

TRAGIC MERCIES AND OTHER JOURNEYS TO REDEMPTION:
DEFINING THE MORRISONIAN TRAGEDY

by

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ABSTRACT

Tragic Mercies and Other Journeys to Redemption: Defining the Morrisonian Tragedy problematizes current portrayals of tragedy and tragic acts in African American literature. Using Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a foundational text, I argue that Morrison executes a literary aesthetic that disrupts traditional constructs of the tragedy that elevate Eurocentric ideologies at the expense of Black identity and subjectivity. This aesthetic challenges the portrayal of the "tragic figure," positioning it as an inadequate trope that nullifies the complexities associated with the lived reality of Africans/African Americans under repressive systems such as American slavery. Morrison reconfigures tragedy to illuminate a space that she calls the "tragic mode" in which her characters achieve a form of catharsis and revelation. I use Morrison's signification of tragedy to build a theoretical paradigm that I call the Tragic Mercy which interprets tragedy and tragic acts, such as infanticide in her neo-slave narrative *Beloved* (1987), as events that symbolize activism against oppressive systems connected to racist capitalist patriarchal ideologies.

The Tragic Mercy is the lens through which I define the Morrisonian tragedy, and I articulate it as an act that generates a physical and psychological journey that leads to redemption, catharsis, and reclamation. I connect this journey to several tenets of African American culture and history, which resist one-dimensional constructs of African American identity and subjectivity. For instance, I use several constructs associated with Black Feminism to demonstrate how the act/action/activism of the Tragic Mercy equips characters with agency

under oppressive systems that would normally handicap their resolve. I also configure thjourney in ways that parallel other cultural expressions that are ingrained in the African American psyche. For example, I liken certain themes to the reclamation of the vernacular tradition. In each instance, I demonstrate how Morrison's literary aesthetic forces the reader to reassess the signification of tragedy as a means to validate the complexities associated with the African American experience. Further, I use the lens of the Tragic Mercy as a viable construct to interpret other works of African American literature, including Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (1996) and *Fucking A* (2001), and Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* (2006). Using these themes, I position Morrison's literary aesthetic as a narrative strategy that builds on African American literary and cultural traditions while simultaneously subverting detrimental Eurocentric ideologies

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the wonderful people who devoted themselves to helping me through this process and imparting wisdom and knowledge that will carry me to the next phase in my academic career. I want to especially thank my family for fully supporting me in all my academic endeavors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's oeuvre symbolizes a cornerstone in the African American literary canon because it so viscerally captures the essence of Black people in turmoil, in joy, in struggle, and in triumph. In essence, Morrison's work illuminates Black identity and cultural expression in ways that validate the multifaceted complexities of Black people and their sometimes-tragic realities in American society. There is no work that does this more resonantly than Morrison's 1987 neo-slave narrative *Beloved*. Morrison has described *Beloved* as a type of memorial to the lost souls whose tragic voices were silenced by the inhumanities of American slavery. In interviews she has said, "There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presence of, or recollect the absence of slaves...And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to" ("A Bench"). In that interview, Morrison talks of transforming the very landscape of Southern towns such as Charleston or Savannah with a "three-hundred-foot tower" or a "bench by the road" to commemorate the tragedies that Africans/African Americans had to survive to become whole despite the trauma of enslavement. But even as Morrison laments the collective indifference toward the shame of American slavery her seminal work, *Beloved* (1987), transforms and reconfigures the landscape of American and African American literature by forcing her readers to confront the past and acknowledge its interconnectivity to the contemporary realities of Black experience in America. Morrison does this by positioning *Beloved* as a work of narrative revisionist history that challenges the historically Eurocentric confines of the tragic mode in order to reclaim Black identity and subjectivity and garner

redemption and catharsis. I position these maneuvers as fundamental constructs that imbue a literary aesthetic that is rich for interpreting African American works in the canon.

In *Beloved*, Morrison executes a literary aesthetic that is applicable to other works of African American literature that interrogate tragedy as an inevitable consequence of black oppression and disenfranchisement. *Beloved* resonates with the works of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (1996) in which women in repressive societies must gain agency through unique, alternative forms of power. This agency may be gained through their sexuality, through their role as women or mothers, or through the tragic acts that liberate them. Several of Morrison's predecessors and contemporaries also interrogate tragic circumstances in order to reveal the inhumanities that African Americans have overcome to gain their freedom. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) does this by showing the intersections of gender, race, class and ecology, while Suzan-Lori Parks does so by illustrating tragic hope in a dystopian society in *Fucking A* (2001). The bounds of African American literature are still further expanded by Kyle Baker's graphic novel *Nat Turner* (2006), which reimagines the Nat Turner rebellion through visceral images that transcribe the narrative. These works illuminate suffering, mourning, and violence in ways that engender resistance, meaning, resilience, and healing despite prevalent injustices in society.

I position Morrison's neo-slave narrative as a text that has viable theoretical implications that can be used to mine these tragic works to define and reclaim African American identity while creating spaces for redemption and catharsis. In essence, I resist the notion to demarcate fiction from literary criticism; in this dissertation, literary fiction and theory are contextualized as interdependent. This strategy echoes the scholarly pursuits of literary critics such as Arlene

Keizer. Keizer posits, “Rather than viewing contemporary literary works solely as texts to which established theories can be applied, I contend that these literary works themselves theorize about the nature and formation of black subjects, under the slave system and in the present, by utilizing slave characters and the conditions of slavery as a focal point” (1). Using *Beloved* as a “fictionalized theory,” (1) as Keizer terms it in her work, I propose a literary paradigm that explores the manifestations of tragedy and redemption in Jacobs’s *Incidents*, Hurston’s *Their Eyes*, Parks’s *Venus* and *Fucking A*, and Baker’s *Nat Turner*. Using this paradigm, I illustrate how the study of tragedy and tragic acts in African American literature is pertinent to fully understanding the foundations of African American literature and its connection to resistance and activism against various systems of oppression. As Adrian Poole argues, “The recognition that we all share the capacity to suffer, that suffering offers a ‘communality of meaning,’ constitutes the first step in formulating resistance to oppression and forcing political change” (6). To successfully engage in African American literary discourse, this research project employs concepts of tragedy, agency, race, class, and gender in order to illuminate new facets of African American literature. *Beloved* is an ideal work for this type of project because Morrison has included various multifaceted layers throughout the work that reflect nuances of race, class, sexuality, gender, and identity. Morrison also masterfully weaves various constructs of African American and American history, African American and American literature, and other social and cultural constructs. Within this amalgamation of historical and literary insight, I construct a framework that can be used to analyze other African American tragic works in an attempt to expand the breadth and depth of African American literature. I call this framework the Tragic Mercy. This research project conceptualizes Morrisonian Tragedy through the Tragic Mercy

paradigm, which illustrates the transmutation of tragic acts to acts that signify liberation and redemption.

The Tragic Mercy paradigm consists of four major components that illuminate the duality of tragic acts in African American literature. These components include: act/action/activism, reclamation of self, subverting tyrannical systems, and initiating internal transformations. I give a thorough definition and application of the Tragic Mercy framework in each chapter of this work. The primary Tragic Mercy used to build this framework is Morrison's portrayal of Sethe's infanticide in *Beloved*. Morrison's manipulation of the tragic act and its subsequent impact both reify the valuation of the Black aesthetic while resisting detrimental ideologies of traditional American discourse. The framework for this paradigm is founded on Morrison's dramatization of the tragic act in *Beloved*. Morrison's manipulation of the tragic act and its subsequent impact both reify the valuation of the Black aesthetic while resisting detrimental ideologies of traditional American discourse. Instead of serving as a plot device that solely defines the character's flaws in classical tragic texts, Morrison uses the tragic act to reclaim Black identity and subjectivity while denouncing tyrannical systems of enslavement that manifest themselves physically, emotionally, and psychologically on the enslaved subject. It may seem that this aesthetic is a standard manipulation of accepted tropes of tragedy; however, this strategy is rooted more so in the Black tradition of signification or signifyin(g) as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. would term it. Gates argues that African American writers often engage in "tropological revisions" where traditional tropes are repeated with distinctions from preceding texts (xxv). He further argues, "To name our tradition is to rename each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they might seem. To rename is to revise, and to revise is to signify" (xii). Though Morrison uses many maneuvers to distinguish her work from the constrictions of the American literary canon, signifyin(g) on

traditional tropes is one of the prominent strategies that allows her to transcend traditional frameworks of American discourse, especially as it concerns the manifestations of the tragic. This framework builds on Gates's assumption by positioning the Tragic Mercy as a lens that illuminates the "tropological revisions" that Morrison executes in her literary aesthetic in *Beloved*.

In addition to transcending the tragic mode and expanding the Black aesthetic, the Tragic Mercy paradigm also provides a pathway to convert trauma into meaning, catharsis, and healing. Though tragedy and trauma abound in African American literature and African American scholarship, few scholar-critics have attempted to conceptualize a construct that transmutes tragic acts into spaces that foster resistance, reclamation, and healing as a means to process the traumas connected to enslavement and oppression. This is an immense void in the African American literary canon because the traumas of American slavery and the Middle Passage continue to haunt African American culture and African American and American discourse. Sheldon George outlines the effects of this trauma on the African American condition. He asserts, "For African Americans specifically, vulnerability to dominant discourses productive of racial otherness leads also to exposure to a psychic trauma that issues from the racial past and repeats itself in the present through the agency of signifiers. I call this trauma the *trauma of slavery*, and I will define it as a continual assault on African American fantasies of being" (8). The Tragic Mercy paradigm disrupts traumas that perpetuate "continual assault[s]" on African American identities and subjectivities by revealing ways that redemption and healing are possible for tragic African American protagonists. The Tragic Mercy paradigm interrogates the transmutation of trauma even as it traces Morrison's transcendent literary aesthetic.

Morrison's transcendence of traditional literary structures in African American and American literature is not new, as many scholars can attest. *Beloved* represents Morrison's engagement in the tradition of revisionist narrative history as she uses the neo-slave narrative form to resist the appropriated Black voice. In the words of Lovalerie King, "A neo-slave narrative that brings to light information subjugated by the privileging of certain narratives over others, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* exists as a form of alternative discourse and, thus, takes place in a continuing tradition of resistance" (273). Contemporary fictional works that adopt the neo-slave narrative form are often characterized as evolutionary expressions of the traditional slave narrative. Ashraf Rushdy defines neo-slave narratives as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). Slave narratives, though they passionately evoke the trials and struggles of the journey from bondage to freedom, are often noted for silences within the text that are indicative of the pragmatic purposes for which they were written. Many Black writers relegated the traumatic and tragic realities of enslavement to the margins in order to appeal to white audiences that could possibly help liberate the enslaved. Morrison's interpretation of the neo-slave narrative, however, reveals her devotion to illuminating silences by portraying "unspeakable things unspoken" that transpire within oppressive systems. Within these broken silences Morrison interrogates tragedy and humanity while simultaneously identifying the authentic Black voice that hearkens back to West African vernacular tradition. Terry Otten notes that "Morrison's writing echoes Black oral and written traditions, especially that of the slave narrative, and the literary conventions of Western culture, which she subsumes, incorporates, reconstructs, and transfigures in her complex and multilayered texts" (284). What makes Morrison's rendition of the neo-slave narrative key to this analysis, however, is her emphasis on multivocal, multilayered, multifaced Black

identities, which yield to a more defined Black subjectivity in the text. Her complex rendering of Black identity allows for marginalized voices, such as those connected to Black womanhood and Black motherhood, to be acknowledged and validated in the midst of racist patriarchal capitalist ideology. Further, Morrison positions her revisionist text as a tool to dismantle dehumanizing identities about race, class, and gender that are often projected onto people generally and Black women specifically. Morrison fits within Elizabeth Anne Beaulieu's purview of Black women writers who "explore slavery through the lens of gender, both to interrogate the myth that enslaved women, denied the privilege of having gender identity by the institution of slavery, were in fact genderless, and to celebrate the acts of resistance that enabled enslaved women to mother in the fullest sense of the term" (xv). This analysis is specifically concerned with examining the ways that Morrison illuminates the complexities of Black humanity through acts of resistance that can be defined as tragic.

Morrison focuses *Beloved* on the traumatic journey of Sethe Suggs, a woman fragmented both emotionally and physically by the remnants of enslavement. In standard Morrison form, the work begins *in medias res* at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, Ohio. Sethe's home is more of a character in the work than an arbitrary space because the ghost of her dead child haunts 124 and stirs up painful memories that evoke the traumas of her former enslavement. Though the baby ghost is defined as "venomous" and "spiteful," Sethe and her daughter Denver stay and endure its wrath while all others have deserted them, including Sethe's two sons who left in the night and her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, who willed herself to death. Sethe's existence in Ohio is defined by her past. The future to Sethe "was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (*Beloved* 51). However, some semblance of a future begins to materialize when an old friend, Paul D, arrives and arouses memories from their time at Sweet Home Plantation. Sweet Home's identity in their

collective history is as ambiguous as its name—though both of them were enslaved, they had a form of independence and stability that was unfathomable on other plantations. Enslaved men could carry guns; enslaved women could get married; and the slaveholder, Mr. Garner, provided an “idyllic” environment that somewhat blurred the lines between enslavement and freedom. These are things that Paul D and Sethe reminisce about as they purposefully evade the more horrific episodes of their past.

Paul D acts as a catalyst to loosen Sethe’s resolve about the past, but his more definitive action is his exorcism of the baby ghost. As he revels in Sethe’s presence, his contentment is interrupted when he enters the doorway at 124 and walks “straight into a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood” (10). It fills him with a grief so visceral that he wants to cry. Paul D is incredulous that Sethe and Denver have abided the spiteful ghost for this long. And when it quakes, shifts, and trembles in his presence he demands, “God damn it! Hush up!...Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!” (22). Morrison uses this interchange to foreshadow the tumultuous impact that *Beloved* will have on Paul D and the torturous existence that Sethe and Denver have endured for more than eighteen years. She also uses the grief-inducing, spiteful presence of the ghost to reveal the cause of its distress. What Paul D and the audience will later learn is that the rage, the grief, and the volatility of this baby ghost is fueled by vengeance because she has been killed at the hands of the one individual that is supposed to protect and nurture: her mother, Sethe.

In this scene, Morrison introduces the epitome of the tragic act as she unveils the horrific details that engender Sethe’s act of infanticide. Though *Beloved* has been exorcised from 124, she is reincarnated in the bodily form of an infantilized twenty-year-old woman. Paul D acts as a type of spark that reveals some of the joys of Sethe’s past, but *Beloved*’s presence incites the

heinous memories of the realities of enslavement and the “rough choices” that many women and men had to make to survive under the dire conditions to which they were relegated. Morrison makes the scene concise and to the point. Sethe flashes back to her 28-day freedom after escaping from Sweet Home Plantation. She basks in the freedom of her children and her newfound role as mother and protector. However, schoolteacher, the treacherous slaveholder that replaces the amenable Mr. Garner, approaches 124 to claim Sethe and her children as his property under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. In a fury, Sethe runs to the tool shed and executes her infant daughter and unsuccessfully attempts to execute her two young sons. The scene is gory, gruesome, and tragic, but it is also revelatory of the lengths to which enslaved people were forced in order to carve out some semblance of agency and humanity under the tyrannical institution of enslavement. It reflects the options that a mother such as Sethe has when there is no other option for salvation. Is she to choose to relegate her daughter to death through enslavement or death at her own hands—a form of rescue that can only make sense under an oppressive system of human bondage? And it is the moral ambiguity of this tragic act that continues to fascinate and plague literary scholars as they interpret *Beloved*.

Many scholars emphasize this tragic act as a form of resistance to the dehumanizing practices of enslavement, especially as it concerns Sethe’s identity as a mother. Historians and literary scholars alike have attested that the term “mother” was often a misnomer under the American institution of slavery. A more accurate, though despicable, term would be that of a “breeder.” African American women were denied the right to nurture, care for, and claim their offspring as their own. Children of enslaved women were commodified in much the same way as Black women: they could be sold off at any moment as chattel regardless of familial ties.

Hortense Spillers explains that the mother/child kinship under enslavement is a misnaming when she asserts,

[W]hen 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 female regarding the enslaved community. Such naming is false, once again 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 legitimate producer of cultural inheritance. (228)

Further, literary scholars such as Lucille P. Fultz argue that the tragic act directly defies the ideologies of white slaveholders. Fultz posits: “Her [Sethe’s] defiance trumps the master narrative of ownership because she is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice on her own terms: if her children are to be taken from her, she will be the agent of their removal. Such defiance further reveals Sethe’s desire to achieve subjectivity for herself and her children by assuming responsibility for their fate” (68). Kristine Yohe echoes this sentiment when she emphasizes that this phenomenon is distinctive to the gendered status of women under enslavement. Yohe emphasizes that “These women’s responses to abuse have always been gendered: their resistance often had direct connections to their status as women, including their roles as cooks and house servants, as well as their status as mothers and objects of sexual predation” (99). As Fultz and Yohe point out, modes of resistance and defiance are key to parsing Sethe’s identity and motivations in this act. Morrison herself has commented on Sethe’s refusal to adhere to the parameters of enslavement for herself or her children. In interviews she has stated, “It has to do with the imagination of what was slavery really like in her day—that it was so terrible she thought it would be better for her children to die, although she loved her children... Those children were the best part of her—she did not want them sullied, dirtied. Women transfer the best part of themselves into the beloved—the children, the husband... The point is reclamation.

The point is not enough that it is there; the point is to reclaim it” (“A Bench” 30). Morrison’s thoughts on “the point” and the need for reclamation are key components for interrogating tragic acts that lead to resistance, reclamation, and redemption after one executes such a gruesome deed. One of the parameters of this literary aesthetic will focus on resistance as an act, whether tragic or otherwise.

One of the prominent characteristics of Morrison’s literary aesthetic, which is directly gleaned from the fictionalized theory of *Beloved*, is the ability to act from a position of one’s own free will. This aligns with the first major component of act/action/activism of the Tragic Mercy paradigm. These acts are performed in opposition to subjugation in oppressive systems because the reality of being subjugated is defined by the inability to combat a system that is detrimental to an individual’s humanity. In this way, verifiable action is synonymous with activism and resistance to tyrannical systems. In traditional slave narratives, the ability to act often precipitates progression from a position of subjugation to one of empowerment. For instance, in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself* (1845), Douglass does not claim his humanity and his manhood until he executes verifiable action, by way of a fight, with his draconian master Covey. It is only this act/action/activism that provokes Douglass’s most famous line: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (64). Acts such as Douglass’s were also reflected in the enslaved Black population as a whole. Maureen Eke asserts that “various slave rebellions represent the exercise of agency, the will to act on behalf of oneself, to free oneself by those whose humanity, rights and dignity have been trampled” (5).

However, these acts of resistance need not be encompassed by brash violence and hostility. In Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the activism is more nuanced to

her protagonist's gendered reality as an enslaved Black woman. Linda Brent chooses to engage in an illicit sexual relationship in order to free herself from the confines of enslavement and sexual exploitation. From her perspective, being able to choose a lover is "something akin to freedom" (48). Further still, contemporary writer Audre Lorde demonstrates the subtle activism that comes from warring against what she calls "the tyrannies of silence" (41). Lorde frames the raced, gendered voice as a tool of activism when she states, "the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation" (42). Jacobs and Lorde frame activism as an execution of choice and the ability to be an agent in one's own destiny, a theme that is prominent in Morrison's *Beloved* and was instrumental in its creation. In the forward to *Beloved*, Morrison reveals that the narrative was partly inspired by her ruminations on freedom and choice for women at that time. Morrison expounds on the formative thoughts that inspired *Beloved*:

I think now it was the shock of liberation that drew my thoughts to what "free" could possibly mean to women. In the eighties, the debate was still roiling: equal pay, equal treatment, access to professions, schools...and choice without stigma. To marry or not. To have children or not. Inevitably these thoughts led me to the different history of black women in this country—a history in which marriage was discouraged, impossible, or illegal; in which birthing children was required, but 'having' them, being responsible for them—being, in other words, their parent—was as out of the question as freedom. (xvi-xvii)

Morrison underlines her thoughts about choice by alluding to the dehumanizing practices that denied Black women the ability to choose in the antebellum era.

Throughout *Beloved*, especially in terms of the tragic act, Morrison uses characters to resist confines of enslavement and systems of oppression through verifiable acts that disrupt power structures and reclaim humanity. These acts, whether as subtle as reclaiming language and voice or as volatile as executing infanticide, reflect modes of agency that were necessitated by the tyrannical institutions of enslavement. Frantz Fanon argues that American whites had to

“prove [their] hatred through action and the appropriate behavior” which led to lynchings and, later, discrimination (36). Enslaved Blacks, on the other hand, had to prove their humanity against these systems through equally disruptive, though not inherently hate-oriented, actions. In *Beloved*, these tragic acts are profound because Morrison portrays them in ambiguous ways that go beyond singular modes of protest or resistance; in the narrative, the tragic act serves as a meditation on the complex Black experience in the midst of the dire constraints of oppression. These maneuvers testify to Morrison’s pragmatic execution of the tragic act to illuminate the nuances of identity and subjectivity in her characters.

In many ways, constructs of agency and choice directly correlate to expressions of Black subjectivity in Morrison’s literary aesthetic. Many scholars characterize Black subjectivity as the demonstrated agency exhibited by an individual of their own volition. Carol Boyce Davies coins the term “migratory subjectivities” to describe Black female subjectivity that “asserts agency as it crosses the borders, journeys, migrates and so re-claims as it re-asserts” (37). Eke identifies Black subjectivity as acting personhood that negates dominating systems such as slavery. She asserts, “To be enslaved is to not own one’s self, not to claim ownership of anything, to be subject to another’s will, to be an object, disposable” (4). In oppressive systems, marginalized people are often denied subjectivity, which leads to a fragmentation of self; however, Black narratives, such as *Beloved*, position characters to reclaim agency through resistant acts. According to Keizer, neo-slave narratives are distinct because they are “a literary form through which writers of African descent in the Americas are attempting to reclaim ‘a true sense of [the] time and identity’ of the black diasporic subject” (6).

Reclaiming Black female subjectivity has become a prominent theme in many other African American literary genres. For instance, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* traces Celie’s

from a teenager fragmented by patriarchal domination to an empowered, independent woman who regains her subjectivity by reclaiming her voice through writing. Celie rewrites herself as a thinking, acting, speaking subject who resists subjugation through language. Similarly, Morrison portrays Sethe and, notably, Denver as characters who must traverse a path that leads them from a position of fragmentation to one of empowered subjectivity. What is distinct about Morrison's manipulation of subjectivity is that it is closely connected to acts that seem to contradict Black female subjectivity and black female identity constructs. Morrison portrays Sethe as an agent of protest and resistance, but how are we to contextualize her position as an agent of death? Sethe's ambiguous actions problematize customary forms of subjectivity in African American literature and evoke interpretations that engender reconfigured notions of Black subjectivity that account for the intersections of race, class, and gender constructs in America. This study emphasizes the Tragic Mercy paradigm as a construct that disrupts traditional expressions of Black female subjectivity as a means to reconcile Black identities that have been distorted by racist, patriarchal hegemony.

Identity formation and reclamation in African American communities has been pervasively plagued by Eurocentric racist, patriarchal discourse. The major focus of the second component of the Tragic Mercy paradigm is to reclaim identities that have been obscured or perverted by Eurocentric ideologies. European explorers and early American settlers were the first to distort constructions of Black identity through racialized and racist pseudoscience. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall argues, "During an era (1800 and following) of 'scientific' theorizing about hierarchies among human species, differences among the races, and the development of physical anthropology and ethnology, it was necessary for Europeans to 'explain' the nature of Africans, whom they saw as racially inferior and profoundly different from themselves—in skin

color, hair texture, sexual behavior, religious practices, dress, language, and values” (18-19). These early dehumanizing constructs evolved into stereotypical, one-dimensional tropes that simultaneously denigrated Blacks while elevating white supremacy. In the critical text, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison theorizes about the ways that racist constructs of Black identity created during American slavery were used to define whiteness in America. Morrison writes,

Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For 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. . . . What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm and desire that is uniquely American. (38)

In other words, Morrison argues that white Americans manufactured a Black identity dictated by otherness in order to validate the economic exploitation demanded by enslavement and white supremacy. This fabricated Black identity quickly became ingrained in the American psyche as what Patricia Hill Collins calls “controlling images” that distort Black identity, especially as they concern Black women because their gendered and racialized characteristics were often used to differentiate them from characteristics associated with whiteness (Morgan 38). Stereotypical, one-dimensional caricatures like the asexual, buxom mammy figure or the hypersexual jezebel or the superhuman matriarch figure have permeated American culture while simultaneously contributing to the further oppression of Black women. However, African American authors such as Morrison and her contemporary Sherley Anne Williams use their narratives to denounce racist and sexist caricatures that distort Black female identity. In the neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* (1986), Williams rejects the appropriated Black voice and the reification of the mammy figure. The protagonist, Dessa, refuses to acquiesce to the opportunistic endeavors of Nehemiah, who

attempts to appropriate her narrative to elevate his writing career. Dessa further challenges the one-dimensional construct of the mammy figure by dismissing Rufel's conception of the mammy figure as a gleeful, self-sacrificing slave for her white family. Williams denounces images that relegate Black women to stereotypical props for white affirmation when she protests "Mammy ain't nobody name, not they real one" (119).

These demeaning images have further fragmented Black identity because many of them have been accepted and reified within the Black community in order to create other forms of domination. For instance, intraracial sexism is often founded on racist ideologies that have been created by white American society as a means to repress Black women. Black feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks have widely explored the occurrence of sexism and its ramifications for the Black populous as a whole. In particular, bell hooks points to the paradoxical power dynamics in American society that allows Black men, and white women to be victims as well as perpetrators of exploitation. hooks asserts: "White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women" (15). And much like racist capitalist patriarchal ideologies, many of these modes of oppression are founded on Eurocentric stereotypes that devalue Black women. Lorde articulates this in her call to action against sexism or what she calls a "Disease in Blackface." In Lorde's words, "If Black men continue to define 'femininity' instead of their own desires, and to do it in archaic European terms, they restrict our access to each other's energies. Freedom and the future for Blacks does not mean absorbing the dominant white male disease of sexism" (*Sister Outsider* 63). As these feminist scholars demonstrate, Black women are multiply attacked by racist, sexist distortions of

Black female identity which hinder their ability to define themselves and their ability to embody healthy expressions of identity.

Morrison works to illustrate the spectrum of Black female identity in *Beloved* through reclamation. She primarily does so by using literary maneuvers that reject one-dimensional images that constrict Black women to caricatures like that of the Mammy figure. Through her manipulation of resistant acts, she portrays alternative identities to celebrate the complexity of Black womanhood. She validates Sethe as a mother in ways that rival racist constructions of Black motherhood; however, she also validates Sethe as a lover to Paul D in ways that celebrate Black femininity and sexuality. Both constructions are fueled by a necessitated effort to reclaim and redeem Black female identities in American discourse. This aligns with Collins's assumption that "controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance of Black woman to have any positive self images" (95). Black women writers such as Morrison and many others are rejecting monolithic images of Black women in order to reinforce self-defined identities that attest to multiple expressions of Blackness. This study will examine the ways that Morrison and other African American writers capture Black female voice by validating Black identities.

This study also emphasizes how Morrison's literary aesthetic uses tragic acts of resistance to disrupt tyrannical systems of oppression. This aligns with the third component of the Tragic Mercy which aims to dismantle repressive and dehumanizing systems. In *Beloved*, once Sethe commits the act, the visceral reaction is to condemn her on a moral basis. It is unfathomable to think of a mother killing her own children when one considers the bonds that often define the mother/child kinship; however, Morrison uses her narrative strategies to engage the inhumanities of enslavement so effectively that it causes the reader to pause before

completely judging Sethe for the act. Sethe is victimized, exploited, and dehumanized under the system of American slavery because of her race, her gender, and, by default, her class and social status. These social limitations force the reader to analyze and condemn the system, which unveils the discrepancies associated with marginalized individuals in American society. Many scholars such as Trudier Harris discuss how the moral ambiguities of the act should be considered in conjunction with the external circumstances. She argues, “Killing a child is certainly antiethical to the basic roots of our society, but Morrison forces us to ask again and again what we might have done under the circumstances. And she succeeds in making Sethe so simply human and American (the God given right to motherhood, love of one’s children, desire of a better life for them, love of freedom, nonconformity) that we cannot easily condemn her act even if we clearly do not condone it” (171). Within her characterization of the “American Dream,” Harris reveals the disfranchisement that Sethe inevitably suffers because of her social status in antebellum America. She points to not only a moral dilemma, but also a human and civil rights dilemma.

Morrison also argues that her portrayal of Sethe’s tragic act should not be singly relegated to a moral transgression. In one interview she states, “The novel admits that it cannot negotiate the morality of that act, that there’s no one qualified who can, except the dead child. That is why her presence, or the belief in her presence, is so important. She alone can ask that question with any hope of a meaningful answer...I can’t think of anything worse than to kill one’s children. On the other hand, I can’t think of anything worse than to turn them over to a living death” (“A Bench” 46). Morrison’s concept of a “living death” hearkens back to the inhumanities of the system of enslavement and the trauma that African Americans endured within its hold. Morris, Harris, and other scholars resist the notion to make Sethe’s act merely a

moral infringement, which prompts a more scrutinizing look at the cultural, social, and ideological realities that engender such acts. This study critiques the inhumane system of enslavement, but it also critiques various other oppressive systems connected to race, gender, sexuality, and class that parallel conditions of American slavery.

