never had (16). The mourners consequently hold Hollis in contempt for presenting a message that rivals the materialist gospel Nedeed represents.

Naylor utilizes the Gothic trope of insanity to convey the awfulness of the residents' obsessive materialism. The nature of Norman's madness emblemizes the psychological decay and obsessive material consumption that infects all of Linden Hills: "The pinks" that Norman regularly imagines will consume him likewise harkens back to Evelyn Creton's death by consumption years before. Evelyn obsessively focuses upon edible materials in hopes of regaining Nedeed's esteem, much as the people of Linden Hills attempt to show their worthiness through their material possessions. Her

consumption overwhelms her and fails to provide the sustenance needed to sustain her despite the massive quantities she consumes. Evelyn eventually both eats and starves herself to death. Norman's "pinks" manifests itself as similar paradoxical threat. It represents a culture centered upon material consumption. At the same time it threatens to consume Norman, leaving his body as much of a fleshless skeleton as Evelyn eventually shrivels into.

Although Norman does not live in the neighborhood, his disdain for Linden Hills' materialism and his fear of the consequences resulting from its skewed ideologies appear in his delusions. Naylor's description of Norman's madness conforms to gothic tropes of madness and contamination. However, Naylor uses the trope to signify the illness of Linden Hills' inhabitants rather than to reaffirm the ideology usually attached to gothic portrayals of dormant madness. The consequence of Norman's madness, in conjunction with Ruth's previous residency among and adherence to a material culture, suggests that "the pinks" are an attack upon materialism and problematic definitions of success. Every two years Norman destroys all that Ruth has "painfully gathered," and returns from the hospital to discover he has shredded their "life" (*Linden* 35). Yet Norman does not shred "their life" and leave it wrecked upon their apartment floor; rather Norman destroys Ruth's materialistic concept of "their life." Despite Ruth's fears, Norman attacks only material possessions and not people. Norman's madness effectively prevents Ruth from engaging in the materialism that characterizes Linden Hills.

Naylor also links Norman's illness to Linden Hills' consumptive materialism through the color's appearance elsewhere among the people at Winston Alcott's wedding. Pink and white crepe paper decorates Alcott's limo. The wedding reception is a spectacle

and tribute to Linden Hills' excessive materialism. A sixteen-piece band plays at the reception hall. Huge silver centerpieces of carnations and poinsettias top the dining tables, and reflections from a crystal-tiered chandelier accent the sprays from a champagne fountain. Waiters float among the guests carrying trays of expensive delicacies. The guests themselves remind Willie of birds of paradise in their furs, fox capes, silk and cashmere. The behavior of a woman in a pink satin suit draws Willie's attention to the missing spontaneity of the fair (*Linden* 82-83). Pink therefore signifies the characters' materialism. Furthermore, Xavier Donnell's date is a blonde woman that Lester dubs "that pink job" (84). The naming associates pink with the whiteness Linden Hills residents associate with success. "The pinks" "constitutes a powerful trope for the sickness underlying African Americans' embrace of white values" (Fowler 75); the color connotes obsessive materialism and surrendered racial identity. The pain and horror "the pinks" inflicts upon Norman and those around him consequently mark the values of ideologies of Linden Hills as destructive and truly horrific.

Although the residents of Linden hills do not literally shrivel into fleshless corpses, their obsessive consumption increasingly dehumanizes them until they look less like people and more like vultures and cannibal automatons. The change is as slow and unobserved for everyone as it is for the Dumonts'. Laurel mourns too late the loss of human connection to blinding materialism, particularly in her marriage. As a result the home the Dumonts build and furnish is not a home at all but an empty and lifeless space. Laurel also emphasizes the significance and destruction of her materialism. Laurel has a tendency to "wrap her soul around the most trivial things [. . .] . And they had to be pried gently from her hands because the need for them came from some mysterious valley that

opened up without warning inside of her” (222). In these moments, Laurel assumes a semblance of otherness and “her eyes burned with [a] strange intensity” (222). The passage acts as a comment on both Laurel and the rest of Linden Hills’ residents’. Their “will to possess” points to a pervasive emptiness within them; they are hollow non-people who attempt to fill their void with a bewilderingly intense materialism.

The individual inhabitants likewise become monstrously artificial and empty in their obsessive consumption. At Alcott’s wedding, Willie characterizes them repeatedly as well-dressed vultures. The impression they make at Mrs. Parker’s wake is even more terrifying to him. Willie observes the disturbingly mechanical movements of the mourners,

looking down into the faces that were looking up through the velar dinner plates from the glass-topped table. And something was haunting him about the rhythm of the knives and forks that cut into the slices of roast beef. Click-scrape. Click-scrape. Click-scrape. Click-scrape. Now, where had he heard that before? Click-scrape. Click-scrape . . . *These days-of dis-inheritance. [. . .] we feast on human heads . . .* The plates never seemed empty of the brown and bloody meat. The utensils worked their way from center to edge, exposing an ear here, a chin there. Parts of a mouth, a set of almond-shaped eyes. (*Linden* 133)

Here the mourners transform into cannibalistic automatons who seem to be continually feasting upon themselves. Indeed, the seeming endlessness of the feasting horrifies Willie. Linden Hills’ populace becomes triply terrible here. The connection between death, the mourners’ obsessive eating, and their consumption and destruction of themselves through their consumption recalls Evelyn’s death by eating. The people are symbolically mimicking Evelyn’s demise. Aside from the explicit revulsion of their feasting upon themselves, their cannibalism also symbolically claims other victims. Bouvier particularly posits that “[t]he mindless consumption of the food as a fetishized commodity represents [. . .] the devouring of the Nedeed wives and emblemizes the

futile attempt to bury and exclude their whiteness, which the mourners accomplish by paradoxically reincorporating that whiteness into themselves as food” (149). They thus eat the wives as much as their eating sympathizes them to the wives’ destruction. Their consumptive materialism likewise reinforces their connection to the oppressive whiteness they try to deny.

The result of the process occupants undergo is cultural effacement. Luther I sought to create out of Linden Hills a subversive space based upon the force of its anti-historical ethnic face. Yet Nedeed realizes that the method of making the residents subversive in fact only reinscribes them as nameless within the oppressive system they sought to defy. When the first three Luthers replace their residents’ erased cultural history with the Nedeed mythic history and a materialist hierarchy, they further cripple the residents. The last Nedeed recognizes that “[h]is fathers had made a mistake: they had given Linden Hills the will to possess and so had lost it to the [white] god they sought to defy” because the oppressive “omnipresent, omnipotent, Almighty Divine [white god] is simply the *will* to possess” (*Linden* 17). The text thus identifies material success “with white culture, and its single-minded pursuit leads to the destruction of the human soul” (Fowler 69). In losing itself in its drive for power to the “white god,” Linden Hills loses its cultural face and name—“Linden Hills [isn’t] black; it [is] successful” (*Linden* 17). By losing its name and claim of distinct blackness, Linden Hills erases its own face much as Priscilla does in the last photo of her album. Priscilla’s shadowed body and erased face mark not just her loss of identity, but the extent to which she becomes a silent shadow indistinguishable and unnamable beyond the bodies of the Nedeed men. Likewise, Linden Hills’ prided distinction from the rest of Wayne County becomes artifice.

Nedeed's "wedge of earth became practically invisible—indistinguishable from their own pathetic souls" (17).

When it sacrifices its cultural face, the populace loses a source of power, endurance, and comfort. Morrison's discussion of the cultural effacement witnessed in *Robinson Crusoe* serves as a fitting theoretical explanation for the kind of effacement Linden Hills witnesses over generations. Like Linden Hills, "Crusoe's narrative [initially appears as] a success story, one in which a socially, culturally, and biologically handicapped black man is civilized and Christianized—taught, in other words, to be like a white one. [. . .] Yet like all successes, what is earned is mitigated by what one has lost" ("*Introduction*" xxiii). The initial population of Linden Hills is composed of social outcasts and cultural "degenerates" like Friday. Luther I rescues his initial residents and their ancestors from a history of "failure," establishing them within a history that "spoke loudly of what blacks could do" (*Linden* 16). Through Luther's influence and cultivation of their "will to possess," the residents gradually become socially acceptable and eventual successes. Yet, as Morrison notes, the issue of rescue is complicated. A rescuer saves a victim from the dangers, complication, and confusion of home, but in return demands power. He also, logically, desires to hear his name adored, not just mimicked ("*Introduction*" xxvi). Nedeed manifests just such power and control over his occupants in Linden Hills. For example, his ability to unname Laurel Dumont denotes the height of his status, which is inevitably demarcated by the power to (refuse to) ask name, tell (your) name, and rename (xxiv). The residents' desire to move down the hill closer to him and their spiritual embrace of his "gospel" also manifest their adoration. Yet their adoration of Nedeed is only part of their "rescue;" as much as Nedeed saves them from a

history and culture of “failure,” he is merely a prophet of the “white god” to whom he inevitably surrenders the “rescued.”

Laurel’s reaction to Roberta’s recount of the story of Brer Fox and Brer Bear proves distressing and indicative of cultural loss. Importantly, Roberta both asks if Laurel recalls the story before she recounts it, establishing the importance of sustaining contact with her home culture. Unfortunately, in accepting the culture of her “rescuer” Laurel has surrendered all such contact, and does not respond to the story with the smiles Roberta is used to. Instead Laurel’s sobs “echoed such an emptiness that Roberta shuddered” (*Linden* 223). Distanced from black cultural art forms, Laurel cannot connect to the “home” in those art forms. Unfortunately, once bereft of her new identity, Laurel is left empty, unable to achieve definition even through Nedeed’s trademark material consumption and the “white god’s” culture.¹⁸ Distanced from their home and engulfed in the world of their masters, the “rescued” residents lose access to discourses that named and recognized their experiences. The residents are “black but unrecognizable at home or away” (*Introduction* xxix).

The residents’ loss of what Grandma Tilson¹⁹ calls “the mirror in your soul” proves terrible; this loss inevitably occurs when they sacrifice all of their cultural selves.

Naylor’s text begins with an epigraph attesting to the horror of losing “the mirror”:

Grandma Tilson, I’m afraid of hell.
 Ain’t nothing to fear, there’s hell on earth.
 I mean the real hell where you can go when you die.
 You ain’t gotta die to go to the real hell.
 No?
 Uh uh, you just gotta sell that silver mirror God
 propped up in your soul.
 Sell it to who—the devil?
 Naw, just to the highest bidder, child. (*Linden*)

Losing “the mirror” marks immediate and real entrance into a nightmare that is usually only spiritually conceptualized. Indeed, the loss is a disruptive act; the boundaries separating and distinguishing the spiritual from the tangible, the dead from the living, and demon from man fall. Furthermore, “the mirror’s” owner/ seller inevitably internalizes the chaos suffered from these disrupted borders. This “mirror” helps its possessor maintain contact with his/ her individual identity against the demands and definitions of other people “when it’s crazy *outside*[:]; you [just] look inside and you’ll always know exactly where you are and who you are” (59). Losing “the mirror” means losing self-definition and the ability to distinguish between internal and external, moral and immoral. Furthermore, the consequent damnation to hell, literal or symbolic, also implies a loss of humanity. The loss of “the mirror” proves crippling and transformative and truly horrific because the types of residents change over generations. The original degenerates and outcasts of society prove less problematic than the later promising and successful residents. The later populace is less moral and human than their ancestors.

Reverend Hollis exemplifies the horror of losing “the mirror” and the characters’ typical refusal to face their loss. As Hollis dresses for Lycentia Parker’s funeral, he carefully inspects all of his body but avoids looking at his face in his dressing mirror. He can no longer avoid facing himself when he goes to brush his hair. Even so, the confrontation does not result in a truthful recognition; instead he tells “himself the usual lie, it was a face that looked like death. Harsh as it was, it was better than the truth: it was a face that looked like it had no reason to live” (*Linden* 164). In her discussion of the novel, Justine Tally brings the pervasive nothingness that Hollis’ reflection signifies “down to basics” (358). “No reason to live” refers to numerous destructive absences: “no

history, no story, no culture, no identity, no present, and, therefore, what future” (Tally 358). Furthermore, Hollis’ lie suggests that residents consumed by such nothingness are something other and worse than living, walking death; they are soulless shells enslaved to damning and oppressive ideologies.

Re-envisioning (Maternal) History

Naylor signifies upon the Gothic and other problematic and oppressive (meta)narratives, such as discourses of patriarchal dominance and white elitist history, to illustrate how they may be redeemed and made useful to the very voices they often silence. The novel also suggests that whereas it is important for men to recognize women’s absence and oppression, women can meaningfully inscribe their experiences within dominant (patriarchal) discourses. Yet meaningful inscription means recognizing both the positive and negative aspects of self as well as a connection to other women’s experiences. Meaningful inscription therefore constitutes the writing of a matriarchal narrative. The text re-makes several gothic tropes—such as the hidden manuscript, the fallen woman, and the rhetoric of the unspeakable—to re-inscribe the female voice against the genre’s silencing mechanisms. Lastly, Willa’s discovery and re-writing serve both as her personal salvation and as a model for the rest of the community.

Naylor foreshadows her re-making of the tropes during one of the text’s early scenes mocking the Gothic. In a supposed testament to Luther I’s evil, Naylor recounts the fright his neighbor suffers on the seventh day of Luther I’s vigil: “Patterson said he was hauling his apples away from the field and the sight of Nedeed sitting there grinning like one of them heathen E-jip mummies scared him out of a year’s growth, and when he got home, all the bushels facing Nedeed’s side of the road had fruit worms in them” (*Linden* 3). Patterson uses the gruesome account as a reason for erecting a fence facing

Nedeed's property. The true reason for his fence proves more mundane, though equally gruesome: "he just couldn't stomach the sight of Nedeed dragging all those dead bodies into his yard. Because the day after Patterson's alleged plague of worms, Nedeed [. . .] began an undertaker's business in the back room of his cabin" (3). Luther I's home-based mortuary is a gruesome image only because it combines two categories that are normally conceived as and kept distinct: life imagined in conjunction with the home, as a familial center and thus space in which life is reproduced indefinitely, against death as written upon the decaying faces of the corpses. However, the physical division and psychological separation of life and death are not natural categorizations; rather, the boundaries between them are as artificially erected as the fence Patterson builds to hide Luther I's transgression of the imagined boundary. As Willa says, everyone is "born dying" (266). Naylor's use of a gothic trope to hide man's self-inflicted anxiety points to her insistence that the horrors of the Gothic are not only imagined but oppressive in their inscription of and insistence upon rigid borders. Indeed, such borders are the reason that, in the text, the South cannot abide burying blacks and whites together, whereas the North merely cannot abide them living together (3).

The numerous voices interlaced throughout the text defy distinction, disrupt Nedeed's metanarrative.²⁰ Each person that Willie and Lester encounter steals a brief space in which to narrate the problematic, subversive details of her/ his life that have been suppressed to maintain residence in Linden Hills. Yet, with the exception of Willa, the only distinguishing textual shift between narratives is an extra line break. These breaks also fall between scene changes and flashbacks sometimes involving the same character's narrative. There is no true overarching textual mark to distinguish between

narrative voices. Naylor's use of undifferentiated discourse "undermines any 'pure black' or 'pure white' narration, since the discourses of both blacks and whites are presented this way, and it also dispels any notion of an objective, totalizing historical narrative" (Bouvier 149). Willa's voice is the only textually distinguishable narrative. Yet it also proves the most disruptive voice in the text, interjecting itself at moments of slight connection with the other voices. For instance, Willa's thoughts over Luwana's slavery fall just after Maxwell's analysis of the photo-spread featuring a black model struggling in chains against a largely unseen foe (*Linden* 116). Willa's voice here acts as a comment against the narrative Maxwell construct around the "victorious" though chained black woman. Willa therefore "constitut[es] a rupturing text that interpolates itself periodically into the body of the main text, further undermining any concept of a pure, unified, masterful narrative of Linden Hills" (Bouvier 149).

Willa's narrative, however, repeats the larger text's denied distinction of interpolated voices. As she discovers and reads the narratives of the other Nedeed wives, their voices and stories blend with her own until her distinct voice becomes most notable for its indistinction. Through these various levels of interpolated narratives, Naylor attends to the importance of multiple truths, of moving past unduly simplified notions of what constitutes the truth or the "right way" of telling it (Kelley xii). Willa's voice also stands as further testament to this sense of multiple contesting truths in its investment in deciphering women's suppressed stories. Naylor's text delves for the multiple voices forming and producing women's subversive narratives. Yet, as O'Connor observes, this is only part of the struggle, since women's literature not only asks "us to know who we are and how to act on that knowledge," but defines liberation in the recognition that

men's "wholeness" is a fabrication constructed by economic ideologies (O'Connor 200). Freedom comes from analyzing and subverting the patriarchal narratives and identities that place women in an exploited position; liberation also stems from recovering the identities and voices lost in/ to such exploitation.

The connection between Willa and the other Nedeed wives both disrupts narrative and temporal boundaries and signifies an important connection to history. The forms of the texts themselves identify a space for and method of disrupting narrative boundaries for Willa. Each wife's narrative hides itself among other texts and thus act as gothic hidden manuscripts whose deciphered messages save the heroine. Luwana's narrative, for instance, is written in the margins of a Bible, each entry corresponding to a particular book of the Bible: "[h]er bewilderment over the rules he had given her about housekeeping and his diet before Leviticus; the sorrows of never knowing her own mother next to the Book of Ruth; her fears of being a new bride before the Song of Solomon" (*Linden* 118-19). Luwana uses "these ancient records as signposts" (118), making the Biblical testaments marginal to Luwana's marginal inscriptions. Her "manner of writing and defining a space for her reflection is especially remarkable. Interleaved as they were [. . .] these thoughts occupy a series of interstitial spaces, constituting themselves as intertexts. As such, they open up spaces for an 'other' voice, a female voice to speak to, dispute with, render inclusive, and continue that most patriarchal of Judeo-Christian texts" (Sandiford 204). The other two wives continue in this tradition; Evelyn conceals her narrative within massive, detailed recipes, and Priscilla inscribes hers within the family's photo album.

Critics find Bakhtin's dialogism a useful theory for charting such ruptures to stable (narrative) structures. The three wives' texts pose a "fight against the domination of male voices in an attempt to inundate them with viable alternatives" (O'Connor 199). The hidden manuscripts, Luwana's in particular, likewise function under O'Connor's interpretation of Bakhtinian dialogism as an alternative to the "strict opposition between, for instance, the marginal woman's voice and the central dominant male voice. It is rather [. . .] the exploration and activating of the unvoiced exiled world of women[. . .]. It defines and redefines the subject with multiple heroines, multiple stories, themselves in constant struggle to ferret out the voices of the past and present" (215). The wives' narratives act as voices that Willa must ferret out, but also reference the numerous other voices embedded within the texts they write themselves into. Luwana's inscriptions thus not only revive her own silenced voice within a patriarchal narrative but point to the other voices still silent within that text. Likewise, Evelyn's and Priscilla's narratives illustrate alternative readings of both types of texts, uncovering secreted women's histories.

Willa invests herself in these alternative texts, identifying with the authors so strongly that the separation between her and each wife becomes increasingly negligible. As she reads Evelyn's text, she fluctuates between Evelyn's narrative and her own until her pronoun referents become unclear and it is impossible to tell whether Willa is talking about Evelyn or herself. For example, Willa begins one paragraph "That must have been a bewildered woman," referring explicitly to Evelyn (*Linden* 188). The same paragraph concludes, "And she could eat" (188), followed by the next paragraph beginning "[t]wenty-nine pounds. She'd put on twenty-nine pounds since her marriage" (189). This second paragraph would still seem to reference Evelyn, since the pronouns in the

previous paragraph did and there has been no introduction of a different referent. Yet by the paragraph's conclusion, Willa seems to have been talking about her own eating disorder and not Evelyn's: "It had taken six years for those twenty-nine pounds. The way Evelyn Creton cooked it must have taken no time at all. The woman had to be immense" (189). Willa shifts the referents without warning; consequently the "she" referred to in the previous paragraph's statement "she could eat" becomes increasingly unclear.

By the time Willa reaches Evelyn's narrative, she has begun to write the narrative as much as she reads it. Though on the surface, Evelyn's narrative is simply a detailed compilation of ingredients and recipes, Willa deciphers the narrative behind the list by filling in the narrative gaps with her personal experiences. She envisions Evelyn's shame as she visits the dark, "dingy back rooms filled with incense and other evil-smelling oils" to pick up her peculiar ingredients; feels Evelyn's nervousness and anxiety at each meal, wondering if her husband will "taste traces of those things in his food" (*Linden* 188). Finally Priscilla's text speaks directly to Willa. She imagines Priscilla's lips move to say "*I knew you would come, and I'm so pleased to meet you*" (205). Thus from Luwana's interleaved text, it seems Willa has learned to write herself in the margins of the other texts. Such multivocality, while transgressing traditional univocal narrative structures, proves liberating to both the reader and writer because "[t]he more voices that are ferreted out, the more discourses that a woman can find herself an intersection of, the freer she is from one dominating voice, from one stereotypical and sexist position" (*"Reconstructing"* 202).

Willa's identification with and psychological connection to the other wives connect her to vital women's histories. Willa's journey illustrates how self-revelation depends

upon an exploration of a group history; the first narrative she encounters testifies to the importance of personally engaging history. Luwana's document reveals another encoded, gothic manuscript—her letters to herself. Since she both writes and reads this second set of documents, it seems the demystifying and saving text that must be understood is the present self and its ancestral origins. What Willa decodes in each text then is the present name and the history attached to it. In these histories, Willa also reads each wife's past names—Luwana Packerville, Evelyn Creton, Priscilla McGuire. Luwana's implicit ideology of reading self as text and Willa's practice of it illustrate James Baldwin's conceptualization of history as “not something merely to be read [. . .] . On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do” (qtd in Tally 358). The form of the wives' narratives also emphasizes the value of women's histories in particular. The Nedeed wives, though consistently suppressed, are the only ones in the novel privileged to have their stories told in the first person through their documents (Fowler 80). Thus Willa spends her time in the basement moving through history, reclaiming the other wives. She uncovers how they left their mark despite the men's attempt to erase them. Subsequently, Willa journeys through the alternative ways women have made history, claiming her identity for herself by doing so (Backtalk 230).

Willa's method of reading women's history is also valuable. The histories themselves contrast with and sharply correct the formal male history of Linden Hills (Fowler 80). Willa actively engages in the already written histories and subjectively and imaginatively enters into each text's reality (84). Sandiford, in fact, defines Willa's

project as "not merely to reproduce the discovered texts in fidelity to their originals but also to complete them by imaginatively supplying those places where the texts are silent" (208). Her engagement serves several purposes. Reading and writing herself into their texts enable Willa to comprehend the documents. Connecting herself and her experiences with these wives also allows Willa to see Nedeed's treatment of her as misogynistic and not based on some failing of hers. Lastly, her method of reading the wives' texts turns cultural history into revealing and liberating autobiography (*"Reconstructing"* 215). The newly written autobiography implies a newly (re)created and self-defined identity, one for which Willa must inevitably claim a name to complete.

Reclamations of denied and unutterable names provide salvation from oppressive histories and ideologies. Nedeed essentially forces each of his tenants to silence some portion of his/ her self. In doing so, the resident loses the name that references and recognizes that portion of their identity. Laurel Dumont's tragedy and namelessness particularly illustrates the destructive power of the Nedeed metanarrative. What is most surprising and disturbing about Laurel's narrative, in contrast to Alcott's, is that she attempts to fight Nedeed's erasure of her name, whereas Alcott collaborates in the silencing. Indeed, Nedeed's narrative is so consuming that it proves difficult to dismantle without the help of a competing narrative. Laurel cannot effectively combat Nedeed's denial of her name; according to his narrative, Laurel Dumont does not exist. Yet Laurel is so thoroughly vested in Nedeed's narrative that she does not think of seeking the original name that came before Dumont. Her original name is never mentioned, despite the opportunities presented in her flashbacks to summers spent with her grandmother during her childhood. The missing name marks Laurel's complete disconnection from

her history; she is left with no weapons to combat Nedeed's erasure of her. Her acceptance of the metanarrative that the name Dumont belongs to inevitably leads to her suicide.²¹

Willa's discovery of the wives' histories via their names proves particularly complicated. Her journey of discovery likewise "entails regaining exactly what the residents of Linden Hills have relinquished: history" (Fowler 79). The texts by which Willa rediscovers these names are complex and defy a unitary reading; they are narratives of both surrender and struggle, victimization and victory. Sandiford explains the dualities of the wives' text and how such duality proves redemptive:

Written as covert responses to tyranny and loneliness, the Nedeed wives' texts define themselves unequivocally as gothic forms by their nature and mode of production. In each case the female author forges a text out of her self-division and entrapment which is finally read by another woman. [. . .] Imprisonment within the 'flawed enclosures of family and household' causes self-division and ultimate insanity, but ironically, it also frustrates the intentions of Nedeed misogyny by radicalizing these women, awakening their consciousness to the true nature of their status and function within the Nedeed patriarchy. (Sandiford 203)

It is an invaluable project because "the discovery of family names goes with the discovery of self" (Christol 352). The "self" here implies a history with which to combat Nedeed's consuming myth. On the other hand, reclaiming the name also means reclaiming its attendant horrors, its crimes as well as its virtues. Consequently, in reclaiming her and the wives' names, Willa not only recovers her "will" to reclaim the other names she has been robbed of—"good wife" and "good mother," she also uncovers a history of loss and failure, a history in which each wife has acted as unwitting accomplice in their own victimization. Before she can walk back up the stairs to the "identity that was rightfully hers," Willa must first recognize that her horrific

imprisonment in part “happened because, taking one step at a time, she descended those basement steps” of her own will (*Linden* 280).

Willa’s discovery of the Nedeed wives’ names is an overwhelming tour through a history of madness, failure and fractured identities. Each narrative is a recording of the systematic fracturing and loss of the wife’s identity and, seemingly worse, the wives’ contributions to their misery. Willa discovers that “the name and history of each of these women [. . .] constitute in sum a history of despair and madness [. . .] . The history of ‘failure’ of these marginalized octoroon women reveals the names of the past wives [. . .] and thus introduces a resurgent element of difference, both between each Luther Nedeed and his wife and between each Luther Nedeed and the other Luther Nedeeds” (Bouvier 148). When Willa is finally ready to reclaim her identity, she also begins by charting her despair and loss. She immediately recognizes that she is dying:

she could feel it happening: the passage of air through lung tissues that disintegrated a little with each breath; heart muscles that pumped and weakened, pumped and weakened with each surge of blood through the body; blood moving through each loosening vein, each tightening artery, nourishing cells that split and divided toward a finite end hidden by her skin. [. . .] In the normal rush of affairs, it was so easy to forget that she was born dying. (*Linden* 266).

Willa’s recognition of her most profound and inevitable loss acts as a double attack against Nedeed. She reclaims her existence and self; her inevitable death confirms her birth and life. At the same time, she deprives Nedeed of the power to destroy her and places it firmly back in her control. Feeling the faint but definite pull of death, she is able to define how death contributes to her existence. Accepting the supreme loss death poses and owning its certainty, Willa “passed the ghosts from every spectrum of human emotion she’d released in that room. But when she finally sat down to cry, the tears belonged to none of them” (268). Hence she has to recover and accept her and the wives’

numerous other losses and failures in order to make her way to the peace her tears signify, and to access the power and strength in the wives' narratives. Accordingly she concludes, "[s]o it had all come to this. [. . .] Now that she had actually seen and accepted reality, and reality brought such a healing calm. For whatever it was worth, she could rebuild" (268).

Her recognition of innate and self-imposed suffering allows her to recognize the history of externally inflicted violence and silence within the Nedeed myth. Her ability to differentiate between the names that were sacrificed and the names that were erased or stolen in the wives' texts allows her to systematically reconstruct her identity. In doing so, she "reads (writes) the text of her own life within the flawed structure of Nedeed patriarchy. [. . .] The texts and her continuing structuration of them unfold for her new revelations about the meaning of her name (Willa equals will, resolve) and help her to rediscover the shape of her face" (Sandiford 207). Willa reconstructs her identity along the very lines that the previous wives lost theirs. As Luwana witnessed a separation of herself—her past identity fragmented from her new, increasingly distorted self—Willa's first reclaiming declaration, "Her name was Willa Prescott Nedeed" (*Linden* 277), unifies her past self, Willa Prescott, with her present self, Nedeed. As Evelyn distorted and disfigured her body trying to conceptualize and remold her role as wife and mother, Willa conceptually rebuilds her body by charting its growth and development throughout her life, concluding with an affirmation of her definition of and identity as a wife and mother (277-80). Lastly, as Priscilla's album records her gradual effacement, Willa looks into a mirror of water and rebuilds her own face, carving out its shape in the air (267).

Having rebuilt the identity that Willa sacrificed, “she could walk back upstairs” to reclaim the names of wife and mother “that was rightfully hers, that she had worked hard to achieve” (*Linden* 280). Willa’s discovery of her name is a final strike against Nedeed as a method of asserting self and identity, and in its disruptive power via its similarity to “Willie” (Bouvier 150). Most importantly, only she can speak her name and the names of the wives. Though Willie is aware of the pervasive silence surrounding her name, and psychically connects to the other wives through Willa’s reading and his dreams, Willa is the only person in the narrative to speak her and the other wives’ names. She manifest Christol’s ideology that the black female author, “doubly invisible in the eyes of history, alone can reread her own story within a field of gender and ethnicity that implies both conflict and the search for consensus and communality, transcribe or recreate her group’s own ‘social dialect,’ thus resurrecting the distant silenced names that give shape to her experience” (347). Only Willa can imagine her and her foremother’s experience to give them voice within and against silenced and silencing categories. As an Other to this group of women, Willie can only read portions of her product and never conceptualize the whole. Thus his dreams, while illustrating a psychic connection to Willa, are never complete or fully decipherable. He misunderstands his nightmares and can reference them only to himself. Consequently, he cannot name Willa or speak the names of the other wives; such naming is Willa’s sole responsibility and power.

Naylor’s use of Gothic motifs and tropes suggests that signifying with a difference is a definitive method of liberating the self. In discussing Naylor’s texts, Kelley, for instance, “focus[es] on the capacity for signifyin(g) to challenge one’s complicity in illusion through a narratological effort: by creating a structure marked by repetition and

reversal, the ‘signifier’ can challenge pretenses and disrupt assumptions” (xvii). Yet while Naylor does practice such “repetition and reversal,” the conclusion of *Linden Hills* illustrates how Naylor adds notes of difference to her signification. Indeed Willa’s resemblance to Madeline Usher marks a supreme moment of repetition with difference. In Poe’s text, the woman does not speak; her only motive appears to be madness and rage. Yet Willa counters this destructive reaction to women’s oppression even as she repeats the consequences. Firstly, Willa speaks, affirming not only her cognizance but also her position and power. “Luther . . . your son is dead” (*Linden* 299) names the father and forces his tie to the son through her narrative and presence. The phrase likewise marks Nedeed’s unjust attack, her loss, and her survival—she lives to speak their dead son’s name and life. Most importantly, the phrase denies Madeline’s unknowable and destructive rage.

Although Willa’s encounter with Nedeed results in a scene that nearly perfectly replicates Poe’s, Naylor gives voice to Willa’s motives. Willa’s “attack” is actually a defense of her self and refusal to submit to further victimization. Thus Willa seems to repeat the Usher’s tragic end, but with a vital narrative difference that places blame upon Nedeed’s inability to recognize his changed wife. Naylor’s choice to make *Linden Hills* an overtly Gothic text is an invaluable moment of signification. The novel critically examines and comments upon the (canonized) American Gothic writers that came before her. Her signification upon the Gothic also exemplifies her desire to talk to her precursors and show that diverse literary texts represent multiple truths that can fruitfully and mutually exist (Kelley xiii). The *Joy of Cooking* or a family photo album can do the same theoretical work as and even contest canonized Gothic tales. Likewise the Gothic

genre that has helped marginalize various “others” can be made to speak the alternative (hi)stories of the female, racial, and/ or queer body.

Notes

¹ Naylor extensively draws on the Gothic family romance intertext for numerous themes and motifs characterizing the Nedeed saga. Nedeed is perhaps anachronistic not just because he seems to stem from another time, but also because he stems from an extreme gothic space. Furthermore, the first Luther Nedeed continually renovates the house as the neighborhood grows until the house resembles a castle. The finished product has three levels and “an artificial lake (really a moat), a full twenty yards across, totally [sur]round his house and grounds [. . .] the only entrance to his veranda was at the back, through a wood-and-brick drawbridge that he always kept down” (6). Furthermore, the last Nedeed traps his “traitorous” wife in the basement-morgue of this “castle,” thus rendering the basement-morgue into a dungeon as well. The interior of Nedeed’s house particularly references gothic castles. The den houses a fireplace with a “deep, open hearth, [and] blackened andirons” (*Linden* 285). The light cast from the fire highlights the empty, darkened corners and “[t]he silent and shadowed room threaten[s] to rise up and condemn” Nedeed (285). Wandering through Nedeed’s home, Willie notes the absences of “living smells” that engulfs Nedeed’s house. The house thus becomes doubly horrific. Threatening and forbidding to its own resident, the house is also morbidly engulfed by an absence of life. Naylor reinforces the house’s gothic atmosphere in Willie’s reflections on Nedeed’s den: “The high stone fireplace, the heavy walnut tables, the fringed Oriental rug, the leather furniture. [. . .] Willie felt out of place. [. . .] they seemed to suspend him in another time. Why, it was like walking into a movie set for *Wuthering Heights*” (290).

