

“(RE)CONSIDER ME”: BLACK GIRL-WOMEN  
IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

For years, many authors have neglected, minimized, or created one-dimensional black girls in African American literature, often including their stories as mere context or backdrops for adult characters. Likewise, critics commonly overlook African American female children and adolescents in their scholarship and loosely use the designation “black girl” to describe adult black women and children alike. This project attempts to shift this trend by locating and emphasizing complex black female children and adolescents in African American literature, particularly characters whose innocence and childhoods are denied and whose maturities have been expedited for familial, laboring, and/or sexual purposes.

To enhance the emerging interdisciplinary field of black girlhood studies, I present a new conceptual approach—the black girl-woman, a female character whose mental development is or has been interrupted or stagnated by traumatic experiences suffered during her formative years, forcing her to behave as a woman or to perform various duties associated with womanhood despite her chronological age. I apply this theoretical approach to a broad swath of African American literature, including Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, Colson Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad*, Delores Phillips’s *The Darkest Child*, Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Getting Mother’s Body*, A. J. Verdelle’s *The Good Negress*, and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever*.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother and my rock, Doris Bickham. My ongoing goal as a mother is to be as supportive and nurturing to my daughter, Adaia, as she has been to me.

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## INTRODUCTION

### VISUALIZING BLACK GIRL-WOMANHOOD

*All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men.*

—Sofia, *The Color Purple*

Before her fourteenth birthday, Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) endures so much sexual, physical, and mental abuse that she solicits God to achieve a better understanding of herself and the horrifying circumstances of her life. Instead of requesting divine intervention to punish or destroy her tormentors, as many biblical characters do, she merely reports her offenders' actions as a journalist might and wonders why God forsakes her, especially since she has "always been a good girl" (Walker 1). In the preface to the tenth anniversary edition of the novel, Walker states that Celie's struggle is a religious one, that the young girl "starts out in life already a spiritual captive" until she develops a "new spiritual awareness" and encounters "That Which Is Beyond Understanding But Not Beyond Loving."<sup>1</sup> Certainly, Celie wrestles with her religious identity and personal beliefs throughout the narrative, but her childhood difficulties extend far beyond the metaphysical and existential into the physical and psychological realities of her troubling existence. She is an unprotected, overworked, physically abused, and sexually assaulted adolescent forced to manage households teeming with other people's children, while her babies are literally stolen away from her and sold. These traumatizing experiences simultaneously expedite Celie's maturity and stagnate her

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<sup>1</sup> The anniversary edition provides no page numbers for this portion of the text.

mental development, forcing her into what I describe as black girl-womanhood, a liminal psychological state between childhood and adulthood.

Celie is an archetype of the kind of character that drives this dissertation, one of many black girls commonly overlooked, oversimplified, or completely ignored in literary studies. In my research, I attempt to shift this trend by locating and emphasizing complex black female children and adolescents in African American literature, particularly characters who are adultified,<sup>2</sup> that is denied their innocence and childhoods, and who are forced to grow up too soon for familial, laboring, and/or sexual purposes. To expand literary scholarship and its presence in academic exchanges with the emerging interdisciplinary field of black girlhood studies, I present this new conceptual approach—the black girl-woman, a female character whose mental development is or has been interrupted or stagnated by traumatic experiences suffered during her formative years. These difficulties force her to behave as a woman or to perform various duties associated with womanhood despite her chronological age. The theory of black girl-womanhood offers scholars a new paradigm with which to consider literary depictions of black female youth in a more comprehensive manner, expands academic discourse on a population regularly excluded from such conversations, and (re)affirms the importance of African American girls, not as soon-to-be black women, but as individuals worthy of consideration in their own right.

Commonly, black girl-womanhood emerges after an African American female child or adolescent character endures a debilitating trauma—the death or absence of a parent (most likely

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<sup>2</sup> In the 2017 Georgetown Law report, “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood,” adultification is defined as “the perception of Black girls as less than innocent and more adult-like than white girls of the same age” (Epstein 1).

a mother), sexual abuse or harassment, and/or various types of racial violence.<sup>3</sup> Celie experiences all of these traumas before age fourteen as a result of living in the racist Jim Crow South, where her biological father is lynched, her mother suffers a debilitating illness before dying “screaming and cussing” (Walker 2), and her stepfather, who she believes is her biological parent, repeatedly rapes and impregnates her. At times, Celie seems unsurprised by the adultification she experiences, becoming accustomed to others denying her innocence and perceiving her as an adult, and she spends her childhood and adolescent years keeping house, tending to children, and quietly studying other people’s actions and attitudes to avoid the myriad abuses she has come to expect. At times, when she somehow avoids painful interactions, Celie is almost completely ignored, which causes her to believe that even God must be reminded of her age and life history as she begins the letters that shape the novel. Since the people who periodically notice her are usually judgmental, she does not expect their concern or protection, and she neither asks them for assistance nor anticipates salvation. She simply wants God to “give [her] a sign letting [her] know what is happening to [her]” (Walker 1). Often resembling a child, with her simplistic reasoning, fearful obedience, and limited understanding of basic ideas, Celie accepts her fate and treatment in her stepfather’s and husband’s homes as inevitable. At one point, she willfully participates in her adultification by dressing up as a sexy woman to entice her pedophilic stepfather, Alphonso, as a means of preventing him from raping her beloved younger sister, Nettie (Walker 7). The maneuver works but with a high cost since Celie states, “He beat me for

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<sup>3</sup> A 2019 *American Psychologist* article by Comas-Díaz et al., states that racial trauma “involves ongoing injuries due to the exposure (direct and/or vicarious) and reexposure to race-based stress” and notes its similarity to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with “effects such as hypervigilance to threat, flashbacks, nightmares, avoidance, suspiciousness, and somatic expressions such as headaches and heart palpitations, among others” (2). The authors also note that racial trauma causes long-term “psychological and physical distress” (1), “leaves scars for those who are dehumanized” (1), and has “intergenerational effects” (2) and “cultural relevance” (2).

dressing trampy but he do it to me anyway” (Walker 7). In this dissertation, I argue that, like Celie, often other black girl-women exhibit behaviors that reinforce adultified perceptions of them in order to survive their circumstances and to protect the people they love, all of which simultaneously cause the saviors to sacrifice their childhoods further.

Without intervention, black girl-women can remain in their traumatized states indefinitely, and as art often reflects life, these characters must (re)discover their voices, return to the past, particularly the site of their trauma,<sup>4</sup> and share their stories<sup>5</sup> with others to metamorphose into fully actualized adults. Celie finds this process nearly impossible in her youth, especially since no one is consistently invested in guiding or assisting her as she struggles to overcome her trauma-filled childhood and adolescence. On one occasion, a teacher, Miss Beasley, visits Celie’s home, most likely at Nettie’s behest, to ask Alphonso to allow Celie and Nettie to continue their education, but once the woman notices Celie’s pregnant belly, she “stop talking and go” (Walker 10), completely aware of Celie’s living conditions and strong desire to continue her schooling, but unable or unwilling to help her escape. After Alphonso forces Celie to marry Albert, a local man so old that Celie refers to him simply as “Mr. \_\_\_\_\_,” one of Albert’s sisters urges him to buy Celie some clothing and attempts to defend Celie in the household and to encourage her to fight back. However, Albert abruptly ends his sister’s visit,

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<sup>4</sup> A 2015 study of trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy states that returning to the scene of the trauma can be a “valuable part of treatment” (Murry et al. 1) for those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders by “extinguish[ing] the fear associated with the site through exposure” (Murry et al. 2). Researchers found that such visits can “achieve various therapeutic tasks” including helping clients “distinguish the past from the present. . . find new information about the traumatic event that they had not previously accessed, which may help them to reevaluate problematic appraisals. . . reconstruct, elaborate and fill in any gaps in the trauma memory, therefore making it easier to process. . . [and] test out specific beliefs and predictions,” which have helped clients gain a sense of “closure and moving on” (Murry et al. 2, 3).