Another significant portion of this study will elucidate Morrison's literary aesthetic that challenges traditional constructions of the tragic mode and reconfigures them to account for Black identity and Black cultural expressions. Though *Beloved* is a multilayered text that can fit in a variety of genres, ultimately, many scholar-critics define it as tragedy. Morrison has admitted her tragic stance prominently: "I write [in] what I suppose could be called the tragic mode in which there is some catharsis and revelation. There's a whole lot of space in between, but my inclination is in the tragic direction" (qtd in Otten 286). The tragic realm is an ideal space to interrogate the traumas associated with African American struggle, and Morrison has exceptionally navigated this space in all of her works, but *Beloved* epitomizes the tragic mode while it also reconfigures it to account for the nuances of African American expression and African American culture. Otten attempts to define Morrison's tragic stance in his work "Transfiguring the Narrative: *Beloved*—from Melodrama to Tragedy" by interpreting her amalgamation of features of the slave narrative and high tragedy. He posits, "It is little wonder then that *Beloved*, while it defies simple generic labels, combines the features of tragedy with the rich tradition of slave literature. While inverting, qualifying, or violating the strict architectonic model of what Aristotle defined as high tragedy, *Beloved* maintains its essential vision and shaping characteristics, while at the same time tapping and modifying the resources of the slave narrative" (286-287). I am intrigued by Otten's arguments about the correlations between slave narratives and high tragedy in Morrison's work, but I believe that there is a far richer analysis

that goes beyond the traditional Eurocentric tropes of high tragedy and the formulaic structure of slave narratives. *Beloved*'s signification as a neo-slave narrative, though closely connected to the genre of the slave narrative, qualifies it as a distinct genre with characteristics that are unique to its overall construction and purpose. Though I agree with Otten's overall qualification of *Beloved* as a tragic text that may use some of the standard tropes of tragedy, I argue that Morrison has transformed the tragedy through her literary maneuvers in ways that simultaneously challenge the standard tragic mode while validating the distinctions of African American literature.

One major discrepancy between Morrison's text and other forms of Eurocentric-focused tragedy is the characterization of the protagonist. In this analysis of the tragic realm in African American literature, I challenge interpretations of the protagonist as flawed because of her performance of the tragic act; instead, I argue that because of her performance of the tragic act, the protagonist experiences an internal transformation that leads to catharsis and healing. This aligns with the fourth component of Tragic Mercy which emphasizes a transformation that redeems the protagonist while critiquing the oppressive system. Scholars such as Otten characterize Sethe as a flawed, divided, and morally ambiguous character. Otten focuses on her weaknesses and perceived lapses in humanity as the culprit for her tragic act. He argues that Morrison "projects in Sethe a classically 'divided' heroine who, confronted with unresolvable opposites within, must choose against her 'self'" (287). Otten continues with a critique of the character in conjunction with their social circumstances as he argues, "In the slave narrative, the 'enemy' is wholly evil and outside the self; in tragedy it is also within the self" (287). Otten finds his argument on the formulaic structure of tragic drama that originated with the ancient Greeks. In ancient Greek theatre, the tragic hero and his motives took precedent over any other plot devices in the play. As Otten argues, the tragic hero is at war with the self in the midst of

the dire constraints of culture and society. David Palmer explains it in these terms: “tragedies depict people being overwhelmed by a set of events in which they are complicit that threaten to destroy their sense of self, against which they rebel, and which leave them in agony” (6). Both scholar-critics point to an ever-present force in high tragedy: “*harmatia*” Coined by Aristotle, *harmatia* translates to a “fatal flaw” or “fatal error” that drives the narrative of the work. This fatal flaw defines the tragic hero throughout the work and confines him or her to a state of moral limbo. Though Otten and many other scholar-critics interpret these characteristics in Sethe’s tragic act, these constructions inaccurately interpret her motivations and dilemmas in the text. I argue that Sethe’s action, though undoubtedly tragic and gruesome, points to a “flawed” system more so than a “flawed” character. Further, I argue that Sethe’s performance of the tragic act provides a gateway to redemption.

In order to properly interpret the tragic act and how it functions in the text, the circumstances that engender the act must be scrutinized. A singular scrutiny of the tragic character does not adequately interrogate the complex relationship that he or she had developed with the culture around him or her nor does it account for the distinct identity constructs of the character. This is in line with Poole’s assumptions that “tragedy stages moments of crisis in a community’s understanding of itself, moments when it risks being torn apart by conflicting beliefs” (36). If the traditional confines of high tragedy fail to adequately critique societal standards and are the only parameters by which we can interpret *Beloved*, then I argue for a reconfiguration of the tragic mode that accounts for the traumatic circumstances of African Americans who are often subjugated by oppressive systems such as slavery. In his scathing review of *Beloved*, Stanley Crouch states, “That Morrison chose to set the Afro-American experience in the framework of collective tragedy is fine, of course. But she lacks a true sense of

the tragic. Such a sense is start, but it is never simpleminded” (67). Though I disagree with Crouch’s assessment of the work, I wonder whether his inability to gauge the tragic in the text stems from his inability to gauge the tragic from a discourse that does not neatly fit into the confines of Western Eurocentric thought. I believe that both Otten and Crouch miss the mark in defining the tragic realm in *Beloved* because they have not accounted for Morrison’s purposeful manipulation of the tragic mode. This study unveils ways that Morrison has used the concepts of marginalization and subjugation, resistance and activism, identity and subjectivity, and tragedy and trauma to create what I call the Morrisonian tragedy.

Throughout this work, I utilize foundational concepts that I believe are promising in my interpretation of the African American tragic text, and I explore these parameters in chapter one of my dissertation. I use the tragic act in *Beloved* as a defining moment in this framework, and my first task is to interpret it in a way that redefines and reconfigures it. My current construction portrays the tragic act as a gateway or portal to redemption as well as a form of activism and resistance against oppression. I develop these notions of resistance around the concept of the Tragic Mercy, which articulates the mental and physical journey that characters such as Sethe must traverse in order to gain redemption and wholeness. A major focus in this initial chapter is to lay the groundwork for the Tragic Mercy as a tragic act that redeems the protagonist. I argue adamantly that condemning Sethe for her tragic act is not in line with the overall purpose of the text, but I show how it is possible for her to move from a position of physical and mental enslavement to a position that is receptive to redemption and catharsis. In keeping with the “gateway” trope, I define parameters that qualify as a tragic mercy. Though the act is often viewed as monstrous and grotesque, I resist these signifiers as I explore characterizations that transform the character. In this section, I conceptualize the four major components of

act/action/activism, identity reclamation, system disruption, and internal transformation in context with Morrison's *Beloved*. I also emphasize ways that the Tragic Mercy paradigm is applicable to other texts.

In chapter two of my dissertation, I explore tragic acts of infanticide in other creative discourses including African American theater and African American graphic novels. The texts that I explore are *Fucking A* from Suzan-Lori Parks's *The Red Letter Plays* and Kyle Baker's graphic novel *Nat Turner*. In *Fucking A* I focus on the effects of the dystopian environment that Hester, the protagonist, endures while trying to free her son from incarceration. She is both a mother and an abortionist, and though these identities seem incongruous, they foster a type of agency that allows her to infiltrate the oppressive systems around her while delivering her son from the perils of unjust bondage. Similar to Morrison's *Beloved*, *Fucking A* portrays filicide as an inevitable tragic act that leads to a type of catharsis and resistance to repressive societies. Baker's *Nat Turner* also portrays infanticide as a form of rebellion in the midst of the Nat Turner rebellion. Using *Nat Turner*, I analyze the visceral images in conjunction with various written narratives to interpret how alternative genres portray the tragic journey that Black Americans endured from enslavement to freedom. For both *Fucking A* and *Nat Turner*, I utilize facets of my Tragic Mercy construct. I also analyze these works in conjunction with the theoretical frameworks associated with their respective genres. In both considered works, protagonists are confined to tyrannical systems that challenge the notion of motherhood. Parks's work especially focuses extensively on how gender, sexuality, and class constructs subjugate and exploit Black women and force them to resist through a tragic form of love.

Chapter three focuses on tragic acts that are often viewed as sexually deviant, but that, ultimately, provide similar forms of agency against oppressive systems. In this chapter I

interrogate Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* and Harriet Jacobs's slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In these texts, protagonists defy racist, sexist, and classist constructs through their own sexual autonomy or their manipulation and transcendence of sexual practices. Parks's *Venus* has been deemed as a reappropriation of the racist European capitalist patriarchy that Sara Baartman, known pejoratively as the Venus Hottentot, endured while on display in various freak shows in France and England. However, I argue that Parks re-imagines agency and humanity through her portrayal of Venus as a sexually autonomous African woman who has the ability to choose how her body is displayed for her economic viability. This most closely resembles Harriet Jacobs's Linda Brent who "plunges into the abyss" of an illicit affair in order to deliver herself and her children from the bondage of enslavement. These portrayals of sexual autonomy directly challenge the respectability politics that continue to plague women in general and Black women specifically, while also providing a form of agency that was not traditionally granted through the patriarchal system in which they resided. These sexual encounters will expand the breadth and depth of the tragic journeys that many Black women had to traverse in order to survive.

Chapter four emphasizes ecological imbalances and how they impact the tragic mode in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I emphasize Janie's performance of Tragic Mercy as a means to challenge ecological imbalances that contribute to hierarchical patriarchal oppression. Hurston explores the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class and nature in order to illuminate the unique burdens that women are forced to carry to survive in a male dominated society. I argue that Janie's performance of the Tragic Mercy on her purported soul mate, Tea Cake, dismantles patriarchal subjugation and allows her to define herself apart

from racist, sexist ideologies. Further, I explore the intersections of sexual autonomy, relational equilibrium, and Black female identity in connection with Morrison's tragic aesthetic.

By using the Tragic Mercy theoretical framework to analyze each of these works, I create an innovative way to read tragedy that provides a space for more analysis in African American literature. African American literature can no longer be defined by the parameters of the traditional tragic mode because the cultural realities of the African American human condition vastly differ from Westernized Eurocentric ideologies. This study reveals the ways that Morrison has transformed and reconfigured the tragic mode in much the same way that she has transformed African American literature as a whole.

2. THE TRAGIC MERCY: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK DEFINED

“Of all creatures that have life and reason we women are the most miserable of specimens! In the first place, at great expense we must buy a husband, taking a master to play tyrant with our bodies” (Euripides 1.230-233). In her remorseful declaration to the Ladies of Corinth in Euripides’s *Medea* (431), Medea exposes the vulnerable status of women in patriarchal, oppressive systems; they endure the tyrannical rule of men who wreak havoc on their bodies without consequence. Like so many other patriarchal systems, marriage is akin to enslavement, and that enslavement is connected to the misery that women endure under bondage and submission. Euripides’s tragic play and its characterization of women in society have often been connected to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). In his unsavory review of *Beloved*, Stanley Crouch¹ calls Sethe Aunt Medea, while Steven Weisenburger² encapsulates Morrison’s portrayal of Sethe within his *Modern Medea*, which traces the origins of Morrison’s tale to the true story of Margaret Garner. Morrison has publicly said that *Beloved* is not a contemporary rendering of *Medea*, stating in an interview, “[t]his is not Medea who kills her children because she’s mad at some dude, and she’s going to get back at him. Here is something that is huge and very intimate” (“Toni Morrison” 51). However, these comparisons are not without warrant. Both Sethe and Medea are, indeed, oppressed in patriarchal societies, though in completely different eras, and

¹ For more information on Stanley Crouch’s passive aggressive stance toward Morrison’s novel, please see his review “Aunt Medea” in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison’s Beloved* edited by Barbara H. Solomon.

² Weisenburger gives a very thorough historical timeline of Margaret Garner’s life and the social impact of her act of infanticide in his *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-Murder from the Old South*.

with completely different manifestations of oppression. Both women are disenfranchised outsiders: Sethe is an enslaved Black woman portrayed in pre- and post-Civil War America, while Medea is an excommunicated non-Greek woman in the Corinthian society of Colchis. But the most striking comparison alludes to the criminal act that defines these women: infanticide. Medea and Sethe execute a choice to kill their offspring in a calculated move that can be defined only as tragic.

However, within this nexus of moral ambiguity and tragic choice, Morrison diverges from Euripides's portrayal of tragedy and infanticide by reconfiguring the act to indict the repressive institution of American slavery and its numerous branches of tyranny. Instead of vilifying the main protagonist, Sethe, Morrison demonizes the system of American slavery. Using the tragic act of infanticide, Morrison ultimately signifies on the expression of tragedy in African American literature. Morrison's manipulation of infanticide offers an exemplary subversion of rigid Eurocentric tropes. Instead of portraying infanticide as a form of vengeance and rage, Morrison treats it as a sacrificial event that transforms the executor. Further, instead of relying on the traditional metonyms that portray fragmented characters who are doomed to execute flawed motives, Morrison subverts these tropes by positioning the characters on a migratory path that leads to redemption. This theoretical framework is founded on the assertion that Morrison's literary aesthetic transfigures and redefines modes of Westernized, Eurocentric tragedy, modes that are exemplified in works such as Euripides's *Medea*. Though *Medea* is not a focal text that I will be analyze, it provides an example of many of the tropes executed in the tragic realm. Some of these tropes include, but are not limited to: the fatal flaw which determines the protagonist's fate; the confines of fate itself, which often limits a protagonist's ability to exert her will; the infallibility of social orders or race, gender, sex, and class systems;

and the one-dimensional identities that inhibit subjectivity and self-definition. By using a theoretical framework that I call the Tragic Mercy I will demonstrate how Morrison subverts tragedy by way of the tragic act in order to challenge the confines of Eurocentric literary discourse and establish African American cultural expressions and the Black aesthetic. In this study, I argue that Morrison undergirds Morrisonian tragedy with the tragic act of infanticide, which is the ultimate expression of the Tragic Mercy. The Tragic Mercy is an act that, when performed, allows characters to reclaim agency and subjectivity, dismantle dehumanizing systems, and gain catharsis and redemption which invokes an internal transformation. I distinguish tragedy and the tragic act in ways similar to those described by Jennifer Wallace who distinguishes tragedy and dramatic tragedy thus:

The common use of the term [tragedy] suggests that it is the event (the death, the loss), which is tragic. But the dramatic sense of the term suggests that it is the attempt to give the event aesthetic form on stage which lies at the heart of tragedy. Moreover, the common use of the term suggests that there are few rules—other than the media’s responsibility to protect public sensibilities from the horrific and shocking—and that a tragic event is simply devastating in its emotional power. The dramatic sense of the term, on the other hand, suggests that there are generic expectations which give a pattern to the representation on stage and make it bearable. (2)

Instead of focusing on dramatic tragedy as Wallace does, this paradigm focuses extensively on the ways Morrison uses the neo-slave narrative genre to establish her tragic aesthetic. Morrison uses the act of infanticide to transform the tragic realm into art that provokes understanding about the Black experience in antebellum and postbellum American history. The Tragic Mercy paradigm gives a construct that clarifies Morrison’s vision to explicate and memorialize the tragedies of women such as Margaret Garner who Morrison’s protagonist Sethe is loosely based on. Morrison gives Garner a voice through *Beloved*’s protagonist, Sethe, and this theoretical construct elucidates that voice through its interpretation of the narrative.

Morrisonian tragedy challenges the assumption that classical tragedy is the only valid rendering of tragic expression. Morrison has repeatedly attested to the fact that she writes in a “tragic mode” that engenders “catharsis and redemption” (qtd in Otten 286) and many scholars assume that she executes an aesthetic that mirrors Greek tragedy. For instance, Terry Otten finds his entire analysis of *Beloved* on the confines of traditional Greek tropes. In his words, “the novel sustains tragic focus in its depiction of conflict within character, in its obsession with the presentness of the past, in its movement—however circuitous—toward reenactment...and its ultimate ambiguity mirroring the ‘victory in defeat, defeat in victory’ that ends high tragedy” (288). Otten and other scholars who automatically position Morrison’s aesthetic within the Eurocentric confines of classical, high tragedy engage in a facile argument that positions Greek tragedy as both universal and superior as a form of literary expression. Kevin Wetmore, Jr. denounces this erroneous position when he posits, “We must remain wary of the idea that Greek tragedy is somehow ‘universal.’ It is the product of culture that itself resulted from many different influences” (3). Wetmore’s assertion is especially pertinent to definitions of Morrisonian tragedy because the theoretical foundation of the Tragic Mercy paradigm emphasizes African/African American cultural influences that Morrison uses to reconfigure traditional tragedy into something that she would define as “irrevocably, indisputably Black” (“Memory” 389). As a later explication of the Tragic Mercy framework will show, Morrison executes several literary maneuvers that authenticate African/African American consciousness in oppressive societies such as America. By illuminating Black cultural expressions such as the vernacular tradition, folklore, the Middle Passage, and African/African American memory, Morrison injects the staid discourse of Westernized tragedy with the rich cultural history of Black people who ingeniously created culture in the traumatizing void of slavery.

This theoretical framework also operates on the assumption that what scholars have traditionally characterized as Greek tragedy is actually an appropriation of an expressive form that evolved from earlier African cultures. It is not surprising that scholars have found numerous connections between African American literature and Greek tragedy. Many historians and literary critics cite several African and Asian cultures as the original arbiters of tragedy.

Wetmore, in his analysis of African American theatre, argues,

Historically and ideologically speaking, Greek tragedy is not necessarily European culture. In recent years the controversy about the Afroasiatic origins of Greek culture has grown...numerous other authors and their works have raised the possibility that Greek culture developed out of Egyptian, and therefore African Culture. Therefore, when a playwright uses Greek material it is not the result of cultural imperialism privileging European classics but a retaking of what was once African. (7)

This is a powerful revelation as it pertains to the construction of Morrisonian tragedy because it points to the reclamation of an expressive form that has been westernized and whitewashed for mass consumption. In essence, Morrison's literary maneuver not only reconfigures the tragic mode to align with the distinctions of African American cultural expression, she also reclaims the form from constructions that have dismissed the contribution of African/African American artists. In *Beloved*, and so many of her other seminal texts, Morrison operates within the tradition of narrative revisionist history that has defined African American literature, criticism, and history and solidified the validation of the Black aesthetic. She aims to isolate and authenticate Blackness in ways that sustain the culture in the midst of societal and artistic disenfranchisement. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, "Insofar as we, critics of the black tradition, master our craft, we serve both to preserve our traditions and to shape their direction" (8). And Morrison has continually guided her literary poetics away from the confines of the Western tradition. When analyzing the trademarks of her work, she has stated, "If my work is to confront a reality unlike

that received of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West—discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some racial value, but because it is information held by discredited people, information dismissed as ‘lore’ or ‘gossip’ or ‘magic’ or ‘sentiment’” (“Memory” 388). Morrison’s writing of an alternative racialized text engenders a distinct reading of that same racialized text.

The scope of literary criticism in African American literature has been greatly hindered because the lens through which critics analyze tragic themes aligns with ideologies that inherently discredit people of African descent. This is especially true when the racialized subject becomes a *gendered* racialized subject. Euripides’s *Medea* offers an apt example demonstrating the complexities associated with race, gender, and tragedy as they concern Black women. Comparing the tragic pathways of Sethe in *Beloved* to Medea is problematic if we interrogate Sethe’s tragic choice according to the Greek tropes associated with Medea’s tragic choice. In Medea’s characterization, Euripides magnifies her *hamartia*, or tragic flaw, throughout the text. Medea is a victim of rage and vengefulness, and her motives in *Medea* are ultimately self-serving and spiteful. She is jilted by her husband Jason and excommunicated by Jason’s father-in-law because he fears that she is a “sorceress” with “dark knowledge” (Euripides 1.285-286). Scorned and humiliated, Medea poisons her ex-lover’s new wife and kills her children to avenge her lover’s betrayal. As is true for many classical tragedies, Medea is limited by her tragic flaw and by fate. The Ladies of Corinth who advise her and the male tutor who pities her both allude to filicide early in the play, and Medea can neither alter her path nor execute another choice that will satisfy her rage and fury. Her victory is pyrrhic, and she endures no consequences at the play’s end. There is no character evolution, no pontifications on the moral ambiguities of Medea’s act, and no blatant manifestations of the psychological and emotional consequences of

such an action. Further, though *Medea* alludes to the repressive patriarchal systems of Corinthian society, Euripides offers no interrogation of these systems in response to Medea's unspeakable actions. The formulaic structure of this Greek tragedy leaves no room to interrogate the complexities of Medea's character, and though Medea is often portrayed as an unsympathetic character, scholars still laud her as the equivalent of a male tragic hero: not silenced, not sacrificed, not rendered powerless.

However, Medea's characterization as a tragic heroine is hardly adequate when assessing the complexities of Sethe's character in *Beloved*. The parameters of classical tragedy should hold no bearing on African American tragedy because the intrinsic structures associated with classical tragedy reaffirm stereotypes that are detrimental to African American identity. For instance, though fatal flaws reveal human weaknesses that define the human condition in traditional tragedy, in African American tragedy fatal flaws may magnify already problematic ideologies used by the dominant culture to undermine African American identity. This is especially true when we consider complex themes such as maternity and infanticide and their connection to character development. In racist, Eurocentric discourse, Black women are often portrayed as objects that are incapable of possessing traits that would distinguish them as nurturers, protectors, and providers for children. In effect, they are portrayed as inadequate mothers; in fact, they are not perceived as mothers at all because of their dehumanized and exploited status in American society. Beverly-Guy Sheftall directly correlates this dehumanization to the portrayal of Black women as racially and physically different from white women, which made their ability to be "ideal" women and mothers incongruous to their identity as chattel under American slavery. In her words, "Slave women were also victims of their reproductive capacity, since they were encouraged to breed like animals. They were also the

South's perpetual wet-nurses, providing from their breasts milk for Black and white babies alike. In other words, it was the exploitation of the Black woman's body—her vagina, her uterus, her breasts, and also her muscles—that set her apart from white women and that was the mark of her vulnerability" (30). Guy-Sheftall points to the tactics that Eurocentric American discourse used to disassociate Black women from motherhood specifically and humanity generally. Women who were forced to "breed like animals" could not possess traits that would allow them to be nurturers and caregivers. These assumptions manifested into detrimental stereotypes that portrayed black women as indifferent mothers at best and uncivilized, bestial "breeders" at the worst.

These one-dimensional tropes are not lost in the typology of classical tragedy, and the Morrisonian tragedy aesthetic works to resist these denigrating constructions. Wetmore points to the problems inherent in automatically aligning classical tragedy structures to the lived experience of enslaved Blacks in his work. In his analysis of Margaret Garner, Morrison's inspirational figure for Sethe, Wetmore argues, "To posit Garner as Medea is to call her a vicious child killer and sorceress, the embodiment of chaos and madness that supports the nineteenth century view of the character of Medea. Such a construction is in perfect argument with white America's beliefs about women of color, thereby allowing stereotypes to continue and to use classical culture to dismiss the larger issues of the Garner case" (4). Weisenburger's assumption points to two detrimental results of conflating African American lived experiences with those dramatized in classical tragedy. First, as with many other examples of racist, Eurocentric discourse, stereotypes used to dehumanize Black Americans are reiterated in classical tragedy. Second, classical tragedy obscures larger issues surrounding complex experiences like those of Garner's. Weisenburger's assumptions provide a prominent foundation for Morrison's literary

aesthetic in *Beloved*. Classical tragedy cannot encompass the nuances apparent in the complex and traumatic narratives that connect to the past experiences of enslaved Blacks. However, Morrison's literary strategies in *Beloved* provide the necessary tools to assess adequately the tragic mode in conjunction with the African American experience. Analyzing tragedy through the lens of Morrison's aesthetic frees African American tragedy from the metaphorical chains that have subsisted from American slavery. Morrison's aesthetic liberates protagonists from flawed origins and evokes interpretations that consider the complexities of their lived reality in oppressive societies. Using Morrisonian tragedy also allows for a more culturally adept reading of African American literature because it will address the nuances of the Black experience in America.

In order to adequately define Morrisonian tragedy, I use the Tragic Mercy paradigm to illustrate how Morrison's aesthetic emancipates the narrative from the confines of western, Eurocentric discourse. As a theoretical framework, the Tragic Mercy encompasses four major components that outline the revision and transcendence of the tragic realm in African American literature. All components are directly or tangentially connected to the tragic act in the text. The first component positions the tragic act stylistically as an act/action/activism. In this formation, the tragic act is defined by the executor's ability to act against the tyrannies of injustice in an oppressive system. Intrinsic to this component is the ability of the executor to disrupt power structures and ideologies associated with African American identity and subjectivity. Another key concept of the act/action/activism of tragic mercy is the capacity for choice in a society that generally denies it. Ultimately, the act/action/activism of the tragic act positions the executor as an acting subject despite opposing forces that would normally thwart her/his agency. The second component emphasizes the tragic act as a gateway or portal to the reclamation of self, identity,

humanity, and familial/ancestral connections. Key proponents of this concept emphasize self-definition and reclamation of the motherline and the black body. Further, it emphasizes resisting one-dimensional constructs of Black subjectivity and identity. The third component emphasizes the subversion and dismantling of detrimental systems associated with race, class, and/or gender. This portion of the framework emphasizes the ways that the tragic act challenges systems designed to oppress marginalized people because of their intersectional status in society. Executing the Tragic Mercy emancipates the executor and the sacrificial vessel from the traumas of repressive systems. The fourth component focuses on the internal transformation of self through shifts in ideologies and connections to the community. This component traces the emotional and psychological migration that happens as a result of the act. This component engenders catharsis and revelation, which leads to redemption in the narrative. In each of the components, this theoretical paradigm emphasizes the duality of the tragic act in Morrisonian tragedy. Morrison does not position the act as one that is void of moral responsibility; however, she does position it as an act that can be mined for its transformative and redemptive qualities.

Tragic Mercy as Act/Action/Activism

In order to decipher the ultimate purpose of the Morrisonian tragedy, infanticide must be contextualized with notions of choice, agency, and fate within the narrative. These constructs become more salient when considering Sethe's performance of the Tragic Mercy as a means to act on behalf of her children and herself. Morrison vividly captures Sethe's Tragic Mercy through two different perspectives that illuminate the unspeakable sacrifice that she makes in order to protect her children from the living death of enslavement. Morrison's omniscient narrator details the gruesome act:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere—in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at—the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of its mother’s swing. (175)

Though Morrison’s portrayal of this scene is visceral and thought-provoking, the Tragic Mercy becomes more resonate through the eyes of Sethe’s daughter Denver as the girl contemplates the ensuing turmoil between her mother and the embodiment of the slain child, Beloved. Beloved is revealed as the resurrected sacrifice that has previously haunted the house on 124 Bluestone Road and unearthed buried memories that Sethe has tried to forget. Though both mother and daughter initially rejoice in their delayed union, their relationship becomes injurious to both as Beloved abuses and denigrates Sethe while Sethe willfully endures. As Denver observes Sethe and Beloved’s toxic behavior, Morrison writes,

Yet she knew Sethe’s greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning—that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant—what it took 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 that adored body, plump and sweet with life—Beloved might leave. (295)

In both scenes, Morrison’s visceral imagery relays a paradoxical act that juxtaposes Sethe’s fierce love with the gruesome act of infanticide. The vulnerable and delicate ways that she describes the baby body against the background of the grisly imagery of an execution style death challenges the reader’s conception of maternal love and motherhood. However, within the confines of the narrative as a whole, it also forces the reader to contextualize Sethe’s act within the confines of the grisly nature of enslavement. One of Morrison’s most poignant purposes for this scene is to prompt the reader to contemplate “what it meant” for Sethe to commit this gruesome act against her own offspring.

Sethe's Tragic Mercy undergirds Morrisonian tragedy because it symbolizes one's ability to act within a system that vehemently forbids action. The act itself represents the individual's capacity to exert her free will through choice despite dominating forces that aim to render her powerless. According to Orlando Patterson, one of the defining characteristics of slavery is its capacity to make a slave powerless in relation to another individual (4). However, once a person exercises her ability to choose, she assumes a position of power and resistance that challenges the oppressive system. Morrison contextualizes the power and impact of choice primarily through Sethe's act of infanticide. In the preface to *Beloved*, Morrison talks at length about the conundrum of choice for American women both in contemporary society and in the antebellum era. Of Sethe's tragic choice she states: "The heroine would represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror, assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom" (xvii). What is intriguing about Morrison's conception of choice and infanticide is its connection to freedom. Though she acknowledges the shame and terror of such an act, she also acknowledges that the act, and the actor's ability to choose it, yields to a form of freedom and, indirectly, a form of reclamation. Both concepts symbolize the character's ability to wrest power and agency from a system that is designed to enslave her. Further, Morrison's statement alludes to the obvious dilemmas that evoke such choices within enslavement. In *Beloved*, Sethe must execute choice and free will on behalf of her children who are powerless and vulnerable against the system of American slavery. Sethe must choose between exposing them to a life of bondage, dehumanization, familial alienation, and physical and emotional abuse or executing a merciful death that symbolizes safety, peace, and rest for the enslaved. Within this dilemma, Morrison indicts the oppressive system of enslavement while validating Sethe's role as a devoted mother to her children because, given the same circumstances, what mother would choose the former

without remorse and regret? The ultimate question that Morrison posits: What choice must a mother make when there is no viable choice that would spare her children from the “death” of enslavement? In effect, Morrison uses the tenets of choice and free will to subvert the Tragic Mercy from an act of terror and shame to one of resistance and empowerment.