² From hence forward I will differentiate between the firsts and last Luther Nedeed by referring to the previous Nedeeds as Luther I through III and the final Luther Nedeed as Nedeed.

³ Willa’s suicide would have been as much a murder as a suicide. Indeed, her death while in the morgue would not require active destruction on her part but submission to the perilous and lethal circumstances in which Nedeed has placed her: “She knew how to die, Just let the mind swing out [. . .] . Let it slip. Slip. Toward the edge. [. . .] put your mind on the clock. Right there. On the clock. And let it swing you to death” (*Linden* 65-66).

⁴ Nedeed refuses to recognize Sinclair as his son, though the two are identical in body structure and differ only in their skin tone. He instead proclaims that Sinclair is the illegitimate consequence of an affair. Furthermore, though Sinclair is named when he is five, just before he dies, only Willa names him. In the Nedeed’s patriarchal structure and narrative, which never recognizes the female voice, Sinclair remains, for all intensive purposes, unnamed even in death.

⁵ Nedeed here repeats early gothic concerns and paranoia over hybrid bodies, usually made monstrous in their ability to mask their blackness and contaminate/ stain pure whiteness.

⁶ There are four generations of Nedeed wives referenced throughout the novel. The first is Luwana Packerville, followed by Evelyn Creton, then Priscilla McGuire, and lastly Willa Prescott. Each wife’s story is told through Willa as she reads through their hidden, encoded journals.

⁷ Willie observes a similarly disturbing scene between Nedeed and a female corpse. The sight of Nedeed, shutting the coffin makes Willie shudder and feel ill. Though Willie tries to deny what he sees, claiming all he saw was a man closing a casket, he cannot shake the vision of Nedeed’s right hand “mov[ing] too slowly over the top of the lid before it clicked shut” (*Linden* 186). Yet Willie signals the horror of the moment when he is unable to formulate what Nedeed’s movements imply: “Why, it moved as if Nedeed was . . .” (186)

⁸ The son’s possession and silencing of his mother are slow and methodical but certain: “Ten years passed before she noticed the shadow. As the child grew, the height of his shoulder cast a faint shade across

Priscilla McGuire's body. It had started at her lap and then slowly crawled up across her stomach, chest, and neck. What began as a slight gray film was now deepening into a veil" (*Linden* 208).

⁹ Willa's imagination, furthermore, aligns Evelyn with the later as Willa envisions Evelyn sneaking through the grocers to "one of those dingy back rooms filled with incense and evil-smelling oils. [. . .] How did she feel with her precious grams of dried bull's testicles tucked deeply in her velvet gloves" (188).

¹⁰ Naylor recounts her complete surprise when she finally wrote the scene, exclaiming that she was so angry at Willa's decision she stopped writing for two weeks. Naylor recalls how Willa "turned on [her]: she said she was happy to have been a wife. That's how she got her identity. She loved cleaning that house. She loved making a way for her husband. What she was going to do was climb up those steps and not tell him 'get out of my way,' as in some great feminist dream. She was going to climb those steps and start cleaning house" (Rowell 183).

¹¹ Willa, wondering how she is "no longer anyone's mother or anyone's wife," concludes that "[i]t happened because she had walked down into the basement" of her own volition (*Linden* 279).

¹² Nedeed sends an anonymous letter to Alcott's father, threatening to send a similar letter with pictures to the partners in Alcott's law firm. As a result, Alcott's family pressures him to marry a woman and soon (*Linden* 77-8). Several chapters after the wedding, the text implies Nedeed is the deliverer of the message when Nedeed questions what he had accomplished by forcing Winston's marriage (286).

¹³ In an endnote to her essay "Reconstructing History," Teresa Goddu details the relevance of Braithwaite's name. The fictional historian's "namesake, William Stanley Braithwaite, also denied his black perspective. By accepting a formalist model of poetry instead of Dunbar's vernacular one, W.S. Braithwaite chose not to write as a black poet or about racial themes" ("*Reconstructing*" 228). Braithwaite was, however, an influential critic and notable anthologist; inclusion in his *Anthology of Magazine Verse* in fact became a popular mark of poetic success at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance.

¹⁴ One of the reasons residents seek to escape history is that it is "someone else's history about what you could not do" (*Linden* 16). In the context of the novel, the "someone else" is implicitly white.

¹⁵ Luwana's letters to herself lead her to realize that she is and always will be a slave to her husband and son; Evelyn eats herself to death; and Priscilla's erases her face in the last family photo in her album.

¹⁶ Luwana talks about her mistress in endearing tones, explaining, "I tend to forget about the small vexations that I suffered under Mistress Packerville because they pale in the light of the good that she rendered me. You know I would not have learned to read or have knowledge of the grace of our Saviour were it not for her. [. . .] Mistress Packerville consulted me about everything that came or left that house. [. . .] So when I think of Mistress Packerville, I think only of this Bible she gave me and the tears she shed when I had to leave her home" (*Linden* 123).

¹⁷ Each home is leased to a particular family and their descendants for a thousand years and a day.

¹⁸ Hélène Christol discusses how Naylor stresses the importance of maintaining contact with your original culture and identity in her examination of Naylor's novel *Mama Day*, which followed *Linden Hills*. The inhabitants in the novel gain their strength, independence and stability from their awareness and maintenance of their historical and cultural identity. The people of Willow Springs—geographically isolated on an island off of the Carolina and Georgia coast—sustain and control political and commercial relations with the country on their own terms and do not depend upon American law and justice systems. They are able to deny all American filiations by tracing and claiming their heritage from their only white master, a Norwegian, and an African slave (Christol 349).

¹⁹ This is Lester's grandmother and one of the few original people in *Linden Hills* who sustained a sense of her heritage and resisted Luther II's offer to buy her out and remove her contaminating influence.

²⁰ Bouvier defines *Linden Hills*' narrative style as "free indirect discourse," explaining that "[t]his type of narration presents itself as an internally dialogized form, where boundaries between the 'autonomous' narrator and characters break down" (149).

21 The Dumonts have been residents of Linden Hills since 1903 and have been a part of Linden Hills, and the Nedeed-centered history of the area, for nearly a century. Their movements are inevitably listed among Braithwaite's twelve-volume history of the area.

CHAPTER 4
THE LOST VOICES OF TIMS CREEK: NARRATIVE RE-INSCRIPTION IN A
VISITATION OF SPIRITS AND “LET THE DEAD BURY THEIR DEAD”

Randall Kenan’s texts speak to and complicate the slave narratives’ revisions of the Gothic genre. Although the slave narratives are certainly notable for their manipulation of the genre to suggest the horror of white racist culture, the narratives did not seek to defy the ideology of heteronormativity inherent in the culture and the genre.¹ Henry Gates observes that slave narratives often draw distinctions amongst slave classes based upon color gradations (Gates 274). Likewise texts such as *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* often portray white male willingness to engage in homosexuality as a contemptible transgression that only reinforces their image of white slaveholders as monstrous. Similarly, William Crafts’ conclusion to *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* suggests that his wife’s transgression of gender roles was a necessary yet disruptive evil that had to be rectified once they escaped the contaminating immorality and horror of slavery. Kenan’s texts repeatedly illustrates how the narratives’ formulation of black identity based upon sexual Othering is problematic and how modern Black refusal to challenge these formulations perpetuates oppression within their own community. The stories suggest that modern black identity is still dependent upon defining and containing bodies Othered and marginalized according to sexuality, gender and colorism. Kenan implies that Black selfhood dependent upon policing boundaries between normative and “monstrous” identity proves oppressive to the Other the self is

defined against; it likewise perpetuates deceptive and erroneous mythologies of normative identity that inevitably prove destructive for the entire community.²

A Visitation of Spirits (1989) narrates the events leading to and surrounding the suicide of Horace Cross, the text's homosexual protagonist. In the novel Kenan writes out of and explores the intersections and interactions of three identities: "southern," "black," and "gay" (McKoy 22). The text is an amalgam of narrators, temporal shifts, and genre forms. The story alternates between Jimmy's narrative implicitly documenting the impact his young cousin's death has had upon him, the strange and nightmarish adventures Horace undergoes the night of his death, and Horace's flashbacks to his life in Tims Creek. Through the tragedy and terror of Horace's death, Kenan's novel interrogates the horror of being forced to align yourself with a group that demonizes homosexuality and that defines itself by a singular, stable identity. Like much of "[c]ontemporary gay fiction that deals with 'family' or 'community'" Kenan's novel "exposes the ways those concepts cover over difference: the group achieves a cohesive identity through disavowal of 'aberrant' individual identities" (*Queer Renaissance* 70). Horace's memories illustrate that any part of self that departs from the group's concept of their identity is banished into tortured silence and the self comprised of such unacceptable components is eventually damned and irrevocably damaged. While the spiritual turmoil and psychological torture Horace suffers are among the traditional tropes of Gothic fiction, the reason for his suffering—the conflict between his homosexual and imposed normative identity—indicates that the community's turmoil results not from the presences of transgressive identities and bodies, but from the community's inability to accept them. Consequently, Tims Creek's mythic wholeness, and the unity it implies,

proves damaging and inevitably damning both to those who do not fit within the parameters of the community's identity and to the community itself.

"Let The Dead Bury Their Dead" continues the interrogation of Tims Creek's past and people, presenting horrible events and grotesques characters against the background of slavery. The consequence is a tale dizzying and comic in effect, its bizarreness continuing the narrative and textual disruptions begun in *A Visitation of Spirits*. The story is, for instance, overtly anachronistic. "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" was published in 1992, but its introduction is dated in 2000 and records the death of its "writer," Jimmy, who is a central character of the novel, in a car accident in 1998. "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" also illustrates the struggle between official forms of history and unofficial, folk forms. Kenan explicitly admits to "playing with academic history as opposed to oral history as opposed to personal history, and memory, and plain old gossip. And how at once they are all very different and disparate, and all very much alike" (Hunt 414). Perhaps equally important, the story expands upon *A Visitation of Spirits*' theoretical model, which is an attempt to recapture the queer narrative of a sexually Othered and silenced voice. The story similarly uncovers and reclaims sexually Othered voices, but also reclaims the narratives of gendered and racial Others as well. In reclaiming such an array of voices, Kenan illustrates how the creation of a stable historical metanarrative inevitably erases numerous bodies from its story and therefore proves incomplete.

Many of the critics interested in Kenan's fiction primarily laud him for his inscription of a black, queer voice upon the Southern literary tradition. Several studies also connect Kenan's religious experiences to his racial and cultural discourses. Susan

Ketchin, for instance, discusses the effects of Kenan's childhood religious experiences upon his work and explores Kenan's works for their comments upon the notion of race as a myth and the nature of the dichotomy between North and South. Lindsey Tucker's discussion of normative racial identity and sexual desire proves particularly valuable for this essay. Tucker details how Kenan's text repeatedly disrupts stable definitions. She for instance notes that "[p]ossessed of a world view that is basically fundamentalist and separatist, the community has attributed its survival to the rigid maintenance of patriarchal family structures, stable racial identities, and normative sexual desire. Yet, as Kenan is intent on showing, such control [. . .] is unrealistic, unworkable, and only serves to underscore the permeability of all borders, whether communal, bodily, or psychic" (Tucker 306).

A great deal of the work on Kenan focuses upon his texts as they contribute to Queer theory. Patricia Holland Smith concerns herself with the similarities between James Baldwin and Randall Kenan as they re-write the Queer body in public spaces. Yet of the scholarship devoted to Kenan, only Robert McRuer's work *The Queer Renaissance* begins to connect Kenan's use of the Southern and Gothic traditions to his exploration of Queer identity. However McRuer's chapter on Kenan is primarily concerned with explaining how Kenan engages Gothic tropes in creating a queer trickster figure that is "able to reverse hierarchies of power and transform even the supposed 'margins' of the queer world" (*Queer Renaissance* 30). What McRuer fails to fully enumerate is how the community's racial, sexual and religious figurations of normality also create the queer monsters they seek to silence and destroy.

My essay seeks to explain how the community distorts and destroys Horace's queer body by encapsulating him within Gothic tropes of otherness, madness, and haunting. Yet Horace haunts back and defies the silence his community imposes upon him. Horace's haunting proves the impetus for Jimmy's ethnographic text. "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" begins as Jimmy's recognition of the Queer silence in the community. The prequel soon expands to reveal how the community's oppression of Horace in *A Visitation of Spirits* is emblematic of the typical silencing historical metanarrative imposes upon sexual and racial Others. While McRuer's formulation of Horace's trickster identity certainly proves notable, Kenan's reliance upon and subversion of gothic tropes deserve further attention. While Kenan seriously uses tropes such as the unspeakable, the hidden manuscript, the haunted house, and doomed anti-hero in his novel to articulate the consequences of defining (sexual) difference as deviance, he also parodies the Gothic in "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead." Indeed the story uses gothic tropes to achieve a humorous effect and subverts the genre's ability to transform racial minorities and queer beings into monstrous Others through its refusal to fulfill the Gothic's traditional effects of apprehension and terror.

Normative (?) Communities

A Visitation of Spirits is Kenan's gothic story of a young man pursued by demons through a quaint small town. Tims Creek, for instance, is the typical gothic town haunted and distorted by the presence of a demonic and contaminating anti-hero. During the light of an average day, Tims Creek is a quaint, rural, southern town. The town's fundamentalist views about their group identity are very much aligned with the American Gothic's ideology of fixed racial and sexual identities. Furthermore, the town's paranoia and strict set of taboos echo nineteenth century Gothic fear of human nature's destructive

potential; like the genre, the town clearly worries over human nature's descent into deviance "when freed from the fetters of social and ethical taboos and codes of behavior, taboos and codes that [. . .] are necessary for the stability of both society and the individual" (Byron 137). Indeed, Horace acts much like a typical villain and/ or monster in his inability to fit within their stable identities; his transgression of recognized categories threatens to destabilize the hierarchies and boundaries that order the world of Tims Creek as much as any vampire or ominous villain could.

Consequently the town's typically welcoming attributes and normative persona assume a haunted and evil aura on the night of Horace's nightmarish adventures and death. Demons hide among the bushes and trees, ghastly and grotesque figures appear along the roadside, the local school becomes a labyrinth peopled by cruel ghosts, and all manner of evil aberrations infect the town's spiritual center, the Church. Horace's nightmare seems to utterly infect the seemingly pleasant town. Horace's multiple visitations, however, illustrate how such a community is invariably haunted by various "evils" that give rise to Horace's demonic presence and deeds. The very ideologies that provide the basis of Tims Creek's normative, quaint façade create the horrors and demons that plague them. The novel is therefore a study in how "monsters" such as Horace Cross are created from oppressed beings.

The novel's prologue-like section "Advent" and epilogue "Requiem for Tobacco" portray life in Tims Creek as an idyllic yet imperiled existence based on unity and tranquil normality. South York County High School is

the pride of the county. Its football teams, basketball teams, track, tennis, and even baseball teams, both junior varsities and varsities, were local favorites. [. . .]The varsity football team had been considered the best in the state for a while, winning the state championship three years in a row; the last few years it had ranked in the

top twenty. The top seeds of the tennis teams went on to do well at East Carolina and State; and several members of the track team had won scholarships. “You can tell the caliber of a school,” the principal, Mr. Unger, once said at an assembly meeting, “by the caliber of its sportsmen and women.” (*A Visitation* 141)

The school’s successful image seems to reflect the happiness and unity of the community it serves.³ At the same time, the school’s appearance is but another mark of how Tims Creek’s tranquil life is disappearing. Just as the rituals, behaviors, and attitudes of Tims Creek increasingly seem anachronistic, the bulk of the school’s architecture “belonged to a different era” (140). However the school’s latest addition, an auditorium with a music chamber, is “a streamlined giant in faded beige brick not in keeping with the farms and garages and woods and fields that surrounded it” (140). The high school’s exterior appearance reflects the gradual change that the community has been witnessing.

The difference in architecture coincides with the shift away from rituals such as the hog killing portrayed in “Advent,” but not from the normative gender ideology inscribed within that section. Indeed, “Advent” charts the socialization of the community’s children into rigid gender roles through the recurrent communal ritual of hog killing (*Queer Renaissance* 91). The young boys crowd with the older men around the hog pen. Here they watch the ritualistic slaying as “[s]ome older man [. . .] give[s] a young boy a gun [. . .] and instruct[s] him not to be afraid, to take his time, to aim straight” (*A Visitation* 8). Meanwhile the girls gather with the women around long tables and a pit, cleaning and preparing the slaughtered hog for cooking (7). Even though the text implies that ritualistic hog killing is slowly disappearing from community life, noting “they don’t happen as often as it once did” (6), the students’ behavior at school implies the survival of the gender roles and ideologies taught through the ritual. Indeed, their rigid policing of normative roles is typical of Black cultural experience; as a group that has consistently

“struggled with the well-founded fear associated with being perpetually defined outside of the normative, Africans in the Americas [. . . have] a particularly virulent history of homophobia” (McKoy 16). Hence the residents of Tims Creek insistently construct the sexual Other to validate their existence within the normative and counter oppressive definitions of themselves as racial Others.

The Cross family strongly illustrates Tims Creek’s rigid patriarchal structure. For instance, Zeke, Horace’s grandfather, recalls the Cross family history in purely masculine terms, tracing the family’s landholdings through myths of his grandfather’s exploits. Jimmy’s extensive account of the Cross history suggests that the familial goal is to maintain power in the church and community through maintenance of a seemingly powerful patriarchy. Underlying Jimmy’s narrative is an implicit disappointment with the family at being unable to repeatedly reproduce versions of Thomas Cross—the founding ancestor who “was a big, strong, hardworking, Christian man, who walked in the ways of righteousness” (*A Visitation* 53)—with complete success. Although the Cross’ slave history and surname implies a likely degree of miscegenation, the historical accounts given by both Jimmy and Zeke ignore any familial connection to the white Crosses.

The Crosses are particularly determined to maintain stable racial identities and loyalties. The family lives with the racist tribulations they have suffered in the past, recounting them in stories that illustrate the familial determination to stand for their rights as well as the reasons for their continued distrust of whites. For instance Zeke recalls the time when, as a teenager, he confronted a white man who owed him money. Zeke got his money, but was later arrested for theft and assault. The judge calls in his father and, after

threatening Zeke with prison, proceeds to lecture Zeke's father: "Boy, this youngin of yours is got to learn his proper place. [. . .] you know we can't let little black boys run around pulling guns on grown white folks. [. . .] I'll let him go, but you and that other one there with you go to whip him, right here before this court, before me. And you be sure to whip him good, too" (*A Visitation* 159). Although Zeke is guilty of a serious and dangerous offense, the judge's attitude about the case belittles both Zeke and his father. The judge lectures the two men and declares the problem as simple and menial: Zeke was silly enough to forget his proper place in respect to white men and so must be punished. The intention was to secure Zeke, his father, and any other present Black men in their proper place.⁴

Horace's aunts exemplify the consequent colorism that results from their historical condition as oppressed minorities. When Horace calls his aunt a bigot, she angrily denounces the accusation, exclaiming, "[d] you have any idea how many white men have called me girl and aunt? Out of disrespect? Out of hatefulness? How many white men called your late Uncle Malachai [. . .] boy and uncle? [. . .] And that's just the beginning. [. . .] I don't qualify for prejudice. I know all *the facts* already" (*A Visitation* emphasis added 187). "The facts" she refers to is the history of racial discrimination that the Crosses have consistently confronted. Consequently Horace's aunts teach both Black and white children in their classes yet continue to regard white children "with a strong and bitter wariness" and regularly take Horace "aside and instruct [him] in how to deal with 'those people'" (*A Visitation* 90). As a Black man and particularly as a Cross, Horace is expected to confront incursions of white authority at every turn, regardless of the form of that authority. Their command remains the same even when authority takes

the form of Horace's white principal, though his aunts are teachers at Horace's school;
the aunts declare

if he must fight, he must fight and damn the consequences, for not to fight would hold graver, more shameful consequences than any punishment the principal could ever dole out. There was an armor one wore to beat the consequences, invisible, but powerful and evident; an armor he heard in the edge of his grandfather's voice, in the stoop of his great-aunt's walk, in the glint of their eyes when they encountered white people. Integrity. Dignity. Pride. [. . .] Not to have this quality would be, must be, like being lost. (93)

Horace's family members raise their armor whenever they encounter white people, indicating no differentiation between people or instigating events. Acceptable racial identity for them, then, is marked by essentialist racial delineations—Blacks can only trust and befriend other Blacks and all whites are to be mistrusted and challenged.

The Crosses' colorism echoes the strict racial and sexual binaries that defines Tims Creek's identity and governs their social interaction. Yet both the Cross family and the Tims Creek community prove incapable of consistently behaving in a manner that upholds the binaries. Indeed both are haunted by misdeeds, ideological conflicts, and destructive acts that impede their own concept of stable identity. For instance each character in the text confesses to engaging in sexual misconduct even though all subscribe to Christian mandates defining and restricting sexuality: Zeke and Ruth both privately confess to extramarital affairs; Jimmy confesses to the "true sin" of living a double life as a licentious, sexually experimental and ravenous student in college; and Anne, remembered in beatific terms, openly and repeatedly cuckolds Jimmy without regret. There is, as Sheila McKoy observes, no true moral authority in Tims Creek because everyone seems to have committed secret sexual sins (20). The identity that each group presents is consequently a façade hiding the "demons" they wish to exorcise from their "bodies." The hidden disorder belying Tims Creek's tranquility implies that

the disorder and transgression at the root of Gothic nightmares speak closer to the truth of social interaction and categorical (de)constructions.

Tims Creek's uncanny qualities manifest themselves early in the text. For instance, Horace's stealthy research into the occult occurs under the school librarian's guard. The librarian nods "knowingly" as Horace searches for a book and gives him a "knowing smile" as he "riffle[s] through the pages like a madman" (*A Visitation* 13, 14). Although Horace believes she is oblivious to his aim, the repeated adjective indicates that she knows far more than he guesses. The passage's tone implies the librarian's uncanny looks hide knowledge of a number of horrors, including those Horace suffers. One of Horace's visions indicts the town for the horrors it has committed and allowed to occur. The weird talking buffalo meditates upon the increasingly unforgivable behavior of people and complains to Horace that "[t]hey abide by no rules. Beasts is what they have become. Beasts" (209). The scene is amusingly odd in its portrayal of a bizarre beast marking the atrocious beastliness of townspeople; moreover the buffalo's uncanny quality and complaints reflects and mocks the town's nightmarish aspects.

One of Tims Creek's nightmarish qualities is their colorist mentality that is both key to maintaining their stable identity and also a part of Tims Creek's horrific slave past, portrayed in "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead." Tims Creek has replaced slavery's plantations with new ones of their own making. The most damaging of these is the Elementary School that, "in its plantationlike grandeur, made Horace wonder about hell. As he and his felons roamed its grounds he thought, Will life there be as harsh as the lives of slaves" (*A Visitation* 87-8). Horace's description is telling of the educational environment; although the students are not slaves there is a great deal of unrest between

the black and white students and little social contact. The students are consequently doubly imprisoned: once, simply, as students jailed in the educational facility for the sake of learning, and again by the unspoken racial restrictions and regulations placed upon them by the community. But as much as Horace's homosexual presence disrupts the sexual norms of the community, so too do various transgressive bodies disrupt the racial norms. For instance, a white student secretly admits to Horace his "deep desire to be a black person" (144). For Tims Creek, uttering such a desire proves as problematic as Horace's uttered sexuality, and thus the student whispers it and, interestingly, only to Horace.⁵ The school is nightmarish to Horace because of its racial and sexual fundamentalism. Horace witnesses direct attacks upon the homosexual psyche at school as his friends gather to belittle the only openly gay student. Likewise, the black students ostracize Horace for befriending white students based upon principles they first learn in elementary school.

Understandably, the school plays a significant role in Horace's nightmare. Horace enters the eerie, quiet building on the night of his death and wanders towards a classroom "wondering what horrid, hideous, malevolent, bone-crushing, evil beast he might meet. What unenviable end he might find? What pain lay here? What torture?" (*A Visitation* 142). All he finds is his biology teacher, "Clarissa Hedgeson, wearing her old maid's print dress, her silver steel-rimmed specs, and her authoritarian snarl" standing in front of his classmates (142-3). Though the vision seems harmless enough, its occurrence is telling of the nightmarish reality Horace suffered in school. Hedgeson and the class are the malevolent beasts, not innocent victims or bystanders.

The title of the first two chapters supports Tims Creek's alignment with destructive racial ideology. "Black Necromancy" references the power, history, and ancestral ideology of Tims Creek, yet it is not vastly different from "White Incantation," a title that implies the power of verbal and textual racial rhetoric. The titles are significant beyond the difference between sorcery and necromancy;⁶ they imply that "black" magic is as harmful as "white" incantation (Holland 279). Furthermore "[t]he *source* of black gay identity is not white *sorcery*" that acts as an infecting, twisting influence "but the subtle manipulation and command of a 'white' text in the black pulpit" (Holland 279). Kenan implies that the source of Tims Creek's power is hardly different from the source of white power during slavery; they have manipulated a "white" text for their power and used it to ostracize racially transgressive members and to completely oppress and destroy the homosexual body.

Kenan manipulates the Gothic trope of the familial secret or curse in the Cross family ancestry by revealing a number of "curses" that only become problems because the family insists on secreting them. There are equally numerous signs of racial and sexual "aberration" among the Crosses. The family repeatedly suppresses and/ or expels those members that explicitly manifest signs of difference; however, such expulsions can never completely exorcise those elements that destabilize the familial identity. For instance, the Crosses insist upon limited interracial social interaction and never recognize any white ancestors. A summer play by a white Cross, however, reveals the miscegenation within the black family line. The truth of the Cross's genealogy disturbs their essentialist notions of familial and racial identity by defining the existence of and their beginnings among the white Crosses (Tucker 308).

The play also reveals the Cross “family secret” as one of disempowerment and oppression. Philip Cross of the white Cross lineage portrays the slaves who will become Horace’s recognized ancestors as menial characters in his production. All of the white, slave-owning Crosses are in the center of the play’s poster while the slaves are represented by three black people “[o]ff to the right of the group [. . .]. A man, shirtless, horse-muscled, and bronze, and a woman, her head beragged, both with an out-of-place grin on their faces [, and] a young boy, his eyes much too big, the smile on his face lost somewhere in the conflagration of counterfeit glory” (*A Visitation* 211). The poster and play reduce the black Crosses to stereotypes, their “buffoonery and hijinks” providing the comic relief for the show (213). In the play the Black Crosses appear in definite contrast to the Biblically powerful image they otherwise present throughout Tims Creek.

The Crosses suffer repeatedly destabilized gender and sexual roles that damage the family’s sense of stable patriarchy. For instance, there are two particular cases of Cross women who defied the patriarchal tradition: Jonnie Mae, whose vying for power “amazes and chills” Jimmy, and Rose, who deserts the family and who they treat as “a servant girl, humiliating her, excluding her, backbiting, [and] accusing” her upon her return (*A Visitation* 117, 119). Jonnie Mae is particularly vital to complicating the familial identity. She insists at once on upholding the rigid gender definitions and on disrupting the definitions that help stabilize patriarchal rule. Jonnie Mae is as powerful as Zeke; the two equally share work and building the family’s holdings. Her particularly androgynous name also proves indicative of this destabilization. Lindsey Tucker also notes that Jonnie Mae destabilizes gender boundaries because she embodies a rigid Christianity and advocates uncompromising cultural sanctions as much as, if not more than, Zeke (309).

Even her determination to uphold the family's normative image disrupts that image because of the power she exhibits in doing so.

Perhaps the best illustration of Jonnie Mae's disruption of patriarchal authority occurs at the Thanksgiving dinner, a particularly traditional occasion, during which Horace reveals his pierced ear. Although Zeke is the eldest Cross at the dinner table and the family patriarch he remains largely silent during the attack upon Horace. Zeke's silence is further remarkable because Zeke raises Horace, thus acting as Horace's parent. Even the seating arrangement challenges normative patriarchal constructions. Although Zeke sits at "the head" of the table, Jonnie Mae sits in a similar position at the opposing end of the table while all other men, including Reverend Barden, sit in between them. Considering the events of the day, the true "head" of the table remains questionable and difficult to distinguish between the brother and sister.

Jimmy also recalls three Cross men who defied normative sexual behavior.⁷ The two that live, Lester and Jethro, are eventually stifled and suppressed by the family and slowly disinherited from their property. Such stories only further illustrate the instability of the Cross patrilineage. Indeed, neither Horace nor Jimmy is raised by or even near their own fathers. Zeke banishes Sammy, Horace's father, for being rebellious, hard drinking, and sexually overactive; he banishes Jethro, Ruth's husband, supposedly for being an alcoholic and wasteful with the family's resources. The expulsion of transgressive family members only "reveal[s] the instability of gender identities within the bounds of the family—in other words, to assure the spectral presence of difference" (Tucker 310). This "difference" assumes homosexual terms when it references the Cross men. In one of Ruth's many arguments with Zeke she counters his accusations that she

drove Jethro to drinking with the sense of deep-rooted familial “evil” that “wont just on Jethro. It’s on Lester. It’s on this boy [Jimmy] here. It was on your grandboy [Horace]” (*A Visitation* 197). The connection she ties between Horace, who is obviously gay, and the others suggests, in addition to other clues, that homosexuality, and not drinking and unbridled sexual activity, troubles the Cross family history. As Tucker observes, Jethro is probably unhappy in his marriage because he is gay (Tucker 310). Ruth’s observation that the family seems cursed⁸ by an unnamable “evil” that contaminates some member(s) from each generation also highlights the role of homosexuality in early American Gothic fiction as an unspeakable sexual transgression.

Both Lester and Jimmy manifest signs of homosexuality during the family argument about Horace’s pierced ear. Jimmy and Lester side with Horace against the family’s hetero-normative rules defining his piercing as a “perversion.” Jimmy declares that the piercing is “not that big a deal” (*A Visitation* 184) and Lester exclaims that he actually likes the piercing before the others silence him (183). Likewise aunt Rachel’s marital history, or lack thereof, also destabilizes the family identity: “Rachel seemed disinterested in men, and though her mother nudged and pushed and argued and coerced her to find a husband, she never did” (118). Considering the “evil” that plagues the family, Rachel’s extreme “disinterest” strongly implies that she is a closeted lesbian.

Jimmy proves as sexually transgressive as his deceased cousin, if not more so. While Horace’s sexuality is explicit, though troubling, Jimmy’s remains unstable throughout the entire text. Jimmy indulges in a great deal of sexual experimentation while he is away at school, sleeping “with anything that was willing” (174). He does not use a gendered noun to limit the range of his sexuality.⁹ Jimmy’s own wife challenges

and complicates his sexuality on two separate occasions. McRuer argues that Anne's presence emphasizes the instability of sexual identity for Jimmy. Jimmy's impotence indicates the "other problem" that he can't shake or speak. He can't say he is "gay" and can't "entirely *not* say it either," relying upon his sexual performance to solidify his heterosexuality (*Queer Renaissance* 103). When Anne asks "Are you capable" Jimmy responds with sex, but immediately follows that with the confession "I have lied. To myself" (*A Visitation* 172) suggesting heterosexuality isn't as enjoyable for Jimmy as he pretends (*Queer Renaissance* 104). Yet McRuer's suggestion that heterosexuality is discomforting and confusing for Jimmy only partially defines Jimmy's sexual problems. Indeed, the ease with which Anne repeatedly cuckolds Jimmy as well as his recognition that "she never truly gave herself to me" further problematizes sexuality for Jimmy until "the idea of heterosexual normality becomes a sort of caricature of itself" (Reid-Pharr 607).

Ruth's observation of the Cross' boundary problems are typical of the "definitional struggles that gather around the categories of hetero-homo" (Tucker 310). Like the Cross' banishing mandates, "such definitional exclusion belies the presence of the homosexual within the structure of the hetero, for the exclusion of the homosexual relies on an internal mechanism for its existence within that familial and communal perimeters" (310). Although homosexuality remains an unspeakable haunting specter even for Ruth,¹⁰ her simple declaration "[y]ou all is something else" (*A Visitation* 197) marks unnamable and unknowable difference upon the entire family, not just its exorcisable members, and impedes any familial definitions by which the Crosses might identify themselves. Such differences are not what makes the Cross family a horrible aberration,

however; rather it's their demonizing of difference and the consequences of such expulsions that make them horrible.¹¹ As Charles Nero notes, Black families suffer for oppressing and alienating their gay children; they "suffer because their oppression robs them of a crucial sign of humaneness: compassion" (411). The family loses its humanity in trying to retain a stable, hetero-normative identity, and in doing so, it robs Horace of his humanity as well.

Jimmy's destabilized identity proves especially telling of the instability underlying the general community as well as of the destructive immobilization the communities' fundamentalist ideology wreaks upon individuals. As Tims Creek's religious leader, the school principal, and one of the few, if not the last, remaining Cross men, Jimmy should portray the kind of stable identity the community advocates. Yet his leadership roles afford him no comfort; indeed they rather immobilize him because his identities consistently conflict with each other. Familial interactions prove particularly useful for heightening the conflict between Jimmy's identities. Jimmy proves powerless as the only mediator in an argument between his aunt Ruth and uncle Zeke:

[. . .] being the minister, he should have been more stern with his great uncle. Wondering how.