<sup>5</sup> Psychologists Lynne E. Angus and Leslie S. Greenberg describe the effectiveness of using narrative expression as a therapeutic approach to address childhood trauma, and they note that “stories help us make sense of our emotions” (4).

again leaving Celie to fend for herself against a man who seems more like her master or rapist stepfather than a loving, protective husband. Also, church women are aware of Celie's troubles, as she notices their tendency to gossip about and judge Albert's long-time girlfriend Shug Avery: "They some of the same ones used to be here both times I was big" [her word for pregnant] (Walker 41). Yet, none of these women intervenes on Celie's behalf. Even Nettie, who arguably cares most about Celie and attempts to teach her "spelling and. . . what go [sic] on in the world" (Walker 16), must reluctantly leave her dear sister to prevent herself from being abused as Celie is.<sup>6</sup> Such would-be saviors either remain on the periphery of or quickly enter and exit Celie's life, and since Celie admits that she does not know how to fight and can only "stay alive" (Walker 17), she remains a black girl-woman well into her adult years. Perhaps she might have learned to defend herself and improve her life if Nettie and the other women had continued infusing her with confidence, strength, and knowledge, but without such influences, Celie focuses on survival and self-preservation rather than rebellion and revolution. These circumstances firmly secure Celie's position as the archetypal black girl-woman since she experiences trauma early in life, receives little to no assistance in dealing with those conditions, and exists in a traumatized state for a large portion of her life, before she can heal by escaping her abusers, learning to speak for herself and becoming a storyteller, and returning home to deal with the truth of her past. My dissertation reveals the necessity of such restorative processes in order for other black girl-women to overcome their traumas.

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<sup>6</sup> Before her departure, Nettie is already displaying evidence of psychological trauma when she must tend to both Celie and her young stepmother and then rush outdoors to vomit after Alphonso rapes Celie (Walker 7). Up to this point, Nettie avoids and seems unaware of Celie's abuse, most likely because Celie is so determined to protect her younger sister. However, when Nettie observes how brutally Alphonso mistreats Celie, or as Celie states, when Nettie "finally see [sic] the light of day, clear" (Walker 7), the knowledge makes her physically ill.

While Celie is one of the most well-rounded depictions of black girl-womanhood, many others exist in American literature, although they may be overlooked, as many other black girl characters tend to be. Such oversights often exist since authors commonly neglect, minimize, or create one-dimensional black girl characters, who serve as mere context or backdrops for more centralized African American men, women, and young boys. Many scholars credit Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) with altering this literary tradition.<sup>7</sup> Morrison realized the disregard of young black girls in literature and explained that her aspiration for writing the novel was to share the stories of the "most vulnerable, most undescribed, not taken seriously little black girls [who] had never existed seriously in literature" (Gross). Likewise, in a 2004 interview with the National Visionary Leadership Project, Morrison noted a hierarchy of agency in American society, which places "female black children" firmly in the most defenseless position ("Toni Morrison Talks"). In her opinion and those of many other scholars, *The Bluest Eye* calls this societal and literary norm to task, and rightfully so. However, the process of centralizing black girls in literature has been a more concerted effort than some might think. It is one I consider historically, ultimately to understand the positionality of black girl-women. Some of the earliest literary references to African American girlhood appear in publications by and about Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano; from that point until now authors and critics have continued using the designation "black girl" loosely to describe adult black women and children alike.<sup>8</sup> Despite Wheatley's being nearly twenty years old when she published *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), her contemporaries and critics commonly refer to her as an underaged person. This reference might result from her master John Wheatley's

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<sup>7</sup> Further exploration of *The Bluest Eye* will be offered later in this introduction.

<sup>8</sup> Remarkably, this language starkly contrasts the historical use of the word "boy" when referring to black men, which society at-large, and especially people in the black community, recognize as emasculation or racial degradation.

description of her as “a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa” in his authentication of her ability to write poetry (“To the Publick”). Similarly, Mary Eliza Church Terrell notes that Wheatley, “a little black girl,” began the trend of referring to George Washington as “First in Peace” in a poem composed in his honor (230), and educator and journalist Irving Garland Penn describes Wheatley as “a little black girl” in his 1893 study on “The Progress of the Afro-American Since Emancipation” (48). Additional examples of this tendency exist in various historical records, many of which praise Wheatley for accomplishing such a tremendous literary feat at so young an age; however, assigning such a youthful description to a writer, who most would consider to be an adult even by today’s standards, accentuates the rarity of her accomplishment rather than her status as a young enslaved woman. Around the time of Wheatley’s publication, Equiano includes two references to African girls in his slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African. Written by Himself. Vol. I* (1789). He mentions a “poisoned negro girl” in Africa and the discovery of her assailant (35), and he describes the common occurrence of child rape aboard slave ships. Equiano states, “I have even known [the ship’s crew to] gratify their brutal passion with females not ten years old; and these abominations some of them practiced to such scandalous excess, that one of our captains discharged the mate and others on that account” (206). Aside from mentioning the heinous crimes committed against these black girls, Equiano provides no further explanation of them as individuals. One might wonder whether he or any of the other captives considered assisting or protecting the abused girls or if he conversed with any young girls or women about their particular experiences during the Middle Passage or enslavement to bolster the rhetorical appeal of his narrative, if for nothing else.

More than fifty years later, African American authors persisted in mentioning black girls in abolitionist literature, but they continued the tradition of offering very little information or insight to illuminate the black female youth experience. For example, Frederick Douglass references a young black girl in his 1841 “The Church and Prejudice” speech, which he delivered at a Plymouth Church Anti-Slavery Society meeting. In an anecdote about a “great revival of religion,” which was organized to bring sinners into the “kingdom of heaven,” Douglass recounts a white deacon’s practice of drawing the evangelical net ashore, “cull[ing] out the fish,” and separating those with “black scales,” a discriminatory action the man overcame in this particular instance solely to avoid offending an onlooking minister, who “was a kind of abolitionist” (4). To reinforce this imagery, Douglass describes a “colored girl” who “thought she might sit at the Lord’s table and partake of the same sacramental elements with the others,” but after receiving the cup “containing the precious blood,” the young white lady next to her “who had been converted at the same time, baptised [sic] in the same water, and put her trust in the same blessed Saviour [sic]. . . rose in disdain and walked out of the church” (4). Concluding this story, Douglass explains, “Such was the religion she [the black girl] had experienced!” (4). He offers no further speculation about the girl’s thoughts or pain, as if he did not consider her humanity, value her emotional response to the event, or realize how those details might have personalized or strengthened his speech. In his oration, the girl is transformed from a flesh and blood human being with feelings into a bite-sized allegory. Today, someone like Douglass might similarly reduce her existence and experience into a hashtag, that is #BlackScales or #SavedButNotTheSame, which essentially would be a display of solidarity with the abolitionist cause rather than true consideration of the person being mentioned. Further, the “girl” seemingly attends communion alone, which suggests that she is older and therefore not a child. Ironically,

Douglass employs this anecdote to emphasize the white deacon's bigotry, but also he is blind to the way he collapses the girl's chronological age and societal classification, which similarly diminishes the importance of black female children and adolescents.