Morrison interrogates the incongruities of choice and enslavement through Sethe’s disenfranchised status on Sweet Home plantation. While she is an enslaved tenant on Sweet Home Plantation, Sethe has her agency gravely nullified because of her inability to choose pathways that will liberate her and her family from the ravages of enslavement. This is apparent through Morrison’s portrayal of Sethe’s horrific past under enslavement. *Beloved* is a treatise on the past and its ability to fragment the present and future of characters who refuse to resolve past traumas. As Sethe says, “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (51). While Morrison flits through flashbacks of the ironically named Sweet Home Plantation, she reveals Sethe in states of vulnerability and oppression that are framed by her inability to act and exert her own free will. This is especially true as it pertains to her roles as wife and mother on Sweet Home Plantation. Morrison portrays Sweet Home Plantation uniquely as a space that evokes a form of egalitarianism under the faux liberal sentiments of slaveholders Mr. and Mrs. Garner. The enslaved Blacks on the plantation exist with measured forms of autonomy and agency that veil the true import of their condition. Men such as Paul D, a “Sweet Home Man” and Sethe’s long time friend, can carry guns and leave the plantation to hunt, while Sethe can navigate the domestic space of womanhood and motherhood with some semblance of authority. In effect, these characters trust in their fabricated choices while they sink further into submission and diminished agency. In Sethe’s case, this is apparent in her “choices” to marry Halle Suggs, another “Sweet Home Man,” and birth his children on the plantation. In the deceptive haze of

Sweet Home ideology, it would seem that Sethe has escaped some of the dehumanizing practices of slavery because she has exerted her free will by choosing to marry Halle Suggs instead of being paired with him by a slaveholder and being forced to be “bred” so her offspring can yield to the economic viability of Sweet Home Plantation. However, Morrison reveals Sethe’s lack of agency through her interaction with Mrs. Garner shortly after Halle has proposed to her:

“Halle and me want to be married, Mrs. Garner.”

“So I heard.” She smiled. “He talked to Mr. Garner about it. Are you already expecting?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Well, you will be. You know that, don’t you?”

“But I mean we want to get married.”

“You just said so. And I said all right.”

“Is there a wedding?”

Mrs. Garner put down her cooking spoon. Laughing a little, she touched Sethe on the head, saying, “You are one sweet child.” And then no more. (31)

In this brief interchange Morrison reveals the limitations of Sethe’s ability to exert her own free will on Sweet Home plantation and under the institution of slavery. At first glance, it would seem that Sethe is an acting subject that executes choices that would be improbable on other southern slaveholding plantations. She does, indeed, choose a mate instead of being forced to engage in sexual relations with another enslaved Black man. And she is able to ensure that the man of her choosing will father her children. Both of these choices would have been an anomaly for many enslaved Blacks in the antebellum south.

However, Sethe’s agency is an illusion because it is viable only on Sweet Home Plantation and only under the direction of the Garners. In reality, Sethe is disenfranchised and exploited in her roles as wife and mother on the plantation. This is apparent in Mrs. Garner’s preoccupation with Sethe’s maternity status. After Mrs. Garner inquires about Sethe’s pregnancy status and Sethe reveals that she is not pregnant, Mrs. Garner answers her in a demand: “Well, you will be. You know that don’t you.” Mrs. Garner’s response symbolizes a chasm in the faux

egalitarianism of Sweet Home Plantation. Though it may seem that Sethe has a choice in matters of marital relationships and maternity, Morrison reveals that the Garners are the true arbiters of these decisions. Under the Garner's charge, Sethe does not have the right to choose if and when she will have a child because her enslavement on the plantation is predicated by her role as a "breeder" who will be forced to have children for the economical advancement of the estate. Jewell Parker Rhodes extends Sethe's futile agency to her relationship with Halle. She posits, "Sethe's choice of Halle is, to a degree, no choice...if she had not expressed an interest in sexual relations, her owners could have demanded it of her" (83). Rhodes astutely acknowledges the unspoken parameters of slavery by which Sethe is bound: whether she chooses a romantic partner or not, her reproductive economy under enslavement would have been demanded regardless of her individual desires. Her children could remain on the plantation and be forced into dehumanizing slave labor, or they could be sold to another plantation where they would await an unknown fate. Morrison carefully articulates this reality through her portrayal of Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law. While Sethe is initially spared the tragedy of losing her children to the auction block, Baby Suggs is not so fortunate. Her children have been "moved around like checkers" (28) so disposed and disposable that she eventually denies herself intimacy with them. Baby Suggs's inability to act on behalf of her children eventually leads her to barely glance at them because "it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood" (163). Morrison uses Baby Suggs's and Sethe's maternal limitations to interrogate the diminished capacity for enslaved Black women to exert choice in matters that connect to the basic tenets of humanity. Morrison disrupts these parameters, however, through Sethe's sacrificial act of infanticide.

Once Sethe performs the Tragic Mercy, she subverts the powerlessness and disenfranchisement inherent in slavery by executing a choice that protects her child from the brutality of white slaveholders. Morrison portrays Sethe's infanticide as a merciful act of desperation that reflects the strength of her mother love and her need to protect her child from a life of degradation, trauma, dehumanization, and physical brutality. Initially, Sethe is able to provide her children with a measured form of protection under Mr. Garner's charge; however, once he dies and is replaced by Mrs. Garner's brother-in-law, the brutal schoolteacher, Sethe realizes that she must flee to protect herself and her children. Schoolteacher beats Sethe and the "Sweet Home Men" while dehumanizing and degrading them for his own entertainment and exploitation. Sethe can endure this denigrating abuse, but she refuses to allow it for her children because she understands that the limits of dehumanization under enslavement are endless. She realizes, as Morrison writes, "That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you...she could never let it happen to her own" (296). After Sethe has escaped Sweet Home plantation and settled in Cincinnati, Ohio, at 124 Bluestone Road, schoolteacher, his nephew, and the sheriff arrive unannounced to collect their human "property." Sethe, unwilling to subject herself or her children to the inhumanities of further enslavement, tries to execute all of her children, though she succeeds in only executing one. Once Sethe performs the sacrificial act, she subverts the imbalanced power structures that have divested her from protecting and nurturing her children. In that moment, the act transforms her from a powerless extension of the slaveholder's property to an autonomous individual who is able to exercise free will to deliver her child from enslavement. Sethe proclaims this triumphantly to Paul D: "I stopped him, she said staring at the place where the fence used to be. I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (193). In this instance, Sethe reclaims her

maternal power in the midst of a system that vehemently tries to deny it. As Carol Boyce Davies argues, “Sethe’s violent action becomes an attempt to hold on to the maternal right and function” (139). But Sethe’s act is more than an attempt, however, because she succeeds in redirecting her own and her children’s fate despite the influences of slavery. Further, she succeeds in eliciting true activism through her act, as Stamp Paid notes that her act was a “rough response” to the Fugitive Slave Act that would have made it legal for white slaveholders to capture her children and re-enslave them. In each instance, she challenges the systems of enslavement by challenging fate.

As a Morrisonian tragedy, Morrison’s *Beloved* disrupts the standard tropes of tragedy by repositioning protagonists as subjects who redirect fate in ways that are redemptive and emancipatory. Sethe’s character is not a victim who is doomed to succumb to the wiles of fate because she is incapable of executing choice; instead, Sethe’s character is an acting, speaking subject who executes choices that liberate her from the despotic systems that aim to dehumanize and disenfranchise her. Morrison constructs her characters in direct opposition to the standard character of classical tragedy who, according to Wetmore, is “limited by fate and tragic flaw to a lesser role than he otherwise might have had” (28). Sethe is in no way limited by fate or her propensity to act in *Beloved*. Instead, Sethe’s Tragic Mercy is a calculated action that nullifies the strongholds of slavery and redirects her child’s fate in ways that challenge white supremacy while validating Black mother love. In this way, Sethe’s infanticide has a dual purpose in the text: it resists racist patriarchal systems as it simultaneously empowers the executor of the act and liberates the subject of the act. Morrison portrays the Tragic Mercy as a form of activism that allows Sethe to challenge American slavery while protecting her offspring in the only way that was possible for her at that time. In essence, Morrison reconfigures Sethe’s infanticide from

an act that symbolizes a monstrous, grotesque act of insanity, to one that symbolizes activism and salvation which leads to her and her infant child's redemption from the horrors of enslavement.

Tragic Mercy as a Gateway to the Reclamation of Identity and Subjectivity

In *Beloved*, Morrison is specifically concerned with disrupting detrimental constructs and reclaiming Black subjectivity and identity in ways that validate African American identity and culture. Morrison's primary task is to reclaim Black motherhood, Black womanhood, and the Black family through the performance of the Tragic Mercy. Reclamation is a primary component of Morrison's tragic aesthetic, and it enables Sethe to reclaim and reconfigure identity, culture, and selfhood in ways that denounce racist, patriarchal, one dimensional constructs of Black subjectivity. Morrison portrays the Tragic Mercy as the vehicle that allows Sethe to create alternative identities that challenge racist, sexist ideologies. Historically, there has been an essentialized, defamatory construction of Black identity that has hindered individual Black subjectivity. These one-dimensional constructs of Blackness have primarily persisted through racist, sexist constructs of Blackness in American literature, drama, and media.

According to Trudier Harris, Black artists had to perform in opposition to "the tradition of minstrelsy and buffoonery" ("Introduction" x) in white American spaces. In this way, Morrison uses infanticide to denounce white constructs of motherhood in lieu of Black, self-constructed, self-defined, notions of motherhood. As Davies argues, "Black women defined in opposition to the terms of motherhood accorded to white women, and with a different set of historical realities, developed their own discourse of womanhood" (136). The potency of the Tragic Mercy in this context is its ability to create an ideology that rivals white female spaces of empowerment that were denied to Black women. Morrison uses her tragic aesthetic to create alternative spaces of

subjectivity that elevate Black women and allow them to define their own realities in American society.

In *Beloved*, Morrison problematizes the constructs of Black motherhood under American slavery through her performance of the Tragic Mercy. Under the Garners's regime on Sweet Home Plantation, Seth's ability to mother is greatly hindered by enslavement. The two constructs, motherhood and enslavement, are incongruous because Sethe as an enslaved woman cannot properly fulfill the role of mother in ways that validate American Eurocentric constructs of maternity. Enslaved Black women could not nurture and care for their children in the same ways as white women because Black women were bound to forced labor that prevented them from doing so. J. California Cooper articulates this by portraying the maternal trials of enslaved Black women in his neo-slave narrative *Family*. The protagonist, Clora, mournfully revisits the death of two of her children, one who was burned alive while laying in the sweltering sun and another who was bitten by a scorpion or snake while the child was secured in a tree meant for protection. Both deaths, Clora reveals, are a result of her forced labor in the field. In *Beloved*, Morrison echoes these notions by portraying the maternal traumas of Sethe's own mother, who Sethe barely knew and barely interacted with during her time as an enslaved child. Though Sethe has consistently rebuffed memories of her enslaved mother's absence and inattention, she is confronted with her traumatic familial past through Beloved's obsession with her and her history. "Your woman she never fix up your hair?" (72), Beloved asks as Sethe contemplates what to do with Denver's--her own daughter--hair. With that loaded inquiry, Sethe gives an answer that revisits a past defined by the absence of mother love:

My woman? You mean my mother? If she did, I don't remember. I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By time I woke up in the morning, she was in line. If the moon was bright they worked by its light. Sunday she

slept like a stick. She must of nursed me two or three weeks—that's the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was. So to answer you, no. I reckon not. She never fixed my hair nor nothing. She didn't even sleep in the same cabin most nights I remember. (72)

Sethe's answer to *Beloved* mirrors the realities of motherhood captured in many autobiographical narratives including Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. While Jacobs bitterly remembers the time her grandmother nursed the master's children while her own children went without, Douglass indifferently recalls the death of his mother which he accepted with "much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger" (18). In each narrative, the authors recall with remorse the ways that slavery robbed them of the defining maternal relationship. Morrison, Douglass, and Jacobs point to what Orlando Patterson calls "natal alienation," which he argues prevented the enslaved from having "legally enforceable ties of 'blood' and from any attachment to groups or localities other than those chosen for him by the master" (7). While using these constructs to define relationships on the plantation, white slaveholders also justified their strategies by arguing that Black women were incapable of being nurturers and caregivers to their children and, therefore, the familial bonds that were broken because of enslavement were inconsequential.

Before the Tragic Mercy, Sethe only has one opportunity to claim motherhood without the entanglements of enslavement. Morrison portrays this sacred maternal space as twenty-eight-days of freedom in which Sethe fully asserts her maternal rights apart from the dehumanizing ideologies and practices of enslavement. Morrison portrays this twenty-eight day cycle as a time of healing from the horrors of slavery: "Sethe had had twenty-eight-days—the travel of one whole moon—of unslaved life. From the pure clear stream of spit that the little girl

dribbled into her face to her oily blood was twenty-eight days. Days of healing, ease and real talk” (111). She also uses it to symbolize a space that allows Sethe to claim her maternal rights in the fullest extent of her role as a mother. She explains this realization to Paul D:

It felt good. Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. You know what I mean? (191)

Morrison uses these flashbacks of the twenty-eight day cycle to represent the beginnings of a metamorphosis for Sethe. It is no accident that Morrison directly connects it to the lunar cycle and indirectly connects it to a woman's menstrual cycle. The twenty-eight days symbolize a process of maternal subjectivity that will allow Sethe to define Black motherhood in ways that rival the white patriarchal parameters of enslavement. This process is stopped abruptly, however, once schoolteacher and his clan come to steal her children and further enslave her.

Sethe's Tragic Mercy creates a gateway that allows her to reclaim maternal subjectivities that have been stolen from her. Further, it allows her to disrupt white constructions of motherhood as a means to create a space for self-defined modes of Black motherhood. Under enslavement, the process of maternal subjectivity is gravely stunted, and the threat of this reality re-emerges once schoolteacher arrives at 124. However, once Sethe commits infanticide, she creates a gateway for maternal self-definition that is unencumbered by racist, sexist systems of society. Morrison positions infanticide as an act that redefines Black motherhood for Sethe. Instead of remaining on the margins of true womanhood and true motherhood, as was the reality for enslaved Black mothers, Sethe creates alternative maternal definitions that challenge white ideologies that undermine Black mothers. As Barbara Christian argues, “Morrison challenges our very definition of what it means to be a mother and suggests that motherhood itself is

constructed, affected by specific societal and political constructs” (38). These sentiments hold true for Morrison’s subversion of motherhood through Sethe’s act of infanticide. In the moment that she executes the act, she becomes the mother figure that was denied her at Sweet Home plantation and would have been stolen from her if schoolteacher would have succeeded in his efforts. In Sethe’s new configurations of Black motherhood, infanticide becomes a “perfect death” for her “crawlingalready? baby” (116) because it liberates the child from the maternal alienation, physical brutality, and dehumanization that would inevitably befall her under enslavement. Within this configuration, American slavery is indicted as the grotesque monster, not Sethe. Ironically, Morrison crystallizes Sethe’s reconfiguration of motherhood through Paul D’s contemplations of her actions: “This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw” (193). Paul D accurately conveys the contradictions of Sethe and “any other woman” because her maternal act distinguishes her from traditional roles of motherhood; however, her act is validated because it does, indeed, fall within parameters of the traditional roles of motherhood: protection, love, self-sacrifice. These parameters cannot be verified by Paul D, however, because he aligns with patriarchal white ideologies that measure maternity through the “ideal” roles of white maternity. Sethe’s act, however, symbolizes maternal choices that are impacted by the horrific system of enslavement. In Sethe’s case, performing the Tragic Mercy was the only option available to her considering her dire constraints under enslavement.

Morrison also uses the act of infanticide to validate Sethe’s and her child’s humanity. American slavery was distinct when compared to other forms of slavery in that it was founded upon the precept that Blacks were subhuman. This characterization justified enslavement for

white slaveholders because it allowed whites to situate slavery as a mechanism that “civilized” Blacks. These dehumanizing tactics were especially brutal for Black women because they led to sexual exploitation through rape and through “breeding” with enslaved Black men and white slaveholders. This form of sexual exploitation reified Black women’s dehumanization because as Patricia Hill Collins argues it “objectified them as less than human because only animals can be bred against their will” (167). Morrison interrogates these egregious conditions through her portrayal of schoolteacher. Once schoolteacher arrives on Sweet Home Plantation, his objective is to subjugate the Sweet Home men and Sethe through physical and mental degradation. His tactics aim to keep the enslaved Blacks submissive while he attempts to verify their animalistic nature. Morrison portrays this in a pivotal scene in which Sethe stumbles upon schoolteacher and his pupils on the porch. She immediately pauses upon hearing her name and the import of schoolteacher’s lesson: “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (228).

Schoolteacher’s assertions blatantly represent the racist American discourse that has persistently dehumanized Black people in historical, medical, and academic narratives. The focus on bodily “characteristics” is especially telling because enslaved Blacks, especially female enslaved blacks, were often defined by their physical characteristics above all else. Sethe challenges these racist constructs, however, through the execution of infanticide. Through the Tragic Mercy, Sethe metaphorically reclaims her and her child’s humanity by resisting images of Black women as subhuman breeders who are indifferent to their offspring, and, therefore, indifferent to their treatment at the hands of white slaveholders. Instead, Morrison portrays Sethe as a mother consumed by motherlove that humanizes her in the midst of the system of slavery. In the

moment of Sethe's Tragic Mercy, her expression of love validates her alternative form of motherlove.

Ultimately, the act of infanticide humanizes Sethe because it allows her to love her child freely in a system that has deemed motherlove incompatible with Black women's identity. Sethe reclaims her maternal rights by challenging the notions that Black love is a disability for Black women. As Ralph D. Story argues, "one of the devastating things about the experience of black people in this country was the effort to prevent the full expression of their love for one another. Slaves could not love fully because the object of their love might be sold, brutalized, or murdered tomorrow" (26). Morrison reiterates throughout the text the vulnerability of Black people that exhibit familial love. This is prominently portrayed in the relationship between Paul D and Sethe. Paul D is content with Sethe as a romantic partner until he realizes that she is the Black woman in a newspaper clipping that killed her daughter. What is intriguing is that Paul D does not blame her "rough choice" on insanity, or selfishness, or vengeance; instead, he blames it on her choice to love her children freely. Initially, he acknowledges the freedom inherent in getting "to a place where you could love anything you choose—not to need permission for desire—well now that was freedom" (191). However, his ideas about love are ambiguous, as he also believes "the best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit" (15). Paul D's assumptions also align with those of Ella when Ella says, "If anybody was to ask me, I'd say, Don't love nothing" (100). Morrison points to the fear associated with loving too much because of the ease that familial bonds could be broken under enslavement. Despite this, Sethe demands the right to love her children so fiercely that she would execute the unspeakable act in order to prove her love and her humanity. She unflinchingly tells Paul D as she recalls schoolteacher's lesson, "No notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither" (133). Morrison indicts the repressive

system of slavery by pointing out the tragic choices that women must make in order to reclaim humanity in a system that vehemently denies it. By portraying infanticide as a transformative act that reclaims humanity and maternal rights, Morrison's tragic aesthetic further subverts tropes of traditional tragedy in ways that reclaim Black identity formation.

Analyzing Tragic Mercies, such as infanticide, in African American literature through Morrisonian Tragedy constructs positions characters to reclaim Black identities in ways that resists one-dimensional constructs that confine traditional tragedy. Protagonists who are forced to execute sacrificial acts, such as mercy killings, to save themselves and their offspring from oppression often emerge from the act with the capacity for subjectivity, redemption, and wholeness. For instance, Morrison's aesthetic is easily translatable to Yvette Christanse's novel *Unconfessed* (2006). Christanse's protagonist, Sila, an enslaved South African woman, must sacrifice her nine-year-old son in order to protect him from the degradation of enslavement. Similarly to Morrison, Christanse portrays Sila as a mother who is incapable of fulfilling her maternal responsibilities because of the horrific institution of enslavement. Though Sila is initially disenfranchised and exploited, she gains agency and subjectivity by performing the Tragic Mercy. She is also able to reclaim and reconfigure traditional motherhood tropes in ways that validate her Black African identity. Like Morrison's *Beloved*, *Unconfessed* relies on the premise that in certain cultural and social contexts, infanticide is a transformative act that redeems and liberates the executor and the sacrificed child. This transformative quality is in stark contrast to traditional tropes, which portray tragic acts as destructive events that are executed by destructive and fragmented protagonists who are doomed to a tragic fate. Morrison's distinct aesthetic allows characters to regain voice, choice, and subjectivity through the tragic events that

they endure under oppression. Further, her aesthetic subverts classical tragedy in order to expand and expound upon the Black aesthetic.

Resisting and Disrupting Systems/Dismantling Social “Orders” Through the Tragic Mercy

Morrison counters and dismantles social orders and dehumanizing systems through her dramatization of the Tragic Mercy in *Beloved*. Morrisonian Tragedy disrupts systems of race, class, and gender by dismantling social orders that further enslave marginalized people after emancipation. Sethe’s infanticide represents a tradition of resistance that has been ingrained in African/African American/Afro-Caribbean culture since the Middle Passage. According to J.M. Allain’s research on infanticide in Barbados, Jamaica, and Saint Domingo, “it is extremely likely that mothers who committed infanticide did so with the dual intentions of saving their children from slavery and resisting slaveholding hegemony” (1). Infanticide and other less extreme forms of resistance are well documented in African/African American culture and history as pathways to empowerment. For instance, many modes of resistance are found in African American folklore tales. According to Lawrence Levine, “To improve their lot, to effect a rough sort of justice, and to protect themselves from some of the worst features of the slave system, slaves translated many of the tactics of their animal trickster tales into their own lives” (121). He continues, “tales were the vehicles through which slaves rehearsed their tactics...and taught their young the means they would have to adopt in order to survive” (125). For instance, many enslaved people would routinely frustrate their white slaveholder’s work plans in similar ways as Br’er Rabbit in Uncle Remus’s appropriated folklore tales. This paradigm is not founded on the premise that Morrison characterizes Sethe as a trickster figure; instead, it posits that by contextualizing her tragic aesthetic within the tradition of willfully resisting dehumanizing systems and orders of white supremacy, Morrison transfigures classic tragedy into an aesthetic

that validates African American resilience and survival in white American society. She accomplishes this by positioning infanticide as an act that challenges demeaning and dehumanizing social orders that have disenfranchised Sethe.

When Sethe commits the tragic act, one of the primary systems that she obstructs is that of white paternalism over the enslaved Black body. In *Beloved*, Morrison acknowledges that under enslavement white familial constructs are elevated above Black familial ties, especially as it pertains to white paternalism. In Hortense Spillers's oft-quoted essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers positions the slave master as the inevitable "father" of the enslaved because of his/her orphaned status in captivity. According to Spillers, "In the context of the United States, we could not say that the enslaved offspring was 'orphaned,' but the child does become, under the press of a patronymic, patrifocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal order, the man/woman on the boundary, whose human and familial status, by the very nature of the case, had yet to be defined" (218). In *Beloved*, Spillers's assertions are embodied through the Sweet Home men. Paul D, Paul F, Paul A, Halle, and Sixo are orphaned by American slavery and forced to adhere to Mr. Garner's order of white paternalism. This is even true for Halle Suggs, whose mother, Baby Suggs, remains on the plantation, because legally Baby Suggs cannot claim Halle as her own. Morrison characterizes Garner's paternalism as a system that fragments Black identity and subjectivity because it is veiled as freedom, when, in reality, it is another form of enslavement. Morrison portrays this paternalism through Mr. Garner's interactions with other slaveholders:

Y'all got boys, he told them. Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stroppin boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one.

Beg to differ, Garner. Ain't no nigger men.

Not if you scared, they ain't." Garner's smile was wide. But if you a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men too.

I wouldn't have no nigger men round my wife.

It was the reaction Garner loved and waited for. Neither would I, he said. Neither would I, and there was always a pause before the neighbor, or stranger, or peddler, or brother-in-law or whoever it was got the meaning. (12)

Mr. Garner's contrived response to his fellow slaveholders reveals the emasculating paternalism that buttressed American slavery and fragmented Black identity formations for enslaved Black men like Paul D. Though Mr. Garner acknowledges that his enslaved Black men are indeed men, he qualifies his statement by reminding his listener that they are only men by the white, patriarchal system that he has established. Their masculinity is validated only if his masculinity is valid, revealing an order that is founded on the premise of white male supremacy. In this construction, Black women and Black men are inconsequential in the cultural and social order of society. The Black family is, therefore, nullified because it has been usurped by white hegemonic constructs.

Morrison challenges this patrilineal order, however, by severing the paternal and economic rights to her slain child through the act of infanticide. Sethe uses infanticide to dismantle the patriarchal system by claiming her child in a way that preserve her own subjectivity and self-hood. Morrison primarily disrupts the social order by signifying on the construct of "claiming" in opposition to white, patriarchal concepts of "claiming." However, Morrison subverts traditional notions of claiming because she does not claim Beloved for capitalist, sexual, or ideological gains; instead, Sethe claims Beloved in ways that validate ancestral connections and Black subjectivities that have been fragmented under enslavement. Morrison portrays the nuances of claiming through Sethe's first experience outside of human

bondage. After Sethe has been beaten, objectified, and dehumanized under enslavement, she slowly begins to experience freedom by claiming herself. Morrison writes, “Bit by bit, at 124 and in the clearing, along with the others, she claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (112). Morrison’s text begs the questions: What does the act of claiming look like for the enslaved mothers of enslaved children who have extremely limited choices for freedom? And how does this differ from the oppressor’s mode of claiming? Morrison positions the answer within the intersectional dynamics of claiming as it connects to infanticide and the patriarchy.

Claiming in Morrisonian Tragedy is a form of resistance that defies the patriarchal social order by denouncing the legal rights established by laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which codified enslaved Blacks as property that could be claimed by white owners. Once she performs the Tragic Mercy, Sethe challenges schoolteacher’s rights to claim Beloved, and, consequently, the patriarchal order in which he operates. This is apparent in his response once he enters the shack at 124: “Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing to claim. The three (now four because she’d had the one coming when she cut) pickaninies that they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not” (176). Schoolteacher cannot claim Beloved because Sethe’s act is done in opposition to the current social order and has dismantled the system that has allowed it. Morrison’s tragic aesthetic distinguishes Sethe’s act from the patriarchal order by characterizing it as an act that redeems mother and daughter instead of exploiting them. Sethe’s form of claiming is vastly different from white, patriarchal forms of possession because it symbolizes the maternal right. Under the patriarchal order, claiming is directly connected to maintaining exploitative power over another,

which is often symbolic of pervasive gender constructs in American society regardless of race. For instance, in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent relays an incident in which her brother is caught between doing an errand for his mistress and doing an errand for his father and he is unsure of which command to follow. After considering the matter, he decides to follow the command of his mistress to his father's chagrin. His father responds indignantly: "You are *my* child...and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water" (11). After recalling the event, Linda empathetically says, "Poor Willie! He was now to learn his first lesson of obedience to a master" (11). It is telling that Linda does not specify who the master is in this case. And one can conclude that her use of the masculine "master" excludes the mistress and instead alludes to her father. Jacobs seems to use this scene to relay the ways in which paternal relations often mirror master/slave dynamics of power. The father's claiming Linda's brother as "*my* child" (emphasis added by Jacobs) alludes to a form of possession that infringes upon the subjectivity of Linda's brother. Morrison, however, uses the act of infanticide to subvert patriarchal hegemony that relies on claiming for possession. Instead, Sethe's infanticide represents claiming that validates the maternal subjectivities that lead to freedom and redemption.

Morrison uses her tragic aesthetic to challenge the systems and orders of society in much the same way as classical tragedy. As Jennifer Wallace argues, "Tragedians have traditionally used the pattern and order of aesthetic form in order to test whether such order exists in the world they represent or whether surplus, inexplicable suffering somehow eludes them (1). Morrison uses the act of infanticide to inform her aesthetic and dismantle and disrupt these orders so that her protagonists can create subversive and progressive orders that allow sustainability and

survival in hostile systems such as slavery. In this way, Morrison amplifies the Black aesthetic while creating new modes of subjectivity and agency for Black characters.

Transformation of Self/Internal Transformation Through Tragic Mercy

Morrison portrays the Tragic Mercy in *Beloved* as an act that initiates a transformation in Sethe and the Black free community in Ohio. Morrison does not portray infanticide as a plot device; instead, she portrays it as an event that invokes understanding and knowledge through the individual and communal suffering of all those impacted by the act. As Jennifer Wallace argues, “The recognition that we all share the capacity to suffer, that suffering offers a community of meaning, constitutes the first step in formulating resistance to oppression and forming political change” (6). This process of redemption and catharsis is directly connected to the emotional, psychological, and ideological shifts that happen once Sethe engages in the act of infanticide. Morrison uses Sethe’s Tragic Mercy to interrogate her characters more deeply than would be possible through scrutinizing their individual motives, desires, and shortcomings in the text. Of course, Sethe’s transformation is more profound, more impactful, and more complex because she is the executor of the act, and she is committing an act that, by traditional standards, would contradict the role of mother and caregiver. However, Morrison also situates infanticide as a reverberating act that will inevitably evoke transformation in all those connected to Sethe and the act. As a tragedian, Morrison uses infanticide to pierce the exterior of the human experience and unveil the deepest motivations of the human experience. With this understanding comes resilience and healing that allows Morrison’s characters to move on. Sethe’s transformation is, by far, one of the most complex and dynamic in the text, and Morrison characterizes it as an ironic pathway to liberation and catharsis.

Though Morrison portrays Sethe's act as empowering and redemptive, she also portrays it as a portal that allows Sethe to reconcile the vulnerabilities that arise from the consequences of the act. Though Sethe's act was committed in love, there is a societal cost that she must endure in order to move forward. Early in the narrative, she tells Paul D, "I took one journey and paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much" (18). The cost is Sethe's fugitive status within the free Black community of Ohio as well as the internal sufferings that she must endure because of the act. Initially, Sethe's neighbors cannot understand nor forgive her for the act of killing her child. Stamp Paid, Sethe's oldest friend and the man who helped her escape northward over the Ohio river, refuses to set foot in 124 after Sethe's act. Further, once he realizes that Paul D and Sethe have begun a romantic relationship, he feels obligated to tell him about Sethe's past. Though Paul D is at first infatuated and then fiercely devoted to Sethe, he recoils when he finds out about Sethe's tragic mercy. "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (194), he says, dehumanizing her in ways similar to white slaveholders. Paul D's sentiments are echoed by the townspeople who resent Sethe for her resilience and perceived blamelessness. According to the narrative voice, as she is escorted into the sheriff's wagon, they wonder, "Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight?" (179). They are unnerved and disgusted by what they perceive as pride after the fall.