By the time Jimmy got to the car, Ruth was already sitting there in the backseat staring straight ahead. As he stood there, before the door, before her, he realized once again that he had no idea what he should say to her, how he should say it, or if, indeed, he should say anything at all. But he felt, somewhere in the place that spurred him on as a minister, that he should speak. So he opened the car door. She would not look at him. (*A Visitation* 199)

As Ruth's and Zeke's minister, Jimmy's role is to counsel them and lead them to reconciliation. As their grandnephew, Jimmy is in a disempowered position amongst a family that privileges age and silences youth. Jimmy's educational history only adds to his problems of positionality. Jimmy is clearly an "insider" among Tims Creek and the

Crosses, yet he “is also something of an outsider as well. His long years of college and seminary study spent away from Tims Creek, as well as his awkward position as both a child of the community and its religious and educational authority, produce for him an indeterminacy of position that [. . .] place him and his discourse in between worlds of conflicted meaning” (Tucker 315).

Jimmy’s and Horace’s confessions reveal that they are both trapped in the same heteronormative worlds. Meditating upon Horace’s banishment from the family, Jimmy concludes “[t]hat is what finally got to Horace, isn’t it?” (*A Visitation* 188), implying that Horace’s inability to comfortably and willfully circulate amongst worlds through and in spite of his difference led to his downfall. Horace existed in a world outside of Tims Creek, “peopled with new and hateful monsters” that followed different rules and regulations, but he also, “just like [Jimmy], had been created by this society. He was a son of the community, more than most. His reason for existing, it would seem, was for the salvation of his people” (188). The confessions also reveal that both remain alone and their relationships are inevitably tragic because of the identities and definitions family and communal history render unto them (Tucker 245). Consequently, Jimmy’s sad recognition that he is “alone and unknown and unknowable” (*A Visitation* 180) also applies to Horace at the end of his life as a “possessed” and suicidal figure. The very presence of both characters in Tims Creek marks the extreme instability of group identities throughout the rest of the town despite the community’s consistent insistence upon heteronormative and colorist identities.

The Demonic Other’s Exorcisms

Horace Cross serves as the anti-hero of the story. There is no distressed damsel that he must save on his dark quest. Rather, having been thoroughly inundated with the

notion that he is a sexual deviant, and monstrous because of this deviation, Horace seeks to save himself from the torments of a demonized sexuality. The demons he conjures to save him lead him on a tour through his conflicted and confused past. Horace's struggles with his homosexuality throughout his past occur in a fashion quite similar to the escape-capture motif prevalent in the gothic tradition. Horace's psychological struggle literally manifests itself in his nightmarish adventure through Tims Creek as he re-visits sites that represent momentous occasions in his identity formation. Indeed, having been "captured" by his desire for a homosexual classmate, Horace attempts to elude his desire, rejecting his lover and homosexuality for over a year before once again falling prey to his queer desire. Horace's fatal spell consequently proves his last escape attempt. The tragedy of Horace's suicide implies that queer desire is not the horror that Horace must flee; the text repeatedly stresses the notion that the demonic Other is constructed and made Other by oppressive heteronormative constructs.

Horace Cross circulates among a number of seemingly contradicting communities within Tims Creek, none of which are capable of equally acknowledging and accepting Horace's homosexuality, racial heritage, and interracial associations. Among his family and church, Horace is "black," but not gay; at the theatre where he works during his last summer, Horace is openly "gay," but his "blackness" is invisible; and although he is to some extent tokenized by his "alternative" white friends at school, Horace is neither "black" nor "gay" in his immediate interactions with them ("A Visitation of Difference" 227-28). Each community defines itself against an aberrant identity that also comprises part of Horace's self.

As a figure of fluidity Horace exemplifies both the value and shortcoming of the Grotesque as a revolutionary trope—its ideology insists that beings move between categories because of, not despite, their differences. These grotesque individuals access a degree of freedom and actualization unavailable amongst a group that consistently ignores or destroys difference. Horace's multifaceted self is the very component that allows him to move among the varying groups and (inter)act individually within the groups. For instance, Horace's affair with Antonio, a Puerto Rican, illustrates a meaningful connection across differences. The two, brought together by their homosexuality, also connect over the history of racial marginalization. In a moment of foreplay, the two playfully exchange racial epitaphs, acknowledging their different yet similar histories of racial oppression. This exchange follows as the resolution to an argument over their homosexual identities.¹² The very terminology used to identify and understand the Grotesque seemingly captures and quarantines such multiply-identified beings within a category of otherness; Horace's fear of othering and quarantining, enacted as communal chastisement, effectively impedes his ability to accept a fluid identity.

Kenan's use of Horace illustrates how the Grotesque is often used in American Gothic literature as an incomplete ideology; it posits the trope as mere otherness and ignores the Grotesque's useful and revolutionary potential. Fortunately Kenan presents a figure that counters this incomplete and problematic construction of grotesqueness. Gideon is, like Horace, a fluid and transgressive figure. Gideon is able to access the insurgent power of the Grotesque because he lauds his differences rather than denies them.¹³ Consequently Gideon, who begins as an openly queer child from a disreputable

outcast family, grows into a still openly queer young man who is able to achieve success among various sectors of the community.

Horace's inability to accept his grotesque self as a positive and revolutionary identity seems to drive him mad. The consequent mysterious voice that influences Horace vocalizes his desire to rebel against the strict racial and sexual binaries that demonize him. Horace first and foremost challenges the racial segregation esteemed by his family and Tims Creek. The community finds it peculiar when Horace initially begins "to hang around those white students known as 'the beautiful people,'" but soon enough Horace is "criticized sorely by his fellow black students for getting an attitude, for being an Oreo" (*A Visitation* 161). Horace's transgression only grows as he refuses to accommodate the criticisms (161) and even goes so far as to defend his white friends to his family. Horace's aunts are particularly amazed by this betrayal, exclaiming "[a]fter all the white man's done to us, you gone take up behind him and do everything he tells you to do" (186). Horace's recognized refusal to abide by the racial regulations imposed by his family and community only aggravate his unspoken sexual transgression. As Jimmy observes, Horace's homosexuality, though unacceptable, is merely a "simple, normal deviation" among the community. However such "deviation" becomes an unforgivable "flaw" when compounded by Horace's refusal to align himself with their racially essentialist ideologies and behavior.

Kenan explores the gothic trope of the unspeakable, welding the trope specifically in reference to its historical connection to and disfiguration of queer bodies. Many critics note "the defining pervasiveness in Gothic novels of language about the unspeakable" (Sedgwick 94). The term masks homophobia in the Gothic's paranoid plots; this

namelessness proves yet another method of social control over sexuality. Indeed, the tales often “crumble” at the point of homosexual transgression “or are ‘wholly illegible[;]’ the speaker is strangled by the unutterable word, or the propositions is preterited as ‘one so full of horror and impiety, that even to listen to it, is scarce less a crime than to comply with it’” (93). Kenan chooses to articulate this traditional treatment of homosexuality through a queer character that is incapable of uttering the term. To Horace homosexuality is, at best, the unspeakable “Other, the thing that called him so severely” and that he initially “could never quite picture” (*A Visitation* 88). More typically, Horace understands homosexuality as a “disease” (160) that causes its infected to engage in “abominable behavior” (148). Homosexuality is a “curse” and its various names are “whispered [. . .] condemnation[s] [that] sizzled in the air” (100).

The unspeakable becomes a prison for the (sexual) Other who cowers from both his self and his tormentors who also masquerade as his victims. For instance feelings of pleasure and self-loathing accompany Horace’s eighth grade discovery of masturbation. He does not even call the act by its proper name, but rather terms it a way of “sin[ning] with his hands” (*A Visitation* 100). The act of masturbation so irreparably conflicts with religious doctrine that the natural act proved nightmarishly confusing for the child, who “knew he was doomed to hellfire and damnation, for try as he might, he could not stop. He would go for days, weeks, without touching himself, only to succumb in delicious fury, and afterwards feel the guilt of a murderer. [. . .] God thundered in his mind after orgasms; this God bellowed in his head when the need arose and Horace had conjured up the pornographic images he had seen” (100-101). Horace’s confusion about and terror of sexuality becomes only more complex when the truth of his homosexuality reveals itself.

Since religious ideologies of normative sexuality instruct Horace to denounce unmarried sex as “unholy congress” (*A Visitation* 101), recognizing his desire as homosexual is impossible at first. Homosexuality remains the unspoken thing haunting Horace’s dreams and “the terror, the familiar question he had refused to acknowledge” (152).

Kenan portrays physical sensuality as a gothic experience to stress the psychological terrors the rhetoric of the “unspeakable” wreaks upon the queer body. Sexuality becomes so conflicted for the alienated self that Horace inevitably grows to associate the “sensations” he feels in the pit of his stomach that designate sexual attraction as something horrific. One of the first demons that Horace encounters manifests this horror, whacking Horace “in the stomach hard with his spear shaft. Horace doubled up in pain, as the ache radiated in a circular fashion throughout his body” (*A Visitation of Spirits* 67). The nightmare reproduces homosexual desire as Horace, attacked by the demonic warrior’s phallic “spear shaft,” again feels “sensations” in his stomach associated with another masculine body. Yet the passage illustrates how nightmarish sexuality has become for Horace. The phallus has become the weapon of a destructive, evil Other, and the “sensation” in his stomach proves the sign of pain, not pleasure. Consequently, Horace reacts with anger to the last homosexual attraction he has before his death (216). Although the attraction and encounter occur months before Horace’s spell and death, the events of the text suggests that Horace has understood his sexuality in the above terms even as he cannot deny his attractions.¹⁴ The result is Horace at the novel’s beginning—unable to accept himself because of his sexuality, feeling alien and strange already, he seeks to actually become something other.

Kenan's recognition of homosexuality as one of the transgressions that haunt traditional gothic texts becomes apparent in Horace's relationship with a young Latin actor. Looking for a place where they can be alone together, Horace and Antonio wander across an old, crumbling house. Horace recalls the house's foreboding appearance. The house, though not a mansion, is typically gothic and "remind[s] Horace of the haunted houses of his childhood fears":

The door was open, hanging off its hinges. Once inside, surrounded by the overpowering smell of dust, decay, rotting wood, motes rising from their movement in the flashlight's beam, they looked along the grey floors and peeling walls, seeing no furniture, no sign of a family ever having lived there. [. . .] They got a blanket from the car, and for several nights this became their place, quiet but for the sounds of rats in the rafters and down the halls, the hoots of owls and the munching of termites, in this dilapidated shell of the house. (*A Visitation* 223)

The "haunted" house becomes a welcoming place for transgressive sexuality in part because both the house and the queer body function within traditional gothic texts as figures of horror.

The scene also indicates that the monsters and villains that haunt the house in traditional gothic texts hide a fear of transgressive sexuality. For instance, when Horace is wandering naked and somewhat insane down the road a passing driver finds it easier to believe that he had passed a ghost rather than a nude, gun-toting boy (67). At the same time, Horace's and Antonio's comfort in the house also challenges the Gothic's construction of such houses as horrible. Horace's revelations about the "haunted" house also lead to realizations about himself, culminating in an "understanding [of] the truth behind the lure of the flesh, not just its power, but its promise fulfilled" (223). Consequently Horace begins to accept, for the time, "the unexplained groans coming from the downstairs rooms" (223) as well as the groans and moans he and Antonio make together.

Horace unfortunately does not have the strength to confront the community's erroneous ideology and so inevitably accepts their image of him as monstrous Other. Horace is ultimately unable to direct his anger at and disdain for oppressive heteronormative ideals outward at the originating community, and instead directs his contempt inward at the prohibited sexual self. Consequently Horace remains a gothic character who attempts to escape his oppression through embracing the social image of himself as a horrific being that does horrific things. Horace's resolution stands in notable contrast to slave narrators/ authors. As noted in my first chapter (ex-) slave writers fought oppressive, dominant definitions of Blackness as monstrous, villainous, savage, and innately evil by revealing white society, and slaveholders in particular, as truly villainous, cruel, and uncivilized. Writers such as Henry Bibb implied that slave use of conjure,¹⁵ for instance, resulted from slaveholders' resolution to deny slaves access to Christianity and hope of any sort. In light of this history of defiance, Horace's choice to identify as monstrous instead of challenging the community's definition proves particularly critical.

Acting like a typical gothic villain, Horace engages in a ritual that will transform him, but also summons dreams of infanticide: "In the dream he would sing to the child, singing: *Hush, little baby, don't you cry*, as he smothered it to its white death beneath a goose-stuffed pillow and when he raised the pillow in the dim starlight the silent child would still be staring at him, this time the eyes a little puzzled, unfocused, slobber rolling fresh from its still-smiling, slightly parted lips" (*A Visitation* 19). Horace completes the ritual using a number of mystic symbols late at night "when demons walked the earth most freely" and "call[s] on ancient demons to save him" (25). The spell does not

transform him, but summons a strange voice, “a cackling demon in his head” (209) that impels Horace towards destruction. His spell complete, Horace rises, “his face as vacant as his soul” (27), and finds himself “surrounded by hobgoblins and sprites and evil faeries and wargs—aberrations like himself [. . .] he was happy, O so happy [. . .] happy for the first time in so, so many months” (28). At home amidst a group of aberrations Horace witnesses several other supernatural beings that guide him through his memory throughout the rest of the night and novel.¹⁶ The community essentially forces and directs Horace’s entry into the world of the Gothic other. Kenan unmask the monstrous supernatural in the gothic as a construct meant to contain or represent “what men despise. Or think they despise [about] Themselves” (252).

Kenan illustrates the extent to which racial and sexual difference become interchangeable signs of aberration. The fight between and reconciliation of Horace and Antonio also illustrates how they both function under these interchangeable signs of aberration. The characters interchange terms such as “punk” and “faggot” for racial slurs such as “boy” and “Tonto” (*A Visitation* 225). The connection between homosexuality, racial stability, and normative identity is most apparent in the Cross family’s reaction to Horace’s pierced ear. The family’s criticisms of Horace’s white friends and their disgust and dismay that the earring signals Horace’s sexuality occur within the same space of text. His aunt Jonnie Mae declares Horace has “[n]o better sense than to go on and follow whatever them white folks do” and just four lines later exclaims “He *just* pierced his ear. Like some little girl. Like one of them perverts” before commenting again upon his problematic friendship with the white students (*A Visitation* 184). The family’s attack on Horace illustrates McKoy’s notion that “[b]y locating homosexuality outside of the

parameters of black identity, this [homo]phobia aligns homosexuality with whiteness and with what Phillip Brian Harper terms ‘failed manhood.’ In other words, black gay identity is erroneously connected to what is not masculine and not black” (17). The conflict culminates in his aunt’s assertion that Horace has disrespected the Cross patriarchy and renounced his familial connections through his interracial friendship. Jonnie Mae declares that Horace had “forgotten [him]self,” and reminds Horace of who his family is and the history of their struggles before Zeke banishes Horace from the family’s Thanksgiving dinner (*A Visitation* 187). The implication is that Horace is no longer a Cross after the encounter, but something other, outside of the Cross patriarchal identity. For Horace to know who he is, then, he must be both heterosexual and self-segregating.

While the repeated othering Horace suffers throughout Tims Creek would seem to suggest the horror and inconceivability of Horace’s transgressive differences, Horace’s othering actually illustrates the horror of a (group) identity organized around strict racial and sexual binaries. McRuer explains Horace’s final alienation as a consequence of the sameness/ difference binary along which Tims Creek structures its community:

Horace confronts the ‘regime of sameness’ almost everywhere he goes in Tims Creek. None of the subcommunities of which Horace is a part is comfortable with ‘difference’ within its ranks; thus, in none of the locations in which Horace finds himself is he able to be comfortable with ‘sameness.’ The compulsion to be ‘the same,’ even as it is reproduced within the cultural category ‘black gay,’ invalidates any of Horace’s attempts to come to terms with his own identity. (*Queer Renaissance* 82-3)

The social constraints that surround his othering inevitably alienate him from self and all possible communities, leading to the horrific night and events of the story. As Jimmy implies in the first narration of Horace’s suicide, the only demons that possess and destroy Horace are (socially) imagined. Yet Kenan’s text reveals that socially imagined

and imposed demons are as damaging as, if not more than, any real, spiritually possessing alien creature for two specific reasons. First, attempts to exorcise sexually and racially transgressive aspects from Horace only alienate him from a fundamental part of himself and any possible communities. Secondly, such exorcisms must prove fleeting; unlike the spiritual entity, the social demon cannot truly be gotten rid of. Horace's repeated, worried question to Jimmy, "what if I can't change" (*A Visitation* 114), speaks to the inability to exorcise his homosexual "demons" despite his best attempts. When the repressed, demonized identity resurfaces, the individual suffers further exorcisms and/or utter alienation from all communities and self.

Kenan repeatedly reveals how socially imagined religious doctrine reproduces the Gothic trope of homosexuality as unspeakable, monstrous Otherness. Homosexuality is not only wrong, but also sinful, corrupt(ing) and infectious according to doctrine. Reverend Barden's sermon quotes Biblical scripture both as a reiteration of divine mandate and as evidence of the undying ideology guiding the rest of his sermon. The sermon defines homosexuals as tormented and damned creatures with "darkened" hearts who God "gave [. . .] up unto vile affections" (*A Visitation* 77). The scripture also marks Horace at a young age as something vile and unnatural, cursed by God for the sin of pride. Reverend Barden ends his sermon in trepidation because "your children, my children could have been watching this [homosexual] filth [on television], as if it were as natural as a horse foaling or a chicken molting" (78). His ending reflects the ideology of homosexuals as abnormal, intolerable, and evil as well as infectious destroyer of innocents.

Barden's sermon epitomizes the demonizing homosexuals generally suffer in religion. The Church has used exorcism as a way to oppress gays for a long time, and homosexuals are typically forced to undergo an exorcism when they come out (Nero 408).¹⁷ Nero particularly contends that "[p]ublicly stating and affirming sexual identity actually causes the exorcisms. Put another way, their exorcisms are punishments for stating that they practice 'the love that dares not speak its name'" (408). Horace's "possession" occurs after his family has openly condemned him as queer in front of Reverend Barden and immediately after a summer spent frequently engaging in homosexual activities. Yet Horace merely manifests what was always already present in and for the Church. Horace for example, concludes that "it was just as preachers had been preaching it all the years of his life, warning: there are wretched and wicked spirits that possess us and force us to commit unnatural acts" (*A Visitation* 28). His recognition implicitly proclaims that the Church has created the possessing demons for Horace and imposed them upon him as a way of quarantining and eventually exorcising Horace's sexuality. However if, as Horace worries to Jimmy, he simply cannot change (77), then Horace must completely become that Other who must then be exorcised from the community.

In a chorus of affirmations, the community supports Barden's vision of homosexuals, and thus Horace, as an unholy threat. The shadowy menagerie of forms that taunt Horace at one point in his possession is not actually a group of demons. The shifting forms are merely representative of the chorus of voices throughout the community that typically condemn Horace for his sexuality. The first of the taunts—"Wicked. Wicked. Abomination. Man lover! Child molester" (*A Visitation* 86)—repeat

Barden's the condemnations in Barden's sermon. The rest of the names and admonitions are the results of a community that subscribes to such a doctrine:

Old men, little girls, widows and workers, he saw no faces, knew no names, but the voices, the voices . . .
Unclean bastard!
Be ashamed of yourself!
[. . .]
Cocksucker.
Oreo. (87)

Even Horace's schoolmates have subscribed to the idea of the homosexual as infectious and destructive Other. While Horace is in denial about his sexuality, others mark it, exclaiming that he is like Gideon, the only other local homosexual boy.¹⁸ Since Horace's sexuality is recognized though unnamed, his classmates merely mark him as weird. The only way that Horace can defy ostracism at that point is by tormenting Gideon. Yet Horace's behavior unifies and affirms the heteronormative ideologies he has been inundated with.

The othering that Horace suffers through religious doctrine leads to spiritual alienation. Horace's first "demon"-led visit is back to the church he was raised in, and the site of an ideology that explicitly condemns and demonizes him. Unable to find acceptance within Christianity's teachings, Horace turns to Christianity's negated aspects for escape. Indeed, Horace first realizes his escape lay in sorcery while he was reading the Bible, and the spell Horace casts in the beginning of the book is based upon a story of an old monk who made a pact with a demon (*A Visitation* 240, 14). Likewise Horace envisions several other distortions of Christian tropes early in his journey. He sees, for instance, an angelic creature "with the graceful lean body of an athlete" gruesomely crucified upon an old sycamore tree: "He had been scalped, the raw flesh hanging in

tatters along his head, his eyes wide and dead in a fixed and distant gaze, the blood streaking and streaming down the lean body, splattered all over the once-magnificent wings” (*A Visitation* 67-8). The horrific scene opens with a description that has homoerotic undertones suggesting that the only place Horace can access the homosexual voice within a religious context is in an inverted version of Christianity.

Kenan revises the trope of the haunted house to make it into an alienated space for the Othered individual. Whereas the dilapidated house Horace and his lover use for a love nest is not haunted, the church Horace grew up in is and becomes horrifying for Horace. The church has an eerie gothic quality to Horace, rising “before him in the clear night like a dark vision” (*A Visitation* 68). The doors swing open “with a gothic creak” (69) and demons seem to haunt the church’s interior. The sanctuary’s accessories are also strange, though unaltered, to Horace, who “just could not remember the walls gleaming quite so white, or the carpet that led down the aisle to the pulpit being quite so red, or the oak pews for the congregation to be polished with quite that glossy a finish—and the pews were [. . .] crammed with more people than Horace had memory of ever seeing” (70).

Kenan uses the Gothic trope of the hidden and/ or illegible manuscript to present Horace’s self-alienation in very real terms. For instance he attempts to write an autobiography to clarify his “confusion,” referring to the conflicting multiple identities that have led to Horace’s numerous otherings.¹⁹ Yet the autobiography must inevitably fail because the words are meant to exorcise more than they are meant to clarify. His autobiography remains an unfinished effort because “he never read what he had written, hoping rather to exorcise his confusion;” consequently the words can never “lead him out

of [the] strange world in which he had suddenly found himself" (*A Visitation* 239).

Horace only writes his demonized self to be rid of it, not to understand it. Of course he finds no answers in his writing, and so he burns the autobiography, effectively destroying his written self.

Kenan uses an encounter with a doppelganger to literalize Horace's self-alienation and destruction. Horace's climatic meeting with his (re)mirrored self is his last chance at redemption. He meets himself sitting in front of a mirror. At first Horace does not recognize the man seated applying make-up. However Horace soon recognizes himself, dressed as a clown, and is also able to pick out the ancestral traits recorded on his face; he sees "the nose folks said to be just like his great-grandfather's, the lips rumored to be like his grandmother's, his father's determined chin, his maternal grandmother's sad eyes" (*A Visitation* 220). Unfortunately Horace is unable to accept and embrace this reflected self. Rather, the confrontation of himself is the final scene of recognition and disavowal in which the recognition is a sign of horrific inadequacy. All of the (re)doubling Horace witnesses leads him to what he believes is the "truth" about himself: "he is a clown, he wears a mask, he only plays a role, he betrays the communities of which he is a part" (*Queer Renaissance* 85).

Horace is unable to reconcile what he believes of himself and the disruptive potential his doppelganger reveals to him. The reflected Horace shows him that his place is as a destabilizing figure whose difference allows him to circulate among various group identities. Horace cannot conceive of or accept such a subversive and complex definition of self and so says "no" to what he recognizes as redemption (*A Visitation*

234). When the doppelganger insists Horace take his hand, Horace responds with profound violence:

In such a rage he could barely see, Horace raised his gun and fired. [. . .] there on the ground he lay, himself, a gory red gash through his chest. His face caught in a grimace, moaning and speaking incoherently. Why? Why. You didn't have to. You shouldn't have. [. . .] He looked at his hand, covered in blood, and Horace looked up at Horace, his eyes full of horror, but in recognition too, as if to say: You meant it, didn't you? You actually hate me? (235)

The murder finalizes Horace's alienation from himself as well as all possible communities of which he has been a part, particularly the family reflected in his own face. The scene also insists upon the self-destruction such alienation must lead to.

Kenan manipulates the genre's trope of haunting and madness to illustrate the overall consequence of Horace's alienation. The (e)strange(d) voice that plagues Horace and drives him to destructive acts throughout the night. Despite what Horace thinks the voice is not that of some external, possessing demon, but his own oppressed voice so distorted by social pressures and ideals that it seems monstrous. Horace's initial description of the voice implies that it is his own: "A voice. Where? In his head? In his mind? In his soul? It was [. . .] the very voice of pain and anguish and sorrow itself, and the voice of lust and hate" (*A Visitation* 27). Like Horace, the voice is transgressive, defying singular, stable definition; it is "old and young and mean and good" (28). Horace sees the voice as demonic because of dominant society's lessons, yet the voice is merely a violent reaction to the psychological violence that Horace regularly suffers.

Although the voice and other figures are not evil, they only offer destructive solutions. The voice only leads Horace towards a destructive manner of defense—attacking each community as he is attacked—that will leave Horace isolated.

Unfortunately this becomes the most viable solution for Horace, since he cannot envision

changing how he engages each community nor how each community can and must change because of his presence. Furthermore, the destruction Horace wreaks upon the community also prevents Horace from integrating his identities within his self. Speaking about the fragmented queer self, Marlon Ross explains that “[i]ntegrating same-sex desire within the self meant finding a way to remain integrated within the home community while remaining true to one’s desire. [. . .] For the black homosexual, same-sex desire was a matter of finding a way to reaffirm continuity, rather than a matter of breaking with a dominant culture in order to gain a new identity through an awkward consciousness shared with others of a similarly oppressed status” (505). Horace must connect to difference and suffered oppression within various communities, not break all ties to the problematic groups, if he is to successfully integrate his desire. However, in Horace’s mind the demonic voice and his destructive behavior stand not as proof of the consequences of the community’s horrific ideologies, but as a testament that he is monstrous. His choice to listen to the destructive voice can only lead to his death because his actions prevent any (re)connection to community and self.

Haunting Sacrifices

Critics continue to debate whether or not Horace’s destruction is necessary for the community. On the one hand, Horace’s presence was not truly contaminating. After all, his transgressions were no more substantial than the disruptive differences each group hid amongst its members. Nor does it seem that Horace was truly possessed by an external demon. The narrative introducing the second telling of Horace’s suicide tells us that we should indeed “[r]egard [the demon] with awe and loathing, for he is what men despise. Or think they despise. *Themselves*” (*A Visitation* 252). Men merely imagine demons,

reprehensible transgressive beings that they are, that stand for the disruptive self that men can then exorcise from their normative identities.

While Horace mourns his inability to achieve such an exorcism, he functions as a sacrificial body for the whole communities. Demonizing Horace for his transgressive presence, they could then exorcise him and their own “sins” along with him. Robert Reid-Pharr explains that such communal scapegoating is a typical response for marginalized communities. In an attempt to dismantle their own image among dominant society as aberrant, destabilizing Other, marginalized groups choose and exorcise a figure emblematic of their transgressive identity. Consequently, “[t]o strike the homosexual, the scapegoat, the sign of chaos and crisis, is to return the community to normality, to create boundaries around Blackness, rights that indeed white men are obliged to recognized” (Reid-Pharr 603). Reid-Pharr’s observation suggests that the community’s need to signify and exorcise aberration is connected to its racial fundamentalism.

Horace’s last name, Cross, further indicates his role as a sacrificial scapegoat. Like Christ, Horace must also carry a “cross” for the “sins” of others (McKoy 19). Jimmy’s observation that Horace’s “reason for existing [. . .] was for the salvation of his people” (*A Visitation* 188) also supports Horace as a sacrificial figure. This role, furthermore, connects Horace to the hogs slain during a community ritual described in the prologue-like section “Advent.” Chronologically the hog killing follows Horace’s death although it is narrated in extensive, gruesome description before Horace’s narrative begins. McRuer’s work is particularly valuable here for the connection it draws between the hog killing and Horace’s suicide and sacrifice. In both deaths the community essentially

gives a young boy a gun and instructs him to “aim straight” (*A Visitation* 92). Horace’s death would seem a necessary evil for the community because

the community can exist only in the sort of (heterosexual) pastoral wholeness represented in ‘Advent’ and ‘Requiem for Tobacco,’ through disavowal or outright elimination of some of its members. The hog and Horace both play a sacrificial role for this community, and the passages, detailing their individual moments of death underscore this similarity of purpose [. . .]. After both deaths, the community is once again free to celebrate a mythical wholeness. (*Queer Renaissance* 92)

Yet the structure of the text reveals such “mythic wholeness” as horrific and the “compulsion towards sameness as violence” (*Queer Renaissance* 89). Like his description of the hog killing at the beginning of the text, Kenan describes Horace’s suicide in vivid terms and immediately follows it with a portrayal of the unified community. Normalcy proves as fractured and terrifying as Horace’s split skull, and Kenan’s repeated evocation “you remember” in the last section implies that in remembering you must consider this and other “whole” communities with a sense that something is horribly amiss (“A Visitation of Difference” 230).

The vision of Horace’s death as a sacrifice for the sake of community purification is therefore, highly questionable. First of all, Horace’s death establishes a haunting presence that insistently marks a place for queer positionality²⁰ in communities. Both the hogs and Horace return as “stubborn” ghosts, “trampling the grasses and flowers and fancy bushes, trampling the foreign trees of new families” (*A Visitation* 10), to disrupt the lives of the living. The very fact of his sacrifice signifies that instability exists within the communities in the first place and that there never was a natural “mythic wholeness.” The moments of his death proclaim him as the irretrievable son of the community. In his last recollected moments Horace juxtaposes the memory of the tastes and smells of a country home with the description of an erotic encounter.²¹ These last moments proclaim

that there must be a space for the queer body because the queer body is a product of the community; his death marks the absence of such bodies as profound and disturbing.

Secondly, Horace's sacrifice suggests a need to reconsider history and search its tombs for the bodies and voices of disruptive figures sacrificed for the sake of unity. Horace disrupts all binary-based stability by "(re)surface[ing]" in order to disrupt the complacent security of Tims Creek, to render unstable the binary oppositions (center/ margin, clean/ unclean, etc.) that ground the life of this community" (*Queer Renaissance* 95). While *A Visitation of Spirits* starts the mixture of myth and reality as early as "Advent" (Betts 13), Horace's death finalizes the disruption of even such typically stable categories as fact/ conjecture. The section describing his death consequently concludes that in the case of Horace's suicide, "Ifs and maybes and weres and perhapses are of no use [. . .]. The facts are enough, unless they too are subject to doubt" (*A Visitation* 254). Within the blurred lines of the text, the narrative's suggestion that the facts may be subject to doubt means that they are doubtful. Consequently, nothing can be certain and the entire truth of the night's events remains incomprehensible. Yet this instability proves especially useful considering the next section's focus on memory. If the "facts" of an event are destabilized, then the memory of that event cannot be static. Furthermore, the call to remember assumes historic tones as the passage evokes the memory of an entire community's past life. The passages indicates that memory and history are subject to constant re-writing as we search for the voices, bodies, and elements that the "facts" missed, distorted, and/ or suppressed.

Lastly, Horace's sacrifice proves useful as a method of forcing the community to realize the horror of its ideologies. In an interview, Kenan proclaimed that Horace has to

die in order for the community to change: “They have to understand the devastation they’re wreaking on certain people and tragedy most effectively disturbs and moves people” (Hunt 417). “Requiem for Tobacco” signals a change in the community through its nostalgia for the dying way of life in Tims Creek. The section describes a way of life that isn’t exactly what we witness in Horace’s story; rather, Tims Creek has, in many obvious ways, already begun to shift away from the idyllic life described in the closing section, even as the town holds tight to the façade of that life. The narrative posits that Tims Creek must continue its shift, dropping the façade along the way. The last paragraph suggests that the ghost of the sacrificed, and not the act of sacrificing itself, is what will force the community to change further: “And it is good to remember that people were bound by this strange activity [. . .], bound by the necessity, the responsibility, the humanity. It is good to remember, for too many forget” (*A Visitation* 257). The paragraph’s list of things remembered echoes Horace’s dying voice in the preceding chapter; the mandate “to remember that people were bound by [. . .] the humanity” also references the horror and lack of humanity leading to Horace’s death. The section implies that Horace’s death is both reason for and reason why the community must change; the memory of his suicide will force the people out of forgetfulness.

Jimmy’s confessions prove the extent to which Horace’s suicide has forced self-awareness upon individuals. Jimmy’s confessions begin with a similar portrait of his life as idyllic, but gradually reveal that picture as a lie. Furthermore Jimmy’s occasional inability to focus on any one thing in his confessions illustrates how Horace’s death has “destabilized the secure meanings around which Jimmy’s life was organized” (*Queer Renaissance* 99). Likewise Jimmy begins to read his life through the memory of

Horace's death. All of the headings of Jimmy's confessions echo Horace's, and all of Jimmy's self-meditating sections inevitably return to scenes of critical moments in Horace's life.

The ethnographic writing Jimmy produces after Horace's death further illustrates the resounding impact of Horace's death. In "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" Jimmy attempts to recover an imagined past and lost culture in a search for an explanation for Horace's demise in the town's history (Tucker 308). The story Jimmy uncovers establishes a theoretical connection between the othered bodies of the slave society and Horace. Tims Creek began as a maroon society existing within, not on the outside of, the borders of the plantation society it was a disruptive part of. Tucker significantly observes that Horace's homosexual identity likewise exists within the structure of the hetero-normative because the "internal system" creates the "outside" or Other to supplement its own lack (308). Jimmy's ethnography consequently shows how Tims Creek negates its own powerfully subversive history by silencing Horace's voice and destroying his body because of its difference. Lastly, in reclaiming Tims Creek's history, and Horace through that history, Jimmy also reclaims and re-inscribes a multitude of voices made monstrous and silenced by normative discourse.