At the turn of the twentieth century, widely circulated American literature would return the country's gaze to the abolitionist era; yet, many of these texts offer racist depictions of black girlhood, which exploit their powerless positionality and overshadow the poignant glimpses Douglass and others previously provided. One enduring example of this characterization in white literature is Prissy, a young black girl, initially referred to as a "little wench" (26) in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936). Protagonist Scarlett O'Hara describes Prissy as a "sly, stupid creature" (Mitchell 26) unnecessarily purchased along with her enslaved mother, who is so grateful for the kindness of her new master that she gives the child to Scarlett to serve as her personal maid. Remarkably, like so many literary and historical slave masters and mistresses, Scarlett completely disregards the traumatic, emotional damage that the separation would cause young Prissy and her mother. Mitchell's narrator further dehumanizes and disregards Prissy early in the novel, by creating a caricature of the girl as a "skinny pickaninny" (Mitchell 117), "a brown little creature, with skinny legs like a bird and a myriad of pigtailed carefully wrapped with twine sticking stiffly out from her head. She had sharp, knowing eyes that missed nothing and a studiedly stupid look on her face" (Mitchell 64). Although Prissy is a child, both O'Hara and the narrator consider her to be experienced and self-reliant, a reaction much different than the one they would produce for a young white child. After all, Scarlett, her sisters, and a bevy of other white female characters are old enough to marry, yet they require assistance with virtually every aspect of their lives including dressing, eating, and cleaning, as well as managing their households, social interactions, relationships, and emotions. The 1939 blockbuster film based on

Mitchell's novel solidifies this memorable, narrow-minded parody of black girlhood through Butterfly McQueen's controversial portrayal of Prissy as a high-voiced, deceitful, ditzy slave girl, who is constantly belittled and beaten. Throughout the motion picture, Prissy shifts abruptly from singing dreamily and speaking softly to crying hysterically when critical circumstances arise, and vice versa. In one scene, Prissy, informs Scarlett that she could "do everything" to help Scarlett's sister, Melanie, birth her baby, but when the delivery becomes life-threatening for Melanie, Prissy confesses frantically, "Lordsy, we got to have a doctor! I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' babies! . . . I don't know why I told such a lie" (Selznick). Immediately, Scarlet strikes Prissy across her head and prepares to repeat the action until she is summoned to assist her sister. Although McQueen later appreciated what she described as the "comedy relief" Prissy provides in the film (Eichler), she disliked the racially stereotypical role initially, and explained, "I was whining and crying all the time because I hated the way that I had to act. . . . Clark Gable [who plays Rhett Butler in the film] said, 'What's the matter, Prissy?' But, I just couldn't put my finger on anything. I just wasn't happy with the role" ("Butterfly McQueen"). Since the film "spawned countless TV specials, tourist attractions, and enviable box office totals" (Pallotta), Prissy's characterization became a mainstay in the American psyche, which easily excuses the physical abuse and mistreatment of a young enslaved black girl for the sake of comedy and romanticizing of the pre-Civil War South.<sup>9</sup>

Years prior to and during this racially regressive, but widely popular presentation of black girls, African American writers began publishing literature featuring more diverse portrayals of young female characters, although most of the texts either present them as

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<sup>9</sup> In a 2018 article about visitors' reactions during plantation tours, Matthew Paul Smith notes that white visitors occasionally reference Prissy "by name. . . attempting to justify how house servants 'had it very good compared to the field hands'" (186).

backstory for the narrative or continue using the term “girl” liberally to refer to young adults. Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) sermonizes the “pernicious influence of the city on untrained negroes” (414) and features spoiled sixteen-year-old Kitty Hamilton. Initially, Kitty possesses the “shyness of girlhood” (Dunbar 361), and her mother still refers to her as a child and even sends her to bed at times (Dunbar 360). Yet, soon Kitty locates work as a dancing girl on the vaudeville stage, which causes her mother to question her “ooman’s ladyship,” or feminine respectability, which suggests that Kitty has surpassed her childhood years (Dunbar 394). In “The Politics of Self-Identity in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*,” Bridget Harris Tsemo acknowledges the limited attention Dunbar devotes to Kitty’s story and notes that “from the little we learn about her, it becomes clear that she also dismisses her mother’s concern about appropriate southern behavior, becoming instead like the ‘unwomanly’ northern girls who wear clothing that is not ladylike to pursue her own dreams of becoming an entertainer” (33). Tsemo’s explanation of Kitty’s dilemma and usage of the terms “unwomanly” and “ladylike” when referring to the character also suggests that Kitty is more woman than child, which again, perhaps is indicative of underrepresentation of black girlhood in literature.

During the New Negro Movement, now considered the Harlem Renaissance, many writers, whether intentionally or inadvertently, continued conflating black girlhood and womanhood often using the terms “girl” and “gal” to represent the youthfulness or risqué lifestyles of adults. Even the prolific Langston Hughes seems largely to overlook black girls in his poetry, preferring instead to focus on young black women: “A Ruined Gal,” who curses her “black old mammy’s soul / For ever havin’ a daughter” (Rampersad 121); a “Black Gal,” who bemoans her dark skin and the eventual loss of a lover named Albert Johnson to a “yaller gal” (Rampersad 121); or “Ruby Brown,” a “young and beautiful” woman, who initially works in “a

white woman's kitchen" but later becomes a prostitute to "white men" (Rampersad 73). Likewise, despite its promise of a youthful character, the poem titled "Young Negro Girl" admires a woman who is "like a warm dark dusk / In the middle of June-time" (Rampersad 234), and in "Cabaret Girl Dies on Welfare Island," the speaker describes the final thoughts of a performer who lives "[d]runk and rowdy and gay" but dies destitute (Rampersad 251). Even "the dancing girls" in "Poem for Youth" refer to adult cabaret entertainers, and the titular character in "Ballad of the Girl Whose Name is Mud" is actually a young woman named Dorothy who is called a "hussy" after getting "in trouble / With a no-good man" (Rampersad 256). Further, in one of his poems entitled "Girl," the speaker describes a nameless female character who "lived in sinful happiness / And died in pain" (Rampersad 106). Chiefly, Hughes's "girls" and "gals" are fun-loving, often broken or fallen women either reminiscing about or mourning the enjoyable times they experienced with friends and lovers.