However, Sethe is not daunted nor rebuffed by these accusations because the impact of the Tragic Mercy, the trauma that she endures, and the suffering that she must navigate reveal the true import of her actions. In the moment of the act, Sethe experiences the fullness of the terror, the shame, and the trauma of having to kill a child that she loves dearly. When Morrison writes that Sethe fears that Beloved will not understand what it meant to, "...drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin," Morrison is alluding to the transformative self-sacrifice Sethe makes in

order to ensure her child's fate (295). The act goes against everything that a mother, under ordinary circumstances, would want for her child. However, Sethe feels that she must perform it because, as she argues, "if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (236). Her act is the epitome of mother love simply because she is willing to accept the shame, the terror, and the trauma of the act without complaint. In her tumultuous relationship with the resurrected Beloved, Morrison notes, "Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused" (297). Morrison reveals that Sethe is willing to pay the cost for her act because she is aware of her culpability, but she is still justified in her resolve because she did not feel there was any other way to express her love for Beloved. This act transforms Sethe because through it, she is able to understand maternal love from a position that is inaccessible to anyone who has not endured the act. When Paul D says that her "love is too thick" (194), she counters: "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all" (193). The Tragic Mercy transforms Sethe into a true mother figure who is more conscious of the sacrificial nature of maternity because she chooses the life of suffering and trauma in order to deliver her child from the same fate. In this way, Sethe's infanticide converts her suffering into a form of catharsis because it validates her claim to maternity and humanity.

The extent of Sethe's self sacrifice is also evident in the bodily transformation that occurs during the act. Morrison vividly portrays the transmutation of Sethe and Beloved from two separate bodies to one body linked in anguish. Morrison writes that Sethe desperately wants Beloved to understand "what it meant" for her "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 that adored body, plump and sweet with life" (295). In this passage, Morrison portrays the integration of two bodies through suffering and trauma. Sethe "feel[s]"

the baby blood pump as if it were her own; she also “squeeze[s] so she could absorb” the jolts of life that escape from Beloved. These visceral images point to a literal absorption of Beloved’s body into Sethe’s, and with that absorption comes self-sacrifice. In essence, by sacrificing Beloved’s body, Sethe sacrifices her own in what can be interpreted as suicide. Maternal infanticide has often been portrayed as suicide in various literary portrayals. According to Sarah N. Roth, antislavery writers dramatized infanticide as suicide because suicide was “the one type of violence women in other antebellum fiction could engage in without reproach” (176). However, Morrison’s portrayal of infanticide as suicide is not simply a rhetorical device used to sway readers emotionally; instead, it is a metaphorical portrayal of the extent of Sethe’s sacrifice for her child Beloved. As Sethe commits the Tragic Mercy, her body and the child Beloved’s body become one and the sacrifice symbolically points back to their original connections nurtured in Sethe’s womb.

Though Sethe’s infanticide is transformative and redemptive, it is by no means translatable to every expression of infanticide. For instance, Delores Phillips’s *The Darkest Child* (2004), which contemplates the cruel and spiteful act of infanticide that Rozelle commits, would not qualify as a tragic mercy because Rozelle’s act does not engender any forms of salvation, resistance, or reclamation. Instead, her act symbolizes violence and suffering without meaning or growth. Like Euripides’s Medea, Rozelle is not affected by the consequences of her actions nor are the vulnerabilities inherent in the act interrogated. The duality of infanticide in *Beloved*, the act’s ability to symbolize both tragedy and redemption, is what distinguishes the act from generic plot-oriented tragedy. Further, the act’s ability to evoke transformation in other characters is also key to the paradigm.

In *Beloved*, infanticide elicits transformation that leads to redemption for other characters that are affected by the Tragic Mercy. It also provides a pathway to deal with the traumas that result from the act. Morrison portrays the act as a catalyst that forces characters to access their own tragic choices within the context of denigrating systems of enslavement. When characters confront their own vulnerabilities, they are able to move from judgment to empathetic transformation which allows them to convert trauma into catharsis. This is evident in Stamp Paid's evolution in the narrative. Like the rest of the Black community surrounding 124 Bluestone Road, Stamp Paid incorrectly interprets Sethe's infanticide as an act that represents vindictiveness and spite toward the white slaveholders that attempt to bring Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home Plantation. Initially, he does not believe that she is worthy of forgiveness or redemption because instead of trying to save her daughter, he feels that she was trying to "out hurt the hurter" (276). Stamp Paid's erroneous rationalization hardens his resolve toward Sethe and he shuns her with the rest of the Black community and instructs Paul D to do the same. However, the impact of Sethe's "rough choice" resurrects itself in him when he ventures back to 124 to apologize to Sethe for his misdeed with Paul D.

As he contemplates Sethe's act, Stamp Paid begins to assess its impact in the midst of the dehumanizing systems and denigrating ideologies that he and the Black community are forced to endure. Ironically, he gains clarity about the true import of Sethe's infanticide by reflecting on Baby Suggs's struggle to liberate herself from the burdens of enslavement. Through Baby Suggs's life, he realizes the helplessness of enslaved women and men like himself and Sethe. Though Baby Suggs's body had been beaten, her children stolen, and her humanity denied, she became "holy" and saved and empowered the Black community. And even with her holy status, Stamp Paid regretfully realizes, "They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve nor

condemn Sethe's rough choice" (213). Stamp Paid realizes that Baby Suggs could not approve nor condemn Sethe's tragic choice because Sethe's lived reality was a perpetual state of choicelessness that symbolized more trauma and death for her child. The shock of Sethe's and Baby Suggs's vulnerability forces him to consider his own instance of tragic choice. Morrison connects his first pivotal transformation to his renaming:

Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master's son. Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive. Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to whom could she return when the boy was through? With that gift, he decided that he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off. (218)

Morrison frames Stamp Paid's tragic choice as self-sacrifice akin to Sethe's infanticide. Stamp Paid is aware of the limited choices that he had in that traumatic event; however, he chose the path that led to survival for himself and his wife. Similarly to Sethe's choice to execute her child, Stamp Paid chose this act despite the trauma, the rage, and the shame because to not do so would lead to another form of death that neither of he nor his wife was willing to endure. He chose to "hand her over" in an act that many would interpret as marital defilement; however, Morrison frames this act as transformative and empowering. Once he executes the act "he decided that he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off" (218). Stamp Paid's reclamation of subjectivity through the "debtlessness" of the act is similar to Sethe's reclamation of maternal subjectivities through infanticide. Each act allows Sethe and Stamp Paid to exert choice and define themselves in a system that vehemently forbids it. By reflecting on these acts, Stamp Paid is made aware of the mutual strivings that he and Sethe had to endure in order to reassert their agency and humanity. Morrison frames Sethe's infanticide as a catalyst that engenders transformation and understanding in Stamp Paid because through Sethe's act he is able to access his own vulnerabilities under enslavement and contemplate the

ways that he challenged the system in order to reclaim humanity and self-respect. Stamp Paid's transformation allows him to empathize with Sethe, which allows him to transmute his debtlessness to her so both of them may move forward to redemption.

3. Tragic Mercy as an Iconoclastic Tool of Redemption in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Fucking A* and Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*

Morrison's tragic literary aesthetic can be applied to myriad genres as a means to create counter narratives that validate Black voice and the Black aesthetic in the American literary canon. The narrow confines of the wholly white, male literary canon have historically ignored the literature of seminal Black artists despite exceptional African American works that have emerged since early American colonization. One of the ways African American writers have challenged this literary disenfranchisement is through reimagining and subverting sacred American texts to account for the silenced Black voice. Two such examples of this subversion are Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Fucking A* (2000), which reimagines Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* from the perspective of a Black woman, and Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* (2008), which challenges historical texts that appropriate the Black voice of Nat Turner. Both texts are ideal canvases to apply the Tragic Mercy paradigm because they both incorporate mercy killings to effect change and challenge repressive systems of enslavement. In *Fucking A*, Parks's protagonist performs filicide while Kyle Baker's fictionalized *Nat Turner* portrays infanticide. Further, Morrison's literary aesthetic is particularly concerned with analyzing reinterpreted American (primarily white) texts. In her groundbreaking theoretical treatise *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison states, "I was interested, as I had been for a long time, in the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them" (viii). Here, Morrison alludes to a type of iconoclasm that Black writers have used in order to reclaim the Africanist Presence in the racist, classist, and patriarchal

language of American literature. The Tragic Mercy lens magnifies this literary subversion by using the tragic act as a tool to reclaim and authenticate the Black voice and challenge discourses that dehumanize and denigrate Black people and the Black experience. Analyzing Suzan-Lori Parks's *Fucking A* and Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* using the Tragic Mercy paradigm creates a space for individual and collective resistance and reclamation through the merciful, transformative act of filicide/infanticide.

Using Morrison's literary aesthetic to analyze Parks's and Baker's texts not only allows for an iconoclastic reading, but also a reading that magnifies the reconfiguration of classic tragedy as a means to strengthen the Black aesthetic. Both artists have attested to the revisionist nature of their respective texts. Parks revealed in an interview that she envisioned the premise for her *Red Letter Plays*, which include *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*, as a "riff on *The Scarlet Letter*" ("The Power"). In her rendition, the outcast "sinner" Hester Smith is the contemporary representation of Hawthorne's tragic Hester Prynne. Both women adorn the symbolic "A" as a testament to their excommunicated status in society; however, Hester Smith's "A" symbolizes "abortionist" while her predecessor Hester Prynne's brand signifies "adulteress." Perhaps the most poignant character shift is Parks's manipulation of Hester's race. Instead of portraying her as a Puritan white woman, Parks portrays Hester as a lower class Black woman living in a war-torn futuristic society.

Similarly, Kyle Baker uses his graphic novel *Nat Turner* to reimagine the mythology of Nat Turner and challenge the dehumanizing discourse that has limited interpretations of his life and his role in the 1831 Southampton, Virginia, slave insurrection. Baker prefaces his visual narrative by pointing to the scant historical references of Nat Turner's life. Baker's guiding question: "Who was this man who was important enough to be mentioned in all the history

books, yet is never spoken about at length” (6). Like Parks, Baker answers this question by reconceptualizing white American discourse that has traditionally appealed to the white gaze. Baker directly critiques and challenges the appropriated Black voice in Thomas Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) and William Styron’s novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) as a means to authenticate Black voice and the Black experience. Baker also challenges the one-dimensional, dehumanizing characterizations that have been used to portray Nat Turner.

Parks’s and Baker’s works are also connected by their portrayal of mercy killings to effect change and reclamation in tyrannical societies. Using the Tragic Mercy paradigm to analyze these texts enables a subversive interpretation of tragedy that redeems and empowers the protagonist instead of vilifying and damning them as classical tragedy has often done. In this way, Parks’s *Fucking A* and Baker’s *Nat Turner* can be read in conjunction with Morrison’s *Beloved*. Each text is foregrounded by a tragic act, which transforms characters while simultaneously resisting oppressive systems akin to enslavement. They also portray the act as a merciful sacrifice that indicts systems of social injustice. Contextualizing these narratives with Morrison’s tragic literary aesthetic illuminates filicide/infanticide as acts that engender activism, reclamation, resistance, and transformation that lead to individual and collective catharsis and redemption in the narrative. Further, these narratives challenge readers to question their own ethical choices in a society that gravely limits agency and subjectivity for people that are marginalized and terrorized because of their race, gender, and class status in society.

Tragic Mercy in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Fucking A*

Parks calls *Fucking A* an “otherworldly tale involving a noble Mother, her wayward Son, and others” (113). The mother is Hester Smith, a black woman who lives in poverty and is limited by her class and profession in a post-apocalyptic society. Parks describes her “sparely furnished”

room with only two chairs and a wash bucket to emphasize her dire existence (117). Parks's characterization of her tragic heroine Hester evokes the magical realism that is prominent in Morrison's *Beloved*. Though Hester does not emerge from the dead and wreak havoc on the living as does *Beloved*, Hester does work as an abortionist who is branded with a symbolic "A" on her shoulder that oozes and weeps in anticipation of her approaching clients. Her wayward son, Boy Smith, has been incarcerated for some time, and Hester is forced to work as an abortionist to atone for his crimes and buy his freedom from the Freedom Fund, a prison organization whose motto is "Freedom Ain't Free." Though she works faithfully at her craft and saves every penny and gold coin that she earns, she can never satisfy the Freedom Fund mandates. Each time Hester visits the Freedom Fund to pay the fine, there is always a new crime that Boy has committed which results in a new fine which Hester must pay before he is released. Parks frames Hester's economic exploitation as a result of the racist, sexist, capitalistic society in which she lives. Hester is gravely limited by her race, class, and gender in this patriarchal, dystopian setting; and her agency and subjectivity are, consequently, also limited, leaving her powerless to free her son from imprisonment or free herself from the economic enslavement that comes from her work as an abortionist. Hester's ability to exert choice is severely hindered, and, because of this, she cannot take control of her nor Boy's fate. Parks frames Hester's and Boy's oppressed status in society as contemporary forms of enslavement, and she reimagines and reconfigures Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* in order to illuminate the silenced narratives of Black men and women in society. Parks's key purpose for the text, however, is revealed through the Tragic Mercy paradigm, which liberates the individual and reclaims the agency and subjectivity that is denied her through the oppressive society that she must endure.

Parks emphasizes Hester's oppressed status in similar ways as Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*; however, Parks emphasizes the intersections of Black oppression in order to expose the evolution of enslavement in contemporary society. Though both Hester Prynne and Hester Smith are oppressed because of their supposed indiscretions, Parks's Hester offers a more nuanced portrayal of a raced, gendered woman who is denied individual and maternal agency in society. Hester's enslavement is directly connected to her lower class status and the inequities apparent in a capitalist society. Her son, Boy, is incarcerated because his impoverishment forces him to steal food from the family for whom Hester works. It is Rich Lady, Parks's not so subtle capitalist antagonist, that sends Boy to prison. Hester bitterly explains the ordeal to her friend, Canary Mary: "When she was little Rich Girl she thought she owned the world. And anything she wanted she could buy. Sent my son away to prison with a flick of her little Rich Girl finger. She cant buy a son or daughter now but I can buy mine. Im buying mine back" (124).

In this brief interchange, Parks reveals the dynamics of possession and dispossession in this dystopian society. Initially, Rich Girl has the economic and social stability to buy what she wants and influence the accessibility of resources. Her wealth ensures that she will be able to buy resources needed for sustainability, but it also allows her to deny accessibility to lower class individuals, like Hester and Boy. Further, because her wealth equates to power, she can also freely influence the legal system, therefore, ensuring that Boy is incarcerated for a trivial crime of survival. Hester's subjugated status is compounded because she is denied maternal and individual agency. Despite her protest that she can "buy" Boy from prison, she cannot do so because her race, class, and gender greatly hinder her ability to gain her son's freedom. Further, Hester cannot protect her son from the corruption and dehumanization that changes him from her beloved "Boy" to the terrifying "Monster" which he becomes as a result of his time in prison.

Hester's inability to shield her child from the ravages of this oppressive system is akin to the plight of enslaved women who could not protect their offspring from the dehumanizing institution of enslavement.

Indeed, Boy's incarceration is akin to a contemporary form of enslavement because as a prisoner he is denied agency, subjectivity, and humanity under the prison system. Michelle Alexander echoes these sentiments in her characterization of the penal system when she posits, "think of the criminal justice system—the entire collection of institutions and practices that comprise it—not as an independent system but rather as a gateway into a much larger system of racial stigmatization and permanent marginalization" (12). Boy's stigmatization and permanent marginalization align with the historical constructs of enslavement; further, the reality of his bonded reality is evident in Hester's continual efforts to "buy his freedom" from the Freedom Fund. Hester's maternal autonomy is greatly diminished because she is not able to provide protection and security to her child from afar. As Verna A. Foster astutely argues, "In this respect she [Parks] recalls the lot of the slave mother separated from her child by the exigencies of long hours of labor or because the child has been sold away from her" (78). Hester's forced estrangement from her son parallels the numerous enslaved black women who were denied the right to nurture and care for their children under the repressive system of enslavement.

Parks uses Hester's dire circumstances to illustrate contemporary forms of enslavement that pervasively hinder choice in ways akin to the institution of slavery in the antebellum era. She makes the confines of slavery more nuanced, however, by examining the intersections of race, class, and gender dynamics. For instance, Hester's role as an abortionist symbolizes a contemporary form of enslavement that directly correlates to her position in society. When her son, Boy, commits the crime against Rich Lady, Hester is given the choice to either join him in

prison, or work for the nation-state as an abortionist so that she can pay off his debt to society and liberate him from imprisonment. She chooses the latter, as she explains to her love interest, the Butcher: “Go to prison or take this job. That was my choice. Choose A or choose B. I chose A” (165). However, in the context of the capitalist, patriarchal society in which she lives, Hester’s choice is only a delusion. Her fate, as well as Boy’s, is determined by her lower class, raced, gendered position in Parks’s dystopian caste system. Whether Hester chose imprisonment or forced servitude, her role in society would still reify systems of oppression that would continue to subjugate and disenfranchise her in ways that would elevate the ruling class.

Parks also magnifies Hester’s diminished agency by juxtaposing her reality as an “enslaved” abortionist to those women who seek her services and are thus liberated instead of further enslaved. Though abortion is stigmatized in the text, as it is in contemporary society, Parks positions it as a legal and accessible service that women have a right to choose regardless of race or socioeconomic status. This is evident in her characterization of First Lady and her indiscretions that lead to an unwanted pregnancy. After years of feelings of shame and guilt because she believes she is barren and cannot give her husband, The Mayor, a child, First Lady meets a mysterious stranger in the park and is enamored by his interest in her. In a plot twist that fuels a major portion of the narrative, First Lady has a clandestine affair with the stranger and becomes pregnant by him. Unbeknownst to her, this stranger, known as “Monster,” is Boy Smith, the same Boy that Rich Girl caused to be imprisoned years before. Devastated and shamed by her illicit affair and unwanted pregnancy, First lady ventures out to Hester’s home to partake of her services. Though First Lady, ultimately, decides not to receive an abortion, Parks validates her agency through her interaction with Hester’s other waiting clients. The women realize that First Lady is a “fallen” rich woman, and one condescendingly prods her by saying,

“Ya come to Hester Smith cause she’ll let you keep yr veil on and wont ask no questions, huh?” (190). She answers her with a curt, authoritative, “Im here same as you” (190). Parks uses this exchange to flatten the hierarchical trappings of this dystopian society in order to portray a society where women, regardless of their race or class, have control of their reproductive rights and access to reproductive services that give them autonomy. Here Parks challenges repressive patriarchal systems that divest women from their reproductive rights based on trivial cultural signifiers such as race and class. Instead of being divided, these women are united in their struggle to remain subjective individuals in the midst of the challenges of womanhood. Further, they are liberated because they have not been denied their right to choose. As Angela Davis argues, “Birth control—individual choice, safe contraceptive methods, as well as abortions when necessary—is a fundamental prerequisite for the emancipation of women” (202). However, these women’s liberation makes Hester’s enslavement as an abortionist that much more devastating. While these women are empowered by their ability to choose their fate, Hester is rendered powerless because of the confines of her labor and its impact to the future of her son, Boy. Parks creates this paradox to critique the intersections of race, gender, and class and its effects on choice and fate in society.

Parks situates Hester in a space of choicelessness in terms of her economic and social uplift and she mines the repercussions of her status in the narrative. Hester’s ability to exert choice is also gravely stifled by the consequences of her marginalized reality. For instance, her ability to liberate herself from poverty is impacted by her illiteracy, which directly affects her opportunities for economic and social advancement. Hester’s only option for survival is the forced enslavement that she endures as an abortionist for the nation-state. The finality of her position is evident in her description of the symbolic “A” that is branded on her chest. She

explains to the Butcher, “The brand comes with the job is all I know. ‘And the brand must be visible at all time.’ That’s the law. Everyone knows what I do—but then, my A is also like a shingle and a license, so nobody in needll ever get suckered by a charlatan” (165). Hester’s brand is yet another testament to her enslaved status as it alludes to the inhumane practice of slaveholders branding the bodies of enslaved blacks as if they were chattel. It also symbolizes how the legal system has codified her gender and race as inferior within the dominant society. These cultural and legal artifacts preeminently dictate Hester’s position in society and, consequently, restrict her agency and subjectivity.

Her role as an abortionist is thrust upon her in much the same way that formerly enslaved black women were forced into domestic servitude in white households where they were often exploited and dehumanized in order to elevate white supremacy. In E. Frances White’s summation of the pervasiveness of black female domestics, she posits, “Their poverty limited their economic resources and educational opportunities. Their race narrowed their employment options to the service functions that grew out of their role in slavery. Their gender relegated them to household work, in a society where the sexual division of labor assigned to women most domestic chores” (60). Trudier Harris also points to the consequences of these confining roles when she asserts that many domestics were “required to look as if [they] were subservient to the white family...in both dress and demeanor” (*Mammies* 13). Hester’s subservience and restricted agency is punctuated throughout the text by characters who both pity and admire her ability to endure. For instance, once the woman who works at the Freedom Fund realizes that Hester is an abortionist, she exclaims: “Someones gotta empty the toilet!” so they say. Mrs. Smith, Abortionist. Working hard at what you do. Yr distressing occupation” (132). Parks uses these instances to interrogate Hester’s role as an abortionist and expose the hierarchies that deny her

individual and maternal autonomy in the text. Throughout the narrative, Hester is exploited by the Freedom Fund, the First Lady, and the women who constantly seek abortions at all times of the day and night. These instances allude to the ways that white society has historically exploited black people through forced, unpaid labor in order to reify white supremacy. However, like Toni Morrison's portrayal of Sethe in *Beloved*, Parks creates a space that allows Hester to reclaim agency, choice, and subjectivity through the performance of Tragic Mercy.

Parks frames Hester's Tragic Mercy as a desperate attempt to free her son from the detrimental effects of contemporary enslavement while simultaneously redeeming and freeing herself from paralyzing effects of patriarchy. What liberates Hester as she performs the Tragic Mercy is her ability to act of her own free will against the oppressive systems that threaten her maternal autonomy. After Hester endures years of forced estrangement, numerous frauds from the Freedom Fund, and countless abortions that fail to atone for Boy's crimes, she reaches an impasse that cannot be dissolved through her acquiescence to previously accepted social confines. Once Boy escapes from prison and arrives at her doorstep, battered, fragmented, and hunted like an animal, she has no viable means to protect him or herself from the oppressive systems that will pervasively and permanently dehumanize and destroy them. Initially, Hester disbelieves that this "Monster" could be her precious Boy: "Hes not. He couldnt be. But what if he is. Monster. He isn't. But he could be. Although hes not. You know hes not. Just wanna make sure. See that mark again. Yr motherlove is playing with yr mind, that's all. Or it is him" (216). Hester is reticent to accept this man as her son because the prison system has so thoroughly dehumanized him that he has transformed into the Monster that has terrorized the townspeople and has terrified her from afar. Upon realizing that this Monster is, indeed, her son, and is being pursued by The Hunters and their dogs, she rushes to act, quickly realizing that, once again, she

is unable to protect Boy from an uncertain fate. She is unable to execute her maternal right to shield her child from the inhumanities of the world system. And she is unable to execute choice to influence the fate of her child. Monster, too, realizes that there is no viable way for him to save himself. As sounds of the baying dogs get closer to the house, he tells his mother, “Take the gun. Shoot me with it” and then “Us killing me is better than them killing me” (218-219). His statement is eerily similar to the import of Sethe’s explanation for her performance of the Tragic Mercy: “How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to here” (236). Both statements allude to the desperate motherlove that these women were forced to execute in order to deliver their children from enslavement and dehumanization. At the pinnacle of Hester’s choicelessness, Hester takes the knife that Boy hands her and with a “quick firm motion” that she learned from The Butcher, she slits his throat (220).

In Hester’s performance of the Tragic Mercy, she disrupts the oppressive system of enslavement by acting of her own volition and ensuring her child’s fate. Her Tragic Mercy is a form of activism because it directly challenges various forms of enslavement, which have previously disallowed her from protecting and nurturing her offspring. Though her ability to act had been thwarted by her role as an abortionist, her performance of filicide gives her the ability to choose in a way that echoes the agency of her clients. Though the Freedom Fund robbed Hester of the ability to emancipate her son from forced labor, dehumanization, and an unjust and humiliating death, the act symbolizes a form of merciful salvation from those realities. Hester’s performance of the Tragic Mercy echoes bell hooks’s assertions that, “[women] can reject the powerful’s definition of their reality—that they can do so even if they are poor, exploited, or trapped in oppressive circumstances” (*Margin* 90). In the moment that Hester executes the

Tragic Mercy she rejects tyrannical systems of oppression and is transformed from a powerless enslaved person to an empowered vessel of agency and free will.

Further, Hester's act directly challenges a plethora of social systems that aim to disenfranchise marginalized populations. This assertion rivals some contemporary literary criticism of filicide, which only views the act from its literal import. For instance, in her analysis of *Fucking A*, Foster erroneously argues, "In killing their children, the contemporary Hesters destroy not those who have harmed them but those whom they love, those who are in the same sense a part of themselves, without effecting any change in the social conditions that produced their rage" (75). What Foster, and other scholars that share similar sentiments, miss is the implications of the act itself in the midst of social injustice. They are analyzing the text through a classically tragic lens that damns the protagonist and ignores the inherent transformation that occurs through subversive configurations of African American tragedy. Analyzing *Fucking A* through a Morrisonian Tragedy lens allows for a more nuanced reading of tragedy that contextualizes the struggles of Black people generally, and Black women specifically. Hester's performance of Tragic Mercy indicts the system of capitalism, which enslaves her through her profession and Boy through his incarceration; it indicts the class chasms that allow the dominant class, people such as First Lady, to dictate the lives of the lower class; and it indicts the criminal system, which unjustly imprisons black males to elevate white supremacy. In similar fashion as Morrison, Parks positions filicide as a tragic act that dismantles disenfranchisement. Using Morrison's tragic aesthetic allows for a reading that considers the ways tragedy can be used to transform trauma into redemption. Through the Tragic Mercy, Hester is able to execute choice and agency that allows her to determine the fate of her child, Boy. This alone is a testament to the subversion and reconfiguration of tragic tropes in *Fucking A*'s contemporary narrative.

Hester's performance of the Tragic Mercy also initiates the reclamation of identities that aid in her individual construction of Black female subjectivity. In this space, Hester is able to resist the hegemonic confines of Black essentialism that white American society often thrusts on marginalized people. Parks's Hester parallels Hawthorne's Hester in this way because both women subvert their marginalized existence and redefine themselves in the midst of one-dimensional constructs of womanhood. As Siobhan O'Gorman argues, both Hawthorne's and Parks's Hesters are "threatening spectres of resistance, at times feared and hated by their wider communities" (41). However, Parks uses the Tragic Mercy as a tool to further define and scrutinize the unique traumas that Black women endure as a means to define themselves within systems that pervasively dehumanize and denigrate them. One such system that Parks critiques and dismantles in *Fucking A* is the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which validates some women while invalidating others, all to appease the male gaze and male objectives. Adrienne Rich articulates the realities and dangers of the patriarchal institution of motherhood:

At certain points in history, and in certain cultures, the idea of woman as mother has worked to endow all women with respect, even with awe, and to give some say in the life of a people or a clan. But for most of what we know as the 'mainstream' of recorded history, motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities. (13)

Woman's "degraded female potentialities" are on display throughout *Fucking A*. Parks firmly situates motherhood and womanhood within the patriarchal directives of powerful men like The Mayor who define the value of women through their reproductive capital. This is evident through his volatile relationship with his wife, First Lady, who cannot bear him a child. The Mayor treats First Lady's barrenness as an affront to society and an insult to the nation-state. He diminishes her value by reminding her that her father finds her "inability disgraceful" (127) and that his constituents see her "inability as a kind of treason" (129). Both instances point to the

inability of women, even white women in this case, to define themselves and validate themselves apart from patriarchal ideologies that aim to elevate masculinity. Further, these constructs of motherhood allude to the commodification of Black women's reproductive capabilities under enslavement. Though First Lady represents a white woman in the text, the parallels between her predicament and those of enslaved women who were only as valuable as the offspring that they could provide is evident. Parks uses this interchange to represent the ways that white women are also enslaved by the tyrannical systems that arise out of patriarchy.