The Haunting of Oral Narratives

Jimmy's ethnography may have been intended as an investigation of Tims Creek's history, but his "work" continues *A Visitation of Spirits*' theoretical attack upon general history as a metanarrative built upon the silenced bodies of the marginalized. Of course this may come as no surprise, since Kenan originally intended to include "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" as part of the novel. The oral tale told to Jimmy by Zeke and Ruth signals Other('s) (hi)stories buried within (hi)stories, each competing for voice. Kenan's

text uses gothic characteristics to undermine the Gothic's silencing capabilities. The Gothic genre, especially as it was popularly wielded in the nineteenth century, made the racial, gendered, and sexual Other monstrous. Kenan's text actively questions each of these distortions. For every outrageous gothic event Kenan presents the voice of the Other typically masked behind the event. For instance, Kenan counters the Preacher's lewd and grotesque homosexual exploits with the rational and sympathetic voice of an oppressed homosexual character. Lastly Kenan reveals the active and willful distortions of Other('s voices) throughout fictional and historical narrative.

Yet Kenan finds both popular fictional forms, such as the Gothic, and scholarly historical forms valuable despite their marginalization of racial and sexual Others. Each form holds some valuable grain of "truth," some useful insight into the events of the era. The text's "archival documentation, set against the folktale of the informant[s], is deployed in Kenan's ethnography to contest the differences (and similarities) between reality and fantasy and offer a means of collapsing the two" (Tucker 324). Parts of the history correspond with what appears in the personal diaries and letter, and with what is said in the oral narrative. Consequently, Kenan's story implies a denial of national history's narrative power as absolute and only. "History" becomes no more or less true and official than personal and cultural voices.

Kenan's text resembles the manipulation of history in southern women's literature, a genre also frequently discussed in terms of the gothic and grotesque. In southern women's literature social pressures connect trivial and everyday life with large-scale economies. Consequently history becomes connected to everyday truths (Yaeger 154). Kenan's text manifests structural and theoretical similarities to the genre of southern

women's literature, as Yaeger outlines it. According to Yaeger, southern women's literature disrupts history in a number of ways, two of which Kenan illustrates: they catalogue semantic, unspoken, disused histories (157) and present "fantasmatic history" (159).²² Like southern women's literature, Kenan's disrupted histories impede typical reading practices by using a displacing, quasi-short story form for his text. Furthermore, narrating such "fantasmatic history" introduces potential change within seemingly fixed or static cultural maps (163). History becomes flooded with the everyday, and the everyday is made strange and disturbing. The text's landscape, in its inscription of individual and social stories, re-enacts (hi)story. One can read in the landscape the gothic story of capture, enslavement, resistance, and freedom. In each of the texts the land is itself evidence of resistance to silence and suppression, and inscribes the place and power of the individual life to enact change.

The similarities between Kenan's novel and southern women's texts do not, however, detract from his text's place in African American literature. Rather, Kenan's choice to wield a number of forms outside of the Black tradition reaffirms his defiance of singularly voiced and singularly read histories. His web of multiple forms is but another way of showing history as interlinked by a multitude of sometimes oppositional voices. To deny one form in favor of another becomes a problem. In choosing a multiply arrayed form for his text, Kenan engages and expands Harryette Mullen's criticism of the "speakerly text"²³ as the privileged form in African American tradition. Mullen contends that Gates' theory impoverishes the tradition by privileging a narrow definition of "authentic black voice" to the exclusion of works that draw more on the culture of books, writing, and print (Mullen 624).²⁴ Kenan's story suggests that it is only when we read

these different forms and versions of (hi)story together that we begin to construct the text that can liberate us from our past and continued (shared) bondage.

Writing about August Wilson's plays, John Timpane remarks on the reading differences between empowered and excluded groups, especially when they are reading historical narratives. He concludes

[t]he excluded and the empowered *do* read history differently. Indeed, they cannot but do so, since so much of reading consists of position and wishes, of constructing and projecting. As Nietzsche and Foucault imply, empowerment leads to a history that assumes empowerment: a way of reading that begs the question, rationalizes what it assumes out of sheer privilege. The empowered read history as a 'fullness' of time. As Wilson's art construes the question, exclusion leads to other voices, other ways of reading. (Timpane 81)

Kenan's text explicitly presents a number of the disempowered voices from racially and sexually marginalized groups typically excluded in readings of history. The remaining question is, what are the other ways of reading? The multivocal form of the text answers this very question. No one narrative form, voice, or story ever occupies the primary focus of the text. This form of narrative defies the idea of center and margin because the elements of narrative that typically function as ornament become part of the center. The (average) events of the (average) human life become grand, and all members of the matrix are equally valid, significant, and indispensable.²⁵

"Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" emphasizes the extent to which individual and personal (hi)stories are silenced and sacrificed for a "unified" national (hi)story that privileges another story. Kenan adds two extended narrative descriptions to his text in addition to the personal histories—Rebecca's diaries and Phineas's letters—that interrupt the folktale. The oddly-timed descriptions are memories of Ruth and Zeke, the two folk narrators, in their everyday life ("Let the Dead" 294-95, 329-330). The two descriptive interludes assume a fundamental role in Kenan's challenge to narrative and history. In

Kenan's text, the voice becomes the story even as the voice is telling the story. The descriptions are a disruption of hierarchal difference and the individual stories of the narrators' day to day activities become as historical as the tale and documents composing the rest of the text.

Kenan uses gothic elements much in the manner wielded by Eudora Welty. In her study of Welty's gothic, Ruth Weston illustrates how Welty "utilizes the tradition not as the popular Gothic (upper case) genre of 'escape' fiction, but as a core of gothic (lower case) materials—plots, settings, characters, image patterns, and vocabulary—that operate in her stories in concert with many other literary conventions" (Weston 1). Kenan equally uses gothic characteristics to achieve a tale that is essentially humorous and resonant with Irving's and Welty's "sportive Gothic" (2). A fictitious town historian's search for the truth behind a mysterious mound—rumored by some as haunted and cursed ground, by others as a geological phenomena and astronomical miracle—provides the impetus for the telling of a story which quickly morphs into a ghost tale and an unspoken history haunting the tale. Told largely by the historian's grand uncle, the narrative's humorous tone becomes explicit in the grand aunt's frequent interruptions of her brother's narrative, signaling the reader's laughter with her own as she mocks the central narrator. The narrative itself particularly utilizes gothic conventions such as enclosed settings, themes of imprisonment and isolation, awe of the mysterious powers and energies of authority figures, and double or disguised characters that represent the unknowable. Yet so mocked are these conventions that Kenan's aim is not a story "with 'Gothic effect' but rather gothic effects that function organically as tools in the formal shaping" of an argument on narrative form and power (9).²⁶

After some initial argument with Ruth over the contents of the mound, Zeke begins his narrative as any good gothic horror should: “See, it all started one night. In a graveyard” (“Let the Dead” 287). This graveyard is, furthermore, already extraordinary because it houses the remains of the powerful, mystical ex-slave Pharaoh and his unknowable book (287). The initial setting is stage for an act of grave-robbing during which the perpetrators choose the darkest of night to complete their task.²⁷ The robbers are “scared to death, trembling in [their] boots” and “hoot owls began to hoot. [. . .] bats come out flapping after bugs and such” (289). Yet subverting the potential for “Gothic effect” himself, Zeke comments mid-description, “Don’t know why they didn’t just put it off till morning” (288). After opening a grave and finding it empty, the robbers encounter a dead man who offers them help. Zeke’s account of the scene has potentially gruesome elements, yet its humor derides the Gothic’s horror even as it uses gothic effects:

Like I said, wont nothing there. No corpse, no bones, no clothes [. . .]. Somebody else say: Yeah, that’s ole Pharaoh’s grave, all right, yep [. . .]. What y’all a-looking for anyhow? That’s when they all turned round [. . .]. [They] just stood there staring, staring at Mose Pickett, who stood there big as life itself. The reason they was all so scared, you see, is that they had just buried ole Mose a week afore. Said he stood there chewing a piece of sagebrush, contemplating that grave. Yep, that there’s Pharaoh’s grave all right, yep, he said [. . .]. Zaceus held that lantern up to Mose’s face and said: Nigger, you ain’t who they think you is, is you? We buried Mose Pickett last week. Mose winked at him, Yep, you sure did. It was Mose all right. That’s when Zaceus said he dropped the lantern and took to running. And the damn thing sploded and that put Ravenel boy in a mind to get in the wind too. Course he ran directly into the grave [. . .] say ole Mose say: Want some help, and moved to help em. (291-92)

Zeke’s entire narrative consists of this intermingling of the gruesome and horrific with humor—the dead return to visit old friends, eat family out of house and home and exact vengeance on those who wronged them (327); the villainous Preacher illustrates a voracious and abnormal appetite for food and sex (316-20); women and children engage

in acts of bestiality, go mad, and commit suicide (316-18), all told with an air of amusement. The Preacher's final attack on the townspeople particularly illustrates Kenan's use of gothic tropes to achieve humor. His unholy army consists of the dead, werewolves, buzzards, and bat-winged red demons. Yet Zeke also lists, amidst the gruesome descriptions of the dead raping children²⁸ and imminent infanticide, amusing, though grotesque, occurrences like the dead shooting at people's feet to make them dance and demons riding women like race horses (331). Zeke, and indirectly Kenan, consequently signals the humor of the tale even as they insist upon a degree of mystery and horror. The mystery, however, is not that "of the classic Gothic, whose aim was to create physiological sensation in its readers. Although gothic conventions may be used to portray it, the mystery is, instead, the inherent mystery of the relationship between people, and between people and places, even across time" (Weston 43).

Kenan expands these areas of exploration, noting how the Gothic's abyss of silence also includes gendered and homosexual bodies, how these bodies complicate each other's "ways of knowing" and are subjugated even as they participate in the other body's subjugation. The male being subordinates the female body to patriarchal desire, while the female being looks with unspoken loathing upon the aberrant sexuality of the homosexual being. Lastly these gendered and sexual beings look upon the raced body as a fearful being and destructive monstrosity when loosed from civilizing captivity. All these beings tell the same story from different knowledge systems. Furthermore Kenan notes how the abyss spreads beyond the speaker to the listener receiving each voice differently—one narrative accepted and documented as scholarly truth, another taken as personal historical view, and the other silenced and buried.

In classic Gothic narratives, women typically occupy subjugated positions in which their only power lies in fleeing. As Leslie Fiedler explains, the archetypal Gothic plot and theme rests upon the threatened female body—a girl flees through a dream landscape in terror and alone amid crumbling surroundings and ghosts. She repeatedly escapes and is caught by her persecutors until she completely breaks free and marries her virtuous lover who has been trying to save her all along (Fiedler 107). Her torments generally include sexual threats as well as lethal dangers. Women are silenced figures in this classic trope. Kenan repeats the general rules of Gothic heroines to illustrate how the patriarchal suppression of women's voices engenders the sexual violation of their bodies. Even Ruth, the tale's co-narrator, finds herself frequently silenced by her brother-in-law, who repeatedly tells her to "hush, now" ("Let the Dead" 293) and "[l]et [him] *talk*" (287). Such silencing and subjugation are most apparent in the "excerpts" from Rebecca Cross's diaries. The homosexual other in *A Visitation of Spirits* witnesses a similar suppression and destruction; Kenan illustrates how the Gothic perpetuates violence equally against both the sexual and gendered Other.

Rebecca is the wife of slave owner Owen and writes during the turmoil preceding the Civil War. Her home is subject to raids and slave uprisings, and she is, early on, menaced by a particularly dark and looming slave named Menes. Her narrative therefore places her in a setting suitable for a Gothic tale, with her occupying the role of distressed heroine. Yet the first of her comments illustrates how her husband and should-be hero participates in her silencing and victimization. Owen silences Rebecca in answer to her objections about his lascivious behavior: "*He lighted another cigar & Said I did not understand a Man's Needs*" ("Let the Dead" 306). He likewise dismisses her pleas by

demeaning her position and fears through laughter and name calling (307). Yet such silencing proves Owen's downfall. Rebecca proclaims her discomfort around and distrust of Menes, "[b]ut Owen just *Laughs at [her]* & *Calls [her]* a Silly Woman. He *Claims Menes*²⁹ *is needed to Help Run Canaan*" (310). Menes later runs away, returning occasionally to plague and threaten the Cross plantation.

Rebecca's verbal subjugation from Owen illustrates only one of his essential qualities as an incompetent hero and the distortion of her position as Gothic heroine. The archetypal heroine's struggle to retain her feminine virtue becomes confused in Rebecca's narrative. Though she is a mother to several sons, there remains consistent sexual ambiguity in her narrative. She notes after her first recorded confrontation with Owen that he does not "*come to [her] bed*" that night ("Let the Dead" 307). She devotes an entire line to this declaration, implying that the lack of sex is important. Whether this is a happy or disappointing development remains unclear however because she says on the next line "*[a]ll is well,*" in spite of her tone in her previous remark (307). Likewise Menes seemingly occupies the usual villainous position in her nightmares, entering her room in nothing but a white loin cloth and forcing himself upon her. He does not disturb her virtue in the nightmare, but Rebecca still wakes up in fright because "*[h]e shackled [her] instead and Forced [her] to do labor*" (310). Though the heroine escapes the Gothic plot's horror of horrors, she presents the idea of rape as preferable to slavery. Furthermore, the extent to which she actually desires a sexual encounter with Menes remains questionable in light of her previous ambiguity over Owen's delinquency from her bed. The nightmare's vision of the heroine's sexual desire is especially important considering the historical consequences Black men have suffered from white sexual

paranoia/ hysteria. Rebecca's nightmare consequently redeems Black men from their fictional and historical portrayal as destructive, hypersexualized terrors; indeed, her nightmare posits Menes as the actual victim since he is the real subject of slavery, and she is the villain.

Rebecca's dairies present an altered voice for the typically subjugated heroine, yet also reproduces the Gothic's discomfort with and vilification of homosexuality as aberrant and contaminating. She briefly acknowledges the idea that Owen's strong attachment to Menes could be evidence that "*He has taken this Menes into Horrible Abomination*" ("Let the Dead" 308). However, Rebecca quickly dismisses the idea, finding proof and comfort in her "*Husband's long History of more Conventional Fleshly Perversions & Shameful Self-Indulgences*" (308). Instead she recounts the tension between father and son: " ' . . . NO! LOOK AT YOU! LOOK AT YOU! I AM ASHAMED TO NAME YOU AMONG MY KINSMEN LET ALONE MY SON ' " (309). The cause of the argument is a rather small issue, Phineas's "*Botanical Research*," and certainly doesn't warrant Owen's attempt to disown his youngest son (309). Owen most likely reacts to Phineas so harshly because of Phineas' homosexuality and not his research interests.

Rebecca alludes to Phineas' homosexuality but never speaks of it directly in her diaries. Rebecca's refusal to name or even recognize her son's homosexuality introduces the Gothic trope of the "unspeakable" as an allusion to the question of sexuality between men (Sedgwick 94). Nineteenth century Gothic manuscripts never clearly communicate the details of homosexuality to their readers. It remains nameless and "manuscripts crumble at this point or are 'wholly illegible,' the speaker is strangled by the unutterable

word, or the proposition is preterited as ‘one so full of horror and impiety, that, even to listen to it, is scarce less a crime than to comply with it’” (94). Rebecca’s narrative similarly “crumbles” at the point of naming her son’s sexuality, renaming it instead as his “*Strange Fascination with ‘Biology’*” (“Let the Dead” 309) and an “*UN-Seemly Madness*” (313). Her own repeated demarcation of the term “biology” within quotation marks denotes it as a cover for something which she cannot speak.

Events in Zeke’s narrative also reproduce homosexuality as grotesque and aberrant; it is in this part of Kenan’s text that he explicitly reproduces the homophobia in Gothic paranoid plots (Sedgwick 92). Zeke implicitly references the Preacher’s homosexual behavior but, like Rebecca, refuses to name it. Furthermore, circumstance and partners augment the Preacher’s sexual aberration. Zeke begins the list of sexual encounters by noting “there was some rumors floating round about [the Preacher] [. . .] Seems one girl [. . .] pretty as the sun in the morning, young, sweet—went crazy as a woodpecker all of a sudden. Fount her, they did, out in a pasture trying to make love to a tree, would come into folks houses naked as a hog singing them nasty chain gang songs a lady ought not to be singing” (“Let the Dead” 316). Next, Zeke recalls a “pretty boy, comeliest boy in town” who similarly went crazy, wandering around “having his way with hogs and goats” (317). Kenan uses the image of hogs in both instances, the girl naked as a hog and the boy copulating with a hog. The two references also occur close together and the image is one of heterosexual copulation gone wrong as the girl can be easily substituted in for the boy’s bestiality. However the Preacher, an implied factor, disrupts normal sexuality with destructive consequences.³⁰ Zeke recounts other instances of people’s madness manifesting itself in the form of sexual aberration before explicitly identifying the

problem: “. . . the rumors were that these folk had had sexual congress with the Preacher-man . . . he had forced himself on them innocent youngens and animals and drove em mad” (318). He references the Preacher’s homosexuality, but among a long list of other aberrant sexual acts including child molestation and bestiality. Consequently, the Preacher’s homosexuality becomes equally aberrant.

After thoroughly reproducing the homophobia typically behind gothic effects and plots of aberrant sexuality, Kenan begins to dismantle and invert such ideologies. Kenan places the homosexual voice immediately after Zeke’s account of the Preacher’s sexual abnormality in the form of Phineas’s letter to his lover. Such placement counters conventions that silence and subjugate homosexual being, similar to Gothic subjugation and silencing of women. If homosexuality is unspeakable, then the voice can never be recognized and heard. Kenan prefaces Phineas’s letter by noting this systematic silencing: “His letters were published . . . but many of them were excluded, presumably due to their revealing nature on the subject of his sexuality. To this day the Cross family prefers not to discuss the matter. But professor Cross himself (who taught at Cambridge, Cornell, and Harvard) was indifferent to rumors and reports concerning his homosexuality” (“Let the Dead” 320). Kenan explicitly points to the ideological and social implications of certain Gothic conventions, connecting the trope of the unspeakable to Gothic paranoid plots of aberrant sexuality by including such an introduction to a fictitious letter in his gothic story. He, furthermore, does what conventional Gothic narratives fail to do—explicitly names and therefore recognizes homosexuality.

Phineas's attitude towards accusations of his sexuality effectively prevents his categorization and containment. He neither admits nor denies his sexuality, becoming essentially a sexual grotesque—transgressive and undefinable. Any consequent categorization we define for him becomes predicated upon only our own fears and (mis)readings. Kenan illustrates the extent to which the categories we create are more a reflection of our selves than definable limits apparent in the external world. Phineas retains the power to subvert and dismantle any categorizations of him with a mere word, illustrating not only the vitality and role of his speech, but a reclaiming of silence as a masterfully wielded tool. Likewise, Kenan's entry of Phineas's teaching position at various prestigious universities comments on the extent to which he retains empowered and subversive positions—the being that nineteenth century texts would silence lectures to the elite students of two nations. In this short passage, Phineas re-enacts the reclaiming and subversion that Kenan enforces upon gothic conventions through the body of his text.

The extent to which Phineas's letter shows a sense of surface sympathy with slaves is especially important. Phineas's outrage at slavery reflects his own silenced and subjugated position: "*I weep for these poor souls, Nigel, I truly do, for they are treated as animals, worked even harder, and their humanity is denied them*" ("Let the Dead" 321). Yet Phineas's letter reveals the extent to which even he has romanticized slaves and slavery. Although his letter is about a dangerous encounter with Menes' group of runaway slaves, Phineas's discussion of slavery only occurs after a long discussion of his disdain for his father.

Slaves become part of Phineas's pastoral background—beautiful, silenced, suffering creatures. Consequently, Black subjects at the beginning of Phineas's letter are still turned into “sacrificial nonpersons,”³¹ present only as emblems for the speaker's individual struggle between family and society. Even after introducing the issue of slavery, Phineas digresses into a detailed description of the pastoral setting bordering his father's plantation. Not for another page and a half does Phineas again mention the sight of slaves. He wanders through woodland like “*a tropical rainforest in its density and nigh-unpassable brush*” of such beauty that “*Keats would have trouble describing it*” (“Let the Dead” 322). Encountering a creek, Phineas hyperbolizes for several lines about its beauty before naming it Thames (323). Within this Edenic wilderness he “*happen[s] upon, of all things, a girl, a Negro girl, standing on the bank, dressed in a frock of the most beguiling colors She looked upon [him] with indescribable fright, just as the deer and heron had, and fled; but [he] pursued she tripped, interrupting her flight, and [he] was able to o’ertake her*” (323). Here the slave becomes part of the setting, like sighting another animal, a body meant for his ocular enjoyment.

The letter illustrates Gothic dichotomization of the racial Other, and Phineas's tonal and mood shift occurs alongside a shift in his view of Blacks from docile aspects of a tranquil background to dangerous threats in a consuming wilderness. In archetypal Gothic plots this questioning ambivalence towards the racial Other usually manifests itself in the narrative presence of two racially equal but opposing figures. One body is the figuration of the racial savage as a spontaneous goodness, instinctive nobility and untutored piety. The opposing body figures as a black, demonic, destructive force hostile to white being and salvation (Fiedler 192). Phineas's letter again illustrates the extent to

which this is merely an imagined dichotomy, the racial Other acting as noble savage or threatening monster depending upon the narrative light. Alone in the wilderness the slave girl is imaginable as an innocent, witless child against Phineas's taunting. When six Black men, one of which is Pharaoh, join her, Phineas's narrative assumes the notes and terminology of terror. The men's "*grim visages inspired within [him] [. . .] fear*" ("Let the Dead" 324). Phineas, a scientist and self-proclaimed friend to the slaves, finds himself unable to utter a solitary word following Pharaoh's command for silence. While Phineas attempts to dismiss Pharaoh's curse as a "*perhaps-spell*" and a bit of "*witchcraft nonsense*," he is unable to completely dismiss Pharaoh's power (326). Indeed, whether it is merely hypnosis or "*African 'witchery'*" Phineas fears Pharaoh may destroy him should he disobey Pharaoh's command (326). Therein lays the terror of the letter. Not only does Pharaoh disrupt the hierarchy and assume a frightening amount of power and control over his former master, but the truth and source of Pharaoh's power are unknowable to his now-servant.

Kenan revises the gothic landscapes and landmarks by using specific southern geographies or landmarks that reference and repeat the southern land as a cemetery of buried bodies, voices, and narratives. Reading these landmarks allows us access to alternative knowledge. Kenan's exploration of gothic southern landscapes also includes a recreation of the late eighteenth century American gothic's nightmarish wilderness, depicted in literature and Kenan as both sacred grove and dark, tangled nature (Weston 28). Weston notes in her discussion of the role of the wilderness in Gothic literature that the wilderness often reflects the Gothic's basic dualities—the real against the unreal, the comforting against the inhabiting nature of communal enclosure. The wilderness is both

the American dream of Edenic wilderness and nightmares of its metamorphosis into something alien and dangerous (96). Phineas's letter illustrates this duality, yet his journey morphs into a "terrible dream," a walk through a "primitive, war-torn Hell" only after an encounter with the unrestrained racial Other.

Kenan presents both faces of the wilderness using the voice of Phineas Cross. Phineas initially praises the forest's "exalted" timbers in his initial discovery, feeling "*blessed for witnessing such untrammeled beauty*" ("Let the Dead" 323). The woods become utterly Edenic when Phineas exclaims at the divinity of the area: "*surely this place was made by God to manifest the glory of the sight, the taste, the touch, the feel, and the smell of His grand wonder*" (323).³² Yet this "*God-made wonder*" (323) quickly becomes horrific with the appearance of six robust escaped slave men and Menes. After a conversation with Menes—which Phineas describes as "*the most single horrifying experience [he has] yet undergone*" (325)—Phineas remains alone in the Edenic wilderness. Yet his descriptors have changed and "*terrible dream*" replaces paradise (326), a "*war-torn Hell*" in a "*primitive South*" replaces "*untrammeled beauty*" (327). The wilderness' face shifts only after an encounter with the racial Other, illustrating the extent to which this nightmarish wilderness is dependent upon racial threat for its power. The Other here becomes particularly monstrous because his mere presence impedes the subject's ability to witness and experience divine nature by mutating the surroundings into something alien. Kenan consequently implies that the dream-like landscape becomes the Gothic's nightmare world only in the presence of the Other, whether this presence is but a "terrible dream" or a tangible reality.

Rebecca's diaries fully exploit the gothic effect of nightmarish racial bodies. Rebecca finds herself surrounded by nightmares, real and imagined, figured in the slave bodies that support her plantation existence. For instance, her servant Clementine mutters a warning to Rebecca about Menes which is in keeping with Rebecca's own fears about him. Yet Clementine also poses a figure of threat, giving Rebecca "*a look which from the Configuration of Her Countenance might surely have curdled Blood*" ("Let the Dead" 308). Phoebe likewise states her misgivings to Rebecca, but remains harmless in Rebecca's sight. Years later during the Civil War it is Clementine who stays to help Rebecca while Phoebe leaves Rebecca, aged and isolated, to run the ruinous plantation. What disturbs in this case is the illegibility of racial bodies; the face that horrified is also the face of the body that saves.

Kenan especially utilizes gothic effects in Rebecca's description of and relation to Menes to criticize American Gothic's racial ideologies. As in Phineas's letters, it is her encounters with Menes' body that inspire terminology and feelings of horror and dread, again because of his usurpation of power and defiance of racial subordination. He gains access to a position he does not belong in, distorting the finely tuned and essential plantation hierarchy. Menes is "*a Frightful one*" principally because "*[h]e has no Place in a Fine House like Canaan & certainly not as a major domo to a State Senator*" ("Let the Dead" 308). Menes epitomizes the gothic villain to Rebecca because he terrorizes her, the gothic heroine, in particular. Rebecca correctly prophesies the destruction Menes will visit upon her house, pleading with Owen that Menes "*is the Devil Himself & I Fear what Evil He Might Reign Upon My House*" (309). One year later "the Devil" has indeed destroyed Rebecca's house and family, and she recalls with nightmarish terror the events

of Menes' escape: "*Satan sent HIM & He is SATAN & [to] think all this Time [we] [were under] the Same Roof with the Devil HIMSELF. That HORRID night will it ever be Expunged from my Memory The Howls of Agony? & afterwards the BLOOD. O! The Un-Grateful Thief. The MURDERER" (311). Rebecca is unable to explicitly speak the events of the night, thus designating them as too horrible to know and recount. Here Kenan presents a passage that uses gothic effect to achieve, were it written as an isolated text for its implied audience, Gothic effect.*

Kenan further extends the terror Menes evokes, presenting him as a recurrent nightmare. Over a year after his escape, Menes continues to haunt and plague the Cross plantation:

They have come again. In the Night. Damnation will they not let us BE. We Know it is Him, the DEVIL . . . He has hit Chinquapin and Charybdis within the last three months. Years later, & he continues to re-visit us. To remind me of My Losses. Will He take My Two Remaining Sons? . . . ("Let the Dead" 311-12)

Rebecca herself emphasizes those elements that make Menes gruesome and horrific. He comes only in the night, repeatedly re-visiting a year after the initial nightmare, threatening her remaining family with death and destruction. To her, Menes is the haunting and tormenting Devil that will not be caught. In Phineas's narrative this unrestrained, powerful slave likewise becomes demonic. Kenan particularly subverts this Gothic effect—the ominous, swarthy villain indicative of, if not actually, the racial Other—in his text to show how such a portrayal actually hides oppressed racial voices and bodies.

Kenan's decision to embed Phineas' descriptive wilderness encounter within the folk narrative points to the silence the Other suffers during the encounter. To Phineas the Other voice is monstrous and overwhelming. Yet presenting that voice as destructive

Other silences the reality of that voice and the narrative it attempts to convey. Menes warns Phineas to stay away from the area and never mention it to anyone. Phineas merely hears an imposition of silence upon him with the threat of death should he speak. Menes is actually protecting the nearby slave community; his narrative, then, is one of urgency and protection. Yet the form of Phineas' narrative, and the place Menes occupies within it, prevent such a narrative from ever becoming apparent. Consequently Phineas' narrative does psychological and narrative violence to Menes, sufficiently replacing the narrative in the slave voice with ineffable threats, even as Phineas' story speaks the common horror of physical violence from monstrous Black bodies.

The gothic conventions in Rebecca's diaries fail to evoke the Gothic's dread and horror because her diaries are quarantined within and subsumed by Jimmy's ethnography presenting the different voices ordinarily suppressed. Furthermore, this larger narrative presents and then replaces these same Gothicized characters. Phoebe, for instance, bases her distrust of and warnings about Pharaoh in his readable slave body. Zeke describes Pharaoh as "big and strong and black" someone the "light-skinned niggers resented" ("Let the Dead" 300). Phoebe, a light-skinned house slave, notes and resents Pharaoh's destruction of the plantation hierarchy, predicting it as chaotic: " 'But Mistress,' She says, 'He Big an Black an Hateful an der aint no cause fuh such ta be ober usens in de Big House. It rit quar. Aint spose ta be lak dat'" (308). However it is Pharaoh's escape and its consequent chaos that gives Phoebe the opportunity to escape her own confines. Furthermore, Zeke's narrative illustrates how Pharaoh is hero, not villain, to the Black ex-slave community. He founds a town for them and teaches them to love themselves.

The Preacher in fact is the villain of the story. The preacher initially seems to be a hero in white, in contrast to Pharaoh's Black villain: he has light-green eyes "clear as colored water," light mulatto-complexioned skin and always dresses in white ("Let the Dead" 314). Pharaoh appears sacrilegious and teaches the ex-slaves to ignore "the white man's God" and consequent ideologies; the Preacher conversely is God-fearing and Bible-preaching, warning against disrespect for God as "the sure way to hell and damnation" (315). After his initial introduction and a few "miracles," the Preacher proves himself monstrous in behavior, committing heinous sex acts, cursing those who disdain his behavior, and killing those who dare spread rumors about him. Zeke's narrative largely applies gothic effects to the Preacher, while most of Pharaoh's powers appear more mystical³³ than horrific. The Preacher's behavior flies to such extreme ends that it becomes utterly gruesome in its awesomeness. His extreme gluttony serves as a fitting example: "Said in one sitting one Christmas Eve two whole chickens, an entire mess of greens, corn, cabbage, a whole hog, and a cake and a pie. He'd eat and they'd just keep bringing [. . .]. Say somebody mumbled something about gluttony and the Preacher just looked at him, mouth full of ham, just looked at him, and the man never said another mumbling word for the rest of his life" (318-19).

Zeke's narrative likewise surrounds the Preacher with an air of horror and suspense, as opposed to the air of awe and mystery surrounding his discussion of Pharaoh. Zeke repeatedly notes that the townspeople were "scared to give up believing on him" despite the Preacher's unseemly behavior ("Let the Dead" 318). The Preacher indeed engages in various typical gothic, horrific (Hawthornian), supernatural acts emblematic of evil and villainy:

Said the Preacher kept a black snake in his room and a big black bird. One woman say she heard the Preacher talking to the snake and the snake talked back. She went deaf. They said he had been seen walking on the creek once, the black snake bout his shoulders, the bird on his hand; said he been seen once taking food from a bear, once walking on the ceiling of the church. (319)

The Preacher's whiteness apparently disguises his underlying darkness. He becomes the absolute terror of the tale visiting unusual horrors upon the townspeople who he has trapped in the church by the story's climax.

Pharaoh then becomes the saving figure to the white-wearing Preacher who stood beneath a thunderous "boiling black" sky with an army of the dead ("Let the Dead" 331). Pharaoh comes "riding in on a great black bull with a shiny gold ring through its nose, snorting flames" and destroys the evil Preacher with one strike (331). Arguably Kenan uses the gothic effect of disguised characters to achieve inversion, but what is lasting about this inversion is its incompleteness: Pharaoh does not save the town. He passes an apocalyptic judgment, declaring "Damnation and ruin. What began as good has ended in evil. We are not ready" (332). He then visits a destructive cleansing upon the town:

fire rained down from the sky [. . .] and none of the wicked escaped. Said it burned for days like a furnace and didn't spread. Just scorched. Smoke filled the heavens, they say. When it died down, wont nothing left. Nothing. Just that mound you asked about, smoking hot. Took a year to cool off. Say it goes all the way down to hell. (332)

Pharaoh is the saving hero that does not save anyone because only two people survive out of the entire town to start anew. Nor is Pharaoh the complete opposite of the Preacher; both commune with terrifying black beasts. Pharaoh becomes an utter grotesque, much in the manner of gargoyles guarding churches—a person can never tell if the gargoyles are the saving protectors or monstrous destroyers (Harpham 37).³⁴ Kenan consequently defies categorization for his characters. There are no utter heroes or obvious villains, no

identifiable marks or readable bodies. There are only confused and incomplete narratives.