The closest Hughes comes to including additional stories of female youth are "all the girls" who adore a foolish boy named Willy in "The Lament of a Vanquished Beau" (Rampersad 598) and the little girl to whom "Mister Sandman" sends "a dream like a precious pearl" (Rampersad 599), although none of these children is identified as African American.<sup>10</sup> A rare inclusion of black female children in Hughes's poetry appears in a poem entitled "Birmingham Sunday (September 15, 1963)," which focuses on the "Four little girls / Who went to Sunday School that day / And never came back home at all" (Rampersad 557). Since this poem alludes to the historical 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing, Hughes only had to recall and utilize details from the terrorist attack to pen his poem rather than create or envision young female characters. Still, instead of presenting the girls as active characters in the poem, the narrator quite literally

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<sup>10</sup> Hughes also depicts genderless children in "The Naughty Child," "Genius Child," and "Kids Who Die."

reduces and morphs the victims' lives and bodies into visual elements of the horrific scene: "Their blood upon the wall / With splattered flesh / And bloodied Sunday dresses / Torn to shreds by dynamite" (Rampersad 557). Even in a poem that focuses on the murder of little black girls, Hughes can or will not devote personalized attention to the church bombing victims, and he lumps them into one generalized group of "flesh" and "blood." In this manner, Hughes's creative choices reflect and reinforce the status quo of the American racial hierarchy existing throughout much of 20<sup>th</sup> Century America, which places black people on the lowest rung of society, women beneath men and girls below boys.<sup>11</sup>

Zora Neale Hurston, a contemporary of Hughes, also includes overshadowed glimpses of black female adolescence in her classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). In the novel, protagonist Janie, who is "full of that oldest human longing—self revelation" (Hurston 7), reflects back on her childhood and sees "her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone" (Hurston 8). Janie envisions her life as a series of interconnected events, which she relates to her friend Pheoby to explain her year-and-a-half-long absence from and seemingly demoralized return to Eatonville, Florida. In this process, Janie recounts many memorable childhood experiences that shaped her life and decides "that her conscious life had commenced at [her grandmother's] gate" (Hurston 10). She notes that, at sixteen, she struggled to reconcile her personal and romantic desires with the racial, class, and gender expectations society imposed upon her. Amid these recollections, the narrator informs readers that Janie's kissing a boy at her grandmother's gate effectively ends her childhood,

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Hughes appears to have no such trouble depicting black boys in his poetry, as evident in "Migration," which carefully illustrates the schoolyard mistreatments of a young, dark-skinned, Southern boy who has migrated North (Rampersad 36). Additionally, in a poem entitled "Beggar Boy," the narrator even attempts to "hear. . . feel. . . see. . . know. . . [and] understand" a young "lad"; yet, Hughes gives no such consideration to the church bombing victims (Rampersad 29).

which the older woman, Nanny, confirms by telling Janie, “‘youse uh ‘oman, now’ [and] ‘youse got yo’ womanhood *on yuh*’” (emphasis mine) (Hurston 12). This declaration and the immediate shift in Janie’s positionality “was too new and heavy for [adolescent] Janie. . . [who] fought it away” (Hurston 12). Yet, the narrator soon reveals how society, and even Janie’s loved ones, collectively expedite her maturity, forcing womanhood on her like an oversized cloak, a gesture that is surprising, ill-timed, and too burdensome for her to bear, considering her age and naïve mentality.

The small portion of Janie’s childhood included in *Their Eyes* indicates that smooth, safe transitions into womanhood are privileges Janie and, often, other black girls cannot afford. This revelation becomes clear when Nanny tells her granddaughter, “‘Somebody done spoke to me ‘bout you long time ago’” (Hurston 13) after she becomes concerned about Janie’s behavior, which Nanny considers to be promiscuous. Janie is merely sixteen years old, and it is clear that her suitor, Logan Killicks, who Janie describes as “‘some ole skullhead in de grave yard’” (Hurston 13), has been romantically interested in juvenile Janie for quite some time, having anxiously anticipated her grandmother’s declaration of her adulthood despite her age. This occurrence calls to mind “Karintha” in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), who “men had wanted. . . even as a child” and for whom “young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them” (5). As in the case of Karintha, the “interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to” Janie (Toomer 5). Nevertheless, Nanny understands Janie’s vulnerable positionality too well, since the older woman had been raped repeatedly by her master during her enslavement, and because years later, she discovered her seventeen-year-old daughter’s brutal rape by a school teacher. These experiences lead Nanny

to believe that “‘de nigger woman<sup>12</sup> is de mule uh de world’” (Hurstun 14) and to understand the dangers facing black women and girls even when they are protected. Although she has resisted Logan’s requests to marry Janie up to this point, Nanny chooses what she believes is the lesser of two evils, uniting her beloved granddaughter to pedophilic Logan Killicks<sup>13</sup> in order to keep her safe and to shield her from “‘trashy. . . no breath-and-britches’” men who would use Janie’s body “‘to wipe [their] foots on’” (Hurstun 13). Despite these disclosures in the novel, Janie’s childhood is a rushed narrative element implemented to provide a deeper understanding of the subsequent choices she makes and the person she becomes rather than to offer meaningful insight into the adolescent experiences of black women.

With the rise of feminist studies and the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and 1970s, African American writers again shifted their gaze to previously overlooked or underdeveloped subject matter and characters, and this social landscape allowed and encouraged the introduction of more stories about black female children and adolescents. In 1969, J. E. (Jennie Elizabeth) Franklin published a bildungsroman two-act play entitled *Black Girl*, which “ran for an entire season in New York and was the only Off-Broadway production of the 1971-72 season to have a film sale,” also won Franklin the New York Drama Desk Most Promising Playwright Award in 1971 (“J(ennie) E(lizabeth) Franklin”). *Black Girl* portrays Billie Jean, “a young girl of nearly eighteen” (5), who is attempting to determine an acceptable path in life and to locate suitable employment. From the play’s inception, it is clear that Billie Jean hopes to become a dancer since she plasters her bedroom walls with “[r]ecord covers and photos of entertainers, especially

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<sup>12</sup> Nanny realizes the powerlessness of black women, but she makes no distinctions about the further helplessness of black girls even though she is relating these issues to Janie, who is sixteen at the time.

<sup>13</sup> While historically, cultural patterns and the lack of legal age requirements for marriage allowed and endorsed unions between young girls of any age to men of any age, I believe these men’s sexual interest in adolescent girls was problematic and predatory in most cases.

anyone in a dance pose,” and because her “linoleum rug is worn down to the black” from her constant jamming to jazz music (Franklin 7-8). The stage direction even offers readers a glimpse of Billie Jean as she is dancing:

The movements of the dance she is performing are graceful and precise, as if she had taken a great deal of time and thought to put this piece together to perform before an audience. . . . The dance itself is intricate and very expressive, like her face while she is performing it. . . . It is obvious that Billie Jean has a great deal of talent, and, with polish and training it all could develop into something. (8)

With such explanations, Franklin focuses her audience’s attention on Billie Jean, not as the girl relates to other characters or the narrative’s larger context, but because readers must witness her story and love of dancing. Arguably, not until this play does an African American text offer the narrative spotlight in literature or onstage to a black girl, though she is nearly an adult.<sup>14</sup> At one point, Franklin’s play seems to return to the familiar, underdeveloped story of black girlhood, in which the narrative or another character flings a teenaged girl too quickly into adulthood. Yet, Franklin refuses this trajectory for Billie Jean and allows her the opportunity to mature on her own terms. With a family friend’s assistance, Billie Jean completes high school and leaves for college to study dance. Here, Franklin’s narrative strays from the traditional outcome imposed upon sixteen-year-old Janie and other young girls previously presented in African American literature.