The realities of Hester's physical enslavement through her role as an abortionist is prominent in the text, but Parks also illuminates the ways that Hester is emotionally and mentally enslaved because of her inability to identify as a mother in terms that align with patriarchal ideologies. The incongruities between the maternal ideals of the dominant white society and her own strivings to be a "true" mother to her child are constantly in flux in the narrative. Early in the text, she erroneously believes she can ground her maternal identity in vengeance and bitterness against First Lady. She tells her friend, Canary Mary, that she cannot forgive First Lady, "until my Boy comes home. I'm not a true mother otherwise. When he comes then maybe I'll forgive her but not before" (120). Hester also fosters anxieties about the respectability of her role as an abortionist in juxtaposition with the idealized respectability of maternity in accordance with white, patriarchal ideologies. She expresses these anxieties when she is face to face with her son who she believes has died in prison. Though Boy tries to make her see him as her son, she rebuffs him. Parks writes, "I'm his mother. Im his dead mother because hes dead. The dead boys mother works for herself now. Shes an aborter. Don't hang yr head shes not yr mother. My fucking A. He woulda hated what his mother has become" (196). In these instances, Parks reveals the maternal fragmentations that Hester sustains in the patriarchal dystopian society. She

sees her role as an abortionist through the stigmatized lens of society which deems it as incongruous to the role of a true mother. She projects these sentiments onto her son, which layers the shamefulness of her reality. Further, though she truly believes her son is dead, she signifies herself as “dead” also because her inability to fulfill the role of mother is akin to a type of death of self in this context. Her “death” contributes to her inability to recognize Monster as her son, Boy. Parks uses these interchanges to show how Hester’s fragmented state is caused by the repressive society in which she lives. These fragmentations, or flaws as they would be read in classical tragedy, are not innately a part of Hester’s nature; instead, they are impressed upon her by the oppressive society that exploits her marginalization and causes her to execute desperate tragic acts in order to free herself and her offspring. Interpreting Hester from this vantage point reveals the ways that Parks subverts standard tropes of tragedy in order to transform and transcend her from fragmentation to wholeness. Parks closely connects Hester’s identity to her maternal role in similar ways as Morrison does in her portrayal of Sethe in *Beloved*, and using Morrison’s tragic aesthetic allows for a more nuanced interpretation of how tragedy is used to solidify identity in ways that validate black subjectivity.

Hester’s performance of the Tragic Mercy stabilizes and validates her identity as a mother in ways that destabilize and invalidate the white, patriarchal projections of motherhood. Parks does this by reconfiguring the tragic act to symbolize a form of mothering that rivals traditional mothering tropes in white American capitalist society. One example of this is Parks’s conflation of Hester’s Tragic Mercy with the Butcher’s philosophical convictions about his profession. The Butcher builds intimacy with Hester by explaining the inner workings of his role as a butcher and showing her how he mercifully executes humanely and thoughtfully. Parks portrays The Butcher’s act as a form of euthanasia which elevates his charges to the next realm

of being. Parks writes: “Butcherings the only think I ever wanted to do. I feel like Im right in the middle of the great chain of being. Passing life from one group to another” (162). Parks ennoble The Butcher with purpose and being through his role which transcends the traditional confines of his profession. Parks transmutes this aesthetic to Hester’s Tragic Mercy through her mimicry of The Butcher’s performance. Hester does not maliciously slaughter her son; instead, she mimics The Butcher’s instructions: “Faster and don't bear down so hard... You dont want him feeling a thing. Like the cold wind crossed his throat, thats all” (162). The true import of these directives becomes clear when contextualized with the tender ways that Hester attends to Boy as she “gently pets his head” before the Tragic Mercy and “holds him in her lap” after it is performed. Here Parks transcends the expressions of motherhood to attend to the desperate sacrifices that Hester must make to deliver Boy from an uncertain but undoubtedly horrific future.

Parks portrays Hester’s act not as demeaning and dehumanizing, like those exhibited in her dystopian society, but as nurturing and comforting as she guides Boy from one realm of existence to another. Once Hester performs the Tragic Mercy, she traverses beyond the one-dimensional confines of the racist, patriarchal society. Her claims to motherhood are no longer tainted by the stigma attached to her role as an abortionist nor its connection to contemporary forms of enslavement. Hester’s maternal reconfiguration also challenges patriarchal ideologies that only value mothers for their reproductive capital. Instead, Parks characterizes Hester’s maternal autonomy from a spiritual perspective in which she acts as a merciful mediator that delivers Boy from the traumas of further subjugation. In Hester, Parks constructs a spiritual Black mother figure that creates liberation and redemption in a society that is only capable of exploiting and oppressing the marginalized. After she performs the Tragic Mercy, Hester pauses and lights a candle before commencing her work. With this subtle gesture, Hester commemorates

her lost son but she also acts as spiritual gatekeeper who illuminates the dark path that will lead to the light of redemption. Many scholars attest to these spiritual overtones and their implications for individual and communal catharsis. Foster calls Parks's Hesters (from *Fucking A* and her earlier work *In the Blood*) types of "sorrowing Mothers of God" who offer "an additional interpretive possibility of suffering motherhood as redemptive" (87). Though suffering is indicative of redemption in this text, Parks also illuminates the possibility of gaining redemption through reclaiming what has been stolen, fragmented, or denied by the dominant society. In this context, Hester gains redemption by reclaiming maternal subjectivities and disavowing the confines of the racist, capitalist, patriarchal society. Parks positions the Tragic Mercy as a form of mothering that transforms Hester from fragmentation to wholeness, which is the antithesis of classically tragic tropes.

Though the Tragic Mercy most directly impacts Hester's circumstances, Parks also emphasizes its influence on Boy's subjectivity and identity. The act is a form of salvation for Boy, primarily, but it also symbolizes a disruption of social orders that would normally dehumanize and emasculate him as a Black male in a white supremacist society. Throughout the narrative, Parks exposes the ways that Black men are portrayed as animals, especially when they are confined to the criminal justice system. Parks uses the characterization of Jailbait to critique the dehumanizing, monolithic ideologies that hinder Black male subjectivity in American society. Hester never saves enough money to buy Boy's freedom, but she does manage to save enough to have lunch with him on the Freedom Fund grounds. However, instead of her son, she is sent Jailbait, another incarcerated Black man that the Freedom Fund passes off as Boy. Hester immediately realizes Jailbait is a fraud. Jailbait is brash to Hester; he "eats like an animal" (129), and when he becomes bored with Hester's efforts to connect with him, he rapes her with

no remorse. Jailbait symbolizes a “controlling image,” as Patricia Hill Collins would term it, of Black male incivility. It is telling that Parks orchestrates this plot twist as a case of mistaken identity because it attests to the ways that society projects one-dimensional, stereotypical images onto Black people en masse. Parks’s portrayal of Jailbait, and indirectly Boy, is akin to Stamp Paid’s assessment in *Beloved* of white people’s perceptions of Blackness. Morrison writes, “Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood” (234). This jungle is projected onto Boy and he is transformed into Monster, a man who supposedly terrorizes the town that he once lived in. The Boy/Monster binary symbolizes another fragmented identity in the text because the signifiers testify to Boy’s inability to exert agency and define himself in opposition to repressive dominant ideologies. Boy cannot reclaim his humanity or disrupt social orders that would deem him as inferior. However, Hester’s tragic act provides a gateway to reclamation and redemption for him.

Hester’s Tragic Mercy disrupts the dehumanization and emasculation that are inherent in the dystopian caste system. This is evident in Monster’s transformation at the cusp of death. Once Monster escapes the prison system, he cannot escape the townspeople or The Hunters that aim to humiliate and kill him by performing a “runthrough” (173), which symbolizes a modern-day lynching. Parks vividly describes the runthrough in the hunter’s hate-fueled rant:

Second Hunter: What’s a runthrough?

Third Hunter: The best thing to do to a convict when you catch him. It gets the loudest screams.

First Hunter: You get a hot iron rod in the ground and let him wiggle on the stick.

Third Hunter: Then you stick the rod in the ground and let him wiggle on the stick. (173)

This lynching represents the epitome of emasculation for Boy because it would authenticate the superiority of The Hunters and rob Boy of any agency that he had previously possessed. As

Harris asserts: “Lynchings became...the final part of an emasculation that was carried out everyday in word and deed. Black men were things, not men, and if they dared to claim any privileges of manhood, whether sexual, economic, or political, they risked execution” (*Exorcising x*). Because Boy dares to claim his freedom, his masculinity and subjectivity are threatened by The Hunter’s planned denigrating act. However, Boy reclaims his subjectivity and reconciles his manhood when he tells Hester to “Take the gun” and then “Shoot me with it” (219). Though his moment of resistance is brief, in this instance he is transformed from a powerless object to an empowered subject who has taken control of his own fate. When Boy initiates Hester’s Tragic Mercy, he reclaims the agency that has been stolen from him by the Freedom Fund, the Rich Girl/First Lady, and The Hunters. Further, he dismantles the Boy/Monster dichotomy and stabilizes his identity as not a dehumanized criminal, but a vulnerable son being nurtured and protected by his mother.

Using Morrison’s tragic aesthetic to analyze *Fucking A* reveals Parks’s subversion of classically tragic tropes. The performance of the Tragic Mercy becomes a gateway to reclamation and redemption, and it empowers protagonists to protest social injustice in oppressive systems. Parks’s narrative also transcends the tragic genre by using iconoclasm as a tool to resurrect the Black voice in narratives that deem Blackness as invisible. In both instances, Parks, like Morrison, reconfigures tragedy to expand the Black aesthetic and validate Black identity.

Tragic Mercy in Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner*

Kyle Baker begins his analysis of the mythic character Nat Turner with a poignant question to the audience: “How does a weaker minority dominate a physically superior majority?” (6). He follows this query by describing Nat Turner as a “lousy fighter” and an “inept swordsman” who

failed to kill the people that he himself felt obligated to kill (7). Following the guise of his predecessors who wrote slave narratives to affirm the identity and humanity of Black people, Baker credits Nat Turner's mastery of literacy to his mythological stature in history. However, in his summation of Nat Turner, Baker also alludes to the anomalous circumstances of his life as an enslaved Black man in the antebellum South. Though Nat Turner was enslaved in a system that severely limited his humanity and agency, his 1831 Southampton insurrection succeeded in having a monumental impact on the moral and political climate surrounding American slavery. In *Nat Turner*, Baker uses his visual narrative to illuminate the ways that Nat Turner wrested power from a system that deemed him subhuman and powerless against white supremacy. Baker does this from an iconoclastic perspective that subverts appropriated narratives, such as Thomas Gray's and William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, in order to magnify the Black voice and validate African and West African culture. Baker's narrative also delves into classically tragic tropes as a means to reimagine the traumatic struggles that Africans/African Americans had to traverse to liberate themselves from the physical and emotional bondages of enslavement. Baker portrays Nat Turner as an ambiguous Tragic Hero whose identity is impacted by his tumultuous and often violent experiences in enslavement. Though Baker illustrates numerous tragedies in *Nat Turner*, including suicide and lynching, one of his most visceral images is depicted through the merciful act of infanticide. Like Morrison in *Beloved*, Baker orchestrates the Tragic Mercy to challenge systemic oppression and transform protagonists through the reclamation of the Black voice, Black identity, and Black subjectivity.

Baker's graphic novel is divided into four sections, which coincide with Nat Turner's identity formation and developing self-consciousness about his role as a leader and prophet for enslaved Black people. The first section, entitled "Home," reimagines the cultural origins of

Black people through Baker's illustration of the everyday happenings of a West African village. He portrays various cultural engagements from villagers shopping at the market to children at play. These serene and endearing images are disrupted, however, by the arrival of white and Black African slave catchers who terrorize the village, kill some villagers, and beat others into submission. The primary focus of this chapter is the juxtaposition between the West African homeland and the horrific events of the Middle Passage as conveyed by a young Nat Turner. In the second chapter, "Education," Baker outlines the circumstances of Nat's education, both through the formal institutions of reading and writing, and through the informal experiences of being an enslaved Black boy on a southern plantation. Baker illustrates key experiences in young Nat's life that impress on him his greatness as a leader of his people. He also emphasizes parallels between Nat and prominent biblical figures as a means to establish Nat as a prophet and deliverer for his people. The third chapter, "Freedom," visualizes the Southampton insurrection from conception to violent execution. Baker conveys both the triumphs and failings of the rebellion while simultaneously building upon Nat's mythical figure. The final chapter, "Triumph," details Nat's subsequent capture, interrogation, and hanging after he has been prosecuted for the murders of over fifty white slaveholders. Baker also establishes Nat as a Christological figure. In each chapter, Baker interlays his visceral images with excerpts from prominent historical texts written by white authors. Interpreting various chapters through the lens of the Tragic Mercy paradigm reveals Baker's attempt to subvert standard tropes of classical tragedy, especially as they concern the construction of Nat Turner as a tragic hero.

Baker's first use of the Tragic Mercy as a metanarrative aligns with standard tragic tropes established in works such as Morrison's *Beloved* and Parks's *Fucking A*. Like both of Baker's predecessors, he portrays the mercy killing as a desperate attempt to free one's offspring from

the traumas of enslavement. However, Baker's portrayal of the Tragic Mercy is unique because he layers it with the dual purpose of simultaneously challenging and revising the appropriated Black voice. Baker uses graphic scenes of infanticide to dispute American discourse that has romanticized and/or misappropriated the realities and horrors of the Middle Passage and enslavement. As Will Murray argues, Baker's graphic narrative, "convincingly erodes fantasies of a history full of heroes and villains and grants readers access to a nuanced look at the nation's violent past" (329). He also attempts to locate and authenticate Nat Turner's voice in the midst of various historical inaccuracies. Andrew J. Kunka asserts, "...Baker situates his graphic narrative within a larger historical debate on the Nat Turner story, yet unlike the prose fiction and historical contributions to that debate, Baker's *Nat Turner*, through the formal choices the cartoonist makes, resists the narrow limitations to which those contributions fall prey" (174). In each context, Baker presents the portrayal of infanticide as a competing historical narrative that reveals the desperate measures that Africans and African Americans took to maintain their humanity and subjectivity in the midst of the dehumanizing experiences of the middle passage and enslavement.

The most prominent illustration of infanticide is portrayed in "Home" from the perspective of West Africans who have been captured, disenfranchised, and reduced to chattel. Baker prefaces the Tragic Mercy by visualizing the detrimental trajectory that causes it to be the only means of liberation and reclamation in the midst of oppression. Though Baker uses few supplementary passages and even fewer dialogue boxes or bubbles to convey the internal or pronounced dialogue of his protagonists, he is able to capture the dynamic complexities of Black identity by framing the emotive expressions of West African characters and their culturally rich surroundings in a West African village. The first image in "Home" (Fig. 1) is a scaffolding of

four separate images that portray West Africans in the market. The first image attests to the cultural mores of the community. The villagers are in traditional West African garb interacting with each other in ways that validate their distinct social and cultural norms. Women in long tunics and head wraps are bartering for produce with eager marketers while semi-dressed children frolic about in the background. Faint huts surrounded by villagers are outlined in the distance.

Baker hones in on two images, one male, one female, and their exaggerated features clearly relay their distinct personalities. The man, with his high cheekbones and slanted eyes, is playful and adventurous, and the woman, veiled and dark with wide eyes, is mysterious and guarded. Baker portrays the measured chaos of this market scene and the poignant expressions of these two West Africans to validate the cultural origins of enslaved Black people and also to re-establish connection to a “home” that was stripped from them once they were captured by slave catchers. In his detailed illustrations of Black Africans, Baker also contests one-dimensional racist caricatures that would eventually permeate American culture, such as Sambo and Jim Crow. Though his characters’ facial features are exaggerated, as is the case in both graphic novels and many racist caricatures of Black people, his images humanize his characters and validate their identity apart from white supremacist hegemony. In each pane, Baker portrays characters that are empowered by their ability to connect to and claim a home and their ability to affirm their cultural identity and subjectivity in that home.

As his visual narrative progresses, however, Baker illustrates the physical and cultural ruptures caused by the infiltration of European forces in West Africa, and he also exposes the trauma and dehumanization inflicted by enslavement and the Middle Passage. He illustrates various scenes that attest to the methodical ways that white supremacist systems of oppression

were ingrained in West African and, much later, American society. Baker focuses on the resistant acts of a prominent female character to illustrate how enslavement dehumanized Black Africans and robbed them of agency. After the West African village has been pillaged and several villagers violently killed or captured, Baker illustrates the escape of a young African girl who flees the village with slave catchers trailing behind her. She eventually finds herself at the edge of a cliff and though she attempts to jump as a final means of escape, her chances for liberation are extinguished as the slave catchers lasso her leg before she can embark on the final plunge. Baker uses this female character to illustrate the process of dehumanization through bodily dispossession and ungendering, both of which allude to deteriorations in agency and subjectivity.

After the young girl's capture, Baker illustrates several panes that document the process of bodily dispossession and ungendering. For instance, in a scaffold of panes (Fig. 2), Baker visualizes drastic changes that the female character has undergone since being captured. In the top pane, there are three shackled figures in the pane with the one in the middle being the prominent female character. The young girl's features have changed dramatically from the initial panes. Her exaggerated features are more angular and less feminine, almost seeming masculine; her expression less pronounced; and her silhouette not as sharp as previous images. The shading of her image is also less defined and more abstract than the person's image behind her. Further, the person in front of her is solely a shaded silhouette of a person with no distinct features. These panes illustrate Baker's visualization of the gradual deterioration of bodily possession and distinct traits of subjectivity. These subjects, once grounded in the cultural artifacts of their home and community, are succumbing to the essentialized, monolithic images that white slaveholders used to vilify Blackness and define it as inferior to whiteness. These enslaved men

and women cannot exert their own bodily free will because they are shackled and “herded” to an unknown location as if they are chattel. In these images, Baker exposes how systems of oppression were founded on the exploitation and dispossession of the Black body and, as a result, their ability to exert choice and free will is greatly diminished.

This bodily dispossession is also evident in another pane (33) in which the female character is stripped of her clothes by white hands. The young girl is portrayed as an undefined, shackled silhouette and her image is contrasted with two sets of well-defined white hands, which exploit and abuse her naked body. Baker illustrates the unrestrained power of these hands by visualizing the quick motion of one set of hands, which rips and tears the clothes from the undefined body. In this scene, the female figure has been rendered powerless by the white supremacist system of oppression and she has been, consequently, robbed of her ability to define herself in the midst of whiteness. The culmination of dispossession can be seen in another pane (40) where the young woman is constricted to a wooden holding space shackled above other enslaved West Africans. The young woman’s facial features are fully masculinized and her head shorn, which makes her visage blend indiscriminately with all other enslaved people in the hull of the slave ship. Baker uses this image to interrogate the intersectional oppression of enslaved Blacks, especially enslaved Black women during the middle passage. This phenomenon was originally observed by Hortense Spillers who states, “We might say that the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of possibility that is not interrupted, not counted/accounted, or differentiated...Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into account as quantities” (215). Because their gendered presence has been obscured during the middle passage and they have become quantifiable entities instead of human subjects, they become floating receptacles awaiting

signification through various systems of oppression. Baker visualizes several of these instances as he illustrates Black Africans who were inhumanely branded, savagely beaten, and gruesomely killed. Baker uses these images to expose the process of dehumanization and powerlessness that resulted in the European/American slave trade. Once Black Africans were disenfranchised and forced into enslavement, they were rendered powerless and they were compelled to perform extraordinary and tragic modes of resistance, such as filicide, to escape systems of oppression and liberate their offspring.

Baker frames the Tragic Mercy as liberating activism by visualizing a father's merciful performance of infanticide as a means to protest the dehumanization, fragmentation, and dispossession inherent in enslavement and the Middle Passage. Several panes illustrate the African captives' inability to defend themselves and protect their children from the wrath of white slaveholders. Several enslaved Black Africans are beaten mercilessly while others are confined to shackles at their necks and feet. Baker emphasizes the perspective of a man and his infant child. As the exploitation and abuse become more gruesome on deck, the man's eyes become tighter and more determined until Baker adjusts the frame to focus entirely on his expression, which conveys to the audience that he has reached a resolution to the turmoil and trauma to which he and his child have been exposed (Fig. 3).

In several panes, Baker illustrates this father's Tragic Mercy: he breaks free from the slave catcher's stronghold and tosses his son over the bow of the ship. A scaffolding of images (Fig. 4) parallels earlier images of white hands, which symbolize white supremacist power and oppression, surrounding a powerless Black female body; however, in this image the white hands grasp the baby's delicate body just as he is about to plunge into the ocean. In these sets of images, Baker subverts the earlier image by dismantling the power structures that enslave Black

bodies and determine their fate in oppressive systems. Baker juxtaposes two distinct paths for this child: one is symbolized by the white hand that holds on to the baby with a forceful fist; the other is symbolized by a silhouette of the infant falling into the mouth of a great white shark. The first path represents the stranglehold of white supremacy, which will inevitably disenfranchise, disfigure, and dispossess this child once he enters enslavement. The second path represents a tragic, but liberating end to suffering. In the mouth of this great shark, the child will die a tragic death, but Baker uses this image to point to the desperate choices that enslaved people had to make in order to reclaim choice, humanity, and subjectivity.

With two choices looming before him, the father chooses the latter as he escapes from one slave catcher and bites the arm of the other slave catcher who has his child's fate in his hands. In this moment, the father reclaims power by reclaiming his ability to exert choice and his free will in order to protect his offspring. In similar ways as Sethe in *Beloved*, this father redefines the parameters of fatherhood to attest to the state of choicelessness in which many Black parents found themselves in as enslaved subjects. Because this father is able to determine his child's fate, and free him from the unspeakable horrors of enslavement, he directly challenges the racist system of oppression. Further, Baker's juxtaposition of these two images—the baby clutched in the white hand versus the baby clutched in the mouth of the white shark—indicts the dehumanizing conditions of the Middle Passage. His images beg the question: How deplorable was the middle passage if a loving father would rather mercifully sacrifice his son to a great shark than have him endure the traumas of enslavement? Viewing these scenes through the Tragic Mercy lens allows a reading that reveals how such acts can be perpetuated and how their effects subvert standard tropes of tragedy. In this instance, the father is not insane, or flawed, or cruel; on the contrary, his actions reflect the immense love that he has for his child. As Michael

A. Cheney poignantly states, "...the fatherly hand that cradles the infant's head in the bottom foreground of the panel...is just as loving as the one that drops the infant into the shark infested waters a few panels later" (287). This act redefines the parameters of fatherly love even as it indicts the repressive system that would engender such a tragic choice.

Though *Nat Turner* aligns with standard constructs of the Tragic Mercy paradigm, Baker adds more nuances to the tragic trope by directly connecting it to his protagonist's, Nat Turner's, identity formation. While "Home" is initially introduced as a stand alone narrative constructed to supplement West African/African American history, Baker inserts a plot twist that intertwines the middle passage and infanticide with early formations of Nat Turner's self consciousness. In the last panel before "Education," Baker imposes an image bubble with the previous pane's visualization of the infant falling into the open mouth of the great shark (Fig. 5). Below the bubble, a young Nat Turner relays stories, including the Tragic Mercy narrative which hovers above him, of the previous lives of his enslaved ancestors. Though Nat Turner is a young boy, his expression is serious and determined as he narrates the story, while his audience listens intently with wide eyes and shocked expressions on their faces. Baker superimposes this image with an excerpt from Thomas Gray's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Baker has a two-fold purpose for this pane: first, he positions infanticide as a transformative act that transcends both space and time as a means to interrogate its influences both individually and communally; second, he presents competing narratives, images versus text, to present a revisionist narrative history that acknowledges the authentic Black voice. Using Morrison's tragic aesthetic reveals how Baker uses the Tragic Mercy to subvert standard constructs of the Tragic Hero in order to validate the Black voice and the Black aesthetic.

From a historical perspective, Baker connects Nat Turner's early self-consciousness with images and stories of the Tragic Mercy in order to reclaim Nat's identity while simultaneously reclaiming the authentic Black voice. Nat Turner's narrative has often been conflated with appropriated narratives from white authors, such as Thomas Gray and William Styron, that vilify the Black voice. As these authors appropriate the Black voice, they reify racist hierarchies that elevate white supremacist ideologies and distort Black identities. Ashraf Rushdy outlines problems with these constructions in his analysis of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*: "Black Power Intellectuals challenged Styron's novel on a series of issues: its representation of a nonheroic slave rebel, its presumption of assuming the voice of a slave, its uninformed appropriation of African American culture, its deep, almost conservative allegiance to the traditional historiographical portrait of slavery, and its troubling political message..." (4). Baker's image of a young Nat Turner relaying the story of his ancestors' Tragic Mercy challenges these one-dimensional interpretations by elevating his spoken narrative above the written narrative of Thomas Gray's text. It is no mistake that Baker positions Gray's narrative in the margins while he centers Nat Turner's image and the image of infanticide. He wants his audience to know that the only authentic voices that can accurately relay the struggles of enslaved Africans/African Americans are those who have intimate knowledge of the culture and experiences of Black people.

In this context, the Tragic Mercy gets its transformative properties from its allusions to the vernacular tradition and its effects on Nat Turner and the community that surrounds him. With this image, Baker hearkens back to West African folklore narratives which were used to educate and unify Black communities. Once Black people were abducted from Africa and forced to endure the inhumane system of American slavery, folklore narratives, more specifically

the telling of folklore narratives, became a form of resistance against white slaveholders. Baker uses the image of storytelling to bolster Nat Turner's status as a hero in his Black community and create a spirit of resistance among his enslaved counterparts. In each instance, the Tragic Mercy becomes a transformative event that is a pre-cursor to the upcoming slave rebellion. Nat Turner reclaims agency and subjectivity by actively validating the tragic stories of his ancestors in opposition to racist American discourses, which demonize the Black voice. Further, his interpretation of infanticide creates a mode of resistance that unifies him and his enslaved counterparts. By being intimately connected to the resistant performance of the Tragic Mercy of their West African ancestors, Nat Turner and the enslaved Blacks in his community can be inspired to execute their own resistant acts to wrest power from the repressive system of enslavement. Baker uses this image to illustrate the pathway from bondage to liberation through the Tragic Mercy.

The Tragic Mercy also creates a pathway for Nat Turner to reclaim his identity and dismantle one-dimensional constructs that characterize Black males as deviant savages. Baker's visualization of Nat Turner's ancestral revelations is the first image that portrays him as a prophet among his people. This image greatly contradicts numerous historical depictions of Nat Turner which align with ideologies that portray Black men as sexually aggressive, mentally inferior brutes. In Nat Turner's case, white historians and writers connected these signifiers to Nat's self-proclaimed roles as prophet and martyr for enslaved Black people. For instance, Gray's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, which Baker uses liberally throughout *Nat Turner*, routinely portrays Nat Turner as a fiend and savage as a means to discredit the spiritual origins of his slave rebellion. Gray asserts that he publishes Nat Turner's confessions "with little or no variation from his own words" (6), which he declares as a way to attest to the veracity of his

appropriation of Nat's voice and character formation. However, Gray incorporates dehumanizing language throughout the transcript, and he also portrays Nat Turner's spiritual insights as fiendish dogma. Of Nat Turner and his fellow conspirators, Gray says, "Never did a band of savages do their work of death more unsparingly" (7). He also says of Nat's role in the ordeal, "He is a complete fanatic, or plays his part most admirably" (21). In each statement, Gray reifies white supremacist social orders that deem Black males as less than human, and, therefore, deserving of enslavement and oppression.

The Tragic Mercy scene allows Nat Turner to reclaim his identity and dismantle white supremacist social orders by transforming Nat Turner from tragic hero to super hero, emphasizing the super human abilities that allow him to overthrow oppressive power structures. In this sense, Baker subverts tragic hero tropes in order to create alternative mythologies that challenge white supremacist discourse. Nat Turner is often portrayed as a tragic hero in much the same ways as Macbeth or Othello, men who are driven to obsession by a vision to elevate themselves in the social order. They are portrayed as exceptional men with suprahuman abilities that have elevated them to their current status. However, their downfall is often their myopic focus on fulfilling their visions in ways that degrade their character and pervert social orders. Baker subverts these tropes by portraying Nat Turner as a man whose visions bolster his status as a prophet and super hero while they simultaneously dismantle imbalanced social orders. The tragic path that he follows is linked to the inequities in society and not inadequacies within himself. While the vision is still the inspiration for action, Baker positions it as evidence of Nat's suprahuman abilities, which foreshadow his martyrdom status in the slave insurrection. This is apparent when analyzing the image in conjunction with statements from Turner's confession, in which he declares,

Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing, said it happened before I was born—I stuck to my story, however, and related somethings which went, in her opinion, to confirm it—others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. (Gray 11)

It is telling that Baker supplements the image of Nat Turner by relaying the rememory of the Tragic Mercy with this particular portion of Gray's *Confessions* because it emphasizes the multi-transformational properties of the tragic act. As Nat Turner recalls the transformation of his ancestors, he ignites a transformation within himself, which in turn transforms all those who are present. This initial vision inspires him to learn to read and write, to seek spiritual guidance, and to liberate his people from oppression. Not only do these resistant acts transform him from an inquisitive child to a formidable leader of enslaved Black people, but they also allow him to denounce one-dimensional constructs of Black identity. Baker embraces myriad expressions of Turner's identity that challenge the rigid constructs that are found in Gray's and Styron's interpretations of the Southampton rebellion. Nat Turner is portrayed as a radical leader, a trickster figure, a prophet, a martyr, and a murderer. Though these identities seem contradictory, they attest to the multifaceted construction of his identity as an enslaved Black man in the antebellum era. Each of these identities allow Turner to reclaim agency and subjectivity in ways that validate his humanity and dismantle the institution of American slavery. As bell hooks asserts in her theories of postmodernism, these type of critiques, "challenge notions of universality and static over-determined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of the self and the assertion of agency" (1). In essence, the transformative properties of Tragic Mercy in *Nat Turner* allows Nat Turner to liberate himself from the limiting constructs of Black masculinity, which, in turn, engenders him

with the agency needed to execute a revolutionary rebellion that allows him to emancipate himself and his enslaved community from the tyrannies of American slavery.