The overlapping and conflicting narratives of Kenan's text challenge ideologies surrounding narrative and history in particular. Weston cites Charles E. May's argument "that the short story 'breaks up the familiar life-world of the everyday, defamiliarizes our assumption that reality is simply the conceptual construct we take it to be, and throws into doubt that our propositional and categorical mode of perceiving can be applied to human beings as well as to objects'" (Weston 52). The short story form challenges our construction of logical, orderable metanarratives of existence; it challenges construction of history. So what then of Kenan's text which is a short story that is not at all short, a total of fifty-nine pages from epigraph to end? The length of his text itself, along with its numerous excerpts of quasi-short stories posing as historical narratives, defies narrative categorization. Likewise his choice to present a narrative wrought with gothic effects without Gothic effects and wrapped around "historical" narratives also defies literature's typical quarantining of Gothic literature (Goduu 82).

Kenan's narrative form especially highlights the challenge to official forms of history; his text presents an oral history accompanied by scholarly footnotes, which is itself marked by documentation, and personal historical evidence in the form of Rebecca's diaries and Phineas's letter. Yet none of these forms are individually complete and credible. Even the scholarly documentation becomes questionable with all of its internal conflicts and gaps. The footnotes themselves, though vast and seemingly detailed, remark that the source of their "record is unclear" ("Let the Dead" 296). The records that the notes do include often conflict with each other, presenting completely

opposing conclusions. For instance, one note recounts the variety of conflicting theories about the mound's source, citing studies that the mound is a meteor, a natural formation or an "environmental/ industrial trophism, etc." (285). Yet two other footnotes follow this one, the first claiming the mound is actually an Indian burial ground, and the second that the mound is the result of a racially-motivated massacre (285-86).

The footnotes are also as much a mixture of fact and fiction as Zeke's oral narrative seems to be.³⁵ Doris Betts observes that footnotes from sources such as John Hope Franklin, Arna Bontemps, and William Styron prove quite real. Similarly the botanical notes about the persimmon tree are accurate, and some of the frequently referenced volumes stored at Southern Historical Collection at UNC-Chapel Hill exist; other volumes cited from the same library are, however, completely fictitious. Nor are the botanical notes about the Chinquapin real (Betts 16-17). The footnotes from Joseph A. Cincotti are especially significant because they elide categorization into fact/ fiction. Betts concludes that while footnotes from this source may be "real," they are highly questionable because they hide yet another personal entry—Cincotti was Kenan's peer writing student at Chapel Hill and is a staff member of the *New York Times*, not a geologist (17).³⁶

These scholarly footnotes are as given to hyperbolizing facts as Zeke does in his narrative. For instance, one footnote posits the wood of a persimmon tree as virtually indestructible, easily enduring "[o]ne thousand hours of mechanical weaving" (291). What Kenan challenges in these footnotes is the scholastic habit of privileging one form of narrative over another simply because of form. In truth, one form can and often does prove as (un)true as another. The unfortunate consequence of such privileging, however,

is that the voices and difference in the unprivileged, unofficial form are often lost.

Indeed, official history poses “the greatest danger to public memory [. . .]. Even the dead, as Walter Benjamin declared, are not safe from the victors, who consider public memory part of the spoils and do not hesitate to rewrite history. Or re-image it” (Hartman 27).

The official records of history become “unclear” about the details of Pharaoh’s existence perhaps because of his power and success. As the subject of a nonconformist narrative to hegemonic discourse, Pharaoh “bec[omes] invisible, fall[s] outside of history” (Nadel 95). We only become aware of the gaps and omissions in officiated history’s narrative when we encounter alternative forms and narratives of history. Zeke’s, Rebecca’s, and Phineas’s voices are important not only because they re-inscribe silenced voices upon dominant texts, but also because they insist we re-examine those texts for other sacrificed voices, bodies, and histories. Like Horace’s death, these alternative narratives haunt dominant history and emphasize the various absences inevitably found therein.

Notes

¹ Kenan’s text thus engages an ideological concern similar to Gloria Naylor, whose *Linden Hills* illustrates that merely inverting the black/ white hierarchy to privilege blackness does not liberate the racial body; rather such inversion only recreates many of the same oppressions and “monsters” the black body suffers in racist white culture.

² Thus Kenan presents, for instance, the Preacher in response to the color gradations repeated throughout Black culture; his light skin and green eyes hide a tormenting devil, not a moral and intellectual savior. Likewise the queer white body in “Let the Dead Bury Their Dead” is a figure of friendliness and alliance, not threat, to the runaway slave community; indeed having suffered sexual oppression under his slaveholding father’s tyrannical rule, Phineas applauds the slaves’ escape.

³ Of course the school’s image is marked by absence like the rest of the town. Where the town is missing figures of difference, the school’s image absents scholars from its picture.

⁴ Zeke’s conclusion to the story, however, undermines the judge’s authority as much as the judge’s declaration undermines their position as intelligent adults. Zeke’s father does deal him a thorough beating, not to re-affirm the judge’s lesson, but because “they made him cough up twenty dollars” (159).

⁵ The situation suggests that differently transgressive bodies are drawn together when faced with a greater oppressing foe.

⁶ Sorcery is the solicitation of help from flagitious spirits for divination; necromancy is, similarly, the conjuring of ancestors for divination and manipulation of current events (Holland 278).

⁷ Jimmy never names the exact nature of their sexual aberration, merely describing the men as “untamable” (*A Visitation* 116) and “not [of] preacher material” (117). However, Horace’s history and conflict reveals that these men’s sexual transgressions may have been homosexual in nature.

⁸ The family curse is also a gothic trope.

⁹ Jimmy’s sexuality seems to go beyond even the dualism of hetero-homo; his uses of the term “anything” opens his exploits to a wide range of possibilities beyond human accomplices.

¹⁰ Ruth never explicitly names the “evil” that’s on the three men.

¹¹ As a “possessed” Horace notes at the end of the text, he destroys himself and is destroyed because “[h]e don’t like life, see. Too many fucking rules. Too many unanswered questions. Too many loose ends” (252). The rules to which he refers are the numerous rules governing familial identity and interaction; the unanswered questions and loose ends are those silences and gaps left by the unacknowledged and marginalized identities exorcised for challenging the patrilineage.

¹² The moment proves especially valuable if we consider it as an illustration of both characters speaking the i/ I/ Not-i self as Trihn T. Minh-ha defines it.

¹³ Perhaps the very fact that Gideon’s family, and thus Gideon himself, have always existed on the margins of Tims Creek’s community assists in Gideon’s ability to accept, rather than suppress, his differences. Whereas Horace is raised in a family bound by religious, racial, and communal strictures, Gideon’s family never explicitly bothers to recognize religion. Nor do they bother to ascribe to communal, or even national, mandates as the disreputable sect of the community. Indeed they are infamous for their licentious behavior.

¹⁴ In attempt to rid himself of his homosexuality and convince himself that he is “normal” Horace becomes a “jock” and begins dating girls, even having sex with one a few times, during his junior year of high school (*A Visitation* 161).

¹⁵ Conjure can be understood as antithetical to Christianity and thus problematic if not sinful. Indeed, slave narrators often remark upon the belief as both foolish and sinful. Bibb’s conclusion that there is no “virtue” in conjure best illustrates how in one remark he expresses both intellectual and spiritual disdain for the belief (Bibb #).

¹⁶ A number of critics have remarked on the similarities between *A Visitation of Spirits* and Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. Both texts’ protagonists are visited by three ghosts and suffer a humanistic, transformative experience. But what Horace observes throughout his “visitation”—“the constraint and confusion he has endured throughout his young life”—does not and cannot lead him to redemption and a happy ending (“A Visitation of Difference” 223).

¹⁷ Although exorcism in Nero’s text extends beyond the theatrical, dramatic event often portrayed on television, he stresses the extent to which modern exorcisms are still traumatic events. The experience of Reverend James Tinney provides a useful example of the modern exorcism imposed upon homosexuals. Tinney briefly describes his exorcism as a traumatic intervention of family and church members who prayed, talked, and counseled. “Prayer” is a method of ensuring conformity through asking for “deliverance” from sin; “talk” proves a means of intimidation; and the inevitably received “counsel” to the individual and family is an exorcism, “a deliverance from unclean spirits” (Nero 410).

¹⁸ Horace recalls typical discussions about Gideon: “Pretty Gideon had, as the old men say, sugar in his blood. But unlike decent folk, he was not reticent about it; he paraded it about. He cultivated a dainty, feminine air, delicate and girllike. His hands formed flowery gestures in midair, and he had something of a mincing walk. People snickered” (*A Visitation* 98).

¹⁹ Horace’s autobiography also acts as the hidden or mysterious manuscript in conventional gothic texts. Indeed, decoding its contents seem to offer Horace salvation. But like many such manuscripts, Horace is unable to read the message hidden in the text and thus misses his chance at salvation.

²⁰ I use Robert McRuer’s concept of the term to designate shifting, fluid, and disruptive bodies and identities. “Queer” describes “fags, dykes, junkies, hustlers, the homeless, people living with AIDS, people

of color, women, and the occasional straight man—all of those who stand in opposition to what Wojnarowicz calls [. . .] ‘the illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION.’” (*Queer Renaissance* 26).

²¹ McRuer details how Horace’s memory establishes his desire particularly as a product of the very religion that utterly demonizes his sexuality. He explains, “Horace’s own queer desire emerges both from within and against the Christian community around him. [. . .] The sentence ‘I remember me’ solidifies the confessions that have preceded it as ineradicable parts of Horace’s identity; despite his difference(s), the community[. . .] has shaped Horace’s identity, and his staunch refusal to relinquish the various parts of this identity suggests forcefully that its is the community, and not Horace, which is in need of transformation” (“A Visitation of Difference” 226).

²² Fantasmatic history is history written with a surrealist edge (159).

²³ According to Gates, the African-American texts that exemplify Black tradition illustrate some aspect of the “speakerly text.” The “speakerly text” uses an “authentic black voice” that is often recognized by its “speech based poetics” and/ or “trope of orality” (Mullen 624).

²⁴ The problem is that beyond a “speech based poetics there is no alternative to production of this [voice] but silence, invisibility, or self-effacement” (Mullen 623). Mullen continues by noting that Gates’ canon of black texts cannot champion Jean Toomer’s *Cane* to the same degree as it appreciates Hurston because Toomer’s text is not as “speakerly” (624).

²⁵ Bakhtin further explains that the unified time of the folkloric chronotope counters the typical bifurcated time by which we usually write history. Bifurcated time presents one measure for events of a personal life and a different measure for “history,” the two measures only intersecting at points when the life is of a historical or public figure (Bakhtin 208). Bifurcated time thus silences and marginalize the individual and other (hi)stories. Furthermore, the development of bifurcated time, as Bakhtin outlines it, marks the time as a tool to silence counter-hegemonic narratives. Bifurcation of time results from and coincides with the development of class-based society. Although in the early stages of slaveholding and feudal societies individual life-sequences are still interwoven with the common life of the most immediate social group, the course of groups and the sociopolitical whole don’t fuse. The separation and detachment of individual life-sequences peaks with the development of financial relations in slaveholding society and under capitalism. The individual sequence becomes private and what is public becomes maximally abstract (214-15).

²⁶ In choosing to parody the Gothic genre, Kenan appropriates the genre’s materials to critique the troublesome ideology beneath the various tropes without being dominated by the genre(’s mechanisms).

²⁷ Notably, the town sanctions the act under the influence of its new preacher. The idea causes some conflict and wariness since Pharaoh, the founder and initial leader of the town, warned the townspeople against looking at his book before he died (288).

²⁸ This particular encounter has an equally gruesome and gothic side effect—the children become unwilling necrophiliacs.

²⁹ The (ex-)slaves know Menes as Pharaoh.

³⁰ The girl hangs herself and the townspeople have to kill the boy (316-17).

³¹ Patricia Yaeger coins this phrase in her discussion of Southern literature and knowledge systems. Designating Blacks as sacrificial nonpersons allows southern culture to create an “absolute knowledge,” based upon and supporting white supremacy, about the direction of violence in any given moment of racial crisis (111).

³² Phineas actually compares himself to Adam, and deems it his duty to name his Eden (Kenan 323).

³³ Kenan’s presentation of Pharaoh’s powers are more in keeping with magical realism and African American folk belief.

³⁴ Harpham discusses the issue of Gargoyles in reference to the issue of ornament as a grotesque that defies definition because it answers too many definitions to be utterly and correctly categorized: “The problem with much border ornament is not that it has no point, but that it makes many conflicting points, performing

a number of tasks at the same time. Gargoyles and chimeras . . . are intended to ward off demons, on the assumption that demons, being only human, will be frightened by the same things that frighten us. But they also represent the demonic forces themselves, contrasting with the divine order of the cathedral” (37).

³⁵ Early American and British writers, such as Charles Maturin and Washington Irving, sometimes used footnotes/ endnotes in their Gothic texts. Poe took extensive advantage of endnotes in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, using them in quite the same manner as Kenan does a century later.

³⁶ Kenan/ Jimmy cites Cincotti as one of the theorists positing the mound as a natural formation, and references his essay “Natural Sulfur Deposits on the North American Continent” in *Geology Today* (“Let the Dead” 285).

CHAPTER 5
“MURDERED BY PIECE-MEAL:” SLAVERY’S LEGACY AND THE
DESTRUCTION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY IN *BELOVED*

While there has certainly been a plethora of scholarship on *Beloved*, little of it has dealt with the text as a Gothic novel. Though critics such as Deborah Horvitz, Susan McKinstry, and Barbara Rigney seemingly analyze the Gothic trope of ghostly haunting in their discussions, they all simply argue that ghosts invoke ancestral memory. Indeed, of the massive collection of essays about the novel, very few specifically read the novel through Gothic tropes.¹ Carol Schumde’s “The Haunting of 124,” for instance, reveals house 124 as the prototypical gothic mansion; her essay posits a parallel between the literal haunting of the home and psychological hauntings. Similarly Pamela Barnett, who reads *Beloved* through the trope of monstrous vampirism, argues that *Beloved* is a haunting succubus whose violation of the male body re-enacts slavery’s emasculation of black men. Although these essays are certainly useful in revealing how the Gothic appears in the *Beloved*, each limits their focus to one or two tropes and consequently ignores Morrison’s complex revision and critique of the genre.

I expand upon these other essays to elaborate the various ways multiple gothic tropes prove useful in *Beloved*’s task. For instance, through the trope of haunting Morrison rewrites the notion of trauma to indefinitely extend the life of the terrible event. Different characters perpetually haunted by the same event are constantly re-exposed to the original trauma; the hauntings thus impede progress toward even post-traumatic stress because they can never actually escape the event. *Beloved* likewise revises such tropes as

the masculine Byronic anti-hero,² the distressed heroine, monstrosity, and sexual threat/consumption to reveal them as interdependent and derivative of oppressive racist and patriarchal tradition.

This chapter builds upon readings such as Schmutde's and Barnett's, and counters critics such as Barbara Christian who insist that reading texts like *Beloved* through the Gothic is Eurocentric. Like Kenan and Naylor, Morrison is both appropriating and revising the Gothic in her text, critiquing the ideologies of the traditional genre and re-writing its tropes to articulate the complexities of black experience. In using the Gothic genre for her neo-slave narrative, Morrison recognizes the terrors and real horrors of the slave existence just as slave writers such as Harriet Jacobs and Henry Bibb did a century before her. The text reveals that the horror of slavery is its ability to haunt and impede the African American family; under slavery, family becomes a chaotic and traumatic institution for its members. In her explanation of the text's goals, Morrison describes *Beloved* as an attempt to uncover and expose the unwritten interior life of (ex-)slaves and "fill in the blanks that slave narratives left—to part the veil that was so frequently drawn" ("The Site" 47). Part of this veil covered the profound distortion that the black family and heterosexual union suffered. Morrison illustrates that the psychological shift from "beast" to "(hu)man" proved extremely difficult as slaves continued to view each other and their relationships through the oppressive lens of dominant white society. Indeed, under slavery, family was reduced to its reproductive function and sexuality was an economic, and not a romantic, issue (McKinstry 260); consequently, mothers in *Beloved* who don't make extreme assertions of ownership typically view mother-child connections mechanically, asserting that love is an unnecessary danger. Furthermore,

slave narratives are often haunted by questions of familial origin. For instance, the narratives often begin with a statement of birth, necessarily implying maternal presence, yet mothers are never fully present; in attempting to articulate maternal absence, narrators gesture towards slavery's incessant attack upon family.

In "filling in the blanks" with a haunted narrative about family, Morrison emphasizes that what proves unspeakable for slave narrators is the terror of slavery's lasting impact upon the free black family. Unlike slave narrators, such as William Craft, Henry Bibb, and Hannah Crafts,³ who attempt to idealistically portray familial and heterosexual connection post-slavery, Morrison insists that life after slavery was not as ideal or hopeful as the narrators typically portrayed. Consequently, in contrast to slave narrators who understandably brought their narratives to a hopeful close, Morrison's narrative denies closure, implying that the effects of institutionalized racism are multifold, complex, and indefinite.

Morrison uses the gothic's tropes, specifically haunting, to connect the challenges and questions of family and gender facing the (ex-)slaves to the turmoil surrounding contemporary black heterosexual relationships. *Beloved* responds to the general recognition that "[t]here was a misunderstanding between the black man and the black woman, a misunderstanding as old as slavery" (Wallace 25). In creating a text about slaves, and their free descendants, haunted by slavery while struggling to maintain families and heterosexual union, Morrison emphasizes the role of white institutionalized racism in the "growing distrust, even hatred, between black men and black women" (27). Indeed, by revising the traditional roles and powers of villain, (anti)-hero, and heroine, Morrison responds to and critiques both the Moynihan report and the black men who

silently agreed with Moynihan's statements about black women.⁴ *Beloved's* narrative of haunting, monstrosity, murder, madness, and abandonment consequently attempts to explain the historical reality of black heterosexual and familial interaction⁵ while criticizing the genre's traditional ideologies and modern blacks for their appropriation of oppressive, white, patriarchal ideals of manhood and family.

Morrison buttresses slavery's haunting specters with its literal manifestations to emphasize the indefinite effects of institutionalized racism. Just as *Beloved* returns as a phantom in the flesh, so too does slavery assume new fleshly forms. Black bodies must be wary in territory haunted by traumatic "re-memories" and "infected by the Klan" (*Beloved* 66). Morrison particularly describes the Klan in Gothic terms of terror and literally makes the groups monstrous. The Klan becomes a "dragon" that "[d]esperately thirsty for black blood, without which it could not live, [. . .] swam the Ohio at will" (*Beloved* 66). Sethe's warning about slavery's ability to haunt assumes even greater significance as Ohio becomes a setting scarred by slavery, haunted by its gruesome horrors, and terrorized by its new incarnations. The characters' responses to these hauntings and terrors are also typically gothic tropes that are rewritten in the novel. What seem marks of dysfunction in the characters—"Sethe's burnt-out eyes, Baby Sugg's depression before she dies, Paul D's uncontrollable trembling hands[—]are all sane reactions" (Rigney 234) to slavery's destructive insanity. The text's revision of the gothic tropes of haunting, monstrosity, and warped love to posit the relationship between blacks and slavery implicitly argues that slavery continues to haunt and destroy black bodies by assuming new, deadly forms. Morrison therefore indicates that contemporary blacks are still under attack from "slavery," as the institution that embodies the first,

highly visible and nationalized form of racism. Slavery's tendency to define black family and romance as reproductive and economic function reappears in the upwardly mobile blacks who pledge themselves to white, capitalist ideology in *Linden Hills*. Naylor, like Morrison, consequently suggests that institutionalized racism haunts blacks far beyond the moment of slavery, and continues to pervade black definitions of self and family. *Beloved* calls upon blacks to consider their actions and interactions as they may reflect reactions to an "insane" society.

Beloved also clearly engages feminist debates upon and challenges to patriarchy, particularly as patriarchy affects the black community. Antebellum households, for instance, were popularly represented as a master-slave dynamic. Popular household guides such as Samuel Goodrich's *Fireside Education* posited "familial government" as rightly despotic. In the "familial government" women and children were rendered powerless, dependent slaves and servants to their monarchical husband/ father/ master (Ginsberg 105, 107). Consequently, a black family constructed around patriarchal ideals inevitably echoes systemic oppression similar to that witnessed under slavery. Scholars such as George Cunningham therefore particularly critique imaginings of patriarchal family romances when they appear in black male writings; such family romances are mimetic and end in the re-inscription of gender hierarchy that reproduces the master's posture toward black women (Cunningham 139). Furthermore, Spillers explains how subscribing to traditional notions of patriarchy inevitably removes the father from the slave family: "the African-American woman [. . .] becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so

much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law" ("Mama's Baby" 278). Notably, Spillers delineates patriarchy as a mere "social fiction" that inevitably proves destructive to black family because they are denied access to it.

The absence of traditionally defined patriarchy, understood as Father Law, continues even in postbellum and into twentieth-century society. Indeed, this loss is one among the list of accusations against the black family in the Moynihan report which repeatedly states that black men are victims of an "abnormal" family structure that features employed black women as its primary destructive aspect. Spillers, in her discussion of the patriarchal attack upon nubile black women-child bodies, notes that the patriarchal loss extends even beyond questions of economic potential and power. Returning to the problem of names during slavery, Spillers contends that "[i]n this fatal play of literally misplaced/ displaced names, the African father is figuratively banished; fatherhood, at best, a cultural courtesy since only mother knows for sure, is not a social fiction into which he enters. Participation in the life of his children, indeed the rights of patriarchal privilege, is extended to him at someone else's behest" ("Permanent Obliquity" 130). In both cases, (dis)possession and the (in)ability to claim ownership are the issue.

The text also problematizes matriarchy, specifically as it denotes and depends upon masculine absence and/ or neglect in racist discourse. First of all, the text reaffirms critics such as Spillers' and Wallace's who explain that traditional constructions of black matriarchy are misconstrued and deceptive. Such erroneous constructions imply that black women exercise power when "black women have been the most powerless group in

our entire society” (Wallace 170); so extreme is their powerlessness and silence that even “[b]lack women have never listened to their [black] mothers. No black woman ever pays attention to any other black woman” (152). Secondly, the text counters racist discourses like the Moynihan report that connected black poverty to matriarchy and the willful absence of black men. Moynihan defined matriarchy in terms of men’s emasculation and women as usurpers, and characterized by the breakdown of family (Berger 412). Similarly, E. Franklin Frazier’s report on the cultural trauma of slavery posits an image of black family marred by masculine absence; he defines the characteristics of black family as illegitimate births, absent fathers and husbands, households headed by single women, and so matriarchy. The account inevitably insists that African-Americans are “traumatized beyond culture” (413). In white racist discourse matriarchy thus becomes a sign of masculine absence as well as trauma that is so extensive it cannot be countered or corrected.

Yet Morrison repeatedly illustrates that black women and family do not and cannot devalue black masculine presence; such devaluation, she concludes is inevitably harmful. Howard’s and Bulgar’s flight references the problems of matriarchy imagined in Moynihan’s terms; they are trapped with a mother they define as terrible and castrating, and denied masculine protection. Yet their flight also signals the loss matriarchy suffers. Indeed, Sethe mourns that “she called, but Howard and Bulgar walked on down the railroad and couldn’t hear her” (*Beloved* 272). Matriarchy construed as dependent upon or accepting of masculine absence and/ or oppression inevitably alienates the very children it claims.

Consequently the issues of patriarchal and matriarchal privilege prove exceedingly complex in the novel. Patriarchy is at once a desire that emasculates when denied, yet it is a privilege that inevitably proves oppressive. Likewise, typical (misconstrued) concepts of matriarchy posit it as emasculating when fulfilled, yet a mythical desire that can replace masculine domination and oppression. The solution inevitably lies in realizing that “[o]nly as American blacks began to accept the standards for family life, as well as for manhood and womanhood embraced by American whites, did black men and women begin to resent one another” (Wallace 42). *Beloved* consequently posits heterosexual and familial interaction that deny traditional and dominant ideology. Manhood and patriarchal power become dependent upon and partnered with womanhood and matriarchal privilege.

This chapter examines Morrison’s re-vision of Gothic tropes⁶ to define and enumerate the multiple ways slavery impedes, destroys, and haunts African-American family. Morrison suggests that, as an emblem of institutionalized racism, slavery indefinitely haunts the black family, rising in new incarnations to ensnare unaware victims at random. Consequently, slavery’s mutation and mutilation of mother-love and patriarchal presence antagonize even the postbellum black family. After establishing the text’s concern with family through an analysis of its images of haunted houses and landscapes, this chapter specifically examines how slavery warps different positions within the family: the mother, father, and child. I contend that slavery warps motherhood into a monstrous and destructive figuration. Similarly, I explain how men’s father-husband positions, based upon problematic constructions of masculinity, are suppressed and absented from *Beloved*; men, attempting to save their family, become anti-heroes

because institutionalized racism makes traditional heroic gestures inaccessible; for the black “hero,” saving the black heroine means inevitably opposing figures of white domination. Such traditional salvation amidst dominant racist society, usually means death for one or both blacks, and unmitigated torment for the heroine beyond what she could have already expected.⁷

This chapter also discusses slavery’s impact upon the family through various infanticidal moments. Each assault suffered by the various individuals within family is a manifestation and manipulation of a gothic trope. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the various exorcisms characters perform to liberate themselves from slavery’s haunting. Overall, this chapter considers the insidious way racist society constructs and debilitates the black family, and notes how Morrison’s revision of gothic tropes specifically emphasizes corrosive definitions of self and familial connection. I conclude that Morrison’s text suggests a deconstruction of both patriarchal and matriarchal (not to be confused with patrilineal and matrilineal) constructions of family. While feminist critics, including Morrison, have made it quite clear why patriarchy must be dismantled, *Beloved* implies that matriarchy is but an inversion of patriarchy, and, as both Kenan and Naylor note, equally problematic.

Beloved Who Was Not Beloved, Home that Was Not Home

One of the many true yet horrifying stories of slavery’s consequences is Margaret Garner’s slaughter of her children. This story, now generally recognized as the basis for *Beloved*, suggests slavery’s multiple and indirect attacks on the African American being. Like Sethe’s action, Margaret Garner’s reaction suggests the absolute terror and trauma of slavery; Garner calmly comments to interviewers after the murder that “I was as cool as I now am; and I would much rather kill [my children] at once, and end their suffering,

than have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered by piece-meal” (Bassett 40). Yet Toni Morrison re-writes Garner’s tragedy with a vital difference; in the actual event, Garner escapes with her children and husband (Schmudde 410). Morrison revises this escape and splits the family apart in their attempt to escape; Sethe first sends the children and then runs away by herself without knowing what has happened to her husband. The change indicates that *Beloved* is specifically concerned with institutionalized racism’s effects upon the African American family.

Beloved suggests that slavery’s destructive impact continues to affect the family and leads to defining the family in terms of property relationships, a question of “who belongs to who.” To claim absolute ownership reinstitutes slavery’s destructive power within familial dynamics. Indeed, Sethe’s absolute claim on her children’s being made her infanticidal act permissible to both her and the community.⁸ The very declaration of ownership that seems to lock the women of 124 in their destructive relationship also implicitly explains the house’s haunting and terrifies Paul D and Sethe’s children. In their individual choruses, each woman repeats “you are mine” throughout their narrative (*Beloved* 200-17) and “mine” is the one term that Stamp Paid can understand amidst the throng of voices barring his way to 124 (172); upon hearing the story of Sethe’s infanticide Paul D concludes that “more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him”(164). The text differentiates between matrilineal/ patrilineal connection and matriarchal/ patriarchal power. *Beloved* reveals the slave narratives’ concern with the origins as a need to define family in terms of connection and relationship, and not the need to establish gendered hierarchies of privilege and power as typically implied in the notion of patriarchy/ matriarchy.

Within a few pages of *Beloved's* opening, Morrison groups her characters in a manner indicating a growing family. With Paul D's arrival, house 124 looks like it could actually be a family home with a mother (Sethe), father (Paul D), child (Denver), and family pet (Here Boy); the picture is much like the pictures of family Morrison presents in the Dick and Jane readers placed throughout her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Yet in *Beloved*, as in that first text, this picture of the traditional patriarchal family proves problematic. We realize that "Dick" has run away and deserted the family twice,⁹ Jane is afraid to leave the yard, the original father is lost, and mother is an iron-eyed woman who terrifies her children. Even the family pet is too traumatized and physically impaired to truly fulfill his role.

Morrison repeatedly posits this family's impairment as both terrifying and gothic. Denver, for instance, recalls that her mother "never looked away, [. . .] when a man got stomped to death by a mare [. . .] and when a sow began eating her own litter [. . . .] [a]nd when the baby's spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye, so hard he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue" (*Beloved* 12). The excerpt illustrates the specific ways the black family is brutalized by racist society. The passage references gothic tropes of murder, mutation, infanticide, cannibalism, torture, and haunting in its symbolic iteration of familial suffering. Morrison's choice to begin the passage with an attack on the male body implies not only that assaults on masculinity are of concern but also that these assaults complicate and impede black men from assuming traditional, though problematic, patriarchal positions as the heads of families; the passage also acknowledges the complex and typically misconstrued ways women are made complicit in the assault. The mare's

attack emblemizes the dismantling of patriarchy by representing female threat and destructive power. Likewise, the image of the sow posits two concerns of the novel: warped and destructive motherhood, and infanticidal assaults on the child's body. Lastly, the baby's brutalization of the dog emphasizes how trauma has corrupted the distraught family; not even the dog can escape. Even worse, a child's spirit is his tormentor; the scene presents the black family as haunted and terrorized by unseen demons. The text never explains the first and second occurrences; they therefore seem to imply a reading of female power as naturally destructive. However, just as the text explicitly concerns itself with revealing the story behind the last attack, so too does it implicitly reveal not only the motivations of the wives/ mothers/ daughters but how these motivations are suppressed and/ or distorted by racist and patriarchal discourses that construct women as malevolent figures. The challenge of the text is multifold: we must reveal the original warping tormentors as well as the multiple ways victims contribute to and perpetuate their trauma, and recognize the consequent effects in order to begin rebuilding black families without revisiting the original traumas upon each other.

The manner that each of the three sections begins emphasizes *Beloved* as a meditation upon the trauma done to African American family. Each section begins with a statement about house 124: "124 was spiteful. Full a of baby's venom" (*Beloved* 3), "124 was loud. Stamp Paid could hear it even from the road" (169), and "124 was quiet. Denver [. . .] was surprised to learn hunger could do that: quiet you down and wear you out" (241). Each statement also confirms 124 as a haunted house. Haunted houses in traditional Gothic texts are typically projections of hidden familial secrets and/ or curses. For example, the haunted home in *Bondswoman's Narrative* reveals De Vincent's terror

over miscegenation as an imagined and hyperbolized fear in comparison to the actual horror of his consequent behavior in addition to the nightmarish ideology of the racial hierarchy supporting slavery. Morrison's haunted house contains many of the traditional gothic features: "noises, displaced objects, smells, lights, a brooding atmosphere, and the sensitivity of an animal to the presence of the ghost" (Schmudde 409).¹⁰ 124 signals familial trauma and, as the narrative progresses, the text names slavery as the black family's trauma, curse, and secret. In traditional Gothic texts, haunted houses often mimic the mechanizations of the Freudian psyche—in both cases "the past cannot lose its power until its secrets are disclosed" (Williams 73). The challenge for the residents of 124, however, is a bit more complicated than simply acknowledging one secret; indeed that the family suffered losses under slavery is no secret. What the characters must reveal is how racist discourse perpetually impacts their conceptions of family, self, and love.

Each section beginning also signals a problem specific to the black family and resulting from slavery. The first section details the loss and destruction slave families suffered, the second section emphasizes the problem of patriarchal loss, and the third section suggests slavery's continued psychological impact on black families post-emancipation. Also, both the first and third sections posit infanticide as a remnant of slavery that haunts black family—the first section explicitly names the spirit of a destroyed infant as the problem and the third connects the slow starvation of the surviving child, now grown, to the house's dying silence. The foregrounding of the house's address also repeatedly invokes and names loss as a principal concern of the black family—124 records both the number of Sethe's children and the loss of Beloved, the third child. The haunted house in Morrison reveals not only the complex and

multifold traumas of slavery but how racist ideology continues to haunt family on multiple, interrelated levels.

Lastly, the opening statements acknowledge the extent to which ownership of a house does not make it a home and therefore similarly imply that ownership does not define family. In other words the act and claim of possession cannot provide a sufficient foundation for family; indeed, the house is “possessed” by the ghost of a family member that makes the building unwelcoming and even dangerous to the surviving family. This act of “possession” also proves disruptive to familial hierarchy and relationships as a baby claims ownership and control over the rest of the family, including both her mother and grandmother. The appearance and reference to another “home” in the story emphasize that house 124 registers the problem of possession for the black family. The invocation of Sweet Home, a plantation that “wasn’t sweet and [. . .] sure wasn’t home” (*Beloved* 15), appears immediately after a description of the loss that haunts 124. The name of the plantation references slavery’s recourse to the metaphor of family as descriptor of the master-slave relationship (Fleischner 31). Yet the simple fact that all of the slaves were owned by a mock paterfamilias on a place called “Home” did not make them familial. Indeed, Sethe’s memories of the family-like relationships among the slaves occur alongside memories of attacks upon the male body.¹¹ Furthermore, it is a “home” that is both beautiful and terrible, a place that makes its inhabitants “want to scream [. . .] and wonder if hell is a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves” (*Beloved* 6). Together, 124 and Sweet Home complicate the Freudian uncanny.¹² Both are “homes” and thus familiar and supposedly welcoming; yet the atmosphere at both locations proves terrifying and destructive to their respective

“families.” In reality, home is not home because, in the case of *Sweet Home*, the family is not family or because the family has been so warped by torment that the bonds between relatives are murderous, tentative and distant. The question of home merely masks the question of family, especially in relation to the problematic concept of possession.