Then, one year after the release of *Black Girl*, Morrison published her groundbreaking novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in which “a child provides the primary voice through which the reader hears, the primary lens through which the reader sees, and the object of the reader’s gaze”

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<sup>14</sup> I do not include Beneatha Younger from *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) in this assertion since she is “about twenty” and already enrolled in college at the beginning of the play (Hansberry 984).

(Werrlein 53). At times, the narrative shifts between the recollections of nine-year-old Claudia MacTeer and the accounts of an omniscient narrator, but the central focus of the novel is Pecola Breedlove, a young girl, who is pregnant with her father's child. Even before sharing Pecola's story, Claudia offers a minor's perspective in the novel by describing the communication barriers between adults and children: "They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration" (Morrison 10). At times, young Claudia even diminishes the importance of adult perspectives by stating, "We do not hear their words, but with grown-ups we listen to and watch out for their voices. . . . We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre" (Morrison 14-15). Adult readers likely would understand the parents' concerns for their children's health when they fall, harm themselves, or become ill, but Claudia, being a minor, misreads the parents' behaviors as anger when they worry and anticipate the additional responsibilities required in caring for a sick child. These glimpses into Claudia's psyche provide groundbreaking and very realistic explanations of child-adult misunderstandings from the minor's perspective and bring to mind similar situations that readers might have had as adults with children or vice versa.

Claudia also provides insight about the ways children often feel overlooked by society and adults, and the surprise and empowerment they feel when this tradition is disrupted. For instance, when the girls receive dolls as Christmas gifts, Claudia feels no attachment to the "blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll [which] was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison 20). Instead, she "destroyed white baby dolls" (Morrison 22) in much the same way that she hates "all the Shirley Temples of the world" (Morrison 19). Claudia clearly understands

her place on that lowest rung of society, watching Shirley Temple dance with Bojangles “who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling” with her but who seemingly chooses a white child instead (Morrison 19); yet, she feels powerless to change her situation. She is too immature and uninformed to realize that systemic racism also restricts actors like Bojangles, who might have chosen a black child to dance with, if offered the opportunity to do so. Sadly, Claudia learns “to worship [Shirley Temple], just as [she] learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as [she] learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement” (Morrison 23). Yet, with this novel, Morrison bucks the system that confines black girls to hopelessness and powerlessness, and she includes Mr. Henry to facilitate this change, using an adult to supplement a child’s story rather than the reverse. For instance, when Mr. Henry becomes a tenant in the MacTeer home, the children expect to be ignored as they are in other interactions with adults. Claudia explains, “Frieda and I were not introduced to him—merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet is here; and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia; watch out for this window; it don’t open all the way. We looked sideways at him, saying nothing and expecting him to say nothing” (Morrison 15). The girls’ outlook resembles the treatment that such characters might have received in earlier literary portrayals, but Mr. Henry focuses his attention directly on the girls, speaks to them, and performs a magic trick for their enjoyment alone, as if to mimic the centralizing of children in the novel. They love him for this consideration, just as Morrison’s readers cherish her novel and its concern for black girls.

While Morrison offers one of the first serious depictions of African American female children and adolescents, Alice Walker greatly advances the legacy of focusing on black girls in literature with *The Color Purple* by vividly portraying a historical representation of their adultification and exploitation, as well as the consequences of those treatments. Over the years,

many other authors, including Toni Cade Bambara (“Gorilla, My Love”), Margaret Walker (*Jubilee*), Edwidge Danticat (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*), Sapphire (*Push*), Paule Marshall (*Brown Girls, Brownstones*), Angie Thomas (*The Hate U Give*), and the authors included in this dissertation, have continued this tradition by offering countless examples of black girls with differing backgrounds and life experiences. Critics from some areas of the humanities<sup>15</sup> are

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<sup>15</sup> In “Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected” (2015), one of the first offerings in this new wave of academic interest in black girls, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw outlines society’s negative assessment of black female youth as opposed to its perception and maintenance of white girl innocence, and she describes zero-tolerance policies and “other factors that seriously undermine [the] achievement and well-being” of girls of color (8). Likewise, Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011) charts the evolution of perceptions about childhood virtuousness, its racialization as white, and the role of literature in creating and fortifying such perspectives. Bernstein describes the conflation of white childhood and innocence in texts such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and the differing narrative treatments of two female children in the text, white Evangeline St. Clare and black, enslaved Topsy. Similarly, the aforementioned “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood” (2017) study by Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake, and Thalia González determines that adults “from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and different educational levels across the United States” (7) believe that black girls need less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort and perceive them as more independent and knowledgeable of “adult topics” and sex (1).

Like these studies, other texts speak to society’s perceptions of and the general vulnerabilities facing black girls, which also are reflected in literature and which often prove detrimental to characters’ physical, emotional, and psychological development and well-being. For example, a report titled “Promoting Sisterhood: The Impact of a Culturally Focused Program to Address Verbally Aggressive Behaviors in Black Girls” describes the lack of assistance that African American female children and adolescents receive while attempting to disprove “negative characterizations (i.e., angry, loud, and aggressive) and advocat[e] for equitable treatment from teachers and school administrators” (Aston et. al. 50). Further, in “Countering the Adultification of Black Girls,” Monique W. Morris acknowledges such challenges and offers suggestions for helping black girls avoid various traumatic experiences. While I recognize that art does not equal life, art often reflects life, and many black girl characters experience similar treatments in African American literature.

Within the past decade, scholars have also begun discussing the specific effects of trauma on black girls. In “Racial Trauma in the Lives of Black Children and Adolescents: Challenges and Clinical Implications” (2011), Maryam M. Jernigan and Jessica Henderson Daniel identify and describe “racial trauma” and the “limited critical attention” paid to such sufferings in black children (123). Although it is commonly known that racial trauma exists and causes harm to those who experience it, the authors scientifically validate this type of suffering and the lingering emotional and psychological damage it causes. Years later, in “Discussing Racial Trauma Using

becoming attentive to African American female children and adolescents and the expanding field of black girlhood studies, yet old habits appear to die hard in literary studies as such scholarship tends to lag a bit in these efforts. Still, a growing number of recent publications are shifting this trend and attracting more attention to such characters. For example, in *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century* (2016), Nazera Sadiq Wright analyzes the inclusion of black girls in various genres of early African American literature, and she posits that early “black writers used black girls as tools to put forward their social and political agendas. . . [and] as emblems of home and family. . . to carry stories of warning and hope, concern and optimism, struggles, and success” (2). Interestingly, Wright describes the “use” of black female children and adolescents, which aligns with my estimation that these characters are often overlooked or ignored except when their presence is necessary to fulfill the needs of adults, which often leads to traumatic experiences for the girls. Other scholarship on black girls in African American literature includes “Narrative Significations of Contemporary Black Girlhood” in which five scholars attempt to answer the question, “How do writers represent the heterogeneity of urban teenage girls in school-sanctioned African American young adult literature?” (Brooks et. al. 7). This article is one of the earliest to consider the literary significance of black girls, and these authors focus their research