The effects of the Tragic Mercy in Baker's *Nat Turner* mirror those in Morrison's *Beloved* and Parks's *Fucking A* in ways that deconstruct the standard tropes of classical tragedy. In his narrative, Baker presents a more nuanced portrayal of the Tragic Mercy by implementing an iconoclastic reading of appropriated white narratives. However, though he formulates these mercy killings in distinct ways that correspond to the respective realities of his protagonist, the results are markedly similar to other expressions of the Tragic Mercy: the act transforms the performer, defies the oppressive system, and liberates the beloved offspring. Protagonists gain agency and subjectivity through their performance of the act, which contradicts standard classical tragedy that relies on exposing and magnifying a fatal flaw. Interpreting these works using Morrison's tragic aesthetic reveals flaws within society that engender these tragic acts, and this process indicts the system as opposed to indicting the executor of the act. In each instance, the performance of the Tragic Mercy creates redemptive spaces that allow these protagonists to move forward as self-actualized, subjective agents in their lives.



Fig. 1 “Home”



Fig. 2 “Home”



Fig. 3 "Home"

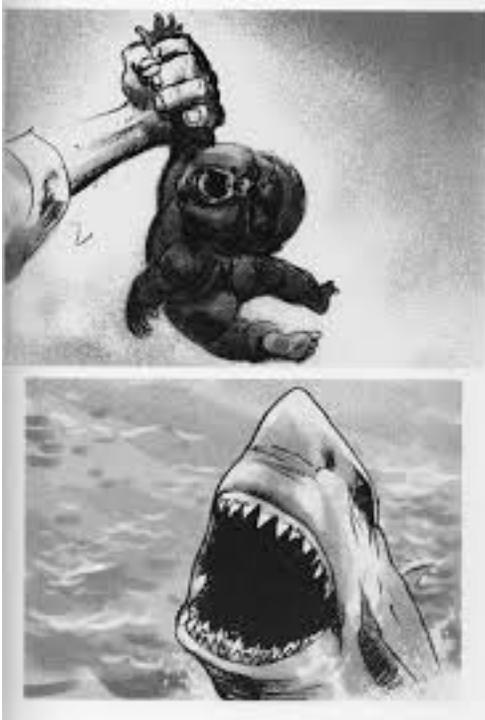


Fig. 4 "Home"



Fig. 5 "Education"

4. [TRAGIC] BLACK SEX AND [FLAWED] BLACK BODIES: TRAGIC (SEX) ACTS AS PATHWAYS TO RECLAMATION AND REDEMPTION IN HARRIET JACOBS'S *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL* AND SUZAN-LORI PARKS'S *VENUS*

Morrison's transformative aesthetic extends to various tragic acts that create spaces of redemption, reclamation, and healing in African American literature. Another component of this multifaceted paradigm considers sexual interactions that are often socially stigmatized in mainstream society because of racist, sexist ideologies that are attached to Black people and Black bodies. Black sexuality in hegemonic discourse has historically been portrayed as tragically flawed in order to promote white supremacist agendas in American society. This is especially true for Black females and the Black female body because constructs of Black female sexuality have often been used to prove the inferiority of the African American race as a whole. As Hortense Spillers argues, "[The Black female] became...the principle point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant white male deemed the distinction between humanity and 'other.' She continues, "the black person mirrored for society around her and him what a human being was not" (76). These dehumanizing ideologies were directly connected to Black sexuality according to Sander Gilman's assessment of early eighteenth and nineteenth century perceptions of race and sexuality in Europe. Gilman posits that, "...the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the black" and further, "by the eighteenth century, the sexuality of the black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general" (228). In my assessment, I transpose "deviant" with "tragic," and I argue that Morrison's aesthetic complicates and subverts tragic sexual acts and

reconfigures them into sites of redemption and catharsis that allow Black protagonists to reclaim their subjectivity and identity and work through various traumas that arise from sexual bondage projected onto Black people and Black bodies. No two works demonstrate the possibilities of Morrison's tragic aesthetic and its connection to race and sexuality better than Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*. Using Morrison's aesthetic to analyze Jacobs's and Parks's works reveals how these Black female writers expand the parameters of Black sexuality in order to challenge racist, sexist constructs of Black female identity and reclaim agency as a means to resist oppressive systems of enslavement.

I define tragic sexual acts as sexual engagements that challenge white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in American society. These sexual "tragedies" may include engaging in acts of miscegenation, which was once illegal in the antebellum era, as a means of survival for one's self or one's family, or engaging in sexual acts for economic gain or liberation from different forms of bondage, or transposing performative acts that may be sexual in nature, such as dancing or singing, into acts that dispossess the white gaze and empower the Black body. These acts may also include internal ideological shifts that allow protagonists to reclaim their subjectivity and challenge oppressive systems. This latter construct provides an entry point into Morrison's *Beloved*. Though Sethe's performance of infanticide is the preeminent tragic act, Morrison parallels its effects with that of Stamp Paid's tragic sexual exchange between his wife and his former master's son. As Stamp Paid recalls the origins of his name, he also signifies on the sexual act that allowed him to reclaim his subjectivity and identity: "Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master's son. Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive. Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to whom could she return when the boy was through? With that gift, he

decided that he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off' (218). Morrison frames Stamp Paid's acquiescence to this sexual betrayal as a survival tactic that ensures that he and his wife "stay alive" in the midst of the treachery of enslavement. Because he must live through it and remedy his trauma, Stamp Paid reconfigures this sexual act as an act of agency in which he can glean empowerment and control. Morrison frames this as a transformative act, which Stamp Paid qualifies with his name change.

In my previous analysis of this scene in Chapter One, I argue that Stamp Paid finds himself in a space of choicelessness that he must transmute into a position of agency. In addition to this assessment, I argue that Stamp Paid also inhabits a space of sexlessness, which adds to his emasculation and inability to assert his sexual autonomy in the text. By performing the tragic act, however, Stamp Paid reclaims his masculinity and subjectivity, which allows him to resist the institution of American slavery and the power of his slave master and his slave master's son. In essence, tragic acts, such as Stamp Paid's act, that interrogate the intersections of race and sexuality in systems of oppression provide protagonists with a pathway to define their own sexual identity and reclaim their bodies from the dehumanizing sexual fetishizations associated with hegemonic ideologies. These empowering acts are not performed without grave social stigmas, however, which lend to their dual, tragic nature and connect them to the Tragic Mercy paradigm. In many instances, the performer of the tragic act experiences a social death that disconnects her from society and their community. This is true in both black and white spaces. For instance, in Brittney Cooper's assessment of "race women," or socially and politically influential women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, she outlines the importance of respectability politics that governed Black women's sexuality in the public sphere. She states, "In a historical moment wherein Black women were forced to adjudicate their moral rectitude in

public, the sexual and gender policing at the center of their call for respectability, conservative as they are, emerge as a reasonable, though not particularly laudable approach to protect the sanctity of Black women's bodies...these calls for respectability were meant to serve as a guard against white male sexual objectification" (15). Cooper brings attention to an unspoken system that resembles, if not parallels, the Cult of True Womanhood which emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century as a means to police middle class white womanhood and ensure that white women exhibited piety, purity, submission, and domesticity in the white household. These constricting social systems contributed to a metaphorical death that is akin to Orlando Patterson's conception of social death under the system of enslavement. Patterson argues that slavery enforced a social death that caused enslaved Blacks to be socially isolated from their community and "culturally isolated from the social heritage of [their] ancestors" (5). This social death diminished Black sexual empowerment and hindered Black men and women from resisting dehumanizing ideologies that elevated white supremacy in American society. However, Morrison's aesthetic creates a pathway to redeem Black sexuality and reclaim the Black body.

Morrison's aesthetic illuminates the ways that writers such as Jacobs and Parks dismantle pervasive ideologies that inhibit Black sexual autonomy and demonize Black bodies. In both narratives, the respective protagonists are initially disenfranchised by repressive systems that deny their agency, hinder their subjectivity, and distort their identities. In *Incidents*, Jacobs exposes Linda's sexual exploitation and sexual oppression during the antebellum era in the household of her cruel slave master, Dr. Flint. Similarly, in *Venus*, Parks interrogates the economic and sexual exploitation of protagonist Saartjie Baartman, later known as The Venus Hottentot, who is terrorized and humiliated by various white opportunists who commodify her body for white consumption in the entertainment and medical spheres of nineteenth century

England and France. In each instance, these women are denied sexual and maternal autonomy which result in physical and psychological fragmentations that prevent their emancipation from enslavement and exploitation. In each narrative, these women endure a sexual void that gravely limits their self-actualization and power in the dominant culture. Spillers critiques this type of sexual absence stating, “While there are numerous references to the black woman in the universe of signs, many of them perverted, the prerogatives of sexuality are refused her because the concept of sexuality originates in, stays, with the dominative mode of culture and its elaborate strategies of thought and expression. We would argue that sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered” (78-79). Though Black women have historically been divested of sexual power in American discourse, as Spillers argues, Morrison’s aesthetic provides a vehicle for restoration that subverts one-dimensional identity constructs while simultaneously expanding the lexicon of Black sexuality. By using empowering sexual acts as vehicles for gendered resistance, writers such as Morrison, Jacobs, and Parks create spaces that allow Black men and women to exert choice and agency, to reclaim stolen identities, to resist oppressive systems, and to initiate internal transformations that lead to healing. In reconfiguring the staid tropes of Eurocentric tragedy, Morrison’s aesthetic specifically challenges and redefines the perverted “signs” of Black sexuality that scholars, such as Spillers, critique.

Subverting the Tragedies of Sexual License in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents*

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is set in a close-knit community that evokes the small town where Jacobs was raised in Edenton, North Carolina. Although the narrative content is autobiographical in nature, Jacobs and her editor, Lydia Maria Child, chose to obscure Jacobs’s identity as well as the identity of her family seemingly to ensure that they would be safe during and after the Civil War (Yellin xvii). The protagonist, Linda Brent, an apparent model of the

actual Harriet Jacobs, is often positioned as more of a character device than a realistic representation of Jacobs herself. Stephanie Li argues that the character Linda is more of a “reflection of the political aims of her author” (19). For instance, at various points in her life, Jacobs acted as an abolitionist, writer, and reformer; however, Jacobs foregoes these roles and singularly focuses the narrative on Linda Brent’s maternal roles as a nurturer, caregiver, and protector—all roles that would appeal to Northern white women who upheld the standards of domesticity in that time period. The narrative follows Linda’s harrowing journey from naïve child to vulnerable teenager to tormented “fallen woman” to liberated, self-actualized mother.

Linda’s early childhood is marked by naiveté as she lives a sheltered life ignorant of the realities of enslavement. Jacobs makes this anomaly possible by portraying the insulating security that her well-respected family offered her in the midst of their enslavement. Of Linda’s beginnings, Jacobs writes, “I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away” (8). In the care of her mother, father, and grandmother, she experiences a form of independence that is not the norm in many southern antebellum towns. Linda’s environment parallels Morrison’s fictionalized Sweet Home Plantation with its measured spaces of resistance. Linda’s idyllic environment changes, however, when her mistress dies and bequeaths her to the family of Dr. Flint, a well-respected physician who becomes a constant tyrant to her physical and spiritual well-being.

Jacobs uses Flint’s terrorizing presence to illuminate the threats to young black women’s purity and spirituality under enslavement. Initially, as a fifteen-year old girl, Linda is powerless and cannot protect herself from the degraded sexual demands of Flint, which are protected by laws under the institution of slavery. She rightly laments her helpless position when she describes Flint’s motives: “When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his

command in everything; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong” (18). Despite her diminished agency under enslavement and under American laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Linda maneuvers a plan to thwart Flint’s advances by engaging in a sexual relationship with a well-respected white lawyer and has children for him as a means to resist the patriarchal power dynamics of slavery. To save her children from further enslavement, she escapes from Flint’s household and hides in her grandmother’s garret for seven years until her children are sold to their father and taken to the North where they are liberated. The key to Linda’s resistance is her performance of sexual acts that would have been greatly stigmatized in nineteenth century antebellum America. With the emergence of the Cult of True Womanhood, Linda’s engagement in miscegenation, her status as an unwed mother, and her unabashed sexual autonomy would have qualified her as “fallen,” socially dead, and sexual deviant by the rigid standards of the domestic cult and the patriarchal standards of the antebellum south. As Minrose C. Gwin argues, “The black woman was indeed measured by the standards of the nineteenth century Cult of True Womanhood...” (42). And black women, such as Linda, would, undoubtedly, fall short of the criteria for true womanhood as a result of their bonded existence. However, using Morrison’s aesthetic to analyze Linda’s tragic sexual license in that era of racial and sexual oppression reveals that her acts are empowering, cunning, and redemptive. Further, they indict the systems of oppression that limit her sexual and maternal autonomy and thwart her attempts to liberate herself and her children from enslavement. In essence, Morrison’s tragic aesthetic reveals the dual nature of Linda’s tragic acts: they point to the egregious flaws in society while they simultaneously transform Linda into an empowered individual that can subvert those flaws through her sexual agency.

One of Jacobs's primary tasks throughout *Incidents* is to expose the limitations of enslaved black girls' and enslaved black women's sexual autonomy under enslavement. Through her portrayal of Linda and the various incidents that she experiences throughout her young life, Jacobs critiques the ways that white slaveholders and their wives diminish black women's capacity to exert their own free will in matters of sex, pleasure, and intimacy. Instead, Black women are pervasively portrayed as sexually exploited victims whose sexual presence is appropriated by white slaveholders. Under this guise, Black women have no power to disrupt the power dynamics of enslavement and take control of their own sexual identity, nor can they liberate themselves from other forms of bondage. For instance, Linda's master/slave relationship with Flint is indicative of the sexual power that he wields over her under American slavery. In "The Trials of Girlhood" Linda articulates her powerlessness and vulnerability in Flint's presence:

He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile Monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection? (26)

In this instance, Jacobs juxtaposes the "pure principles" of Linda's grandmother with the monstrous behavior of Flint in order to underscore the travesty of Flint's sexual exploitation of Black women in an era that greatly values purity in women. This strategy would have garnered immense empathy in Jacobs's audience of middle class white women who ascribed to the Cult of True Womanhood's call for purity and piety in all interactions.

Jacobs's more profound strategy in this passage, however, points to Flint's unmitigated sexual and social license in this scenario. In this engagement, Flint arrests Jacobs's sexual license by implanting his own morbid proclivities into her impressionable mind. He "peopled"

her mind with “unclean images” that align with his ideologies as a white slaveholder in the antebellum South (26). Flint’s ability to control Linda’s mental capacities through unbridled licentiousness is immensely detrimental to Linda’s sexual possibilities because the images that he uses to portray sexuality reflect ideologies that deem Black women as subhuman entities that can be possessed and forced to bend to the will of white slaveholders. This is the underlying power of enslavement according to bell hooks who asserts, “...white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination” (“Black Looks” 2). Far more troubling for Linda than these images, however, is her realization that she is not protected from Flint’s sexual depravity under the oppressive laws of American slavery. She is aware that she must be “subject to his will in all things” according to the laws that designate her as property (26). This racist, sexist system renders her powerless and her inability to act or disrupt it magnifies her vulnerability as an enslaved Black woman. This, in turn, diminishes her sexual and maternal autonomy and her subjectivity.

Linda’s powerlessness and vulnerability stem from her limited access to choice under what she calls the “demon Slavery” (48). One of the chief causes of Linda’s turmoil in *Incidents*, besides her traumatic engagements with Flint, is her inability to direct her and her future children’s destiny. These limitations extend to her sexual agency in choosing a partner and father for her children. As a young woman Linda experiences the profound possibilities of sexual agency when she entertains a local free Black man, but she quickly realizes that her subjugated status nullifies her sexual autonomy. Once Flint finds out that she wants to marry this free Black man, he rebuffs her requests by telling her, “If you must have a husband, you may take up with one of my slaves” (35). To which she replies, “Don’t you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying?” (35). In this brief interchange, Jacobs reveals Linda’s

budding resistance to Flint and his patriarchal domination under slavery. Linda is keenly aware of the unspoken sexual power in choosing a partner because it would directly disrupt the power imbalances of slavery and affirm her sexual and maternal identity; however, she is also aware of the impossibilities of executing these choices as an enslaved woman. Jacobs emphasizes these imbalances by juxtaposing Linda's status as an enslaved Black woman with that of free middle class white women. She writes:

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I also could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws... (48)

Jacobs connects sexual choice to protection, love or "affection," and social and religious order within society. Ultimately, Jacobs points to constructs that give white women the power to affirm their identity as devoted wives and mothers in the antebellum era. She appeals to her white female audience by reminding them that these advantages, which they highly value in society, are denied Black enslaved women and, therefore, they cannot adequately perform the role of wife and mother in ways that affirm their identities as "true" women.

Jacobs also emphasizes the detrimental effects of limited sexual agency on the Black family structure. Specifically, Jacobs illustrates how Linda's diminished sexual autonomy directly affects her maternal autonomy in that she cannot choose the father of her children. Under enslavement, Black women could be raped and sexually assaulted incessantly, and the resulting offspring from their forced unions became the property of the slaveholder and he alone decided their destiny. The children followed the "condition of the mother" and their rights were stripped along with their mother's. Further, these women were tasked with bearing children for men who violently raped them without consequence. These traumatic experiences had grave

psychological and emotional effects on enslaved Black women. For instance, in *Beloved*, Sethe's mother executes a distorted form of sexual agency by murdering all of her offspring that were the result of rape by white men. She kept Sethe because she was borne from a union with a Black man of Sethe's mother's choosing. Though Sethe's mother's act is morally ambiguous, with it she attempts to affirm her sexual autonomy by denying white slaveholders the right to violate her body and possess her children. Linda does not reach this extreme precipice of choice in *Incidents*; however, as she contemplates her traumatic future with Flint, Jacobs reveals psychological breaks that directly connect to her diminished sexual and maternal autonomy.

Jacobs writes:

The crisis of my fate now came so near that I was desperate. I shuddered to think of being the mother of children that should be owned by a tyrant. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children. I had seen several women sold, with babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife. (49)

It is telling that Linda likens the unknown fate of her future children to a crisis that leads to desperation because it testifies to the extreme psychological and emotional traumas that enslaved Black women endured as they attempted to exert agency in a system that denied it. Though Linda's desperation to control her and her children's destiny does not mimic the tragic acts associated with enslaved women such as Sethe's mother or Sethe herself, it does force her to perform another act that would be similarly stigmatized in the pseudo-Victorian antebellum South. In order to reclaim her sexual identity and sexual autonomy and ensure that her family does not succumb to the corruption of American slavery, Linda engages in an illicit relationship with respected white lawyer, Mr. Sands.

By contemporary standards, Linda's choice to engage in an illicit relationship to restore order and agency in her life may be viewed as unfortunate and ill-advised according to modern

social constructs; however, by the standards of the nineteenth century, which was shrouded by the domestic cult and unbridled patriarchal standards, her actions would be characterized as a tragedy from which that she could never recover. Once Linda relinquishes her sexual purity to a man who is not her rightful husband, she puts herself on a pathway to both a metaphorical and literal death according to the social and cultural standards of the times. Mary Vermillion contextualizes this ideology within the popularity of the sentimental genre in which Jacobs writes. She asserts, “Sentimental heroines who undergo such a desperation (i.e. lose their ‘sexual purity’) be it by their own choice or not—face a bout of madness or muteness usually followed by a slow, painful death” (246). Georgia Kreiger layers the social implications of Linda’s act by emphasizing the grievous impact that it would have on Linda’s audience whom she needed to empathize with her plight and act on behalf of their enslaved Black sisters. Kreiger posits:

the moment at which she confesses the sins of her past to an audience that up to that point may be in full sympathy with her, Jacobs portrays Brent’s liason with Sands as a fall, and Brent as a fallen woman...the fall is not just a stumbling virtue into vice, but a headlong hurdle into a death-like void. In terms of her innocence, Brent dies. Because of her confession, Jacobs may suffer a social death in the North at least as tortuous as her former enslaved state. The young woman’s plunge foretells her descent into a moral nether region cut off from the realm of virtuous womanhood that Jacobs’s readers presumably occupy. (614)

Jacobs is painfully aware of the social implications of Linda’s past, and she uses Linda’s confessional tone to assuage her white female audience. Unlike other seminal slave narrative texts, such as Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, Jacobs is not unapologetic about her transgressions under enslavement. Where Douglass viewed his ability to outsmart and outwit his white counterparts as personal triumphs that elevated his character, Jacobs views her attempts to defraud the system as necessary evils that stem from the corrupt principles of slavery. Though she confesses that she willingly made a “plunge into the abyss,” she also reveals to her audience

that she “wanted to keep myself pure; and under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery” (48). In this instance, Jacobs challenges the perceptions that Linda’s transgressions are a reflection of her character; instead, Jacobs indicts the system that would engender such a tragic and desperate sexual act in a time where piety and purity were the standard for true womanhood. Further, Jacobs challenges white female readers to consider how they would respond if their fate was similar to Jacobs. “Pity me, and pardon me, O Virtuous reader!” Jacobs laments, “You never knew what it is to be a slave, to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of chattel...” (49). Jacobs’s underlying question: If the tables were turned, what would you do? Jacobs’s emphatic appeals to pity and grief concerning her sexual travails are poignant and visceral; however, they are superficial means to an end. Jacobs’s more profound strategy in *Incidents* is her ability to transpose Linda’s tragic sexual act into an act that engenders empowerment and catharsis.

Jacobs portrays Linda’s illicit relationship with Sands as a form of activism that disrupts the repressive power structures that impede her ability to exert sexual autonomy and sexual identity. Initially, Linda does not foresee alternative options to liberate herself from the domination and sexual exploitation that she endures under Flint’s rule. Linda’s desperation stems from her inability to act. She states: “I had rather live and die in jail than drag on, from day to day, through a living death” (47). The only way that Linda can subvert her vulnerability and emancipate herself from this sexual purgatory is through choosing an alternative lover that will reaffirm her sexual and maternal agency. She achieves both of these aims once she reveals her act to Flint. After Flint tells Linda of his latest demented scheme of building a cottage in the woods for them to be together, Linda replies, “I will never go there. In a few months I shall be a

mother” (49). In this instance, Linda has both rebuffed Flint’s exploitative advances and undermined the racist, sexist constructs of American slavery. By choosing a lover, she disrupts Flint’s domination over her and, as Jennifer Larson argues, it allows her to “undermine ‘breeder’ and take control of her sexual autonomy” (749). Linda further dismantles the system of enslavement by ensuring that she engages in a sexual relationship with a man who will allow her to direct her child’s fate. She reasons, “Of a man who was not my master I could ask to have my children well supported; and in this case, I felt confident I should obtain the boon. I also felt quite sure that they would be made free” (49). By committing this tragic sexual act, Linda is able to use the system of enslavement against itself. A white man, such as Sands, possesses the privilege and means to purchase Linda and the children that he has with her and set them on a path toward freedom in the North. The true triumph of Linda’s ingenuity is her ability to subvert her stigmatized interaction with Sands into an act that empowers her to choose a pathway that leads to emancipation for herself and her future offspring. As she states, “I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation” (47).

Though Jacobs positions the emancipatory effects of Linda’s sexual act as the preeminent reason for her relationship with Sands, by parsing through the silences of her relationship with Sands, it is apparent that there are depths of her sexual autonomy that Jacobs glosses over in consideration of her conservative audience. Linda’s sexual relationship with Sands should also be interpreted as a transformative turning point in which Linda reclaims her sexual identity and sexual autonomy apart from the distorted confines of American slavery and apart from the rigid constructs of the Cult of True Womanhood. Instead of viewing her sex act as solely a “deliberate calculation” that liberates her from the oppressive systems that dominated nineteenth century America, we should also view her act as a sexual rebirth that allows Linda, and her creator

Jacobs, to experience the sexual awakening that she was denied with her free Black suitor. Scholars have erroneously characterized Linda as an asexual character that is solely motivated by her maternal instincts. For instance, Li asserts, “Writing amid stereotypes of black women as licentious and morally suspect, Jacobs presents Linda as strictly asexual. She is never motivated by sexual desire, engaging in relations with Mr. Sands specifically to escape the advances of Dr. Flint. Accepting the inevitability of her sexual assault, Linda attempts to exert some control over the experience by choosing who has initial access to her body...” (21). Patricia D. Hopkins also argues, “...I read Linda Brent’s actions—sexual intercourse with Northern, businessman, Mr. Sands—not as resulting from ‘desire’ or ‘compulsion’ but rather a desperate act, for, in her eyes, her life, and the lives of her unborn children were held in the balance” (8). Though both Li and Hopkins make several valid assertions that have already been confirmed in my argument, I find their emphasis on Linda’s asexuality or lack of sexual awareness myopic and one-dimensional. Further, their arguments re-inscribe controlling images that evoke the virgin/whore dichotomy, which deny women the agency to define themselves apart from patriarchal institutions such as the Cult of True Womanhood.

Jacobs portrays Linda’s sexual relationship with Sands as a transformative sexual awakening that has cathartic implications for Linda as she progresses toward a liberated, self-actualized individual. Just as her traumatic relationship with Flint arrests her sexual development and reifies racist, sexist constructs, Linda’s relationship with Sands dismantles those constructs while freeing Linda to expand her sexual identity in ways that affirm her subjectivity. It would be easy to interpret Linda’s tragic sex act as solely a necessary means to an end given the rigid social and cultural constructs of the antebellum era; however, Jacobs’s text challenges that type of reading. In Linda’s justification for her relationship with Sands, she says, “It seems less

degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has not control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (48). Many scholars use this passage to emphasize Jacobs's focus on disrupting the unjust power structures of American slavery, which reify white supremacy and patriarchy. And Linda does, indeed, equate her newfound agency with a type of freedom from systemic oppression. However, Jacobs also connects Linda's sexual autonomy to a form of freedom that transcends the confines of the mechanizations of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In this passage, Jacobs captures Linda's humanity by illuminating passionate emotions which are intrinsic to the human condition such as affection, intimacy, longing, and desire. Linda's ability to "give one's self" in the performance of a sexual act alludes to a need for desire and passion which can be gained from intimacy with another willing participant. Further, Linda juxtaposes the draconian control of her slave master Flint with that of her lover Sands, who can only "control" her by "kindness and attachment." The fact that Jacobs mentions "attachment" nullifies arguments that Linda interacts with Sands as if he was merely a pawn in her game of emancipation. And this argument does not attempt to trivialize the life and death circumstances that surrounded liberation for enslaved Black people during the antebellum period. However, this reading does encourage a more holistic analysis that interprets Linda as a multidimensional character. She may not be in love with Sands by contemporary standards, as she proclaims to Flint that she is "thankful that I do not despise him," but she engages in a relationship with him that is founded on affection and attachment, emotional constructs that were often incongruous to the realities of many Black women's heteronormative relationships on antebellum plantations (52). Though Jacobs seems to gloss over these sentiments in favor of emphatic appeals to

Northern white women, there are several other instances throughout the text that testify to the transformative nature of Linda's sexual relationship with Sands.

For instance, Linda's sexual relationship with Sands allows her to reclaim her body, both literally and metaphorically, from the fragmentation and obstruction that results from the traumas of enslavement. Throughout *Incidents*, it is apparent that Jacobs is aware of the detrimental stereotypes that have been projected onto the Black body. In many Eurocentric texts, the female Black body has often been used as a canvas to articulate the inferiority of Blackness.

Descriptions of the female Black body were also problematic in some abolitionist texts that aligned it with a patriarchal gaze that used it solely to illustrate violence as a means to incite Black male rage. Vermillion critiques the problematic constructions of the Black female body when she asserts, "Numerous scholars have demonstrated that both the institution of slavery and antebellum writing constructed the black woman as the sum total of her bodily labour and suffering. Antebellum writers—including abolitionists and black males—depicted the black woman as breeder, wet nurse, field laborer, and most significant, as sexually exploited victim" (244). Ultimately, the Black female body has been used as a site of domination and exploitation in both white and Black discourses, which has plagued constructs of Black female subjectivity and identity.

Jacobs undermines these constructs by emphasizing and challenging disembodied traumas projected onto the female Black body. Many interactions between Flint and Linda focus on verbal sexual abuse as opposed to physical abuse; however, Jacobs portrays these verbal assaults to be as equally detrimental as physical assaults. For instance, after Flint catches Linda teaching herself to write, he begins sending her notes to which she responds, "I can't read them, sir," to which he answers, "then I must read them to you" (29). Here again Flint uses racist,

patriarchal constructs, which hinder Linda's sexual autonomy and identity, but in this case, he uses written text as a means to dominate and exploit her. In my article, "Disembodied Intimacies and Shadows of True Womanhood: Reclaiming Agency in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," I write at length about how Jacobs uses these engagements, which I call disembodied intimacies, as modes of resistance against attacks on the female Black body. The argument rests on two main assertions: first, "[Jacobs's] literary aesthetic acts as a form of resistance that subverts racist and sexist ideologies associated with the black body while also combating the system of enslavement." Furthermore, I assert, "[the aesthetic] expands the parameters of sexual exploitation to illuminate the ways trauma can occur without physical threats to the body" (Burge 4). These constructs emphasize disembodiment as a strategy to manage trauma. However, while Linda's interactions with Flint force her to de-emphasize her corporeality in order to move forward, her interactions with Sands allow her to reclaim embodiment, which puts her on a path to bodily wholeness and redemption.