The issue of possession proves one of the primary disruptions of family. The text posits how slavery, particularly the issue of possession, haunts black family and prevents blacks from ascribing to traditional forms of family in the first place. Hortense Spillers explains that slavery had to actively prohibit family building because of how the slave family contradicted and contested property relationships. Slavery depended upon the denial of kinship because property relations would be undermined were kinship possible: children would “belong” to their mother and father (“Mama’s Baby” 271). Furthermore, slavery perpetually denied blacks the possibility of engaging in traditional familial dynamics on a very basic level. The trip through the Middle Passage stripped slaves of gendered identity as male and female as they became connotative of quantity and not gendered roles that were typically defined within the domestic sphere (“Mama’s Baby” 267). Parental roles were also distorted as a consequence of the sexual trauma inevitably suffered under slavery.

The question of family becomes a particularly complicated yet necessary challenge for a group plagued by a haunting slave history. The text repeatedly asks us to consider and challenge dominant constructions of family typically based upon patriarchal privilege: the masculine power and right to claim possession of his “woman” and children. Similarly *Beloved* recognizes that the general concept of family, especially as it appears in women’s slave narratives, was crucial as a counterforce to the soul-murdering

abuse suffered under slavery (Fleischner 29). Yet critics often note how *Beloved* suggests that the memories of slavery's horrors cause such profound despair that they cancel out the possibility of resolution or pleasure in the present or future. Such critics contend that Beloved's appearance, and the memories of slavery that she literalizes, forestall the promise of happiness between Sethe and Paul D at the carnival (Horvitz 65). This happiness is based upon denial and silence. Indeed, Paul D's horrified reaction to Sethe's back after their first sexual encounter, his inability to listen to her narrative of her imprisonment, and his judgmental response to her story of Beloved's death all indicate that romantic happiness between the two is an impossibility because slavery has already impacted their relationship. Both Sethe and Paul D must redefine what family, freedom, and love are before they can have a successful relationship. Likewise the house's reaction to the entrance of a dominating masculine presence suggests the extent to which traditional patriarchal models of family prove inadequate and problematic; the house literally pitches a fit at Sethe's first inclination to submit to patriarchal power and place her responsibility in Paul D's hands (*Beloved* 18).

Although the issue of maternal possession is a primary concern, the question of patriarchy and masculine ownership proves equally problematic. The masculine need to define family in terms of patriarchal rule repeatedly occurs in the text; yet Morrison also represents this need as a near impossibility for male survivors of slavery. The repeated denial of black patriarchal claims becomes justification for men to abandon families in the story. Furthermore, Morrison repeatedly links abandonment to various other horrors and inevitably makes it an infanticidal act. Lastly, parents struggling to define their gender behavior and positions based upon oppressive white patriarchal concepts

inevitably bequeath their warped images of heterosexual interaction and traumatized paternity to their children. Consequently, even the children who do not suffer abandonment suffer traumatic attacks upon their constructions of self and perpetuate the cycle of warped and infanticidal paternity.

Monstrous Mothers

Morrison illustrates how slavery forces women to necessarily disconnect themselves from their bodies and the consequences of this dissociation for families. For instance, Morrison constantly positions prostitution in the background of women's narratives. Its commonplace appearance mimics women's sexual distance from their own bodies; the prostituted body becomes but a commodity, just as it was under slavery. By presenting prostitution as a regular option and method of survival, Morrison recalls the problem of representing black women in romantic plots and gothic narratives. Slavery forecloses the possibility of black women positioning themselves as distressed, virtuous heroines and forces them to occupy and accept the role of fallen seductress. The constant sexual attacks women suffer¹³ under slavery prove psychologically haunting and the consequence is a view of the body as disconnected from self. Morrison observes how black women are necessarily already and always the female other as a consequence of slavery and not because of a spiritual fall.

The text furthermore suggests how such roles and psychological trauma impede romantic relationships; if women are constantly "dirtied" because of male attacks during and after slavery, then black men are at best inept heroes and at worst consuming rapists. Lastly, because claiming self becomes seemingly impossible and terrible,¹⁴ black women have two equally terrible reactions to their children. They either repeat the dispossession they've suffered in their relationships with their children even after slavery or they utterly

claim their children as their “best thing” (*Beloved* 272), and possessively define their children as extremely protected extensions of themselves. However, both dispossession and warped maternal claims prove the equivalent of infanticidal attacks.

Morrison revises the Gothic’s traditional portrayal of women, as fallen woman and virtuous heroine, and the various threats and attacks they suffer. The would-be heroines in *Beloved* all survive the Gothic’s horror of horror, sexual assault, on numerous occasions. In order to express the terror of the attacks, Morrison shifts the terms through which she speaks of them and describes the various beatings and rapes in cannibalistic terms; the women are “chewed” and “swallowed” by an assailant. The text reveals the trauma and invisible scarring done to the psyche as more terrifying than the sexual attacks. By positing the survival mechanisms as the haunting aspect of these attacks, Morrison not only suggests how traumatic and lasting such attacks prove, but also illustrates how survival does not necessarily denote healing. The novel attempts to name one of the haunting traumas that slave narratives cannot speak; although the “narratives give a clear view of how sexual exploitation interferes externally with the slave narrators’ individual sexual lives, [. . .] they can only hint at the presence of internal disruptions, the psychological consequences of sexual abuse” (Fleischner 69). Traumatized as sexual objects under slavery, black women continue to suffer trauma post-emancipation by the prostitution of their bodies.

The text repeatedly connects women’s forced sexual objectification post-emancipation to slavery and death. Carl Plasa, for instance, observes that *Beloved*’s sexual assaults, for both men and women, “gesture[s] back towards the institutionalized effects of sexual violence under slavery, as the black male subject is emasculated and the

black female commodified into a source for the reproduction of labour” (72). Sethe’s memory of her encounters with prostitution emphasizes it as a repetition of slavery’s institutionalized violence: “They said it was the bit that made [Sethe’s ma’am] smile when she didn’t want to. Like the Saturday girls working the slaughterhouse yard” (*Beloved* 203). Sethe also includes prostitution as part of the many lasting and dispossessing horrors of slavery: “I don’t have to remember that slaughterhouse and the Saturday girls who worked its yard;” this attempt to block memory occurs amidst a list that includes her sons’ fear of her, Beloved’s murder, and Baby Suggs’s death (184). The first mention of prostitution occurs in connection with Beloved’s headstone; Sethe exchanges ten minutes of sex for the seven letters of Beloved’s gravestone. The description of the encounter itself is replete with images of death. She “rut[s] among the headstones” and spends the ten minutes “pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide as the grave” (5). These moments become intimately connected with Beloved’s death and her haunting of 124 thereafter; Sethe describes the intensity of the moment as “more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers” and compares the misery of it to having “to live out her lives in a house palsied by the baby’s fury” (5).

The text signals the predicament black women found themselves in. Since motherhood was associated with replenishing slave stock and rebellion sometimes took the form of child-murder, infanticide haunts the mother-child bond even after slavery. Women resigned themselves to prostitution as a means of feeding their children (*Beloved* 204), yet infanticide haunts the relationship since, as the text repeatedly observes, infanticide was often slave women’s form of rebelling against being a profitable source

of reproduction. Such terrible moments of rebellion are not erased for the free mother; rather infanticide haunts mothering and serves as a reminder of how the initial assault and the psychological trauma continue to impact family.

Another effect of slavery is women's ideas about and interaction with men in romantic relationships. Morrison's portrayal of the romantic distress between black men and women revises Gothic romantic plots and disrupts the traditional gender roles inherent in them. *Beloved* illustrates how black men are positioned as anti-heroes as a consequence of slavery, and traces the real consequences such positions pose for the future and the family. The text repeatedly uses similar terms when describing consuming assailant and loving mate. For instance, Sethe typically describes the two nephews that rape her as having "mossy teeth" (*Beloved* 70), and Beloved herself frequently fears being chewed and swallowed. Yet Beloved fixates on the teeth of the man she loves, describing him as "the one whose teeth I loved" (211, 212). Although the tone signals a difference between rapist and lover, they are similarly described in terms of threatening images of consumption.

The text suggests that for these traumatized women, the difference between men is an issue of use—rapists chew and devour with their teeth while lovers use theirs to sing (*Beloved* 212). Thus for Sethe, Paul D becomes as much a figure of salvation as he is a figure of harm. When he commits a verbal attack upon Sethe that repeats her dehumanization under slavery (165), Sethe easily excuses him as an inevitably problematic figure. Indeed, Sethe reduces him to a questionable hero and mate from the beginning of the text by noting that "a man was nothing but a man" (22). Sethe astutely summarizes men's positions in connection to black women whose lives are innately one

of terror: “feel how it feels to be a colored woman roaming the woods with anything good made liable to jump on you” (68). Her articulation at once denies men humanity, designating them as nameless “things,” even as she implicitly includes Paul D among the group of amorphous, dehumanized “things.” Paul D, then, becomes as willing and capable of victimizing black women, be it through an active attack or through passive inability or refusal to defend, as the white rapists that haunt black women’s memories in the story.¹⁵ The consequence of Sethe’s general dismissal of black men is her assumption that she can better protect and provide for her family. Yet, as Wallace notes, the black woman’s belief that black men are nothing, and that she must be “better” to amend for it, blinds “her from seeing her own lamentable condition” (178).

Baby Suggs’s passive yet infanticidal dispossession most poignantly registers the horror of slavery’s impact upon the family. Her willingness to abandon her last child supports Spillers’ observation that “ ‘kinship’ loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations” (“Mama’s Baby” 269). When Halle is born Suggs barely glanced at him “because it wasn’t worth the trouble to try to learn features [she] would never see change into adulthood anyway” (*Beloved* 139). Although Suggs later assumes an active role in her son’s life, she again abandons her (grand)children once she is confronted with the meaninglessness of her claim since “nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (23). Explaining to Stamp Paid that she could not stop slavery from entering her own yard, Suggs abandons her grandchildren to their murderous mother and a haunted house and resigns herself to bed. Suggs’s retreat passively enacts a kind of self-protection against

loving too much that prevents the responsibility of motherhood; it also enacts an infanticidal threat because her grandchildren feel safest with her (206).

Both Sethe's mother and Ella rebel by denying maternal responsibility. The descriptions of their resistances signal the incongruity of being a mother and a sexual commodity at once. Sethe's mother merely "throws away" the unwanted children who are products from her rape by white men (*Beloved* 62), and Ella simply refuses to "nurse a hairy white thing, fathered by the 'lowest yet'" (258-59). Both women's willingness to destroy their children suggests how slavery both destroys motherhood and makes it traumatic. Slavery not only begets infanticide but leaves women so dissociated from their bodies and children that infanticide becomes an unfeeling act; throughout the text murder is easy, even natural, and mothering becomes the truly traumatic.

Motherhood appears monstrous and consuming for both mother and child. Morrison uses gothic tropes of monstrosity, insanity, mutation, and murder to signal the terror of black motherhood post-emancipation. Sethe's story particularly illustrates that part of the problem of making the claim to motherhood amidst a tormenting institution is that "mother-love is warped by torture into murder" (Byatt 16). The circumstances of slavery made motherhood a near impossibility; indeed, under slavery making the unheard-of claim to be a mother of children was outrageous for a slave woman. To claim responsibility for her children meant claiming responsibility for and/ or a part in what happened to them their entire life (Darling 34). The text repeatedly mentions mothers who have gone insane. Paul D, for instance, recalls seeing a "witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies" (*Beloved* 66) and Sethe resists becoming like Baby Suggs friend, a young woman who "develop[ed] [a]

permanent craziness [. . .], whose food was full of tears. [Or] [l]ike Aunt Phyllis, who slept with her eyes wide open” (97). The madness of the women in *Beloved* becomes a way of coping with the conflict between making a maternal claim and suffering institutionalized loss.

Consumed and defined by maternal responsibility after she loses Halle, Sethe’s consequent excess of maternal feeling becomes problematic because she cannot separate her children from herself. Sethe declares absolute possession of her children’s bodies, lives, and futures against a system that can steal them from her. The moment in which Sethe is forced to act upon this right is consequently one of terror and insanity:

Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful. (*Beloved* 163)

The act of protecting “all the parts of her” against approaching threat becomes ineffable in this moment and Sethe’s mental clarity becomes blurred by “hummingbird wings,” suggesting that Sethe has lapsed into madness. Years after this moment, the maternal claim remains difficult to sanely shoulder. For instance, upon hearing of Halle’s fate, Sethe wishes she could have mourned the theft of her child’s milk like “[o]ther people [whose] brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new” (70). The burden of being held accountable to her maternal claim does prove too much for Sethe. The woman shows signs of madness as she attempts to make up for Beloved’s suffering (240).

Beloved repeatedly signals the shift from maternal claim towards murderous instinct; the shift occurs because “[t]he power to create life becomes the right to own it,

to name or refuse to name it, to legitimize or destroy it” (McKinstry 264). Nancy Armstrong’s explanation of Harriet Jacobs’s relationship to her daughter clarifies the mother-child dynamic behind the shift: “At stake is the ability to reproduce herself socially and culturally in reproducing herself biologically [. . .] To reproduce herself—indeed, to have a self—Jacobs has to keep her daughter pure” (Armstrong 15-16). Sethe’s attack on her children similarly manifests a sense of her children as inseparable parts of herself; thus she declares, “Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing—the part of her that was clean” (*Beloved* 251). In protecting her children Sethe is also protecting herself, and any protests the children might make about Sethe’s “protection” have no bearing upon Sethe’s murderous decision.

Slavery’s ability to make motherhood monstrous is repeatedly evoked through images of corrupted nursing. In typical mother-child relationships nursing is an intimate, nurturing connection between the two bodies. Sethe envisions such a meaning and sense of nursing for her own children, declaring that sending her infant away from her was terrible because “[n]obody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. Nobody knew that she couldn’t pass air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me” (*Beloved* 16). The emphasis in Sethe’s enunciation is on her unique connection to her child; each time Sethe references an other person, a “you,” it is in terms of inaccessible connection.

This idealized image of nursing is repeatedly distorted under slavery. For instance, Sethe suppresses “the picture of the men coming to nurse her” (6); the term “nurse” is

used here to designate Sethe's molestation. The fact that this misapplication of the term is its first use in the text indicates that this perverted form of nursing is typical of the perversions of motherhood under slavery. The most terrible and poignant moment of distorted nursing is also a moment of cannibalism. Goaded into nursing Denver after killing Beloved, Sethe "aim[s] a bloody nipple into the baby's mouth [. . .] So Denver took her mother's milk right along with her sister's blood" (*Beloved* 152). In this moment, nurturing the child's body becomes intimately connected with destroying it.

These warped moments of mothering become components of a motherhood that becomes monstrous. Each time Sethe is attacked by and (successfully?) rebukes slavery from encroaching upon her family, she shows signs of deformity and inhumanity; the encounters seem to have the effect of mutating her into a terrible, consuming mother through the very process of protecting her children. After schoolteacher's nephews "nurse" her, for instance, Sethe launches a plan to protect her unborn child and save her infant's milk; yet Paul D is unable to look at her as she narrates her plan because by then she has "iron eyes" in "[a] face too still for comfort" (*Beloved* 9). The iron suggests her strength and resolve to survive for the sake of her children but at the same time it is unnatural: "her eyes did not pick up a flicker of light. They were like two wells into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held" (9). In her last trimester of pregnancy, Sethe's body literally signals a natural process that should ideally conclude in life and nurture; however, her eyes are remarkably unnatural and empty, signaling torment, alienation, and terrible emptiness. Sethe consequently becomes a monstrous figure as a result of the abuse she has suffered while pregnant.

The pinnacle of Sethe as monstrous, infanticidal mother occurs in the midst of her absolute need to protect her children from theft and enslavement. The scene of Beloved's death emphasizes Sethe's descent into monstrosity as she is surrounded with the ruined bodies of the children she was "protecting":

Little nigger-boy eyes open in the sawdust; little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that held her face so her head wouldn't fall off; little nigger-baby eyes crinkling up to cry [. . .] But the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who looked liked she didn't have any. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they were as black as her skin, she looked blind. (*Beloved* 150).

The emphasis on eyes repeats the earlier passage in which Sethe's eyes are disturbing; in the extreme act of protecting her children, Sethe's "iron eyes" go from being merely disturbing to terrifying. Likewise in one of the many reiterations of the event, the text succinctly describes it thus: "a pretty little slavegirl had recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children" (158). Although the description simplifies the encounter and makes it sound frighteningly harmless, it displaces Sethe as mother(ly). She is a "slavegirl," and not a mother. Sethe is utterly dehumanized in male recounting of the event. Stamp Paid recalls how "she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws" (157). Although the instinct remains the same for both mother-hawk and mother-woman, this moment of protection is also one that mutates Sethe into something terrible and other.

Sethe's demand to particular rights, such as the right to define and end Beloved's life and the right to confine Denver within a haunted house, emphasizes the terror motherhood poses for the children in a warped familial system. After manifesting her possessive claim over her children, Sethe becomes mythically monstrous to her own children; she is the witch of the boys' instructional "die-witch!" stories and the unknowable terror that causes Howard and Bulgar to sleep holding hands for the rest of

their childhood (*Beloved* 120, 183). Furthermore, Denver at once recognizes Sethe as her mother but remains aware that something in Sethe “makes it all right to kill” (206).

Denver’s nightmares point to her confusion and terror of her mother:

She cut my head off every night. Bulgar and Howard told me she would and she did. Her pretty eyes looking at me like I was a stranger. [. . .] I know she’ll be good at it, careful. That when she cuts it off it’ll be done right; it won’t hurt. [. . .] Then she carries [my head] downstairs to braid my hair. I try not to cry but it hurts so much to comb it. When she finishes the combing and starts braiding I get sleepy. [. . .] The scary part is waiting for her to come in and do it. (206).

For Denver, Sethe is both murderer and mother. Denver’s nightmare registers an accepted knowledge of her mother’s murderous intentions, something that Denver merely has to anticipate, not wonder about. Denver’s nightmare also illustrates the extent to which Sethe’s threat to her children is intricately interwoven with her motherly affections and behavior. Sethe is most hurtful and harmful in her role as mother and causes Denver physical pain when she braids her hair, not when she cuts her head off. Denver’s nightmare suggests that Sethe’s position, both as threat and nurturer, makes her monstrous to her children, who wait for her to “do it again” even while she is being tender with them.

The mother’s transformation into monster places her children in a position to defend themselves against her consuming presence by committing matricide. Howard’s and Bulgar’s stories indicate not only their awareness of their mother’s attack (*Beloved* 205) but their preparation and willingness to counter future attacks. They tell Denver the “‘die-witch!’ stories with proven ways of killing her dead” (19) to prepare Denver against another maternal attack. Familial relations prove so mutated under slavery that mothers view infanticide as a way to protect their children, and children guard against attacks upon their body through a willingness to commit matricide. Morrison thus reveals how

slavery mutates mother-child relationships into terrible and gothic interactions that are based not in nurture but in murder.

Fleeing Fathers

The story of Paul D and Sethe is undeniably romantic with Paul D as the rescuing, Byronic hero in traditional gothic texts. Although he is not aristocratic, he is nevertheless extraordinarily charming and a seemingly capable protector; he is “the kind of man who could walk into a house and make women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could” (*Beloved* 17). Yet what impedes Paul D’s ability to save his heroine is his allegiance to traditional ideals of masculinity; indeed, the heroic (white) ideal remains a consistent desire for Paul D throughout the text (Kang 844). *Beloved* therefore registers the contradictions and/ or challenges of acting as the hero in the aftermath of slavery. Kang notes that Frederick Douglass’s writings about his experiences as a black ex-slave male suggests that “manliness is an anxiety-provoking issue for the black individual since he is perpetually undermined by the infantilizing and deprecating nomenclature of white supremacy” (Kang 838). While Douglass illustrates the pressures of claiming masculinity, Morrison’s text suggests what happens to both the individual and family when claims of masculinity specifically reiterate (white) patriarchal dominance as well as the destructive forms of rebellion that surface when masculinity proves unattainable. In *Beloved* black men’s attempts to enact patriarchal dominance and figure as saving hero are exactly what impede their success.

Morrison rewrites the gothic anti-hero¹⁶ to illustrate not just how black men were innately forced into this role by slavery, but how the traditional masculinity is oppressive to both black men and women. Black men are consistently denied access to “manhood” because of their enslaved status, but such definitions also depend upon the domination of

the female body; yet dominating the white female body is impossible because of race, and dominating the black female body mimics the racial oppression blacks suffered under slavery. This revision of the gothic anti-hero is also an interrogation of “what slavery does to men, how dreadfully it wounds what for better or worse defines the manhood that most men cherish—physical capacity, pride of dominance, freedom of will and action” (Christian 23). The text therefore illuminates the lasting impact that slavery has upon the male body and particularly suggests how masculine trauma disrupts the family.

Spillers’s elaboration upon masculine dispossession clarifies one way this trauma haunts family: “The Father *and* the Daughter of this social configuration are ‘missing’ historically because the laws and practices of enslavement did not recognize, as a rule, the vertical arrangements of their family. From this angle, fathers, daughters, mothers, sons, sisters, brothers spread across the social terrain in horizontal display” (“Permanent Obliquity” 148). Spillers suggests that men become trapped in a cycle of perpetual repetition; son becomes/ is father and marries but can never claim daughter/ sister/ mother as wife. Howard’s and Bulgar’s flight is also understandable when read against Spillers’s explanation of the emasculating “horizontal terrain;” sister, living and ghostly, becomes murderous mother/ wife/ daughter. Men, who are repeatedly denied even the illusion of possession or patriarchal ownership, enact a passive dispossession, much like the women, that also proves murderous to both their wives and children.¹⁷

The men fail as heroes in *Beloved* primarily because they ascribe to traditional yet problematic definitions of manhood; as anti-heroes, the men unwittingly revisit the bodily and psychological trauma of slavery upon the very people they attempt to protect. In *Beloved*, as in many masculine slave narratives, virility, power, and ownership of the

female body are signs of masculinity. Paul D's reaction to Sethe's revelation that she escaped alone suggests the extent to which he ascribes to the ideology of male dominance; while he is certainly happy that she escaped slavery, he remains "annoyed that she had not needed Halle or him in the doing" (*Beloved* 8). Paul D particularly illustrates prototypical virility in his courtship of Sethe:

The house itself was pitching. Sethe slid to the floor and struggled to get back into her dress. [. . .]

Paul D was shouting, falling, reaching for anchor. "Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!" A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house [. . .]

The quaking slowed to a lurch, but Paul D did not stop whipping the table around until everything was rock quiet. (18).

Paul D exorcises the ghost through an act of masculine power; he follows his heroic deed by having rushed sex with Sethe. The above passage and their thoughts after sex illustrate this act of masculine dominance as chaotic and fleeting. Indeed, in rescuing his lover from a ghost she welcomes, Paul D destroys her home. Likewise the psychological and emotional connection he and Sethe achieve in the kitchen pre-exorcism is somehow lost during their sexual encounter; afterwards the two "lay by side resentful of one another [. . .] they were sorry and too shy to make talk" (20). Sethe regrets Paul D's heroism and mentally derides him as "nothing but a man" like other men who "encouraged you to put some of your weight in their hands and as soon as you felt how light and lovely that way [. . .] they did what he had done: ran her children out and tore up the house" (22). The moment of masculine power and the consequent claim of the female body prove undesirable.

Part of the process of defining masculinity in gothic narratives is claiming ownership of and power over the female body. In gothic narratives, females are villainous when they defy masculine control,¹⁸ especially over their sexuality. Morrison demonstrates how this need to dominate the female body is really an endeavor to affirm masculinity, rather than an attempt to rescue a virtuous heroine. Paul D sexually objectifies Sethe on several occasions. After their first sexual encounter, Paul D thinks that “the jump [. . .] from [sex with] a calf to a girl wasn’t all that mighty” (*Beloved* 26); the statement dehumanizes Sethe and makes her into a mere object used for sexual gratification. Later Paul D again reduces Sethe to a sexually gratifying body that he claims and uses as a way to combat Beloved’s emasculating gaze (64). Furthermore Paul D counters Beloved’s attack on his manhood by reasserting his claim over Sethe’s body, declaring that he wants her pregnant instead of admitting “I am not a man” (*Beloved* 128). Paul D explicitly realizes that his declaration and decision is a way to “document his manhood” (128). Similarly, Stamp Paid’s emasculation results from his inability to sexually claim and control his wife. The text explains his recognition that “[t]here was nothing interesting between his legs” though there was a time when there had been (170). Considering that Stamp Paid changes his name after he abandons his wife because of his master’s sexual claim on her body, the lost masculinity above refers to his failure to “own” his wife.

The text also concerns itself with the conflictual position to which racist society dooms black men. As men, they desire the role of heroic patriarch, yet as blacks this role is deemed inaccessible and even criminal on numerous social levels. As slaves, even claims to virility were denied them because they were viewed as bodies whose sexual

desire was nonexistent. Black men were denied sexuality even in relation to black women because recognition of black men's desire for black women would pose the men as sexual threats to white women (Gibson 103).¹⁹ Consequently the conceptual categories both Paul D and Stamp Paid know for masculinity don't and can't account for men oppressed by slavery (Barnett 93).

The individual and familial consequences of black men's conflictual positions are two-fold. Harriet Jacobs alludes to one of the consequences of black men's position when, in the midst of her own gothic plot, she questions "[w]hy does the slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence [. . .] [because] the husband of a slave has no power to protect her" (369-70). The red ribbon Stamp finds alludes to the fact that black men's inability to protect extends beyond slavery. Jacobs's question and observation suggest that because patriarchal family structures are made impossible, the viable alternative is a version of masculinity that denies connection, heterosexual relationship, and family. In the self-sufficient version of "manhood" flight is equated with both freedom and manhood.

Paul D's support of Howard's and Bulgar's decision to run away illustrates that this image of self-sufficient masculinity is explicitly counter to family. When Sethe explains that her boys left the family, he thinks "[p]robably best [. . .] If a Negro got legs *he* ought to use them. Sit down too long, somebody will figure out a way to tie them up" (emphasis added *Beloved* 10). Paul D suggests that flight is a particularly masculine necessity, the only way men will remain free; yet the family suffers from this masculine

gesture/ habit. Sethe and Baby Suggs are left without their male heirs, and Denver is abandoned by the only masculine presence she has ever known.

Just as masculinity in typical gothic romances depended upon either the possession or vilification of the female body, so too is this self-sufficient masculinity explicitly posed as a gesture against female presence and power. In the previous excerpt, the context of Paul D's explanation implies that the ensnaring "somebody" is feminine. The boys' flight and Paul D's explanation resembles the male psyche in gothic texts; indeed, images of the terrible mother and femme fatale are abundant in the male gothic.²⁰ In both *Beloved* and traditional gothic texts, the male subject unconsciously represents the female as the pre-oedipal mother who is all-powerful, arbitrary, and irrational. This fantasy results from the cultural demand to align himself with the masculine and to repress the feminine (Williams 79). Hence it is natural for only the boys to run; Denver, as a female, should stay because she must align herself with the "terrible mother."²¹

Paul D's description of his house fits further emphasizes how his masculinity exists as the counterforce to feminine presence: "He believed he was having house-fits, the glassy anger men sometimes feel when a women's house begins to bind them, when they want to yell or break something or at least run off. He knew all about that [. . .] But he always associated the house-fit with the woman in it" (*Beloved* 115). These "house-fits" present home and consequently family, and women in particular, as threats to the masculine body. Family and women become constricting and jailing figures that repeat slavery's capture of the male body; consequently, family becomes but another form of slavery and women, new slave owners, all of which must be escaped if one is to remain a man. Yet this view of family/ women as threat and flight as masculine power/ freedom

makes sense considering that the text repeatedly notes the impossibility of patriarchal domination. In the text “life” means a stable family in which the masculine body is the nucleus (Kang 839); yet the system of slavery has made it so that such a nucleus becomes both problematic and nearly impossible.

Beloved represents the various threats black masculinity suffers under slavery and in racist society. Morrison uses the ghost/ succubus to signal the loss of masculinity as a sign of adulthood and the ability to protect family as hugely traumatic. Furthermore, Morrison recasts the traumas of slavery and racist society in terms of the gothic supernatural. Not only does she use tropes of haunting, monstrosity, incest and rape to suggest the terror of black men’s reality, but she emphasizes the trauma of the attacks upon their manhood by portraying Beloved as a succubus witch in her encounters with Paul D.²² Like a succubus, Beloved is a sexual predator whose attacks Paul D is defenseless against; indeed, he reasons that she has “fixed” or cast a spell upon him because his appetite for her becomes humiliating and uncontrollable (*Beloved* 126). By refiguring threats to black masculinity in a ghostly female body, Morrison posits slavery as a torturous and traumatic institution that haunts and troubles black masculinity.²³

In her role as succubus, Beloved re-enacts Paul D’s memories of rape and “unmanning” under slavery. The gothic frequently positions sexual violation as one of the threats the anti-hero must fend off; such sexual violation occurs not just at the hands of femme fatales, but also comes from masculine villains. In the later case, the threat is masked behind the trope of the unspeakable. In its manipulation of tropes of rape and transgressive sexuality, the text reveals that the rapist/ victim position is not necessarily male/ female but white/ black (Plasa 73). Indeed, the slave men of Sweet Home all

engage in bestiality (*Beloved* 11, 26) which is typically construed in Gothic texts as a sexual transgression indicative of dangerous hypersexuality; yet the slave men are the victims of rape. Furthermore, in figuring *Beloved* as a succubus witch who mimics the homosexual rapes of Paul D's body, Morrison extends Spillers's comment on rape and the ungendering of black bodies. Spillers explains that "[s]ince the gendered female exists for the male, we might suggest that the ungendered female [. . .] might be invaded/raided by another man or woman" ("Mama's Baby" 273). Although Spillers focuses on the female body, Morrison's choice to depict the rape of men's bodies, in addition to the various other sexual violations women suffer in her text, not only posits slavery as an institution that absolutely denies blacks gender but portrays how that ungendering particularly colludes in racist signification of the black male as "hole, the absence of all that constitutes manhood" (Barnett 80).

Morrison rewrites the trope of unspeakable (homo)sexuality as the "unmanning" of black men and the violence inflicted on them.²⁴ Indeed, the novel clearly describes the sexual attack on black men's bodies:

Kneeling in the mist they waited for the whim of the guard, or two, or three. Or maybe all of them wanted it. Wanted it from one prisoner in particular or none or all.

"Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?"

"Yes, sir."

[. . .] "Here you go."

Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, or taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus. Paul D [. . .] was looking at his palsied hands, smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts so like the doves', as he stood before the man kneeling in the mist on his right. Convinced he was next, Paul D retched [. . .] (*Beloved* 107-8)

Although Paul D is unable to recount the scene of his own rape, the text explicitly draws the scene of his impending rape through the proximity of the attacks on the other men. What remains unspoken is Paul D's inability to resist; the guards do not rape Paul D simply because they don't want him to vomit on their pants or shoes (108), not because of any active resistance on his part. Yet the passage notes that they "decided to skip the new man *for the time being*" (108) and consequently implies that Paul D is eventually raped.

Similarly the sexual attacks Paul D suffers from Beloved are as terrible as the attacks he suffers from the prison guards in Alfred, Georgia; in both instances he is positioned as a prostrate and powerless victim. In the above passage, the guards force the prisoners to be complicit in their rape through the metaphorical interchange signifying "hunger" and request for "breakfast." Significantly, Barnett observes that "by forcing the prisoners to express homosexual desire, the guards symbolically 'castrate' them. This violence is both racist and homophobic: 'white racists (literally) *castrate others* while homosexuals (figuratively) *are castrated themselves*'" (sic 80). Paul D's experiences with Beloved mimic this forced voicing (81); Paul D is at once humiliated by her power over him and by his unrestrained appetite for her (*Beloved* 126). Likewise all of the places Beloved moves Paul D to as part of her sexual attack are emasculating: the rocking chair is a maternal space; Baby Suggs's bed is a geriatric expanse; the storeroom is useless aridity; and the cold house equivocates Paul D's utter eviction (Kang 842). Morrison therefore suggests that in both cases, sexual violation, rather by a man or woman, is always an issue of power and its lack; the various attacks by men, and woman/succubus merely illustrate Paul D's utterly dominated, "unmanned" position.

Beloved's attacks upon Paul D, like the memories she inspires in Sethe, prove that slavery is a haunting institution whose trauma cannot be escaped through mere suppression. Paul D's submission to Beloved's demand that he call her name illustrates his continued domination by racist society as well as the elusive impact this history has upon his romantic relationships and gender identity. Indeed, Beloved does not respond to Paul D when he calls her Beloved, though she promised to go away if he did; rather her attack uncovers another name for her, and posits her symbolic figuration for Paul D, as well as other masculine figures in the text: "he was saying, 'Red heart. Red heart,' over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself" (*Beloved* 117). The red heart is what Paul D has locked away in his tobacco tin along with the painful memories of the numerous attacks on his masculinity. Paul D's awakening by his own cry, lastly, signifies his lack of awareness of his "heart" and his masculinity.