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Visual Thinking Strategies” (2017), Roberta Price Gardner details how children can overcome trauma through the development of their voice and agency, and in 2018, the American Psychological Association published “Assessing Racial Trauma within a DSM–5 Framework: The UConn Racial/Ethnic Stress & Trauma Survey” to depict the connection between racism and under-recognized levels of post-traumatic stress disorders in African Americans. According to authors of the survey, “Many ethnic minority groups experience higher rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to their European American counterparts. One explanation for this is the differential experience of racism, which can itself be traumatic” (Williams et al. 242). Much of the aforementioned scholarship focuses on the sociological and psychological issues related to historical black girls’ lives and struggles, which benefits my dissertation by linking black girls’ lived experiences to their literary representations. Simultaneously, all of these studies and articles reveal the damage society inflicts upon young black girls and challenge notions of them as disrespectful and disrespectable, ideas which are often accepted by and communicated within the African American community and depicted throughout our creative works.

on the depiction of urban characters, who, as I will argue, society commonly adultifies and perceives as less childlike and respectable. Interestingly, prior to the publication of the aforementioned article, a great deal of scholarship about black girls focused solely on their educational and cognitive development, sexual behavior, health problems, family circumstances and responses, as well as other topics.<sup>16</sup> Many of those articles overlooked the literary representation and significance of black girls and instead presented them generally as sociological problems to be solved rather than persons in need of individual consideration, protection, and support.

Although some scholarship displays a progression in the attention literary critics pay to black girls, many more scholars seem to mimic authors' history of conflating African American childhood and womanhood, which diminishes the importance of focusing on black girls in their own right, rather than as a state of pre-womanhood. For example, Sam Vasquez's "In Her Own Image: Literary and Visual Representations of Girlhood in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*" (2014) alludes to an evaluation of girls in these texts; however, Vasquez quickly explains that his purpose is to "examine how black *women* in different cultural contexts write themselves into visual and historical records" (58-59; emphasis mine).

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<sup>16</sup> Some examples of previous scholarship about black girls includes the following articles: "Research on Black Sexuality: Its Implication for Family Life, Sex Education, and Public Policy" (1972) by Robert Staples; "The Black Female Adolescent: A Review of the Educational, Career, and Psychological Literature" (1982) by Elsie J. Smith; "The Impact of Social Status, Family Structure, and Neighborhood on the Fertility of Black Adolescents" (1985); "Black, Inner-City, Female Adolescents and Condoms: What the Girls Say" (1990) by Janet Demb; and "(Un)Necessary Toughness?: Those 'Loud Black Girls' and Those 'Quiet Asian Boys'" (2003), among many others. The publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 and Toni Cade Bambara's "Gorilla, My Love" in 1972 slightly altered the culture of omitting black girls from literary scholarship. For instance, critics published articles such as Ruth Rosenberg's "Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in *The Bluest Eye*" (1987) and Elizabeth Muther's "Bambara's Feisty Girls: Resistance Narratives in 'Gorilla, My Love'" (2002). However, the tradition of neglecting and overgeneralizing literary depictions of African American female children and adolescents largely continued.

Additionally, while Cheryl A. Wall focuses on the black girl characters in *The Bluest Eye* in “On Dolls, Presidents, and Little Black Girls” (2010), she reads Claudia as “the voice of social critique” (798), a sentiment with which I agree. However, Wall further describes the child as “a figure for the black feminist critic. . . [who] wants to get at the root of the meaning of race” (798), again transforming a black girl into an allegory to help promote a cause, which is reminiscent of Douglass’s speech. Such scholarship fails to consider and, at the very least, might encourage the continued adultification and expedited maturity of black girls. Like Vasquez and Wall, in “Gospels According to Faith: Rewriting Black Girlhood Through the Quilt,” Myisha Priest conflates black girls and women<sup>17</sup> and then states, “girls have emerged as a kind of ‘ground zero’ symbolizing Black woundedness, a repository of all the pain, waste, and dispossessed freight of ravaged Blackness” (Priest 462), a standpoint that ignores the intersectionality of black girls’ ages and gender.

As previously considered in reference to literary texts, such broad usage of the term “girl” when referencing child, adolescent, and adult black female characters is still common in popular culture as well as in academia. For instance, a Google search of the phrase “black girl” produces a plethora of resources, images, videos, and news overwhelmingly about black women. This tendency threatens to perpetuate the historical oversight and further traumatization of African American female minors, which my research highlights. Not only do I hope to centralize black girls in literary studies, but also I hope to address this trend by identifying a type of character who suffers tremendously and, at times, long-term as a result of society’s oversight and problematic perception and (mis)treatment of black girls. Therefore, in Chapter One, I identify

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<sup>17</sup> In her opening lines, Priest states, “Colored girls are everywhere and nowhere. . . . They are housewives in Atlanta,” among other identities (461). Then, she references the “Black girl body” and discusses “Black girls coming of age” and Claudette Colvin, a “Black teenager” (Priest 461).

and analyze pre-emancipatory black girl-women in slave, pseudo-slave, and neo-slave narratives. Although the first two genres offer insight into the treatment and perceptions of enslaved and indentured black girls, neo-slave narrative authors frequently blend historical and fictional accounts and disregard concerns about maintaining certain levels of decorum, which routinely minimize the trauma black girls suffer in this literature. I focus on Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and propose that Frado in *Our Nig* and Cora in *The Underground Railroad* are black girl-women since their maturity is expedited to meet harsh labor requirements as well as due to their abandonment by their mothers at young ages. Also, while Frado only alludes to problematic and suspicious encounters with men, Cora explicitly describes being sexually assaulted at a very young age, which also contributes to her black girl-woman status. I will also reference various black girl-women characters in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966). As Linda Brent states in *Incidents*, enslaved black girls commonly "become *prematurely knowing* in evil things" (Jacobs 31), and this statement coincides with the challenges and hopelessness black girl-women characters face and endure in various slave narratives since their freedoms, agency, and existences are so restricted and exploited.

Chapter Two explores Delores Phillips's *The Darkest Child* (2004) and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Getting Mother's Body* (2003) to demonstrate the impact that troubled upbringings and unstable home environments have in creating black girl-women. I argue that debilitating traumas, often administered at the hands of close family members, primarily mothers, and other people from traditional support systems, contribute heavily to the creation of these characters. Further, I posit that since some mothers also struggle with black girl-womanhood, their post-traumatic struggles can negatively affect or destroy their relationships with their daughters. Such is the

case with both Rosie Quinn in *The Darkest Child* and Willa Mae Beede in *Getting Mother's Body*. I also examine black girl-womanhood and motherhood in William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (1853) and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970).