After Linda's sexual rebirth with Sands, Jacobs meticulously recreates Linda's body to parallel her burgeoning subjectivity. Jacobs primarily connects Linda's embodiment to her journey to emancipation. While in the oppressive Flint household, Linda's body is obscured and she is defined by the verbal and written correspondence between her and Dr. and Mrs. Flint. However, once she engages in the tragic sex act with Sands, her pathway to freedom becomes accessible, and with it, descriptions of her body begin to materialize. This is evident in one of her first escape attempts at the home of an empathetic white woman who conceals her while Flint furiously searches for her in the small community. Jacobs portrays Linda's transformation through her bodily disguise after she leaves the white woman's servant, Betty. Betty gives her a sailor's outfit of a "jacket, trowsers, and tarpaulin hat" (94). As she walks "boldly through the

streets,” Linda describes her appearance: “I wore my sailor’s clothes, and had blackened my face with charcoal” (95). She also begins to perform the role of a sailor as Betty tells her to “Put your hands in your pockets, and walk rickety, like de sailors” (94). Jacobs’s focus on this type of bodily description is uncharacteristic of the majority of her narrative. By emphasizing Linda’s manipulation of her physical characteristics, specifically altering her walk and the appearance of her face, Jacobs points to Linda’s newfound ability to use her body to define her identity and subjectivity apart from Flint and apart from trauma. Linda sees her ability to disguise herself successfully as a triumph. She says, “I passed several people whom I knew. The father of my children came so near that I brushed against his arm; but he had no idea” (95). In this instance, Jacobs activates Linda’s body in victory; however, several scholars, including Vermillion, also point to the materialization of Linda’s body while suffering in her grandmother’s garret. While concealed for seven years, Linda suffers “limbs benumbed by inaction” as well as instances where her “face and tongue stiffened” (101). Jacobs’s emphasis on bodily manifestations during Linda’s escape and subsequent concealment point to bodily reconciliations that allow Linda to progress toward wholeness physically and psychologically. This reconciliation is only possible through her sexual engagements with Sands because it enables her to define her body apart from exploitation and domination and, instead, connect it to intimacy, affection, and pleasure.

The Insurrection of the Freak Show in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*

Perhaps one of the most tragic figures in African American/African history is that of Sara Baartman or Saartjie Bartman, also known pejoratively as The Hottentot Venus. Sara’s traumatic life story has been anthologized in numerous historical, medical, and academic records which all attest to the sensationalism of her sexual exploitation in various freak shows that traveled across France and England in the early nineteenth century. Born in about 1789 in South Africa, Sara’s

impoverished lifestyle prompted her to seek notoriety and economic freedom on the freak show circuit, which was a lucrative endeavor well into the twentieth century. According to Harvey Young, Sara allowed herself to be showcased as a “wild beast” while she was paraded around London “naked with the exception of face paint and a flimsy apron of feathers tied around her waist” (135). Though she wore a covering on her genitals, she drew large crowds who expected to see what they believed to be her abnormal genitals and large buttocks. She was headlined as the “Hottentot Venus” until 1814 when she was taken to Paris to be studied by various anatomists including Baron Georges Cuvier, who, upon her death, would dissect her body, make a cast of it, and preserve her genitals in the name of medical science. Her remains were put on display at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until 2002 when they were returned to South Africa.

Scholars, historians, and academics have used Sara’s life to interrogate the intersections of history, race, gender, sexuality, colonization, spectacle, and exploitation since her story’s inception. In the midst of infinite discourse, however, Sara’s voice is stifled and her presence obscured by grotesque distortions. In order to reconcile the lapses in Sara’s history, Suzan-Lori Parks creates a platform for reclamation and redemption in her fictionalized account of Sara’s life in *Venus* (1996). Instead of portraying Sara as a perpetual victim who lacks voice and agency, Parks uses the various freak shows in Sara’s life as sites of resistance which allow her to reclaim her humanity and redeem herself from the traumas of the stage and the white gaze. Further, Parks challenges the assumptions that Sara is complicit in her own sexual exploitation by blatantly exposing the pathological systems that commodify and exploit her “otherness.” Though Sara does indeed give her consent to be showcased on the freak show stage, Parks creates possibilities for liberation and resistance. Just as Jacobs portrays Linda Brent as an agent with the ability to defraud the system for her own benefits, so does Parks portray Venus as an

agent with the capacity to invert the system for her own advantages. Using Morrison's tragic lens to analyze *Venus* magnifies Parks's strategy to subvert white, patriarchal ideologies that hamper the possibilities of African American tragedy.

Parks's loose adaption of Sara Baartman's life in *Venus* follows Miss Saartjie Baartman, aka The Girl, and later The Venus Hottentot on her journey from poor cleaning woman, to freak show spectacle, to opportunistic lover. The Venus is "discovered" by The Man, later The Baron Docteur, and The Man propositions The Venus to dance in shows for economic advancement and fame. The Venus agrees to join The Man's show, but she is quickly handed off to The Mother-Showman, a cruel, greedy woman who mentally and physically abuses The Venus and defrauds her of earnings gained from the show. During one of The Mother-Showman's acts, The Baron Docteur sees The Venus and buys her from The Mother-Showman. The Baron Docteur explains his purchase as a form of salvation for The Venus. The Venus enters into a relationship with The Baron Docteur which provides her with agency, luxury, and affection. Parks punctuates *Venus* with various Greek style choruses that amplify the problematic portrayal of The Venus. Parks critiques these choruses in order to indict the oppressive system that forces Sara into the freak show business. Though The Venus is portrayed as an exploited, commodified, and dehumanized character, Parks creates spaces of resistance that allow her to challenge her commodification and exploitation while gaining subversive forms of agency. In *Venus*, Parks also ensures that the horrific, oppressive systems that enslave Black bodies are exposed for their culpability in the fragmentation of Black female identity and subjectivity.

For many scholars, the tragedy of The Venus's story, especially as it pertains to Parks's recreation of it in *Venus*, lies in what many perceive as The Venus's complicity in her own sexual exploitation and enslavement. Several scholars have critiqued Parks for portraying The

Venus's tragic act of performing in European freak shows for financial gain. For instance, Jean Young is unapologetic in her indictment of Parks and her fictionalized interpretation of Saartjie Baartman. She argues, "...while presenting a 'non naturalistic meditation on history,' Parks's historical deconstruction presents a fictitious melodrama that frames Saartjie Baartman as a person complicit in her own horrific exploitation; Parks depicts her as a sovereign, consenting individual with the freedom and agency to trade in her human dignity for the promise of human gain" (699). Young continues by calling Parks's recreated Saartjie Baartman an "accomplice in her own exploitation" (699). However, Young is not the sole critic of Parks's deconstruction nor is she the only scholar who remains skeptical of the possibilities of true agency and liberation in a traumatic experience such as Saartjie's. In his analysis of *Venus*, Mehdi Ghasemi posits,

we can say that in this play, rather than staging a resistant counter hegemonic performance, The Venus imitates and plays to the myths and succumbs to the 'expectation of blackness' simply because the 'white expectation of blackness' 'nurtured, encouraged, and 'fostered' by the ready replication of stereotypes' has been imposed on people of African descent in social settings, and because a series of their attempts to counter those expectations have born no results, some of these people have taken 'the next step in the vicious cycle by beginning to take on the characteristics of the stereotype.' (265-266)

Though Young's and Ghasemi's arguments are not unwarranted given the hyperbolic portrayals of The Venus and her white and Black antagonists, their assertions reveal their inability to grasp the critical work Parks is doing, which is critiquing the impact of Eurocentric domination on disenfranchised Black people such as Saartjie. Parks's *Venus* is more than a narrative revisionist history of a silenced historical figure. *Venus* is also Parks's attempt to locate complicity within her audience, as they themselves are invested spectators of The Venus's exploitation on the theatrical stage. By exposing audiences to unfiltered images of Black commodification, Parks forces them to acknowledge and critique the oppressive systems that have made these images

possible and, simultaneously, made their complicity possible. As Karen Ruth Kornweibel argues, Parks “challenges her audience to realize their complicity in the ways voyeuristic commodification relates to objectifying stereotypes that exist at the intersections of socially defined ideas of racial and sexual identity” (66). Analyzing *Venus* using Morrison’s aesthetic engenders a more nuanced reading of the various systems that contribute to The Venus’s eventual demise, and it also allows for a clearer picture of who is culpable in her commodification and exploitation. Further, Morrison’s aesthetic unveils spaces of resistance and agency that both Young and Ghasemi are unable to access because of their limited consideration of the redeeming properties in the African American tragic mode. Morrison’s aesthetic shows how Parks is able to subvert The Venus’s tragic circumstances into sites of resistance and reclamation in order to manage the trauma of disenfranchisement and enslavement.

As is true in Morrison’s *Beloved* and Jacobs’s *Incidents*, the crux of The Venus’s agency lies in her ability to exert choice and free will in opposition to forces that prohibit her agency. And, also like Sethe and Linda, at the beginning of her journey The Venus’s agency is gravely limited by the circumstances of her enslavement. Parks illuminates her dire existence in Southern Africa by contextualizing it within the dehumanizing master/slave relationship between The Venus and The Man and The Mans Brother. Parks uses The Man and the Mans Brother to illustrate the ways that sexually exploiting Black women has been interwoven into the cultural makeup of white society, giving them the ability to control Black women’s sexuality and elevate white supremacy. Somewhere in South Africa in the early 1800s The Man and The Mans brother approach The Venus, on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor, as they reminisce about “Scheme #1,” “Marriage with the Hottentot” (13), which alludes to a distorted rite of passage in which The Mans Brother loses his virginity at twelve years old to The Venus, presumably

without her consent. The Man and the Mans Brother further objectify The Venus by describing her body in terms that overlap with animal characteristics that allude to the “breeder” moniker that was often projected onto enslaved Black women as a means to signify their racial inferiority. The Man engages in this white supremacist tactic by calling Hottentot women, such as The Venus, “Big Bottomed Girls” (13), “ ‘freaks,’ ‘oddities,’ and ‘curiosities’ ” (14), and he follows with “That’s their breed” (13). Parks uses these instances of sexual exploitation to reveal how white culture has signified Blackness as sexually deviant and racially inferior in order to justify the commodification of the Black body. Indeed, immediately after The Man and The Mans Brother verbally assail The Venus, they anticipate their next scheme: “The African Dancing Princess,” which features The Hottentot Venus.

In the midst of The Man and The Mans Brother’s exploitation scheme, Parks emphasizes The Venus’s limited sexual and economic autonomy as an enslaved Black woman in South Africa. Her lived reality is incongruous with her ability to exercise choice and free will in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society. The Venus’s prospects for economic viability are non-existent because, as history has shown, enslaved people were denied accessibility to resources that would allow them to elevate themselves socially and economically in society. Her future prospects in South Africa would resemble her current station in society as a bonded woman resigned to forced labor, sexual exploitation, and dehumanization. The Venus’s limited economic choices are paralleled by her limited sexual autonomy. The Man and The Mans brother view The Venus as an object of sexual play as boys, which strips her of her humanity and agency. As men they view her as a commodifiable object to be possessed and exploited for economic gain, which, once again, denies her accessibility to humanity and agency. This is apparent during their The Brother’s sales pitch to The Man. He says of The Venus’s economic potential, “The Britsll

eat it up. Oh, she'd make a splendid freak" (14). Historically, under standard constructs of enslavement, this type of exploitation would coincide with the signification of the Black woman as a "breeder," the epitome of powerlessness. Though *The Man* and *The Mans Brother* do not exploit *The Venus* as a "breeder" in the traditional sense, they do attempt to exploit her as a "mule" or a "work horse" for their own economic viability. Parks complicates these imbalanced power structures, however, by subverting *The Venus's* role in the freak show culture.

Like Jacobs in *Incidents*, Parks frames the protagonist's ability to choose her own fate as a qualifier for agency and subjectivity. Only by exerting one's own free will can a person challenge domination and progress toward some form of liberation from oppression. Jacobs complicates the idea of choice and liberation in ways that are unique to *The Venus's* circumstances, and perhaps this is the reason that many scholars perceive *The Venus's* choice as complicity in her own exploitation. Once *The Man* and *The Mans Brother* approach her about performing as the "The African Dancing Princess," they try to sell her on the idea by promising her wealth, in the form of gold, stability, in the form of two years of work, and notoriety, as a princess figure resembling Cinderella. The Brother's allusion to the Cinderella story is an apt analogy because they are promising her a rags-to-riches narrative that would liberate her from her current enslavement. She contemplates their offer while reflecting on her capitalist dreams:

I would have a house.
I would hire help.
I would be rich. Very rich.
Big bags of money! (17)

This is the first of many exchanges in which Jacobs punctuates *The Venus's* thoughts with her plea, "Do I have a choice?" By juxtaposing *The Venus's* dire constraints as an enslaved Black woman to her possible future as a woman of means, it is as if Parks uses her plea to ask the

reader, “Does she have a choice?” so they may assess her circumstances just as she does and have a better understanding of how and why she chooses the way that she does. Ultimately, Parks alludes to the fact that The Venus does have a choice; however, the choices that she must choose between are equally oppressive and she finds herself in a space of choicelessness. Like Jacobs, The Venus must decide whether one form of metaphorical death is preferable to the other, whether one form of enslavement allows her to locate her own form of liberation in opposition to hegemonic systems. Jennifer Larson explains it this way: “what appears to be complicity may be simultaneously read as subversive agency,” and she continues, “Parks’s protagonist chooses potential fame and fortune in a form of exploitation she hopes she can live with over certain slavery as well as unknown and potentially unbearable exploitation” (204). By orchestrating a scenario in which The Venus is forced to choose from one necessary evil or another, Parks forces readers to critique the system that enables her choices. However, whether The Venus chooses to stay in her current enslavement or take the risks on the unknown freak show circuit, her act engenders agency and subjectivity which creates their own spaces of resistance even amongst oppressive systems.

One of these sites of resistance connects to The Venus’s ability to reclaim her voice apart from stereotypical ideologies that have dominated American discourse. Parks does an excellent job juxtaposing The Venus as a complicated, multidimensional person to the Hottentot Venus, who is portrayed as an abstract character created within the white imagination. Since the Hottentot Venus’s infamous reign on the freak show circuit, the dominant culture has transcribed her presence through medical journals, newspaper articles, and court reports. In *Venus*, The Negro Resurrectionist, who performs as a type of master of ceremony throughout the play, continually resurrects the exploited, muted Hottentot in various historical records. These records

portray The Venus as a voiceless caricature who is constructed from numerous racial stereotypes that affirm her inferiority to whiteness. For instance, in one historical extract, *The Negro Resurrectionists* reads the following description of The Hottentot Venus from Robert Chamber's narrative:

Early in the present century a poor wretched woman was exhibited in England under the appellation *The Hottentot Venus*. The year was 1810. With an intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty, she was said by those to whom she belonged to possess precisely the kind of shape which is admired among her countrymen, the Hottentots. (36)

This extract portrays The Hottentot Venus as grotesque and aesthetically inferior by European standards, which alludes to the racist ideology that the Black race is inferior to the white race in general. Parks uses this extract in conjunction with other historical records to attest to the prevailing impact of racial stereotypes on "othered" bodies. She counters these records, however, by emphasizing The Venus's voice throughout *Venus*. When The Venus is called to the stand during the courtroom freak show, she introduces herself by saying, "Im called the Venus Hottentot" to which the Chorus of the Courts exclaim, "She speaks!" (74). This short interaction is a profound exchange because the silenced, fabricated Hottentot Venus is contested by The Venus, who speaks, acts, and exerts free will apart from the freak show of the courthouse.

The Venus's voice becomes even more poignant when considering the fact that historical records of the actual legal case obscured the Hottentot Venus's voice while focusing on the perceived incendiary effects of her body. According to Young, "Within the actual transcripts, Baartman remains silent. The magistrate either speaks for her or summarizes what she supposedly said to him or others behind closed doors" (142). Parks accounts for Venus's absent voice by interlacing her visceral monologues among the absurd voices of the freak show choruses. In one of her most poignant and heartbreaking responses to her perceived sexual

insurrections, she says, “Please. Good good honest people. If I bear thuh bad mark what better way to cleanse it off? Showing my sinful person as a caution to you all could, in the Lords eyes, be a sort of repentance and I could wash off my dark mark. I came here black. Give me the chance to leave here white” (76). In this passage, Parks humanizes The Venus’s suffering in ways that are impossible in the rigid historical and medical extracts that have come to define the Hottentot Venus. In a sense, Parks uses The Venus’s voice to liberate the Hottentot Venus from the grotesque shell that had been constructed for her by those who exploited her. Parks’s work is a form of narrative revisionist history that simultaneously acknowledges and contests the distortions of historical records.

Parks frames The Venus’s eventual consensual sexual relationship with The Baron Docteur as a resistant act that subverts power dynamics and allows her to wrest agency from patriarchal systems. Initially, The Venus is denied any form of sexual agency because her sexual potential is arrested by her white captors’s debased schemes. The Man and The Mans Brother fetishize and exploit The Venus in order to affirm their superiority and masculinity in their male-dominated society. The Venus’s sexual bondage is akin to Linda Brent’s subjugation in *Incidents*. Neither woman can exert choice and free will and that greatly limits their sexual and maternal autonomy in the text and further adds to their oppressed status. The Venus circumvents these realities by subverting the sexual power dynamics in her relationship with the Baron Docteur in order to satisfy her own desires for wealth, comfort, and affection. Parks portrays The Venus’s relationship as a transaction that gives her access to social and economic power, things that were impossible during her previous servitude in South Africa. Parks illustrates her reclamation of agency during The Venus’s and The Baron Docteur’s first encounter in which the

doctor tries to persuade The Venus to come with him to France. Parks illustrates The Venus's heightened agency through her ability to barter for the life that she desires. Parks writes:

The Baron Docteur:
Its settled then.
I find you quite phenomenal.
Hell, you look like you need a vacation. Say yes!
Say 'yes' and we'll leave this minute. (87)

The Venus responds in a succession of responses that attest to her power and agency in this transaction. She responds, "Will you pay me?" and "100 a week" while adding "New clothes and good meals" and also "My own room" (88), all to which the doctor answers in the affirmative. Similarly to Linda in *Incidents*, The Venus views this illicit relationship with the doctor as necessary means to a desired end. Also, similarly to Linda, but in a more pronounced manner, The Venus is able to exert sexual license that affirms her sexual identity apart from commodification and exploitation. With the Baron Docteur, The Venus fulfills her sexual desires and need for male attention on her own terms. She alone directs the parameters of their sexual relationship in the privacy of their bedchambers. While The Baron Docteur rambles on with superficial love poems and nonsensical notions about anatomy, The Venus tends to her sexual needs by telling him "Lets have some love" (103) and "Hold me close to you" (103) and "Touch me down here" (104). Her sexual agency here is a far cry from her original sexual exploitation at the hands of The Man and The Mans brother. Further, it is portrayed as the antithesis of the Baron Docteur's wife, the only other woman in the narrative portrayed as a potential romantic partner for him, which positions The Venus as the only truly empowered woman in the text. Her sexual relationship transforms her from a subjugated object to an empowered subject. Her tragic sex act can be interpreted as a subversive form of agency as Larson asserts when she argues, "Agency...most simply implies embracing the potential for

action—with no moral judgment implied—that serves as an instrument to an end, especially a subversive end” (205). Parks also illustrates a subversive form of agency as it concerns the Black female body.

Parks also redeems and reclaims the Black body by using the various freak shows as spaces that magnify the perversity of the white male gaze which, in turn, exposes white males as grotesque, debauched, and debased. This literary aesthetic indicts white supremacist capitalist patriarchy in its attempts to dispossess the Black body from Black men and women. Ultimately, and obviously, the thread that binds Parks’s text is her contemplation of the colonization and possession of the Black body by patriarchal society. However, Parks complicates traditional notions of possession by focusing almost exclusively on the impact of the white gaze on the Black body. In an interview, she states, “there’s a lot of watching in *Venus*. In *Venus*, the doctor is watching Venus, and the Resurrectionist is watching everybody. Then actually at the end he becomes the watch, the death watch on Venus. So, it’s all this kind of looking. There’s a whole lot of looking going on” (“Interview” 313). Historically, the dominant society has used the white gaze to possess, to exploit, and to subdue those who are unlike themselves. This tactic robs the receiver of subjectivity. As bell hooks asserts in her critique of the white gaze on the Black female body, “She is there to entertain guests with the naked image of otherness. They are not to look at her as a whole human being. They are to notice only certain parts” (*Black Looks* 62). In *Venus*, the inverse is true as it pertains to the spectacle of the white man looking at the Black woman.

This phenomenon is more apparent on the stage, as plays, such as *Venus*, are meant to be observed; however, the spectacle of the white man debasing himself is still a visceral image on the page. Parks orchestrates various freak shows to critique the white gaze. The *Venus* is

portrayed as a spectacle on the freak show stage, on the court room stage, and on the medical room stage. In each of these spaces, white men gather to contemplate the inferiority and primitivism of the The Venus's body and sexuality in accordance with the Black race in general. This is in line with nineteenth century pseudo science according to Gilman who claims, "In the nineteenth century, the black female was widely perceived as possessing not only a primitive sexual appetite but also the external signs of the temperament—primitive genitalia" (232). However, Parks inverts these racist, sexist ideologies by pointing to the primitivism of the male in his visual exploitation of The Venus. For instance, in The Venus's presence, white males lose their ability to control their sexual desires as if they are animals in heat. They act as if their sexual organs are primitive and their sexuality deviant. This is evident when analyzing the Baron Docteur's sexual relationship with The Venus. After the Baron Docteur and The Venus consummate their relationship, he cannot stop himself from looking back at her and masturbating. However, he tells her "Don't look! Don't look at me" (106) in order to discourage her from treating him as a spectacle of deviancy. Parks orchestrates a similar scene with The Chorus of the 8 Anatomists who are led by the Baron Docteur. As they wait for him to continue his lecture, they steal looks at her while they also masturbate. In the stage direction, Parks adds below in parentheses "much like the Baron Docteur did in Scene 14" (119), which conflates the Baron Docteur's sexual deviancy with that of The Chorus of the 8 Anatomists. There are several other instances throughout the text that frame white males as sexually aggressive and compulsive figures who yield to their sexual desires at the cost of their own humanity. Parks orchestrates these scenes to expose the true origins of sexual depravity, which lie in the white gaze. In this sense, Parks uses the freak show as a space that vilifies the white gaze and not the female Black body. Parks encourages her audience to see the how colonization, imperialism, and enslavement

have projected flawed images onto the female Black body. However, the female Black body is not flawed, but the system that attempts to possess the female Black body is flawed.

In closing, Jacobs's *Incidents* and Parks's *Venus* interrogate subversive forms of sexual agency in order to liberate their characters from oppressive systems of enslavement. These tragic acts put their respective protagonists on the pathway to redemption and wholeness. Morrison's tragic aesthetic reveals the nuances of these acts, and provides audiences with an understanding of how they gain their subjectivity and work through the traumas connected to these acts. Further, using Morrison's aesthetic allows literary scholars to expand the scope and depth of African American tragedy.

5. ANSWERING ZORA'S AMBIGUOUS QUESTIONS: SUBVERSIVE MERCY IN HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

Since Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) was rediscovered by Alice Walker in the mid 1970s, it has emerged as an immensely popular "monstropolis" text in the African American literary canon. Initially, Hurston's contemporaries derided *Their Eyes* because it was not quite radical enough to rally the Black rank and file into action against the struggle for racial equality following the Harlem Renaissance era. Richard Wright infamously ridiculed the novel for Hurston's depiction of Black life as "'quaint,' the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior' race" (22-23). However, Hurston's portrayal of the travails of ordinary Black people in the South, such as that of her protagonist Janie Crawford, is the precise reason why *Their Eyes* was elevated out of obscurity and has emerged as a staple in African American literature and culture. By emphasizing Black cultural artifacts such as folklore, African American dialect, African American vernacular traditions, and Black communal traditions, Hurston validates Black art and Black culture in opposition to stereotypical, one dimensional portrayals of Blackness—indeed, many would argue that that is a radical blow against the minstrelsy that Wright alludes to in his critique. Hurston's work is also immensely influential because it consistently transmutes the tragedies of its protagonist's "dreams deferred" into transformative experiences that allow her to progress toward a more subjective self. The road to self-definition and subjectivity in *Their Eyes* is not smooth, however, because of literary and thematic ruptures throughout the text. As many scholars have affirmed, *Their Eyes* is not without its faults and the ambiguous nature of Hurston's narrative can

be a deterrent to easily verifiable themes or ideologies that scholars are so accustomed to ascribe to the literary canon. Despite these superficial pitfalls, Hurston's *Their Eyes* is an ideal narrative to analyze using the Tragic Mercy paradigm because it is through Janie's mercy killing of Tea Cake that she gains the subjectivity and agency that has been denied to her throughout the text.

The tragic mercy paradigm is apt for an analysis of *Their Eyes* because many scholars designate Janie as an inherently flawed character. Some of these assumptions are not unfounded because Janie's persona throughout the narrative is problematic. She often acquiesces to a subjugated status in her relations with men, she silences herself and submits to male dominated discourse, and she ascribes to gender roles that affirm unrealistic fantasies that undermine her subjectivity. Trudier Harris also notes that Janie "cannot accept the consequences of her actions" in her relationships (70). These behaviors are repeated in every heterosexual, romantic relationship in which Janie engages. However, Hurston portrays Janie's story as a journey from innocence to self-determination that is customary for every person who has progressed through his or her own personal *bildungsroman*. Janie's journey just happens to be predicated on her search for her "authentic self and for real love" as Edwidge Danticat asserts but the journey, nevertheless, leads to subjectivity that initiates resistance to oppressive systems (ix). In order to qualify that initiation, we must use a lens that will adequately analyze Janie's unique circumstances in the text. Perhaps the shortcomings of other methods, including feminist criticism, in trying to illuminate the nuances of Janie's character are their inability to interpret adequately the transformative possibilities of tragedy in African American literature. Analyzing *Their Eyes* using the Tragic Mercy paradigm reveals the subversive forms of resistance that eventually liberate Janie from her subjugated status. Further, it points to the race, gender, and class systems that lead to Janie's submission.

In this analysis of *Their Eyes*, I argue that Janie's flawed status is transmuted by her performance of the Tragic Mercy on Tea Cake because it signifies the culmination of her agency, subjectivity, and self-determined identity. Though many scholars argue that Janie's love affair with Tea Cake initiates transformation for Janie, as Tracy L. Bealer affirms, I challenge this reading because Janie's relationship with Tea Cake is founded on many ideologies that are also intrinsic to her relationships with the other domineering men in her life. Janie is in bondage to the patriarchal standards of her Black community as well as by her own ill-informed notions of womanhood and love, which make an analysis of her character unique in juxtaposition to other tragic African American characters. However, Janie's bondage is akin to Sethe's, Linda Brent's, and Hester Smith's in that the oppressive systems of race, gender, and class prevent her from acting to liberate and define herself in opposition to white capitalist patriarchal ideologies. Her performance of Tragic Mercy, however, stabilizes her character and resists domination which allows her, finally, to choose growth and life instead of stagnation and death.

Many scholar-critics struggle to reconcile Hurston's ambiguous stylistic and conceptual choices concerning Janie throughout the narrative. Often, Hurston's narrative is critiqued for its ambiguous rendering of feminist or womanist ideologies in conjunction with Janie's interactions with Hurston's male protagonists/antagonists. Several scholars adamantly situate *Their Eyes* firmly within pro-feminist discourse. For instance, Amanda Bailey notes, "...Janie has been held up as a model feminist character and Hurston as a model feminist writer having created a character to whom women can look for many of the traits they are traditionally accused of lacking, such as strength, courage, enduring love, and wisdom" (322). Bailey easily connects Hurston's portrayal of Janie with concepts of female empowerment and agency, which are cornerstones in feminist philosophies. However, there are many more scholars who challenge a

feminist reading of Hurston's text, citing contradiction to the main tenets of feminism. For instance, Harris argues that using feminism as a lens to interpret Hurston or her narrative is retrospective and inadequate. Harris asserts, "Certainly Hurston was unique in her relationships and in her place in the world, but why is it necessary that we label her and her characters feminist in order to appreciate her? Or at least why not redefine feminist (or prefeminist womanist) in terms of the 1930s, which might prove much more fruitful, than in terms of the 1970s and 1980s" ("Celebrating Bigamy" 68). Harris points to glaring contradictions to support her assumptions, including Janie's inability to determine her fate apart from the men in her life. Like Harris, Bealer points to ruptures in the narrative that disqualify a strictly feminist reading, especially in terms of Hurston's portrayal of Janie's relationship with the carefree Tea Cake. Bealer emphasizes the scholarly vacillations between Tea Cake as a "utopian alternative to the paradigm of masculinist domination" and also as "largely of a piece with the other imperfect men in the novel" (311). In either rendition, Janie submits to him at the expense of her own subjectivity.

And then there is also the conundrum of Janie's missing voice throughout the narrative. Many scholars, such as Danticat, who wrote the forward for the most recent edition of *Their Eyes*, have attempted to overanalyze, overinterpret, and wish away Janie's ultimately silenced voice. Danticat asserts that Janie's voice is a type of communal echo that includes her best friend Pheoby and Hurston herself. She argues, "Her [Janie's] response to Pheoby's call is at the same time an echo, much like the nymph Echo who retains only her voice after having literally been torn apart. Hurston herself also becomes Janie's echo by picking up the narrative thread in intervals, places where in real life or in real time, Janie might have simply grown tired of talking" (x). However, as Audre Lorde has consistently voiced in her works, women must war

against the “tyrannies of silence” (41). Though Bailey signifies Hurston’s text as feminist, she also emphasizes the inherent contradictions in Hurston’s chosen narrative structure. She asserts,

[D]espite its robust presence in academic classes, online lists of top feminist ‘must read’ books, and the American canon, a textual inconsistency, perhaps earning the label of ‘problem’ endures throughout the novel’s critical history. By virtue of the text’s narrative structure, its black female protagonist, Janie Woods nee Crawford, appears to exhibit a perplexing and consistent need for a narrator, a translator, and a mediator both within the text and beyond the bounds of the written narrative itself. (320)

These scholars point to the literary assumptions that characters cannot be fully self-determined and self-actualized without their voice, especially in the midst of various voices of domination in society.

Hurston’s narrative, though beautifully written and highly progressive for its time considering its focus on a self-aware, multidimensional Black female protagonist, fails to capture Janie’s voice fully, which hinders her ultimate agency and subjectivity in the text.