The (un)locking of Paul D's heart also suggests that the family is impacted by assaults on black masculinity. For instance, the name Alfred, Georgia—the location of Paul D's rape—speaks desire for heterosexual union²⁵ but the memory of subservience and rape "prematurely forecloses that possibility of sustained heterosexual partnership" (Kang 841). Similarly, Paul D's understanding of his molestation by Beloved indicates a warping of the paternal relationship by incest. Beloved, as Sethe's daughter, figures like a stepchild to Paul D. He describes her as "a girl young enough to be his daughter" (*Beloved* 126). Kang's argument, however, does not elaborate upon how black men's infantilization specifically impacts their concept of romantic love. The reference to the doves in Paul D's memory of the rapes in Alfred imply that this attack has lasting consequences for his concept of love and affection; the moment is a terrible mock of

romance as the doves' coos, a typical metaphor for love, become synonymous with a rapist's grunts. Paul D later "crunche[s] through a dove's breast before its heart stopped beating" (*Beloved* 106). The destructive and barbaric scene suggests Paul D's stance on love and affection; Paul D sees the scene as evidence of his masculinity, indicating how slavery warps masculinity.

Like the women who resist warped motherhood by positing alternative models, the men also resist emasculating attacks on their manhood by positing models of manhood that privilege independency and flight. Men subscribe to the image of masculinist self-sufficiency—they're independent, have renegade status, cooperate with other men even though their relationships are wary, and are ambulatory in nature, drifting towards a woman but never settling down. The problem with this version of masculinity is that familial ties are impossible to maintain or even establish (Kang 846). While Morrison portrays the attraction of self-sufficient manhood in her text, she also establishes the horrific, murderous impact of the alternative masculinity. Indeed, inability and refusal to protect become the cause and reaction of a manhood in which destructive abandonment becomes an acceptable norm. Though Paul D's restless wanderings from Georgia to Delaware and finally to Ohio exemplify this version of masculinity, the fact that the trip begins as an escape from prison and slavery imply that the masculinity is defined less by romantic and/ or heroic independence than by fear and apprehension.

Stamp Paid's story likewise problematizes the valor and independence typically attributed to this self-sufficient masculinity even as it illustrates the move away from traditional patriarchy. Stamp's first impulse to save his wife from her forced role as the master's mistress is a typical show of heroic power; he thinks to kill the master (*Beloved*

232), yet to do so would condemn himself and possibly his wife. Vashti insists that Stamp Paid leave their young master alone, “[o]therwise [. . .] where and to whom could she return when the boy was through”(185). Declaring that he “didn’t have the patience [he’s] got now” as an independent man, Stamp proceeds to bring the affair to the attention of the master’s wife, but to no avail. Indeed, her reaction insinuates that she is powerless to intercede. Stamp’s statement that his decision was fueled by a lack of patience resulting from his position as husband indicates that he was attempting to act as patriarch maintaining his established claim to his wife’s body. His heroic attempts to act according patriarchal definitions of masculinity are thwarted by women acting in accordance with an emasculating institution.

Stamp inevitably shifts away from patriarchal masculinity and reacts with misdirected rage when he fall short of saving his wife from sexual exploitation. Looking at the back of her neck, Stamp states that he “decided to break it. You know, like a twig—just snap it” (*Beloved* 233). Ironically, this rage reiterates the fact that in traditional gothic plots, the heroine’s distress and salvation primarily benefit the hero who reaffirms his manhood through his heroic gesture.²⁶ Therefore both his violent reaction to Vashti and his eventual flight from slavery position him as the true victim who must be saved, even as he posits his flight as the beginning of his heroic self-sufficient manhood.²⁷

Stamp Paid’s very name speaks to this new manhood; declaring that “he didn’t owe anybody anything”²⁸ after he handed his wife over to his master, “he extended this debtlessness to other people by helping them pay out and off whatever they owed in misery. Beaten runaways? He ferried them and rendered them paid for; gave them their

own bill of sale, so to speak” (*Beloved* 185). He repeatedly does for others what he could never do for Vashti; his ability to act as masculine hero, however, seems contingent upon his independence and control over other bodies. Lastly, Vashti’s fate illustrates that this self-sufficient manhood is not heroic. Although Stamp Paid does not kill her, he abandons her in his move towards alternative masculinity; the gesture proves murderous as the text frequently connects abandonment with death. Indeed, when Paul D asks if Vashti escaped with him, Stamp simply replies “No. She dies” (233).

Paul D witnesses a similar rebirth into self-sufficient masculinity; yet the gothic and horrendous nature of his rebirth indicates that the masculinity stemming from it is problematic. Paul D is literally buried alive in Alfred where he is forced to reside in a “grave calling itself quarters” (*Beloved* 106). Abandoned in the middle of a flood, the men are half buried and half drowned alive (110). Indeed, the threat of drowning proves noteworthy considering that the text posits the Middle Passage as a watery graveyard where numberless black bodies were tossed to rest.²⁹ Paul D and his fellow prisoners escape their tomb, rising up from their flooded and buried quarters “[l]ike the unshriven dead, zombies on the loose” (110). Morrison explicitly portrays Paul D’s escape and rebirth as a Gothic moment through her use of a well-known Gothic trope: the undead.

While their escape seems to imply new life for Paul D and the men who head north where they can be “men” in freedom, their route nevertheless insinuates that they remain the Gothic walking dead and haunted by slavery. Their first stop is among a village of diseased and dying Cherokees whose skin is covered by barnacles (112). Although the healthy members of the village live some miles away, the escaped slaves do not attempt to find the village of healthy Cherokees. Their comfort among the diseased group again

suggests that the men are haunted by death. Lastly, though nature flourishes around him in vibrant colors, Paul D “merely follow[s] in their wake, a dark ragged figure guided by the blossoming plums” (113). Paul D’s flight through blossoming trees emphasizes that he is not a creature engaged in the living cycle of rebirth. Consequently, when Paul D reaches the north and, presumably, freedom, he retains marks of the undead via the rusted tobacco tin lodged where his heart should be.

Morrison emphasizes the problem of defining black masculinity purely in terms of valor and reproductive power through the graphic horror of Sixo’s death. As Sixo is being burned to death for trying to escape, he laughs and shouts out “Seven-O! Seven-O! because his thirty-Mile Woman got away with his blossoming seed” (*Beloved* 228). Sixo’s name, his cry, and the reason for it record a history of combat between the patriarchs of his family and slavery. His name “Sixo” mimics his cry and can be read as “Six-O;” the implication is that his father suffered a similar victory and loss as did Sixo, who bequeaths the conflict to his seed/ son in his death and cry. Although Paul D reads the laughter and cry as victorious, the destruction that both heralds it and is predicted by it suggests the dire consequences such displays of masculine power and rebellion have for the family and future generations. Indeed, the sound of Sixo’s laughter as he burns is “a rippling sound like Sethe’s sons make when they tumble in hay or splash in rainwater” (226). Sixo’s destruction is written in the movements of black boys; the laughter and cry doom “Seveno,” as well as other black sons.

Beloved repeatedly illustrates that slavery’s assaults on black men have far worse consequences beyond mere emasculation. The struggle to assert manhood as a slave and even as a black man in racist society results in the destruction of others around him.

Denied the patriarchal version of manhood, Morrison's characters pursue a masculine self-sufficiency not unlike the version of masculinity Wallace critiques during the Civil Rights era. She notes that in the self-sufficient, rebel image of manhood "the black woman had no value. He projected his self-hatred onto her" (Wallace 224). The men in *Beloved* and the self-sufficient version of masculinity they inevitably resort to echo black men's general complaint during the 1960s and 1970s, according to Wallace: "The black man had troubles and he would have to fight the white man to get them solved but how would he ever have the strength if his own house was not in proper order, if his wife, his woman, his mothers, his sisters, who should have been his faithful servants, were undermining him at every opportunity" (132-33). Implicit in Wallace's summary is the threat of violence. Indeed, *Beloved* reveals that black men subscribing to the two problematic versions of masculinity, as I have discussed them, "will not use [their] 'gun' where it counts, but only against one who will whimper and drag her hair in the dirt ground before [them]" ("Permanent Obliquity" 144).

Slaughtered Siblings

Infanticide serves as the text's principal horror and one that every character is exposed to. Infanticide is the cause of house 124's haunting, *Beloved*'s return, and Denver's fear of the world outside of 124; it is the reason mothers and fathers fear loving their children too much. Yet, the text suggests, infanticide might be preferable to slavery, as Sethe declares. By portraying the institution's infanticidal tendencies Morrison posits slavery as the actual gothic villain in her text. Each destroyed child represents a lost future, family, and lineage; each traumatized child portends an adult who will be haunted and warped by trauma as a mother or father.

Morrison revises the gothic trope of murder through her use of infanticide. Unlike typical murders in gothic texts in which the crime is always directed at specific victims, every black character, both living and dead, is subjected to infanticidal attacks and records a history of childhood abuse, neglect, and molestation. It is an attack that haunts blacks beyond childhood. Survivors revisit their childhood traumas from slavery on their own children. Sethe recalls her mother having to neglect her, leaving Sethe without any milk of her own and in the care of another child, but revisits this same neglect and starvation upon Denver (*Beloved* 239-40), despite her determination to do otherwise.

Slavery's innate need to prevent slaves from forming kinship systems is also the primary cause of its infanticidal nature. On the one hand, its reduction of black people to "checker pieces" (*Beloved* 23) essentially resigns children to a life without nurturing mothers or protective fathers. The very phrase also registers the literal threats posed to children's bodies, which, as highly expendable pieces in a simplistic game,³⁰ are replaced, moved, and dispensed at leisure. Most importantly, the reduction of people to "checker pieces" is one of the ways slavery actively dissuades parents from carrying out paternal responsibilities. The consequence of the resulting severed ties is that children are abandoned for the sake of saving self. For example, although Sethe's mother chose to save her, she still chooses to run away without her.

The trauma of such abandonment is so great that Sethe cannot come to terms with it as an adult. Contemplating the reason for her mother's lynching, Sethe asks, "I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think" but quickly answers "No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she? Would she, now? Leave her in the yard with a one-armed

woman? Even if she hadn't been able to suckle the daughter for more than a week or two and had to turn her over to another woman's tit that never had enough for all" (203). Yet Sethe's own answer explains why anybody's "ma'am" would leave them. Furthermore, as she speaks, Sethe registers the distance between herself and her mother that allows her mother to flee without her; although the pronoun "she" acts as an adequate reference for Sethe's ma'am, Sethe does not indicate her own position with a similar, relational pronoun. The "she" is not accompanied by "her" daughter; Sethe's choice to use a broad, ideological concept in her phrasing "the daughter" also denies the emotional connection between mothers and daughters and marks daughters as easily abandoned. Sethe's earlier comments to *Beloved* reinforce the severed relationship reflected here; she notes that her ma'am never did her hair nor slept in the cabin with her (60-61). Consequently, Sethe's questions during the above meditation register both denial and horrified recognition. She twice asks whether or not her mother could leave her because she knows that her mother would and did.

One of the most notable, though underemphasized ways slavery attacks the child's body is through sexual violation. Although many critics have signaled rape as an explicit concern of adults in the text, few, if any, have discussed the sexual victimization of children. Children, especially females, are constantly denied their childhood, first through their alienation from their parents, then through being forced to labor in the fields, and finally through being sped into sexual maturity. For instance, Sixo's "Thirty-mile Woman [is] *already fourteen* and scheduled for somebody's arms" (emphasis added *Beloved* 24). Although the passage implies that this "woman" is old, she is, in truth, barely a teenager, hardly a woman, and certainly not mature enough to be a wife and

mother. Sethe is, likewise, only thirteen when she joins Sweet Home and fourteen when she marries Halle, a slave designated, along with the other males, as a man (10).

Furthermore, the “Sweet Home men” recognize Sethe as a girl and not a woman.³¹

Notably Sethe is already “iron-eyed” when she arrives at the plantation (10), suggesting she has already suffered experiences unbefitting her young age.

Slavery systematically orphans children and viciously attacks the child’s body.

Indeed, removing the parents from the child’s life makes it possible for slavery to molest, traumatize, and destroy the child. Spillers, for instance, observes slavery’s psychological impact on children, noting that destroyed mother-child ties are hugely destructive to children because the mother’s eye is the first source that mirrors a child’s humanity (“Mama’s Baby” 272). Denying the child access to the mother results in a fragmented adolescent psyche because the child becomes whole in the mother’s eyes (Grewal 110).

Beloved’s monologue best illustrates the fracturing that results from the severed tie.

Recalling the trauma of the original loss, *Beloved* explains, “her face comes through the water [. . .] her face is mine she is not smiling [. . .] I have to have my face [. . .] my face is coming I have to have it [. . .] I am loving my face so much My dark face is coming to me” (*Beloved* 213). *Beloved* speaks of two faces: hers and her mother’s. The monologue, however, illustrates that *Beloved* cannot fully differentiate between her face and her mother’s; she claims “her [mother’s] face” as her own. Deprived of her mother’s presence at an early age, *Beloved* lacks a unique, distinguishable self. What she sees in her mother’s departures and returns is her own face, and in losing that face, *Beloved* loses her own.

Beloved's eventual wild and monstrous behavior manifests the lost humanity a child suffers when denied the maternal presence. In one of the moments in which Beloved assumes the role of Sethe's slaughtered daughter,³² Beloved betrays a destructive and inhumane violence harmful to herself and those around her. Furthermore, the text describes her wrath as a consequence of maternal absence:

She was wild game, and nobody said, Get on out of her, girl, and come back when you got some sense. Nobody said, You raise your hand to me and I will knock you into the middle of next week. Ax the trunk, the limb will die. Honor they mother and father that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee. I will wrap you round that doorknob, don't nobody work for you and God don't love ugly ways. (*Beloved* 242)

Although the moment seems rooted in a typical, realistic problem, Beloved's awful wildness, the havoc she wreaks, and the threat she visits upon Sethe and Denver mark it as another kind of haunting and monstrosity. Indeed, Sethe begins to fade and resemble the walking dead. Morrison extends the consequence of the severed parent-child relationship to suggest that it is a loss terrible and destructive to both parent and child.

Aside from the deep-rooted psychological fragmentation, the trauma of paternal loss and/ or absence also results in the dangerous loss of communication and knowledge systems. Such loss typically appears as haunting and infanticidal silences throughout the text. For instance, throughout the novel, hunger in Sethe's children is filled literally by food and figuratively by story. Morrison repeatedly refers to Beloved's desire to hear Sethe's stories in terms of hunger and Denver conceptualizes an "original hunger" that she can never hope to fill. Likewise, the lack of communication between mothers poses a threat to their children. Sethe, who has "nobody. To talk to [. . .] who'd know when it was time to chew up a little something and give it to them," does not know what nourishment to provide her young children and when (160). Consequently, the act of

speech becomes directly related to the nourishment and survival of infants. Without this kind of speech, the infant's life is place in immediate peril. Even Sethe's initial childhood hunger can be interpreted both as a desire for food and as a need for story.³³

Physical abuse accompanies the various psychological abuses of slavery. The cycle of mother-daughter loss that characterizes all the relationships in the novel is especially problematic given the violent and traumatic nature of the attacks it leaves the child's body prey to. For instance, for Denver, Beloved's theft of Sethe's attention and sanity leaves Denver prey to starvation. By this point Beloved has come to represent slavery's threats. The theft forces Denver to sacrifice herself and the safety she knows in order to save herself; she must "step off the edge of the world" if she is to survive (*Beloved* 239). Morrison emphasizes the infanticidal nature of Denver's abandonment by juxtaposing it with the literal mark of infanticide. One sentence serves to describe Sethe's discovery and tender caress of Beloved's scar as well as Denver's exclusion from her attention. The next sentence details Denver's exclusion from Sethe's and Beloved's play; most importantly they play games that resemble the daily habits and means of survival and reference motherly nurturing: "the cooking games, the sewing games, the hair and dressing-up games" (239). The psychological traumas of slavery's attack on children and family consequently haunt Sethe's family beyond slavery; indeed, like Beloved, these traumas manifest themselves in new behaviors to threaten Denver years after the original event.

In Beloved's narrative, slavery's theft of her mother leaves Beloved unprotected against rape and bodily destruction imagined as cannibalistic consumption. Amidst images of teeth and chewing, Beloved recalls her rape in which her body becomes

interchangeable with the consumed food she serves her white rapist: “I watch him eat [. . .] I am going to be in pieces he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there I drop the food and break into pieces she took my face away” (*Beloved* 212). Beloved’s fear of being consumed and eaten becomes understandable since her rape occurs as her rapist is eating his meal. Yet her frequent references to being “chewed and swallowed” suggest that what was actually consumed during the rape was Beloved. Beloved concludes this memory of her rape with the sign of maternal absence, again implying that the original threat and violation was the theft of the parent.

Beloved’s entire monologue of loss also explicitly uses gothic terms. She describes the men who rape her as ghosts and horrible, monstrous “men without skin” (*Beloved* 210-12). Beloved’s description of the slave ship echoes descriptions of premature burial and she actually finds herself “interred” with a dead man; she notes about the difficulty of “mak[ing] yourself die forever,” implies recurrent suicide attempts (210). Lastly, throughout her chapter and narrative, Beloved is haunted both by the cannibalistic threat, registered as “chewing and swallowing and laughter” and by the fact that “there is no one to want [her]” (211-13). Beloved specifically connects the issue of paternal loss to cannibalistic assault.

The terrors Beloved recalls are the dangers Sethe hopes to protect her children from by killing them. Sethe’s act modifies Beloved’s implicit gothic description of slavery as a living death and positions slavery as a fate worse than death. In Sethe’s monologue Morrison revises gothic visions of hell and damnation to posit them as earthly realities forced upon slaves and, worst of, upon innocent black children. Consequently, in trying

to make amends to Beloved for killing her and not joining her in death, Sethe explains that it was better

to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through the adored body [. . .] [because] worse than that—far worse—was [. . .] [t]hat anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. (*Beloved* 251).

Sethe represents slavery's horrors as unimaginable, reducing them as simply as possible to the term "dirty" yet designating the horrors hidden behind them as unutterable because they were far worse than death. Morrison also revises the gothic trope of the unspeakable in Sethe's explanation. Indeed, in typical gothic plots, the unspeakable is unspoken because of choice; *Beloved* portrays it as absolutely unfathomable and inhuman not simply because it is unspoken, but because the (nature of the) trauma eludes narration. In the text, the unspeakable is horrible because it can't be spoken, despite all attempts. Sethe's term "dirty" here refers not only to rape, but also to the theft of her milk, Halle's madness, Paul D's "unmanning," Ella's imprisonment, and Baby Suggs's shock at slavery's dehumanization of her children.³⁴ Sethe's monologue explains that such "dirtying" is absolutely horrific and unbearable when it is committed upon the child's body.

Morrison emphasizes the gothic nature of slavery's terrible assault on children and familial connections through Denver's birth and nursing in the woodshed; both moments baptize Denver in bloodshed. Although her brothers flee their mother and the offending baby ghost, Denver chooses to stay, recognizing that her mother does care for her and that the ghost is merely lonely and sad. The reason Denver can sympathize with the baby ghost is because of the cannibalistic moment when she consumes Beloved's

blood along with her mother's milk in the wood shed (*Beloved* 152, 209). Denver's birth similarly prepares her to face the various infanticidal attacks she experiences later in life. When she is born she is stuck "[f]ace up and drowning in [her] mother's blood" (84). The passage repeats other moments in which Sethe figures as assailant; here, as elsewhere, Sethe is both literal threat and powerless victim. Denver's early encounter with infanticide prepares her to accept the conflicting views of her mother as powerful assailant and as assaulted nurturer.

"Good Is Knowing when To stop"

The novel's conclusion suggests that the overall goals for the characters are to redefine gender roles and familial dynamics. If, for instance, both the patriarchal and self-sufficient models of masculinity prove problematic and inaccessible to black men, then they must construct a third alternative model; similarly women must redefine and claim self beyond their maternal roles. Furthermore, *Beloved* posits that blacks must recognize the haunting, their place in it, and their role in perpetuating it in order to exorcise it. This view of haunting differs from haunting in traditional gothic texts first of all because lived experience, rather than suppressed secrets and murdered bodies, is the source of the haunting; consequently, there is no dismantling or destroying the assaulting spirit. Likewise, in traditional gothic texts, hauntings are singular occurrences and the ghosts, once exorcised, do not return. *Beloved* emphasizes the psyche's contribution to the haunting; ghosts return when people suppress the memories of their experiences, and hauntings continue as long as people refuse to recognize how their own action perpetuate the destruction revealed in the haunting.

The text stresses the necessity of constructing models of family that defy traditional ideologies of gendered dominance such as patriarchy or matriarchy. While the novel

repeatedly illustrates how “[the] dominant symbolic order, pledged to maintain the supremacy of race [. . .] forces ‘family’ to modify itself when it does not mean family of the ‘master’ or dominant enclave” (“Mama’s Baby” 271), Morrison represents such modifications as a necessity for the dismantling of oppressive institutions and ideologies. Consequently, the drive to “modify” family is not necessarily a problem in itself; the problem is the racist institutions that impede the black family in the first place. Part of this modification requires that blacks understand and accept slavery’s refusal to recognize gendered dominance among them. Spillers, for instance, notes that part of slavery’s dismantling of black family was a transgendering attack: “‘Sapphire’ enacts her ‘Old Man’ in drag, just as her ‘Old Man’ becomes ‘Sapphire’ in outrageous caricature. In other words, in the historic outline of dominance, the respective subject-positions of ‘female’ and ‘male’ adhere to no symbolic integrity” (“Mama’s Baby” 258). Although the text does not propose blacks accept the “outrageous caricatures” slavery forces them into, it does recommend that they defy the strict subject positions of the patriarchal family.

In order to save Sethe at the end of the text, Paul D first has to reject traditional models of masculinity dependent upon independence, power and ownership of the female body. Indeed, unlike traditional gothic heroes who save through a show of force and domination, Paul D surrenders himself to feminized behaviors. Paul D’s reaction to 124, now deprived of Beloved’s haunting presence, illustrates that he has actually developed a sense of and desire for connection. When he enters 124, he realizes that “[s]omething is missing from 124. Something larger than the people who lived there [. . .] He can’t put his finger on it, but it seems, for a moment, that just beyond his knowing is the glare of an

outside thing that embraces while it accuses" (*Beloved* 270-71). Paul D's meditations only a page before his return to 124 suggests that this embracing and accusing "thing" is familial connection. Meditating upon his journey north from Alfred, Paul D recalls meeting various families, fractured and whole, and individuals looking for their families (268-69). These meditations are significant because of their proximity to his recognition of the loss pervading the house.

The shift in Paul D's memory also signals a shift in his posture towards women. Throughout the majority of the text, Paul D lauds the brotherliness of men and nature, implicitly excluding women as figures capable of communion. His attitude towards Sethe reveals that he has come to understand how his masculinity is contingent upon communion with, not domination over, the female body. For instance, despite all of his previous recollections about Sixo and his Thirty-mile Woman, only at the text's conclusion does Paul D recall Sixo's observation about the impact of the woman on his masculinity. Sixo exclaims, "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather and give them back to me in all the right order" (*Beloved* 272). That Sixo proclaims women's power in constructing and affirming his masculinity is especially important considering Sixo is the one person Paul D can declare a man with certainty. Sixo's awareness consequently becomes a model for Paul D's relationship with Sethe at the end. Only then is he able to recognize how Sethe has also contributed to his manhood through "[h]er tenderness about his neck jewelry—its three wands, like attentive baby rattlers [. . .] How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe left him his manhood like that" (273). In addition to explicitly stating Sethe's contribution, the

passage's references to infancy implicitly express Paul D's recognition of his dependency upon her. The references to "baby rattlers" also connect Paul D's position at this moment to slavery's attack upon motherhood; however, Sethe handles the rattlers in a manner that allows Paul D to survive the moment. Sethe's awareness and nurture of Paul D allow him to be a "man."

Consequently, Paul D no longer attempts to establish the domination he illustrated at the novel's beginning when he beat the ghost out of the house and then laid sexual claim to Sethe's body. The Paul D at the end of the text wants instead to "put his story next to hers" (*Beloved* 273), consequently implying equality, sharing, and communion rather than power and dominance. Paul D manifests and accepts highly feminized roles in his saving of Sethe. The route of his return to the main house best illustrates this: "his coming is the reverse of his going" (270), therefore implying that Paul D revisits all of the feminine spaces *Beloved* previously exiled him to. This time Paul D chooses to visit the spaces, and therefore implies his acceptance of the feminine as part of his self. Finally, Paul D's response to Sethe's uncertainty about his aims reaffirms his role as nurturer. She asks if he has come to count her feet, recalling his response to her story about the woodshed (164, 272). Paul D's previous reaction illustrates not only the superior position he assumes over her, but how such imagined masculine superiority victimizes women. In counting her feet, Paul D revisited slavery's abuse upon Sethe's body by reaffirming its definition of her as a breeder and not a mother. Paul D's concluding determination to rub her feet, and not count them (272), indicates not only his shift from judgmental masculine dominance to nurturing companion but also implies how the shift becomes redemptive for Paul D and Sethe.

Sethe's containment within 124 illustrates women's need to define self beyond a singular identity, such as mother, as well as the dangers and consequences of failing to make such a shift. Sethe, believing that she has lost her "best thing" with Beloved's disappearance, resigns herself to a passive death; she lies in Suggs's bed humming the lullabies she sang to her children.³⁵ The structure of the passage in which Paul D addresses Sethe's resolution reaffirms the connection between death, loss, and self defined only through/ against mothering. Angry at Sethe for resigning herself to die like Suggs, Paul D checks himself by asking "What you planning" (*Beloved* 272). Sethe's response that she has no plans and has lost her own best thing leads Paul D to two conclusions. The first, that they "need some kind of tomorrow" (273), reaffirms the need for a plan; the second, that she is her own best thing (273), explains the necessity of defining and claiming herself outside of her children. The latter also implies that Sethe must learn to value herself beyond slavery's devaluation of her.

The consequence of Sethe's stagnancy is a house that remains Gothic and decaying amidst a city and people that have moved on and now prosper. In typical Gothic texts, decaying and/ or haunted houses merely embody and magnify the decaying world that surrounds them. 124 functions similarly towards the novel's beginning, its haunting accompanying the air of death that pervades Cincinnati. After Beloved's exorcism, however, 124 is isolated in its dilapidation and ornamented by oddly placed

cans jammed with the *rotting* stems of things, the blossoms shriveled like *sores*. *Dead* ivy twines around bean poles and door handles. *Faded* newspaper pictures are nailed to the outhouse and on trees. A rope too short for anything but skip-jumping lies *discarded* near the washtub; and jars and jars of *dead* lightening bugs. Like a child's house; the house of a very tall child. (*Beloved* 270, emphasis added).

The house is pervaded by death, decay, and neglect; the manner of its degeneration echoes the various attacks upon mothers and children. Nature is mutated and twisted,

like slavery's warping of motherly instinct; the children's playthings are abandoned much like the children themselves. The image consequently suggests that Sethe has not recovered from the loss of her children or her own infanticidal childhood. Lastly, Sethe's stagnation poses a threat to Denver as well as herself. Not only must Denver live in a dilapidated house, but Sethe again threatens to abandon her daughter to death. Ability to define self beyond the maternal and to progress beyond the horrors of racist past prove necessary for the survival of both mother and child.

The modifications to masculinity and womanhood inevitably lead to a concept of family that defies traditional patriarchy. The text insinuates that a family should be neither patriarchal nor matriarchal because both constructs denote a division and delineation of power according to gender.³⁶ Furthermore, while the text certainly problematizes patriarchy along lines of contemporary debate and theory, Morrison also exemplifies Spillers's contention that the term matriarchy is a misnomer for black families post-slavery. Spillers explains that

when we speak of the enslaved person, we perceive that the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually misnames the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such naming is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once again, because 'motherhood' is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance. ("Mama's Baby" 277)

Consequently, broad application of the term matriarchy to the black family ignores the history of the culture's struggle and loss; as the text notes, ignoring such history only allows it to perpetually haunt and disturb future generations. Furthermore, to insist that Morrison presents and lauds *Beloved's* families as matriarchal is to also assume that she ignores and dismisses the complexities of the black family under assault from a racist culture and institution.

Morrison repeatedly insinuates that the mythical matriarchy Sethe's domination symbolizes is problematic because it accepts masculine absence and even derides the male body. Consequently, Sethe accepts the notion that Halle has abandoned her and their family, deriding him as "nothing but a man" (22). Furthermore, she implies his presence will only impede her bond with her children when she explains to Beloved that masculine distraction prevented her from recognizing the child immediately (202). The boys don't leave because they are in a house full of women but because that house ceases to welcome male presence; they leave after Suggs's, the welcoming grandmother, dies and the baby ghost, a powerful female, offends them.

Yet even as Morrison represents this mythical matriarchy, only to dismantle it, she likewise illustrates that matriarchy is a misnomer for the black family, particularly as black men and racist discourse use it as an accusation of black women's emasculating tendencies. Both Baby Suggs's last days and Sethe's infanticide and communal exclusion suggest that "black women have no status at all in the black community, particularly since the sixties [. . .] The black woman pays an enormous price to walk the streets of her community. Only after she is over sixty and weighs two hundred pounds is she given any peace. And even then at night she may be beaten up [. . .] It is impossible for her to protect her children" (Wallace 172). The communal surrender of its matriarch and protector to the slave catchers and eventual death mimics the marginalization of women and the shattering of the matriarchal myth that occurs when the woman over sixty is "beaten up."

Sweet Home particularly exemplifies the problem of "family" constructed around patriarchal domination; it literally manifests the kinds of relationships witnessed in

antebellum narratives of family, with the slaves looked upon and treated as children under Garner's patriarchal rule. Furthermore, the Garners have no children of their own (*Beloved* 179), emphasizing Morrison's construction of Sweet Home as a mock family. Yet this "home" is clearly organized around and dependent upon a masculine center. Although Mrs. Garner trusts the "boys" her husband has designated as men to run the plantation, the death of the plantation's patriarch wreaks havoc on the "family" because "without his life each of theirs fell to pieces" (220). Furthermore, the plantation requires a masculine center even though the slaves were competent and trusted to make decisions under Garner's rule. Schoolteacher's arrival and the ensuing horrors illustrate how the sense of family and home become dependent upon the type of patriarchal ruler; he also shatters the illusion of patriarchal despotism as benevolent. Paul D's observation, "now ain't that slavery or what is it" (220), applies both to literal slavery as well as to traditional family organized around masculine domination. The novel consequently emphasizes the necessity of moving away from a vision of patriarchy dependent upon women performing disappearing acts;³⁷ in racist society, women and black men must disappear under dominant white patriarchy.

The shift in Denver's appearance and behavior at the end of the text challenges notions that the matriarchal family is preferable to patriarchy. Denver equally embodies characteristics from both her mother and father once she has succeeded in escaping 124 and developing a life of her own. Having resumed her education with the prospect of going to college and gained friends, Denver is "steady in the eyes, [and] looked more like Halle than ever" (*Beloved* 266); likewise "her smile [. . .] had welcome in it and strong traces of Sethe's mouth" (266).³⁸ Similarly, Stamp Paid's role in reuniting Paul D and

Sethe as well as the lover's relationship at the novel's conclusion evokes an image of black family "embedded in cooperative domestic exchange" (Stack 124). The result of such a construct of family that denies gendered domination is a familial structure that is an "organized, tenacious, active, lifelong network" (124).

Like most traditional gothic texts, future hauntings and attacks remain a possibility for the future generations in *Beloved*. Although the text is hopeful about future happiness for Sethe's reconstructed family, Beloved's fate remains unknown. Morrison implies that Beloved will return should we forget the lessons about gender and family. Indeed, unlike traditional gothic texts in which future hauntings remain a paranoid possibility, Morrison's conclusion promises that Beloved will and must return because the desire to forget slavery's horrors is so great. Morrison portrays future hauntings as an inevitable and necessary though undesirable evil. Most importantly, she suggests these hauntings are horrible not because the return of a deceased ancestor is itself a threat, but because of the memory of the institutionalized violence their return signals.

Slavery consequently becomes the haunting specter of the text; its power as a ghost is derived from blacks' (in)ability to confront its assaults and from their unconscious perpetuation of its oppressive systems and ideals. Family serves as the focus of slavery's haunting principally because the institution depended upon the dismemberment of black family. While slavery appears explicitly gruesome and horrific throughout *Beloved*, Morrison specifically portrays slavery's insidious and lasting attacks on the family to show how slavery haunts beyond its lifespan. Indeed, motherhood becomes monstrous and masculinity is defined in terms of infanticidal abandonment under slavery's and racist society's influence. Recognizing slavery's haunting and our place within it

consequently becomes necessary to successfully confront and dismantle the problematic ideologies about family inherited from dominant racist society.

Notes

¹ Several works address the question of ghosts in the text but focus upon *Beloved* as ancestral ghost, rather than reading the various other Gothic ghosts that appear in the text.

² The Byronic anti-hero is one of three types of anti-hero in the Gothic romance. The other two are the Satanic and the Promethean. In particular, the Byronic anti-hero is like many other patriarchal saviors in romantic texts; he is aristocratic, noble, handsome, and charming and usually in love with the text's heroine, who he must save. However, this hero typically fails and leaves the heroine to save herself, because of his own personal/ psychological hang-ups.