In Chapter Three, I discuss the role of geographical locations, such as north vs. south, urban vs. rural, in the depictions of black female children and adolescents, and how they regularly affect people's perceptions of and sensitivities to them and their trauma. Further, I demonstrate that these factors contribute to the creation of black girl-womanhood, especially since critics repeatedly link characters' personalities and potential to narrative settings. For instance, an inner city black girl might be stereotyped as more sexually adultified than her rural counterpart, and the opposite might be true as it relates to the physical and vocational capabilities of a child raised in rural settings. Therefore, I evaluate black girls in rural settings in Walker's *The Color Purple*, in urban settings with Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), and in the conflation of the two in A. J. Verdelle's *The Good Negress* (1996). I propose that circumstances in and complexities of each location affect black girls differently, but neither urban nor rural environments decrease or prevent the creation of black girl-women. African American female children and adolescents are at risk of trauma in both spaces, and being perceived as disrespectful routinely leads to their isolation, vulnerability, and neglect despite their location.

By establishing the concept of black girl-womanhood, this dissertation expands academic discourse on a population regularly excluded from scholarly conversations and offers a new tool for expanding literary critics' participation in black girlhood studies. Connecting black girl-womanhood to racial trauma and post-traumatic stress studies challenges the limited understanding and often negative assessments of black female youth as disrespectful,

disrespectable, and sexually advanced rather than as potentially traumatized individuals in need of assistance. Similarly, by correlating my literary findings to those recently made in the scientific and sociological communities, I encourage a multidisciplinary approach for considering and understanding the complex positionality of black girls in American society. Until we can imagine a less traumatized black girlhood in which we can avoid the creation of black girl-women, more evidence of their presence must be investigated so as not to further traumatize them through omission and misinterpretation. To this end, I suggest that more diverse stories must be told and uncovered to promote narrative healing, and I propose that this theoretical approach is useful beyond literary studies and can be applied to analyses of popular culture as well as to gender, sociological, historical, and psychological research and studies. As Stephen E. Henderson states in an essay titled, “The Forms of Things Unknown,” “Literature . . . is the verbal organization of experience into beautiful forms, but what is meant by ‘beautiful’ and by ‘forms’ is to a significant degree dependent upon a people’s way of life, their needs, their aspirations, their history—in short, their culture” (141). With this perspective in mind, focusing on literary depictions of black girls acknowledges their beauty, culture, experiences, and significance in American literary traditions and in academia at-large.

## CHAPTER 1

### NEVER FREE FROM SLAVERY: TRAUMA AND PRE-EMANCIPATORY BLACK GIRL- WOMEN IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

*“But oh! de Lord, de Lord! what’ll become of me?”*

—Patsey, *Twelve Years a Slave*

In 19th century African American and American literature, the term “girl” might indicate any person from infancy to advanced years when applied to black female characters, especially since they have no authority or agency to define themselves and their identity. As with the use of the word “boy” when referencing black male characters, this muddled classification likely originates with the widely accepted and enduring custom of degrading and disrespecting African American women whether they are enslaved, freeborn, or emancipated. Under such circumstances, not only does creating a generic identifier for a widely diverse group ignore individual characteristics and intersectional complexities, but in this case, it leaves younger female characters even more vulnerable to their enslavers, who carefully orchestrate and brutally maintain plantation labor requirements by day and who indiscriminately appease and justify their sexual desires by night. The depiction of Lupita Nyong’o as young Patsey in the motion picture adaptation of Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) provides an unsettling portrayal of such treatment,<sup>18</sup> as she plays with corn husk dolls, picks more cotton than other enslaved

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<sup>18</sup> Although Northup states that Patsey is “twenty-three” years old in his narrative (186), researchers believe that number to be her age closer to the end of Northup’s ten years on the Epps plantation (Calautti), which suggests that much of the abuse that Northup witnesses occurs during Patsey’s adolescent years. This might be the reason Northup describes Patsey as “a joyous creature, a laughing, light-hearted girl, rejoicing in the mere sense of existence” (189), “the queen of the field” (188) “equal to any two of [her master’s] slaves in the cotton field” (199), and “the enslaved victim of lust and hate” (189) at various points in the narrative. Of Patsey’s

adult women and men on the plantation, and experiences brutal beatings and rapes on several occasions within a short span of time.<sup>19</sup> The indistinguishable category of girl-ness thrives both on the expedited maturity and disregarded innocence and childhoods of enslaved black female children and adolescents and the diminished and denied self-actualization of African American women, which restricts them to a dependent, childlike state.

As victims of such constraints and abuse, Linda Brent in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Frado in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), and Cora in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) exist as pre-emancipatory black girl-women, and they struggle to overcome that traumatized state as they yearn for freedom. While attempting to navigate a country that would rather keep them enslaved, or, at the very least, maintain some level of their subjugation, these characters experience mentally and physically debilitating traumas, both personally and collectively,<sup>20</sup> and their treatments reveal the life-altering dangers awaiting black female children and adolescents in this era, whether or not they have family and friends who wish or attempt to assist and protect them. Often, their liminality is used as a rhetorical device to reflect the confusion and cruelties of slavery and pseudo-slavery, as well as

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unfortunate condition, Northup states, "Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes; not because she was backward in her work, nor because she was of an unmindful and rebellious spirit, but because it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed accursed" (189).

<sup>19</sup> Certainly, Northup's depiction of Patsy offers a much more disturbing representation of black girlhood than Margaret Mitchell's enduring portrayal of Prissy in *Gone With the Wind*. In a 2018 article titled "A Forum on *Gone With the Wind*: A Convergence of Voices," Whitney Martin minimizes Prissy's suffering and finds her depiction to be "funny" because "Prissy still don't know nothing 'bout birthing babies'" (Gentile 248).

<sup>20</sup> Ron Eyerman cites Orlando Patterson's *Rituals of Blood* (1998) and offers some information about such childhood traumas: "[A]nother feature of slave childhood was the added psychological trauma of witnessing the daily degradation of their parents at the hands of slaveholders . . . to the trauma of observing their parents' humiliation was later added that of being sexually exploited by Euro-Americans on and off the estate, as the children grew older" (2).

to further disquiet readers as they process the girls' maturity levels, abuse, and historical oppression.<sup>21</sup> Whether enslaved, indentured, or emancipated, many black female characters featured in the literature composed in or about this era exist in the mentally stagnated state of black girl-womanhood, caught somewhere between their chronological ages, the violence and exploitation they must endure beginning early in life, and their inability to overcome the distressing memories of their bondage. They bear the burdens of their oppression on their bodies and in their minds,<sup>22</sup> and are, therefore, never free from slavery.