Inconsistencies such as the ambivalence of the Black female voice continue to plague earnest scholarship because scholar-critics grapple with trying to pin down what Dale Pattinson calls Hurston’s “notoriously slippery text” (9). Hurston herself emphasizes the faults in her work in *Dust Tracks on a Dirt Road* by revealing deterrents to her creation process. She says of *Their Eyes*, “It was dammed up in me, and I wrote it under internal pressure in seven weeks. I wish that I could write it again. In fact, I regret all of my books. It is one of the tragedies of life that one cannot have all the wisdom one is ever to possess in the beginning” (121). However, Hurston’s self deprecation does not nullify the fact that *Their Eyes* does significant social and cultural work in the African American literary canon, and ruptures in her narrative can be reconciled through the Tragic Mercy lens which aligns with the unique circumstances of the text. The Tragic Mercy paradigm can be used as a corrective lens to illuminate Hurston’s ultimate purpose in the text,

which is to liberate Janie from patriarchal subjugation and allow her to exert agency and affirm her subjectivity.

In order to interpret adequately Hurston's narrative in a way that illuminates her distinct aesthetic, I contextualize the Tragic Mercy in conjunction with ecofeminism, which gives credence to Hurston's emphasis on the interrelationship between humanity and nature in the narrative. According to Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy, "ecocriticism is based not only on the recognition of connections between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women across patriarchal societies. It is also based on the recognition that these two forms of domination are bound up with class exploitation, racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism" (3).

Incorporating ecocriticism and ecofemism in this analysis of *Their Eyes* expands the scope of the Tragic Mercy paradigm because it taps into the cornerstone of Hurston's aesthetic while simultaneously incorporating feminist principles that more adequately suit her work. According to Hajjari, Harehdasht, and Ghasemi, "the world that she [Hurston] depicts...is a playing stage of opposing groups of people: of those who, in their transcendental pursuits are inspired by the organic livelihood of the nature and of those who yield to the mechanisms of stagnant urban life" (39). In *Their Eyes*, the impact of the natural world on ordinary Black people in the South is intrinsic to understanding Janie's tragic journey from bondage to liberation; therefore, this analysis emphasizes Hurston's attempt to naturalize her narrative both literally and figuratively.

Hurston's narrative portrays the journey of Janie Crawford from her impressionable, passionate teenage years to her questioning, searching adult years. Her grandmother, Nanny, who raises her after Janie's mother leaves them, initially influences Janie's primary images of womanhood and love. Janie's journey is punctuated by disruptions of her fantasies of love and womanhood. Her grandmother interrupts her initial sexual awakening because she fears it will

lead to a life of exploitation and shame. When Nanny notices Janie's sexual curiosity, she declares, "...youse got yo' womanhood on yuh. So Ah mout ez well tell yuh whut Ah been savin' up for uh spell. Ah wants to see you married right away" (12). And with Nanny's proclamation comes Janie's first marriage which is doomed to fail and only succeeds in "desecrating the pear tree" (14) of her sexual awakening. While waiting for something on the horizon, she meets and escapes with Joe Starks who does not wholly fulfill her pollen-filled expectations, but he "spoke for horizons" (29) and that excites Janie. However, his big voice kills her own and it remains stifled until she and Joe confront one another on his deathbed. Like Nanny, both Logan and Joe disrupt Janie's awakening and she is unable to continue her fantasy from the pear tree until she meets the carefree Vergible Woods, known affectionately as Tea Cake. Janie has a wide-eyed courtship with Tea Cake that validates and expands her notions of love and womanhood. However, Janie is forced to shoot Tea Cake after he contracts rabies from a dog that bites him during the narrative's climactic storm sequence. Though Hurston strategically positions Tea Cake as a contradiction to both Logan and Joe and also situates him as an initiator of Janie's ultimate subjectivity, it is not Janie's relationship with Tea Cake that transforms her ideas about her identity and position in the world; it is her tragic killing of Tea Cake that initiates transformation and points to her subjectivity apart from male domination.

Initial tensions that hinder Janie's growth and subjectivity coincide with her inability to match the harmony of nature in her romantic relationships. As a young girl, Janie relies on cues from nature to direct her ideas about the world. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston frames ideal romantic relationships on the interdependent, harmonious couplings found in nature. These couplings represent a form of equilibrium that challenge hierarchies that dominate and subordinate. Hurston exemplifies this equilibrium in Janie's sexual awakening as a curious sixteen-year-old.

Though Janie spends most days under a blossoming pear tree, on this particular day she observes the flourishing relationship between bee and flower. Hurston writes,

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bee, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver to the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! (11)

It should be noted that Hurston was intrigued by the impact of nature on her development as a young woman and as a writer. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks*, she states that as a child, “I was only happy in the woods” (41). She also talks about an intimate relationship that she shared with a tree that seems to parallel Janie’s obsession with her pear tree. Hurston writes, “I made particular friendship with one huge tree and always played about its roots. I named it ‘the loving pine,’ and my chums came to know it by that name” (41). Just as Hurston’s adolescent imagination allowed her to use nature to understand herself intimately and to connect with her “chums,” so, too, does Janie’s experience with her pear tree influence her development and her ideas about relationships. Janie emerges from this experience looking for her equal in nature knowing that the bee and the pear tree are both agents that contribute to pragmatic pleasure that leads to growth. She says, “Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen—She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her?” (11). In this vivid image, Janie is the pear tree searching for a bee to “struggle” or labor with in life in an egalitarian relationship. Unfortunately for Janie, her most pivotal relationships are mired by imbalance, domination, and disorder, which stunt her agency and subjectivity in the text.

Hurston frames Janie's early relationships as imbalanced ecosystems that hinder her ability to exert her own free will and effect change in her life. Janie's journey symbolizes the ebb and flow of seasonal change in *Their Eyes*. This is apparent in Hurston's characterization of her path: "Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches" (8). However, though Hurston situates Janie as an ecological agent searching for answers in each season of her life, she also juxtaposes her efforts with characters that oppose her independence and individuality. Though most scholar-critics emphasize her male suitors when assessing her intimate relationships, many overlook the influence that her grandmother, Nanny, has on Janie's formulation of self. Nanny is the first person that challenges and undermines Janie's subjectivity and disrupts the equilibrium that she discovers under the pear tree. Though Nanny is a Black woman, she, undoubtedly, represents oppressive patriarchal ideologies and projections of one-dimensional, stereotypical identity formations.

These ideologies are apparent when Nanny catches Janie kissing Johnnie Taylor at her front gate after Janie's awakening under the pear tree. Instead of allowing Janie to define her own sexuality and her own identity in relation to the opposite sex, Nanny immediately projects onto Janie a hypersexualized identity that parallels white supremacist patriarchal ideologies. Not only does Nanny censure Janie for her actions, but she shames her as well. When Janie protests to Nanny's assumptions that she got her "womanhood on yuh" (12), Nanny says, "What Ah seen just now is plenty for me, honey, Ah don't want no trashy nigger, no breath-and-bitches, lak Johnny Taylor usin' yo' body to wipe his foots on" (13). To this assertion, Hurston writes, "Nanny's words made Janie's kiss across the gatepost seem like a manure pile after a rain" (13). In this instance, Nanny reiterates detrimental ideologies that hamper Black sexual

autonomy and Black identity in society. Nanny does not accept Janie's sexual awakening as a natural occurrence that coincides with her self-determination as a Black woman; instead, she signifies her actions as sexual deviancy that must be tamed in order for her to align with patriarchal standards. These sexually deviant images evoke the antebellum stereotypes of the jezebel or the bed wench which will eventually give way to the contemporary images that Joan Morgan designates as the "...the video-hos, crackheads, and lazy welfare queens," images that she says "obscure much of who we [Black women] are" (26). In either instance, Nanny undermines Janie's subjectivity and hinders her ability to flourish in a healthy ecosystem that engenders equilibrium in her familial and romantic relationships.

Perhaps more detrimental than Nanny's ideology, however, is her orchestration of Janie's arranged marriage, which impedes Janie's sexual and maternal autonomy in similar ways as the forced engagements that enslaved Black people had to endure under chattel slavery. It should be noted that Nanny's arranged marriage for Janie in no way serves the same purposes as white slaveholder's purpose for forced sexual relations among the enslaved on antebellum plantations. This is evident through Nanny's explanations for wanting Janie to marry the local, older landowner Logan Killicks. Nanny tells Janie, "'Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection" (15). However, though Nanny has good intentions for Janie's arranged marriage, she robs Janie of the ability to choose her mate and the father of her future children in much the same way as white slaveholders during slavery. Further, once Janie marries Logan, Nanny gives her an erroneous model for marriage that relies on subjugation and capitalism, which also aligns with racist patriarchal ideologies. When Janie complains about not loving and not wanting Logan, Nanny tells Janie incredulously, "If you don't want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor. Got a house

bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on de big road...Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love!" (23). Nanny's conception of marriage is gravely flawed because it is founded on systems that perpetuate disorder in the ecosystem. Instead of seeking harmony and equality in nature as Janie does, Nanny seeks superficial economic means that will elevate Janie above her Black, impoverished counterparts and create hierarchies that will perpetuate other forms of oppression in the Black community. Many of these hierarchies connect to distinctly intraracial issues that Hurston explores in her narrative, such as class chasms in the Black community, especially as it concerns Johnnie Taylor, as well as colorism, which Hurston explores later in the narrative when Janie leaves her childhood community. Under these oppressive systems, individuals, such as Janie and Nanny herself, cannot grow because they are confined by constructs that will simultaneously exploit them and the natural world in which they live. This universal exploitation is precisely the reason why Janie is unable to stay in a relationship with Logan.

Hurston uses Janie's relationship with Logan to expose the ways that oppressive systems inhibit individual agency and ecological agency. In exposing these connections, Hurston also outlines the ways that oppressive systems control natural resources in much the same way as they control human subjects that depend on those natural resources. Many scholars critique the Logan/Janie relationship by emphasizing Janie's inability to access her "pear tree" dreams because of Logan's stiff, pragmatic approach to his relationship with Janie. Janie's initial impressions of Logan are initially immature and superficial. She says of Logan, "...Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and date pone uh fat back uh his neck" (24). Logan hardly represents the passionate visions that she nurtures under the pear tree. Hurston extends the ruptures in Janie and Logan's relationship beyond Janie's superficial desires

by emphasizing the ways that Logan attempts to control Janie in the same way as he controls his land and his mule. Logan does not facilitate an egalitarian relationship with Janie; instead, he attempts to impress his own agenda upon her while ignoring her desires. One way that he does this is by using the natural resource of his farm to inhibit Janie's agency. In one instance, he tries to force Janie to move a pile of manure with him, to which she responds, "You don't need mah help out dere, Logan. Youse in yo place and Ah'm in mine" (31). Logan's answer to her response exposes his thoughts of her: "You aint got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick" (31). In another instance, Logan tells Janie that he is going to get her a mule so she can plow the land for the upcoming planting. In each of these instances, Logan's control over the land correlates with his attempts to control and limit Janie's agency. In doing this, Logan creates hierarchies that allow him to subjugate Janie in ways that hinder her subjectivity. This dynamic echoes Ynestra King's assumptions that, "There is no natural hierarchy; human hierarchy is projected onto nature and then used to justify social domination" (qtd in Gaard & Murphy 4). The hierarchy that Nanny and Logan erect is the beginning of fragmentation and stagnation for Janie. Because she cannot exert agency, Janie realizes that her "first dream was dead" (25).

Though Hurston frames Logan as an obstacle that can be overcome for Janie, she epitomizes social domination and the realities of hierarchies in Janie's relationship with Joe Starks. In *Their Eyes*, Joe represents a form of hegemonic control that takes Janie the furthest away from equilibrium in nature and in her relationships. Joe exerts his most blatant form of domination by silencing Janie throughout the narrative, effectively hindering her subjectivity. Hurston illustrates this by exposing the ways that Joe excludes Janie from the communal porch conversations. Throughout *Their Eyes*, Hurston uses the vernacular traditions performed on the

porch as cultural and social edification for the residents of Eatonville. While the Black residents joke, rhyme, and signify, they become more in tune with the natural world around them and they are better able to reclaim agency in a system that vehemently denies their ability to act.

Kimberly Ruffin argues that, “African Americans and other oppressed peoples have struggled to obtain and maintain influence in the social world just as they have sought to influence their relationship within nonhuman nature” (18). However, Hurston’s ecological aesthetic overcomes this struggle through the communal performance of the vernacular tradition. For instance, the conversations about Matt Bonner’s mule on the porch become the creative strategy through which the town people exert power in society. While the residents joke about Matt’s stinginess in feeding the yellow mule or playfully warn each other of the meanness of the brute, they are using their own narratives to impact society and culture. Hurston acknowledges this early in the narrative as Janie returns to the town. She writes: “It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human” (1). The mule talk simultaneously disrupts social power dynamics while acknowledging the interdependence of human and nonhuman relations.

Janie is disallowed from this edification, however, because Joe silences her in order to diminish her agency and subjectivity. Hurston writes that Janie, “loved the conversation and sometimes she thought up good stories on the mule, but Joe had forbidden her to indulge” (53). Joe prevents Janie from partaking in the verbal play by first shaming her for wanting to be involved and then by forcing her to work the store, even if there are no customers to tend to. However, despite Joe’s supposed distaste for mule talk, Janie notices that he fully engages in the

culture with his big “he, he laugh,” taking advantage of the power that emerges from signifyin(g). By barring Janie from the porch verbal play and forcing her to perform restrictive work that cuts her off from Black identity and Black power structures, Joe effectively stifles her ability to define herself in conjunction with culture, nature, and society, and he impedes her ability to exert choice over her destiny in the community. In many ways, Joe mirrors the white supremacist capitalist ideologies that Nanny alludes to earlier in the narrative. The “white man is de ruler of everything” as she says, but as the white man subjugates the Black man, the Black man in turn subjugates the Black woman, and she becomes “de mule uh de world” (14). In essence, Joe exhibits white patriarchal power structures to create hierarchies that undermine Janie and other Black women, and some men, in order to position himself as superior.

In these instances, Hurston once again emphasizes ecological imbalances that inhibit Janie’s growth in the narrative. Joe’s communal porch symbolizes an ecological system that is imbalanced and in disorder. In this environment, the reality of death is inevitable. Hurston illustrates this death through Janie’s subsequent fragmentation and stagnation. Hurston outlines Janie’s wilting subjectivity:

So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush. The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again. So she put something in there to represent the spirit like a Virgin Mary image in a church. The bed was not longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired. (71)

Here, Hurston connects Janie’s inability to exert vocal agency to her eventual marital and spiritual death. Because Janie’s identity is so intertwined with her desire to have a harmonious, egalitarian relationship with her partner, this scene also represents her diminishing identity as a sexually autonomous woman. Janie is unable to perform the natural communion that results from

her “daisy-field” play with her husband, and because of this she cannot be known or know herself through nature, which, up until this point, has been a primary source of subjectivity and growth for Janie. Instead, her bed becomes the place for the metaphorical death of sleep, which signifies emotional, physical, and psychological stagnation.

In order to awaken from this metaphorical death, Janie must disrupt the power dynamics that stifle her subjectivity and diminished agency. And, as many scholars attest, she begins to reclaim agency when she finally uses her voice to resist Joe’s domination. She does this first by undermining his masculinity in the presence of the male dominated audience of the porch. Janie rebuffs Joe’s insults about her age by proclaiming, “Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout *me* looking old! When you pull down yo’ britches you look lak de change uh life” (79). The porch erupts in shock and disbelief after Janie’s accusation. The interchange begins to kill Joe literally and metaphorically. His health begins to deteriorate after Janie divulges his private shame, and Joe’s reputation with the men in Eatonville also diminishes. Janie’s accusation is so effective because she repositions the male dominated structure of the porch to undermine its male leader. As Pattison argues, “In each of the spaces that Hurston addresses, the discourses of marginalization attached to African American female subjectivities provide such counter-sites where women may contest the dominant discourses of whiteness and patriarchy” (11). In addition to challenging these male dominated spaces, Janie further attacks the one masculine trait that Joe uses to position himself as superior to women and men whom he deems as inferior: his virility.

Hurston frames Janie’s resistant act as a tactic that reestablishes her agency as it simultaneously restructures the porch culture as a healthy, diversified ecosystem that engenders growth as opposed to stagnation. This aligns with Gaard and Murphy’s assumptions that, “A healthy, balanced ecosystem, including human and nonhuman inhabitants, must maintain

diversity” (4). It is this diversity, they continue, that “opposes all forms of domination and violence” (4). Janie’s subversion of the porch culture and subsequent reclamation of her agency is the first step to reclaiming her subjectivity fully; however, Hurston’s ultimate strategy in *Their Eyes* is to use the Tragic Mercy killing of Tea Cake as a tragic alternative journey that transforms Janie from object to subject. Though Janie’s mercy killing is brief, Hurston uses it as a powerful subversion of the oppressive patriarchal systems that Nanny, Logan, and Joe perpetuate. What is telling about Janie’s performance of the Tragic Mercy is that it is perpetuated in a relationship with similar power dynamics that had previously stunted Janie’s identity and subjectivity. On the surface, Tea Cake seems to be the bee to Janie’s pear tree. When their courtship begins, Janie openly acknowledges that Tea Cake “could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps” (106). However, Hurston’s text does not definitively qualify Tea Cake as either a “bee” or an ideal mate for Janie. Instead, Hurston characterizes Tea Cake as a flawed man who engages in many of the same behaviors as Logan and Joe. The fatal flaw of the text, however, is Janie’s fierce devotion to Tea Cake despite his domineering disposition. Hurston corrects this ambiguous plight by incorporating a tragic mercy that saves Janie even as it mercifully releases Tea Cake from turmoil and suffering. Hurston incorporates the Tragic Mercy in the text in order to initiate a rebirth for Janie and Tea Cake.

When Janie meets Tea Cake for the first time, she has lived in a perpetual state of choicelessness from her arranged marriage initiated by her grandmother to her forced subjugation in Joe Starks’s store. In each instance, Janie is unable to resist adequately subjugation and flourish in a healthy ecosystem that affirms her identity. Hurston attempts to position Tea Cake as a gateway to agency, independence, and nonconformity. Tea Cake

encourages Janie to engage in activities that Joe had previously disallowed. For instance, at the beginning of their courtship Tea Cake shows her how to play checkers and Janie is impressed that “Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play” (96). Further, Tea Cake gives Janie the opportunity to reconnect with nature in a way that harkens back to her adolescent awakenings under the pear tree. With Tea Cake Janie hunts and fishes, and Tea Cake also gardens to impress Janie. Tea Cake also introduces Janie to Big Lake Okechobee with its “big beans, big cane, big weeds” (129). In this new environment, Janie experiences the intersections of Black culture and nature and she is finally able to participate in powerful storytelling which challenges her marginalized status in society.

It seems that Janie has found a viable partner to construct the equilibrium that she has desired since she was a young girl. However, Hurston consistently challenges this reading by illustrating the ways that Tea Cake aligns with patriarchal domination. Tea Cake exhibits a slew of behaviors that align with the antics of Janie’s previous lovers. One of the Tea Cake’s most prominent betrayals of Janie occurs when Tea Cake beats Janie in order to show his dominance. When Tea Cake believes that Janie has entertained another man, he flies into a rage. His response exposes the possessive subjugation that he projects onto Janie. Hurston writes,

Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. (147)

In this scene Hurston resurrects the likes of Joe Starks in the place of Tea Cake. Tea Cake beats Janie in order to both possess her and to reify his masculinity to the men and women on the muck. It is also telling that Tea Cake beats her because of “that awful fear inside,” which presumably symbolizes the insecurity that he harbors because Janie is wealthy, from a higher

social class, and beautiful, all characteristics that that add to her subjectivity in the text.

Ultimately, like Logan and Joe, Tea Cake attempts to “humble” Janie by reminding her of her place in conjunction to his patriarchal power. This form of domination paralyzes Janie in that she does not fight back and allows him to hit her in a way that “Uh person can see every place you hit her” (147) as Sop-de-Bottom says. It is evident from this passage that Janie has not fully reclaimed her identity and subjectivity from male domination and, therefore, she is unable to act and resist subjugation. In this instance, Hurston emphasizes the detrimental effects of patriarchy on men and women who rely on oppressive systems: both are corrupted by its power.

Once Janie performs the Tragic Mercy, however, she disrupts the influence of patriarchal corruption and chooses life instead of stagnation and death under an oppressive system. Janie’s performance of Tragic Mercy is a form of activism against the detrimental effects of male domination which has fragmented the ecosystems in her life. Hurston portrays Tea Cake as an ambiguous character in order to illustrate the denigrating effects of patriarchy on Black men and women. The great tragedy that both Janie and Tea Cake endure is that though they escape the devastating storm in the muck, Tea Cake contracts rabies trying to save Janie from an infected dog. However, Tea Cake’s sickness represents more than a literal deadly disease. Hurston uses Tea Cake’s mental and physical deterioration to symbolize the inevitable effects of unbridled male domination in society. After Tea Cake is bitten, he becomes paranoid, possessive, and violent. These are characteristics that plague Logan and Joe in their interactions with Janie. However, Hurston reveals their hyperbolic manifestations in Tea Cake. At the climax of his disease he pulls a gun on Janie as he confesses, “Janie, Ah done went through everything tuh be good tuh you and it hurt me tuh mah heart tuh be ill treated lak Ah is” (183). Tea Cake’s delirious, fabricated grievances echo those of Joe Starks and even Logan Killicks at the end of

his doomed relationship with Janie. However, unlike her previous relationships where she was forced to acquiesce to domination and stagnation, she acts.

Janie performs the Tragic Mercy by shooting Tea Cake before he has a chance to shoot her, and with that action, Janie reclaims her subjectivity and agency in a way that was inaccessible to her before. For the first time in her life, Janie chooses her own destiny apart from an external force that projects its will upon her. Of this moment, Hurston writes, “It was the meanest moment of eternity. A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake’s head in her lap” (184). Hurston illustrates Janie’s transformation from a vulnerable, down-trodden woman to an empowered agent who exerts choice for her own well-being in society. In this moment, Janie does not wait expectantly for someone to save her, as she did with Logan, nor does she passively endure while life is stolen from her, as was the case with Joe. Instead, Janie performs a subversive mercy where she sacrifices the love she has for Tea Cake for the love she has for herself. And this is a transformative act that she has not explored with any man in her life. For the first time, she chooses self, and this choice affirms her subjectivity in the text.

Janie’s Tragic Mercy also allows her to reclaim her interconnectedness with nature and capture her first dreams under the pear tree. Janie experiences a second rebirth after performing Tragic Mercy, with her first rebirth occurring under the pear tree. Once she performs Tragic Mercy, Janie evolves in much the same way as she does under the pear tree and her growth is directly correlated to her harmony with nature. However, instead of looking to nature for a mate, Janie now looks to nature to help her manage the traumas associated with the mercy killing and with death. This is apparent in her last mentions of Tea Cake. In life, Tea Cake could not provide Janie with the true equilibrium that she sought as a teenager, but in death, he leaves her

the keys that will allow her to commune with him and with nature in order to mimic her first passionate relationship with the pear tree. In the final moments of the narrative, Janie returns to Eatonville and is reminded of the seeds that Tea Cake left behind. Hurston writes, “The seeds reminded Janie of Tea Cake more than anything else because he was always planting things. She had noticed them on the kitchen shelf when she came home from the funeral and had put them in her breast pocket. Now that she was home, she meant to plant them for remembrance” (191). Janie’s plans to memorialize Tea Cake by planting his seeds bring her journey full circle. At the beginning of things, nature imparted knowledge and wisdom upon her and she went out into the world searching for something. Now, as a seasoned, experienced woman, she will plant seeds that will contribute to renewal and rebirth that will influence someone else’s journey and prompt them to rely on nature to lead them. Hurston frames Janie’s Tragic Mercy as a gateway to reclamation and rebirth that affirms her subjectivity and agency in the great ecosystem of life.

In closing, Janie’s Tragic Mercy provides a gateway that transforms and renews her relationally and ecologically. After she performs the mercy killing, she is able to define herself apart from male domination and seek equilibrium between herself and the natural world around her. Janie’s tragic act also creates a space for resistance and subjectivity. By using Morrison’s tragic aesthetic in conjunction with the tenets of ecocriticism, we can answer Hurston’s ambiguous questions about human nature, liberation and freedom, and agency and subjugation. Further, we can point to the true culprits of societal tragedies that lead to oppressive hierarchies in race, gender, and class constructs. Using this aesthetic allows us to expand the scope of African American tragedy while challenging rigid constructs that align with dominant hegemonies.

6. CONCLUSION

The Morrisonian Tragedy provides a platform to interrogate Tragic Mercies in African American literature as gateways to reclamation, catharsis, and redemption in order to subvert Eurocentric ideologies, expand the Black aesthetic, and address trauma in African American literature. Using Morrison's aesthetic vision in *Beloved* to analyze other African American canonical texts proves to be a fruitful methodology that illuminates the complexities of the African American condition in American society. Morrison's contemplations of African American and American history, culture, and literature in *Beloved* provides the ideal infrastructure to assess the nuances of tragedy and redemption in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* (1996) and *Fucking A* (2001) and Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* (2006). Analyzing these narratives using the Tragic Mercy paradigm reveals the ways that traumatic experiences can be transmuted into spaces of resistance and healing that allow protagonists to traverse to a place of wholeness instead of being confined to a fragmented state that will reverberate in African American culture and history. Ultimately, the Tragic Mercy paradigm reconstructs these tragic works as platforms for reclamation and resistance in the midst of tyrannical systems that pervasively enslave African American people both literally and metaphorically.

The Tragic Mercy paradigm also provides an innovative model that has the potential to expand the ways that scholar-critics analyze African American tragic works. When I began this project my desire was to create another lens through which scholar-critics could assess canonical

works to gain understanding about the complexities of the African American struggle as it pertains to tragedy and trauma in African American literature. Just as Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* reconceptualizes the ways that scholar-critics contemplate race in American and African American literature, I wanted to reconceptualize the ways that scholar-critics contemplate tragedy in African American literature in a way that is unique to the African American condition. In doing so, I formulate constructs that not only define the Tragic Mercy paradigm, but also affirm the tenets of African American resistance and resilience in the African American literary canon. Instead of being confined to tropes that connect to concepts such as hamartia or the "tragic flaw," which validate Eurocentric, westernized ideologies and vilify African American protagonists, I provide constructs that expand the lexicon of African American tragedy while simultaneously redeeming African American protagonists. Analyzing the constructs of act/action/activism, identity reclamation, system disruptions, and internal transformations through Tragic Mercies expands the scope of African American literary discourse even as it reifies prominent themes in African American literature. Ultimately, this research project provides an innovative way to analyze African American literature using themes that are intrinsic African American culture. Using this methodology expands the scope and depth of African American literature, especially as it pertains to African American tragedy.

In order to expand the impact of this paradigm, I would encourage future scholar-critics to combine it with other established paradigms in order to analyze canonical African American literary texts. My research agenda for this study focuses almost exclusively on tragic fiction narratives; however, it can be applicable to a wide range of African American literary discourse and it can be combined with a plethora of theoretical constructs to illuminate the journeys from

fragmentation to wholeness. Throughout this research project I allude to various theoretical constructs, but perhaps the most direct application of the Tragic Mercy paradigm and another established paradigm is illustrated in Chapter 4 entitled “Answering Zora’s Ambiguous Questions: Subversive Mercy in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.” In that chapter, I use the Tragic Mercy paradigm and ecofeminism to analyze Hurston’s work. This strategy illuminates key aesthetics in Hurston’s work while also interrogating Janie’s Tragic Mercy killing of Tea Cake. I believe future scholarship will greatly benefit from such an approach. Teaming the Tragic Mercy paradigm with other established theoretical constructs will expand the possibilities of the Morrisonian Tragedy even further, and it will broaden the applicability of the Tragic Mercy framework. Moving forward, I encourage scholars to incorporate Black feminism, Black rhetoric, feminism, ecocriticism, signifyin(g), deconstruction, postmodernism, and other established paradigms that will illuminate understanding in African American literary discourse.

In this project, I exclusively analyze womanhood, motherhood, female sexuality and femininity, the female black body, and heteronormative relationships from female perspectives. As a scholar who focuses on race, gender, class, and sexuality in African American literature, and as a Black feminist scholar, I believe in the importance of interrogating the Black female voice and analyzing experiences pertinent to Black women; however, I believe it would also be beneficial to interrogate Black male authors and Black male protagonists and their journey from fragmentation to redemption in African American tragedy. In Chapter 2 entitled “Tragic Mercy as an Iconoclastic Tool of Redemption in Suzan Lori Parks’s *Fucking A* and Kyle Baker’s *Nat Turner*,” I give a thorough analysis of the Tragic Mercy from a male perspective that I believe is a fruitful addition to my mostly Black female interrogations. Moving forward, I believe future

scholar-critics should also consider the unique experiences of Black male protagonists such as Stamp Paid in *Beloved* and the fictionalized Nat Turner in Kyle Baker's graphic novel *Nat Turner*.

By identifying Morrison's distinct tragic aesthetic and formulating the Tragic Mercy paradigm to analyze other tragic works, this project expands African American literary discourse and provides an infrastructure that future scholars can use to assess effectively the African American canon. Further, on a grander scale, this paradigm provides scholars with the tools to gain meaning from the truly tragic and traumatic experiences that many oppressed and enslaved African American people endured during historical travesties such as the Middle Passage and American slavery. In essence, I believe this project answers Morrison's poignant call for a memorial that acknowledges the enslaved Black people who were forgotten and lost during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and during the horrors of slavery. And I hope it will continue to bolster research that will illuminate the resiliency of people of the African diaspora.

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