³ Although they all end with depictions of the continued suffering of their brethren and a general cry for the abolition of slavery, each text also portrays the profound improvement in their romantic and familial relationships. For instance, William Craft happily elaborates upon his wife's ability to act as a "real" woman and wife to her husband; Bibb, though apparently bitter about his first wife's "betrayal," explains how freedom has allowed him to love and relate to his new wife in ways he never imagined as a slave; and Hannah Crafts ends her text in an idyllic setting, happily married to a minister.

⁴ Michele Wallace notes that although black men openly despised Moynihan's report, they silently agreed that the black woman had "gotten out of control." Black men excused their desire for white women as a response to and escape from black women's domination. They believed and said she "should be more submissive and, above all, keep her big black mouth shut" (24).

⁵ Wallace contends that ignorance about the sexual politics of their experience in this country, as much as racism, nurses the hatred between black men and black women (27).

⁶ Morrison revises gothic tropes such as rape, infanticide, incest, and cannibalism to emphasize slavery's very real horrors. The text's narrative structure emphasizes the multiple hauntings it uncovers—the literal haunting of the characters, the ex-slaves psychological haunting/ trauma, the inherited trauma/ haunting of their free descendants, and lastly the audiences' haunting by racist ideology and culture. *Beloved* is a non-linear narrative that sometimes circles back, sometimes moves vertically, and sometimes "spirals out of time and down into space" (Moblely 51). The novel's structure literalizes Sethe's haunting "thought memories" that can escape their lived moment to disturb different people at various, sometimes simultaneous, moments. Yet the supernatural events that typically cause terror and disbelief in traditional Gothic texts become commonplace and acceptable in Morrison's novel. Thus no one questions the ghost that haunts 124; the characters treat it as a sad and misunderstood family member.

Morrison also depicts Cincinnati as a traditional gothic setting: the city is built on several Indian mounds; Paul D hears the voices of the restless spirits of the dead Miami on his daily route home; and his walk home takes him through an ancient cemetery (Schmudde 410). Yet when missing slavery's figures of power and torment, the landscape remains docile and unobtrusive. What is really horrific and unbelievable is the reality of slaves' lived experiences. Consequently the Atlantic Ocean becomes a terrible and irreconcilable graveyard that hides a scattered pathway of African bones marking the Middle Passage (Wardi 44). Likewise Sethe warns her daughter, who grew up in a haunted house, about "re-memories" of slavery that could arise without warning to ensnare random victims (*Beloved* 36). Equally notable, the stench of dying roses stifles the air the very day *Beloved*, the embodiment of slavery's buried horrors and sacrificed bodies, appears (47).

⁷ Wallace recounts an exemplary scene of black macho/ heroism in her description of a confrontation between Huey Newton and the police as Newton escorted Betty Shabazz to meet Eldridge Cleaver. A "big, beefy cop" steps up to Newton, who is armed along with the other Black Panthers, and shouts "Don't point that gun at me! Stop pointing that gun at me" (Wallace 110). Newton, ignoring the recommendations of his fellow Panthers, begins to antagonize the cop, exclaiming, "You big fat racist pig, draw you gun [. . .]

I'm waiting" (111). The cop eventually backs down and Newton proceeds with the rest of his comrades to meet Cleaver. Wallace concludes that, although this seemed a brave moment at the time, in reality the Panthers only dared provoke fights they knew they would win. Discoursing upon the issue of bravado and black men from slavery and on, Wallace concludes that such patriarchal/ macho moments were highly controversial because "[t]he black man knew that momentary acts of courage could mean the wholesale slaughter of his people, and nothing was more important to him than their preservation" (115).

⁸ Notably, Sethe's infanticide is not what alienates the community, several of whom also commit infanticide; rather the community is angered by Sethe's unwavering pride (*Beloved* 152).

⁹ There were essentially two "Dicks" in the family—Howard and Bulgar—both of who run away and never return.

¹⁰ Schmulde similarly notes that *Beloved*, as ghost, has features consistent with traditional manifestations of the phantoms in human form—her skin is new, lineless, and smooth; she knows things no other human can know; and she has supernatural strength, shapeshifts, and appears and disappears at will (409).

¹¹ Sethe recalls the "mild brotherly flirtation" (*Beloved* 7) of the Sweet Home slaves only a page after summoning an image of "[b]oys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world" (6). Paul D's memory of the plantation occurs in connection to attacks upon the female body. His image of the plantation is marked by the memory of a "headless bride back behind Sweet Home. [. . . that] [u]sed to roam [the] woods regularly" (13).

¹² In his original definition of the uncanny, Freud describes it as a place that is both home and not home; the uncanny designates an alien space that is unsettling because it is also familiar.

¹³ As Harriet Jacobs laments in her narrative, the moment a woman had sex outside of marriage, regardless of the circumstance, she was deemed corrupted and fallen. For slave women this corruption was typically inevitable and she could at best choose the method and partner. Early American male writers of the gothic were even less forgiving. As Fiedler notes, the marriage bed was also a woman's figurative death bed since she her virtue was tied up in her virginity; thus she was doomed once she became sexually aware.

¹⁴ This is largely because such a claim would mean reconnecting to a constantly sexually consumed body.

¹⁵ Sethe makes this accusation in response to Paul D's suggestion that she ask *Beloved* to leave. Sethe thus accuses Paul D of victimizing *Beloved* because of his willingness to sacrifice her to the dangers outside in addition to the accusation she levels at men in general. Furthermore, Paul D's response to Sethe's statement registers the extent to which he is included amidst the group of "things." He replies "I never mistreated a woman in my life" (*Beloved* 68).

¹⁶ Examples of such heroes abound, from Giovanni in "Rappaccini's Daughter," to Willie in *Linden Hills*, and even Sir Clifford in *The Bondswoman's Narrative*.

¹⁷ According to Spillers, the alternative consequence is a scene of violent, incestuous rape figured in texts like "The Child Who Favored Daughter" and even in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*. To some extent, the Nedeeds literalize this horizontal movement in their attempt to retain power.

¹⁸ "Ligeia" proves an excellent example of this. The haunting, destructive female is both psychologically and spiritually stronger than the male; she often treats him like her student. Consequently, she becomes a monstrous, consuming figure that refuses to die and instead possesses the body of the narrator's passive second, notably blonde, wife.

¹⁹ According to Wallace, the myth of the black man as sexual monster who threatened pure white womanhood began mostly after slavery (41).

²⁰ Leslie Fiedler extensively discusses this as a typical feature in texts of nineteenth century American male writers, such as Twain and Cooper, in general. Consequently, their texts are either completely lacking in female figures or feature women as the "thing" from which their male characters flee. Yet women are literally demonized and made monstrous and destructive in the Gothic, whereas they are merely pervaded by an air of uneasiness and entrapment in the other male texts.

²¹ Denver begins to act as mother by the end of the text.

²² Pamela Barnett discusses Beloved as a succubus at length in her essay "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*," therefore I will not delve into a lengthy discussion of Beloved as succubus in this chapter. However, for the sake of clarity, a succubus is the female form of an incubus; both are genderless demons/ spirits that essentially rape both men and women, assuming particular gender traits according to the gender of their victims in the heterosexual assault. Both attack their prey at night, draining them of "life-force," which is, in typical lore, another name for sexual fluids. Victims are typically awake and helplessly aroused during the attacks. The succubus-witch is a hybrid of Euro-American and African-American cultural traditions.

²³ She also suggests the complexity of heterosexual interaction for blacks in a racist environment, and literalizes the monstrosity inherent in figuring black women as castrating "superbitches" by presenting Beloved as a succubus. Morrison thus reveals modern myths of the "historical," monolithic superwoman who "made [black men's] penises shrivel up into their bellies, who reminded them they had no power to control their own destinies, much less hers, who made them loathe and want to destroy that woman" (Wallace 137) as a misguided reaction to institutionalized racism.

²⁴ Morrison therefore suggests that rape as sexual transgression does not posit, to continue the previously established pairings, homosexual/ heterosexual attacks, as the trope of the unspeakable typically implies. However, her refusal to represent positive sexual relationships between men remains problematic, especially given the substantial emotional and psychological masculine bonds Paul D frequently recalls. Consequently, critics have read homophobia in several of Morrison's text, *Beloved* in particular. Morrison's shyness about sexuality between men does, in fact, illustrate a significant shift away from the reclaiming of the queer body witnessed in Naylor and Kenan. Her neo-slave narrative, perhaps fittingly, implicitly repeats male slave narratives' uses of homosexuality as the factor distinguishing between steadfast masculinity/ humanity and displaced emasculation/ monstrosity

²⁵ The name is the result of and speaks to the union between masculine, Alfred, and feminine, Georgia.

²⁶ The story likewise indicts black males' excuse for abandoning black women based upon the myth of her collusion with white men to castrate black men. Stamp's rage and eventual behavior imply that his actual "gripe is that the black woman, his woman, was not *his* slave, that his right to expect her complete service and devotion was usurped" (Wallace 40).

²⁷ The fact that his master is young, between the ages of seventeen and twenty (*Beloved* 233), only aggravates the problem.

²⁸ Thus he declares his obligations, whatever they were, paid off for life; hence the name Stamp Paid (*Beloved* 185).

²⁹ Aniss Wardi's description of Paul D's near death experience is noteworthy. She explains that "[s]ymbolically entombed in the flooded Southern land, Paul D's bodily condition restructures the ancestral graveyard as both terrestrial and oceanic as the rain 'converts his wooden tomb into a watery grave'" (Wardi 48).

³⁰ Morrison's choice to reference checker pieces proves significant given the typical referential image for similar issues is a pawn in a chess match. To say they are checker pieces thus emphasizes their expendability in a game generally deemed less challenging and noble than chess.

³¹ One might reason that Sweet Home essentially turns the male slaves into pedophiles, would-be rapists (*Beloved* 10), and participants in bestiality.

³² Numerous critics agree the Beloved does not occupy a fixed role in the text; she is Sethe's slaughtered daughter and her mother, the embodiment of slavery's horrors and the re-enactor of them, the ghost of numberless sacrificed and slaughtered ancestors and a strange woman seeking safe haven from racist society. Most simply, she is both victim and tormentor. The question is not who Beloved is at a given moment, but how evolved/ developed she is in her various identities/ positions by that event.

³³ Sethe is twice allowed access to her mother's breasts: the first two weeks of her life, and when her mother takes her behind a smokehouse to show her the identifying mark under her breast (*Beloved* 61). The former is presented as such a brief encounter that it is largely forgettable and thus Sethe is denied access to this life-giving resource. Nourished instead by the plantation's wet nurse after she fed the "whitebabies," Sethe "got what was left. Or none" (200). In the latter instance, the mark becomes the point of communication, a sign of name for that moment when Sethe's mother cannot speak her own name. It becomes a point of speech for the speechless; that this mark is branded beneath the breast and given to the child signals its relationship to the act of nourishing children. Significantly, when that time does come—when Sethe's mother is no longer able to speak her "self"—it is at her lynching, a moment when her vocal chords are, importantly, cut off by the noose. Prohibited access at this point, Sethe begins to stutter, her speech retarded and impaired; the relationship between the two—the forbidden access to the breast and the silenced speech—implies the relationship between speaking, nursing, and infanticide (201). Consequently, Sethe twice witnesses an impending death: once as an infant barely getting enough milk to survive and again as a child, barely finding enough words to speak.

³⁴ Baby Suggs' use of the term "nastiness," similar to Sethe's "dirty," indicates that a significant factor in slavery's ability to dirty people and children, in particular, lies in its dehumanization of slaves. Sethe notes that what Suggs called "the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children" (*Beloved* 23).

³⁵ Furthermore, her placement and song connect her to Suggs, suggesting that the (in)ability to progress beyond a view of self as purely maternal is also the (in)ability to progress beyond and defy slavery's racist assaults.

³⁶ Assuming for a moment that matriarchy, as it has been mythically constructed, can exist, then it must necessarily be as problematic as patriarchy. If a "tenet of patriarchal morality is the conviction that men must rule because they are more often right about what's best for everybody" (Wallace 91), then matriarchy is governed by similarly problematic and misguided tenets.

³⁷ Spillers describes the disappearing act as follows: The "daughter" "bear[s] a name that she carries by courtesy to legal fiction and bound toward one that she must acquire in order 'to have' her own children[. . .] she succeeds in disappearing, in deconstructing into 'wife' and 'mother' of *his* children" ("Permanent Obliquity" 127).

³⁸ Denver thus assumes the beneficial traits of both parents—Sethe's ability to speak her story, against Halle's silent madness, and Halle's ability to recognize the power and limitations of parental claims, against Sethe's iron-eyed blindness.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: THE REVISED GOTHIC AS VEHICLE FOR CULTURAL MEMORY
AND RESISTANCE

The racial, sexual, and patriarchal fears and fantasies of the Early White American gothic writers continue to haunt not just American Gothic fiction but other narrative genres as well. Thus Morrison's comment that "the imaginative and historical terrain upon which early American writers journeyed is in large measure shaped by the presence of the racial other" should not necessarily be relegated solely to analysis of early Gothic, southern American literature (*Playing* 46). Contemporary American literature and film continue to be informed, explicitly and implicitly, by the "Africanist presence . . . in compelling and inescapable ways" (46). Thus the deep-rooted American fear of racial contamination and destruction is not only apparent in works by Gothic authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, but also in movies like *Pitch Black* in which the threat of darkness and its monsters is preceded and augmented by the presence and threat of a vicious and murderous black male. Indeed, popular culture's continued consumption and absorption of these problematic images partly explains why contemporary African-American writers revise the genre to contest and dismantle seemingly antiquated racist concepts.

As my project has shown, African-American revision and critique of the Gothic proves an invaluable project in disrupting the racist, heterosexist, and patriarchal discourses within the genre. I have, furthermore, attempted to assuage fears that reading black literature as Gothic privileges white American forms at the expense of uniquely African-American traditions. Contemporary authors evade creating Eurocentric texts by

refusing to simply follow the Gothic “formula” as it has been constructed and wielded by early (American) white (male) writers. In their manipulation and disruption of the genre’s traditional tropes and values, contemporary black authors engage problematic discourses while restructuring the genre to make it a suitable vehicle for expressing their unique and complex experiences.

Although my project seeks to interrogate the complexities of African-American use of the Gothic, it does not and cannot interrogate the multitude of ways black artists resort to the genre. My selection of Gothic black texts illustrates only some of the ways black authors use the genre to posit racial, sexual, and patriarchal oppression as complexly interconnected. Yet another project could very well consider how re-appropriation of the genre shifts depending upon the medium. We might, for example, consider how movies like *Tales from the Hood* and *Bones* revise the horror movie to represent the current traumas of urban existence;¹ we might furthermore consider how and why many contemporary black horror films, unlike *Beloved*, *Linden Hills*, and *A Visitation of Spirits*, detach contemporary horrors from the terrors of history. Similarly, discussing black re-appropriation of the Gothic inevitably suggests black re-appropriation of other genres, such as Science Fiction and Fantasy, is also a theoretical gesture. Amidst such a discussion we must consider if, how, and why contemporary black authors such as Octavia Butler, disrupt their (re-appropriated) genre’s structure with Gothic tropes.

This last question lends itself to a larger challenge: the reasons and consequences of black use of Gothic tropes within non-Gothic texts. Such a discussion represents an equally invaluable future project in the discussion of black authors re-appropriating the Gothic genre. Black writers frequently resort to the trope of the haunted landscape to

represent the various traumas and struggles of black experience. For instance, neither Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976) nor Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1997) are Gothic novels, yet each text inevitably resorts to the genre's tropes for specific and elongated narrative moments. These two texts deserve some discussion here because they use gothic tropes to represent the terrors of institutionalized racism that haunts and oppress black family and community, as illustrated in Naylor's, Kenan's and Morrison's texts. And like these other authors, Dash and Walker consistently posit reconnection with black cultur(al memory) as a useful tool for surviving these hauntings and resisting oppressive white, patriarchal domination.

Both authors, like many contemporary black authors, recast all of the "Southern land as a burial ground . . . [t]he Southern soil, rich with narratives and bodies . . . the earth become[s] interfused with the history that the earth encarnalizes" (Wardi 41). The whole of Southern geography becomes the haunted graveyard and ancestral ghosts "remain in and of the Southern land" (39). Consequently haunted landscapes prove invaluable arenas for contesting codified forms of voice and story. The landscape likewise serves as the point at which African Americans can reclaim not just their histories, but their place and identities.

In Walker's and Dash's texts, silenced narratives are buried within the landscape and the parts of bound bodies eternally inscribe the (hi)story upon the landscape against codified and officiated (hi)stories. In these two narratives, the grotesque distorted and dismembered bodies serve "as a figure for the horror of whiteness . . . [as] a figure of condensation and displacement in which the fragment represents a whole gamut of actions that . . . define white cruelties" (Yaeger 29). The disturbing fragmented bodies

within these texts bear witness to disturbing histories and offer “a peculiar threshold for reconfiguring the way we think about the South’s racist history” (220). Lastly by inscribing the land with the voices of tormented ancestors, the writers reclaim their (ancestors’) humanity by re-telling the horror that was done to erase and deny that humanity. These writers tear down the Mason Dixon “fences” left intact through Reconstruction.

The story of the Sojourner tree in Alice Walker’s *Meridian* literally marks the Southern earth with the horrific story of a single woman’s silencing. Briefly, the story is that the Sojourner tree marks the place where a slave woman named Louvine buried her tongue after her master tears it out as punishment for telling horror stories to the white plantation children, one of whom dies of fright from her unfinished story. Decades later a Women’s College develops with the tree at the center of its campus (Walker 43-44). The descriptions surrounding the birth of the tree are likewise gothic. Louvine pleads for her severed tongue while “choking on blood” (44). Louvine buries her tongue on an ominous day, “when the sun turned briefly black,” under a sickly magnolia tree (44). Significantly, this tree grows to be the largest tree in the nation even before Louvine is dead. Lastly, other slaves believe the tree is magical (44). In this scenario, the tree is a gigantic gravestone marking ancestral ground, the literal burial of the ancestral tongue and the reverberating silencing of the ancestral voice.

The master’s cruelty is an important act of silencing. Louvine was raised in West Africa in a family of storytellers. Louvine’s “blood-curdling” horror stories were an extension of this familial and cultural tradition. The first stories she told were ones she remembered from Africa; she only “made up new, American stories when the ones she

remembered . . . had begun to bore” (Walker 43). By silencing her, Louvine’s master prevents her from engaging in her cultural heritage. He likewise prevents the further melding of her African heritage with Louvine’s new, binding American culture. Louvine can no longer weave new African-American stories. There will be no more African characters imbedded in Southern influenced landscapes and plots. Most importantly, his punishment also prevents Louvine from creatively engaging in the gothic discourse that typically marks and uses her body as a signifier of monstrosity. As a matter of fact Louvine’s literal body re-affirms her as grotesque Other. She was a “local phenomenon in plantation society because it was believed she *could not* smile” (42).² Her stories serve as a means to prevent her utter marginalization to the realm of bizarre spectacle. The white children value her creativity and consequently recognize her as something other than spectacle and silent slave. Listening to Louvine’s stories, these future slave masters engage with her as an intellectual being, and recognize and value her for the products of her mind. Denied voice, Louvine becomes a mute, grotesque spectacle.³

The attempt to silence Louvine is both significant and a failure, as illustrated by the magnolia tree’s phenomenal growth. By the time of the Meridian’s story, the Sojourner is the largest magnolia tree in the country (Walker 42). The plantation slaves believe the tongue, now attached to the tree instead of Louvine, still works; they say the magnolia tree talks and makes music (44). Furthermore, the tongue that terrorized white children fertilizes a tree that “magically” hides slaves from acts similar to the torturous punishment Louvine suffers (44). Likewise the parchment that would seem to record Louvine’s destruction actually re-enacts her voice’s power to elude destruction. Louvine’s story as recorded on parchment ends with the African villain torturing white

children (44). The parchment with Louvine's unconcluded tale effectively preserves the fictional African as forever unpunished, just as the magnolia tree hides slaves from punishment. Consequently even Louvine's silence proves a useful weapon against the brutalization of black bodies. Importantly, hers is a silence that withholds vital and significant information from an oppressive intellect. Louvine's story never re-affirms the ideology of Blacks as punishable monsters. The lack of an ending essentially allows the African to escape and continue wreaking vengeance upon his would-be white masters.

The tree figuratively allows Louvine and other slaves to reach across the historical gap beyond their silence in textbooks to contemporary generations. As Christine Hall explains, the tree "comes to symbolize many aspects of creativity, self-expression, security and comfort for the students. It offers a tangible link with Black history" (100). This link is particularly important considering the codified links represented by the library books and the fragment of yellow paper kept under glass. The students cannot touch the protected parchment and are prevented from physically engaging with this marker of the past. However, they regularly interact with the tree. The difference in interaction further suggests a degree of difference in the connections achieved through these various forms of recording. Wardi explains the importance of the interrelationship between the ancestors and community (Wardi 37), noting that this relationship is often realized, in both fiction and life, via the ingestion of ancestral ground (41). Consequently ancestral remains and the history linked to them must be physically accessible to establish a fulfilling connection. The Sojourner tree offers such a connection. At the center of campus, the tree also serves as an educational space as "[c]lasses were sometimes held *in it*" (emphasis added Walker 42). Whereas Wardi notes a connection

via the figurative consumption of the ancestors, Walker establishes this connection via a figurative ancestral embrace. The officiated historical record remains untouchable and distant in its original form.

Within the text the tree that grows from the initial act of silencing comes to symbolize other silenced and destroyed heroines. The tree speaks the stories of and for these tormented women. The one story that unites the students in yearly remembrance is as gothic as the tree's origins. In the early 1920s a young woman named Mary committed infanticide and suicide. Mary gave birth in the school tower and then chopped her "infant into bits and fed it into the commode. The bits stuck and Fast Mary was caught At home she was locked in her room and denied the presence of a window. She hanged herself after three months" (Walker 45). Mary becomes both Gothic heroine and villain, the maiden trapped alone in the tower and the monstrous mother. Just as the tree is begun out of a horrific act of silencing, so too is Mary's story marred by silence. Mary has no friends on campus and as a social outcast has no one to speak to. Afraid of the shame and disapproval, Mary hides her pregnancy, seeking solace in the Sojourner tree. She likewise muffles her cries during her child's birth. Lastly, when her parents lock her away from society, they effectively silence her before she forever silences herself. By hanging herself Mary forever marks her body with the silencing she has suffered all along as the rope burns mark the closing off of her vocal chords.⁴ Mary's imposed silence connects her to the tree and the tree serves as her voice, preserving Mary's story alongside its own for the students.

Dash also marks the horror of silenced voices and bodies using Gothic conventions in a small portion of *Daughters of the Dust*. A text of stories within stories, Dash notably

begins her narrative with a description of the landscape in an opening chapter titled “The Land.”⁵ From the very beginning of her text Dash designates the land as an important character. In fact, the land seems alive, a conscious being that arrives in the southern area and still searches for a place in the geography:

They appeared along the southeastern coast, a group of shallow islands Fragile bits of land anchored by tenacious grasses and pebbles, the islands moved constantly with the roil of the tides and the violent storms Over time the islands began to form themselves as the plants and the shrubs took hold. They would continue moving west, changing their shape, always searching for a place of permanence. (Dash 3)

Dash allots agency to the land which she then begins to mimic in the African captives that eventually come to inhabit the area, first as slaves and finally as free people.⁶

Consequently if the land, seemingly claimed by these now free Black people, is still inscribed with the buried bodies of slaves then the descendants of these slaves must suffer a similar haunting and disfiguring mark. Dash ties the brief Gothic event to the land, beginning with the discovery of shackled human bones. The incident ends in a narrative of “de evil dat brought [the slaves] here an live in dis land” (237). However, the “evil” defies typical Gothic supernatural forces. The “evil” in the land is simply but strongly the same evil that first brought the African captives to the area. The first horror is thus the haunting of slavery.

Dash announces the entrance of the Gothic with a scream. Lucy and Amelia are cultivating the land Lucy recently purchased when Lucy runs screaming from her work spot. When asked what is wrong, Lucy is incapable of any utterance besides “[i]t evil! It evil back dere” (Dash 227). Amelia completely unearths what proves to be a horrific and monstrous discovery: “

she brushed the dirt from a pair of rusted shackles, a chain running from them into the ground. Despite her misgiving, she grabbed a jagged-edged stick that lay in the

furrow and began to dig . . . her eyes filled with tears as she recognized a human leg bone . . . [she] walked around to the front of the plow and saw, at last, what had sent Lucy spinning. A piece of skull was impaled on the front blade; a jaw bone with several teeth lay in the scattered earth. (227)

The only ghastly event in the text⁷ notably connects to the (hi)story of the dehumanization and destruction of slaves. Left to rot, forever shackled, in an improper and unmarked grave, the silenced bodies suffer further, accidental brutality at the hands of their own ancestors.

The characters' reactions to the incident further mark it as horrific. When Miz Emma Julia names the horror as the haunting of "de Sorcerer," fear covers the faces of the older people in the crowd and "[o]ne of the older men cried, 'Lord don't let dat evil come back on we'" (232). Julia justifies the horror with which the people respond to the discovery and the name in her telling of the story. The story of the Sorcerer is not at all supernatural even as the tale is marked in terms of horror and disbelief. Rather it is the story of a cruelty and injustice done to black bodies during slavery. This injustice remains forever inscribed upon the earth that the slaves' descendants now occupy. Therefore the horror of the Gothicized land here relates not to some innate evil but to a social injustice and brutality which still threatens the community.

Julia's recount further illustrates the idea that slavery is an institution that innately lends itself to Gothic plots. The story of the Sorcerer, in brief, is that a slave-trading captain named Baxter was making a delivery to the Sea Islands during the period when the Atlantic slave-trade was outlawed. On the verge of being captured and imprisoned for illegally trading slaves, Baxter throws his "cargo" overboard in the hopes of distracting his pursuers. The pursuing captain tries to save the drowning slaves but the chains are too heavy and the majority of the slaves drown. Days later the bodies begin to

wash up on the shore of the plantation to which they were initially to be sold. The master commands his current slaves under threat of beating to bury the bodies but “[d]idnt nobody move to do what de Boss Man say. Everybody go back to dey house, shut de door, an sit in de dark Wasnt nuttin said. No cook de supper. Even de babies no cry as us sit in de dark waitin for de new day come” (Dash 236). Eventually the overseer pays white men from the docks to bury the bodies, and the men hurriedly throw the dead into the ground without ceremony (233-37).

Baxter here serves as a typical gothic villain, with “eyes cold as de winter water” (Dash 234). The ease and inhumanity with which he commits the mass murder—throwing men, women, and “lil children” over without discrimination (235)—further aggravate the terror of his crime. That this murder is not only inhumane but terrifying becomes evident even in the white men’s reactions. Initially they are too scared to touch the bodies (236). The slaves’ reactions further add to the Gothic atmosphere of the event. Life stops for the slaves in that moment and all becomes darkness. The atmosphere rings of a supernatural silence observed even by the babies. This silence mimics the silenced and destroyed slave bodies. Importantly, the slaves that drown never speak in the story but remain mute objects. Their deaths and burial only repeats the silencing they have already suffered. Like Walker’s Sojourner tree, the land becomes inscribed with the history and horror of silence via destroyed and buried bodies.

The storyteller’s introduction to the tale of the bodies implies the reason the land and the new generations of people still suffer from their particular horror. Miz Emma Julia asks one girl what she knows about “de Sorcerer,” to which the girl defiantly replies that she never heard of it. Julia consequently exclaims, “Fools! All yall fools, dont got

no kind of sense of who you is an what all went on on dis land fore you got here” (Dash 233). The problem, then, is more than an issue of proper burials; the problem is an issue of narrative and knowledge. Likewise, after she narrates the tragedy of de Sorcerer Julia concludes that the bodies speak a warning to the new generations: “Us haint been livin right, an de ol ones come back *to tell* weUs got to make de journey of de ancestors” (emphasis added 237). Thus the continuing horror and the reason slavery still haunts the land as a buried evil lie in the sacrificed Africans’ silenced voices and story. In contrast to the evening following the discovery of the bones, the night after Julia’s narrative is a clear one, “after having been overcast all day,” as they prepare for the ancestral burial ceremony (237). The only way to convert their current story from a Gothic narrative is to reclaim ancestral traditions and the memories and voices that accompany these traditions. Only then can the spirits cease being terrifying haunts and become like the ancestral ghosts mentioned in several of the tales.⁸ Like Walker’s Sojourner tree, the people must continue to engage with their history if they are to be free.⁹

Together, Walker’s and Dash’s texts represent the primary aims of this project. They posit slavery as the original trauma and as the specter that haunts and disrupts black social and communal interaction. Likewise, these two writers insist that African-Americans recognize and remember the horrors of slavery and the tormented slave bodies if they are to exorcise the specters that warp their concepts of self. Indeed, suppressing the horrible memory of slavery also erases the memory of rebellion and survival and contributes to oppression perpetuated by blacks among blacks, as writers such as Naylor, Kenan, and Morrison repeatedly illustrate. Walker’s text proves particularly useful because it recognizes black appropriation of the Gothic genre beginning with slavery and

posits black revision of the Gothic as a powerful, insurgent act. Equally important, both writers suggest that racial injustice inevitably contributes to and overlaps with other oppressions, specifically attacks upon women's bodies.¹⁰ Lastly, Walker's and Dash's choice to resort to the Gothic's tropes within non-Gothic novels emphasizes both the necessity of engaging the genre as a historical vehicle of oppression and of re-appropriating it as a capable and significant tool for expressing the complexity of black experience in America.

Notes

¹ The modern horror novel and film are derived from the gothic. Critics traditionally divide the genre into two categories: the literature of terror and the literature of horror. We typically associate the aspects of the former, with its unseen and psychological terrors, with the gothic; the modern horror movie's overabundance of gruesome monsters represents the extreme of the literature of horror.

² When Walker comments that Louvine was "not very pleasant to .look at," Walker makes a gross understatement. Indeed, she describes Louvine's looks as quite peculiar: "She had a chin that stuck out farther than it should and she wore black headrags that made a shelf over her eyebrows . . . throughout her lifetime nothing even resembling a smile came to her poked-out lips" (42).

³ Voice therefore is particularly crucial here as it connects Louvine to intellect and, by extension, the being usually denied slaves, as discussed in chapter one.

⁴ Significantly, Morrison similarly represents severed communication in both *Beloved's* and *Sethe's* mother's body. The scar on *Beloved's* throat runs horizontally across her larynx just as *Sethe's* mother is silenced by hanging and thus similarly marked by a rope burn across the larynx. Both Walker and Morrison consequently equate suppression of voice with lethal attacks upon the (female) body.

⁵ Dash's text focuses on the fundamental position of oral narratives to history and identity. Her text presents what begins as Amelia's narrative. Yet, as a northern anthropology student collecting (hi)stories from her family in the Sea Islands, what begins as the narrative of an individual becomes communal. The stories essentially reconnect and re-establish a vital part of Amelia's previously unknown and unrecognized identity.

⁶ Like the land's first wandering appearance, the Sea Island is not the land of refuge for the captives. Their families broken apart in the slave trade, the captives lead a "severe life, but left to their own means they would survive and thrive, raising their families, praying to their gods, holding sacred the ways of the lands from which they had come" (Dash 4). Thus once their masters, the "violent storms" for the slaves, desert the island in preference for the more favorable mainland, the (ex-)slaves begin to form lives for themselves, illustrating the same agency the deceptively lifeless land demonstrates.

⁷ Furthermore, the text is actually full of (stories of) ancestral ghosts, but none of these stories use gothic effects; they are, rather, much like the tales of ancestral haunting many critics like to read the figure of *Beloved* against.

⁸ One such story occurs early in the text and illustrates the position of spirits within the Sea Island's culture. A young woman dies in labor and her spirit wanders around, comforting her family, joining in their mourning rituals and saying farewell to her friends. She playfully "shak[es] the trees and laugh[s] as the

old ones wave to her an the young ones run in fear” (Dash 92). Most notably, the spirit collects the still-captive voices of tortured and traded slaves, and wreaks havoc upon her masters with them:

Circling the old market, her listened to the sounds of despair that lay in the wall.
Gathering up those cries, her swept in the [master’s] house, overturning chairs, knocking
food from the table, shattering glasses, an slamming doors an windows as he an his
family scurried for safety. Gal, them ol spirits tore that house up! (Dash 92)

⁹ Whether Lucy, the new owner of the land, can achieve this freedom is questionable. Indeed, she refuses to re-engage with the land even though she attends the burial ceremony. According to Wardi’s ideology of figuratively consuming the ancestors by imbibing ancestral soil, Lucy’s refusal to continue cultivating the land for crops even after the ceremony also becomes a refusal to remember and engage with the sacrificed ancestors.

¹⁰ The discovery of the buried slave bones begins as Lucy’s attempt to assert her position as an independent woman to her family.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Maisha Lakaye Wester received her doctoral degree in English, with a specialty in African-American literature and culture, from the University of Florida in December of 2006. Her dissertation project, *Blackness Writes Back: Contemporary African-American Re-Visions of Gothic Racial Ideologies*, interrogates the critique and appropriation of the Gothic genre by black authors in the late twentieth century. Dr. Wester also received her masters in English from the same university in 2001; her masters thesis focused upon narrative silence and infanticide in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Dr. Wester began her appointment as associate faculty in English and American cultural studies at Bowling Green State University in Fall of 2006.