In Jacobs's narrative, Linda Brent details the abrupt, involuntary conclusion of her childhood in the household of Dr. Flint at age twelve when her beloved and belated mistress bequeaths her to "her sister's daughter, a child of five years old" (Jacobs 10). Prior to her life with the Flints, Linda describes "six years of happy childhood" with parents who "lived together in a comfortable home" and a grandmother who is able to save a great deal of money and then "loan" it to her mistress (Jacobs 7-8), all of which suggest a great deal of agency as an enslaved people. Aside from the transfer of ownership, Linda's experience could reflect the life of any privileged white child, and she understands that her situation was "unusually fortunate" and "too happy to last" (Jacobs 9). Even after discovering her legal status at age six, Linda recalls a blissful existence since her mistress, who she calls her mother's "foster sister" (Jacobs 9), ensures that Linda "never suffer[s] for any thing" (Jacobs 9), in an apparent attempt to fulfill a

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<sup>21</sup> In *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), Robin Bernstein describes the process of childhood innocence being raced white, allowing the historical mistreatment of African American children.

<sup>22</sup> In "Racial Trauma: Theory, Research, and Healing: Introduction to the Special Issue," researchers cite the intergenerational effects of "historical trauma or soul wounds—the cumulative psychological wounds that result from historical traumatic experiences, such as colonization, genocide, slavery, dislocation, and other related trauma" (Comas-Díaz et al. 2). The documented experiences of characters in slave and neo-slave narratives highlight the originations of traumas from which black girls commonly suffer.

deathbed promise to Linda's mother. With such treatment, Linda believes that, like her mother, she is "a slave merely in name" (Jacobs 9). She explains,

No toilsome or disagreeable duties were imposed upon me. My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit. I would sit by her side for hours, sewing diligently, with a heart as free from care as that of any free-born white child.

When she thought I was tired, she would send me out to run and jump; and away I bounded, to gather berries or flowers to decorate her room. (Jacobs 9)

Linda enjoys this life and perceives her mistress to be a mother figure, but upon the woman's death, Linda realizes the folly in that thinking and discovers a pattern in the life of "every human being born to be a chattel" (Jacobs 9), particularly enslaved black girls.

Once in the Flint home, Linda experiences harsher treatment more similar to that which any enslaved person might expect—inadequate food supplies and scarce, uncomfortable clothing<sup>23</sup>—which challenges her expectations of respectable living and treatment, and she becomes privy to various elements of enslavement that increasingly traumatize her, expediting her maturity and thrusting her into black girl-womanhood. First, when her father dies suddenly, the Flints prevent her from traveling to his home to pay her respects. Then, she begins witnessing the mistreatments of other enslaved people, including various physical and psychological punishments—food crammed down cooks' throats for tardiness and unsavory dishes, a baby starved to punish its nursing mother by keeping the woman away from her infant for an extended period of time, and the brutal whipping of an enslaved person who quarreled with his wife and accused the master of their plantation of fathering her new fair-skinned baby. Clearly, Linda is

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<sup>23</sup> Linda considers the "linsey-woolsey dress" given to her each winter to be "one of the badges of slavery" (Jacobs 13).

surprised by the former events, but unmistakably shaken by the latter, as she states, “Never before, in my life, had I heard hundreds of blows fall, in succession, on a human being. His piteous groans, and his ‘O, pray don’t, massa,’ rang in my ears for months afterwards” (Jacobs 15). Just a few weeks prior, one can safely surmise that Linda never would have imagined such cruelties, but her rapid depictions of these and other brutal accounts suggests that she is overwhelmed by the constant cruelties she witnesses, and it signifies the subsequent horror and trauma she experiences after doing so.

Nevertheless, the distinguishing factor in Linda’s narrative relates to her discovery of the sexual vulnerabilities of enslaved black girls whose bodies can be used, abused, and discarded at the whim of the men and women who own them. Linda alludes to this circumstance by describing her grandmother’s childhood, which concludes unexpectedly when she is captured as a free child and sold into slavery. Although Linda admits that her grandmother is “sold to the keeper of a large hotel” (Jacobs 7) as a little girl, and that she suffered a hard life during childhood, escalating “from cook to wet nurse to seamstress” (Jacobs 8), Linda states that she does not “remember all the particulars” (Jacobs 7) of her grandmother’s experiences, despite having heard the stories related “often” (Jacobs 7). Linda offers no explanation of her grandmother’s age or maturity level during her hardships or the nature of those adversities, and she never mentions her maternal grandfather or the circumstances by which her grandmother becomes a mother and wet nurse, omissions that seem purposeful since Linda is very particular in citing her family’s background.<sup>24</sup> Still, readers might safely speculate that her grandmother’s

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<sup>24</sup> While researchers such as Brenda E. Stevenson note the prevalence of various types of sexual contact and relationships between white men and African and African American women and girls during slavery, others such as Jim Downs note the frustrations that many scholars experience while attempting to create a historical account of slavery and sexuality in cases such

sufferings include some form of sexual abuse, especially since the father(s) of her children is/are not mentioned in the novel. Countless unspeakable exploitations and traumatizing events like these become lost in the “deep, and dark, and foul. . . pit of abominations” (Jacobs 4), a phrase Linda uses to describe the institution of slavery. Perhaps, Linda conceals these details as promised in the author’s preface, as a means of being “kind and considerate” (Jacobs 3) to her grandmother, by maintaining the matriarch’s respectable legacy in the community rather than focusing on the ways in which she might have been disrespected.

Even so, Linda’s grandmother’s experiences foreshadow the sexual, physical, and mental trauma young Linda and other African American female children and adolescents witness and suffer in slavery, when the only impediment to protecting their innocence is their blackness.<sup>25</sup> Linda offers readers an explanation of this dilemma with an anecdote about two beautiful children playing together, one white and one black. Of the fairer child, Linda states, “From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky” (Jacobs 32-33). For the darker child, the white child’s “slave sister,” Linda declares, “She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink” (Jacobs 33). While the irony of Linda’s situation is not lost, being that she is fair-skinned and described as a “bright, mulatto girl” (Jacobs 108), and she experiences an exceedingly comfortable upbringing for many years, the unfortunate turn in her and her grandmother’s circumstances proves that innocence, childhood, and femininity are privileges reserved for white children and that

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as Linda’s, where researchers must work “against political, religious, social, and economic forces that prevented details about sexuality from entering into the historical record” (189).

<sup>25</sup> Robin Bernstein argues that broadly held beliefs about black children’s ability to withstand pain contributed to the following perspective: “White children became constructed as tender angels while black children were libeled as unfeeling, noninnocent nonchildren” (33).

American society, both directly or indirectly, rushes black girls toward maturity and ultimately exploitation. Linda alerts her readers to this injustice by explaining the helpless, volatile situation in which she and other enslaved black girls find themselves during what she deems a “sad epoch” of life (Jacobs 30), as well as by reminding them of her youthfulness with phrases such as “my extreme youth,” “young as I was,” and “my young mind” to describe herself during this time (Jacobs 30). Although some slave narratives minimize details concerning the enslaved person’s age, Linda makes a point of focusing on her and other girls’ youth to highlight the specific hardships they face as minors in the slave system. She also offers graphic accounts of their stories and experiences very early in the narrative, including the agony and suffering of “a young slave girl dying soon after the birth [and subsequent death] of a child nearly white” (Jacobs 16). As the girl cries out in agony and her mother grieves over the impending loss of both her only child and grandchild, their white mistress “mock[s] at [the girl] like an incarnate fiend” claiming that she deserves her suffering “and more too” (Jacobs 16). Linda resists stating outright that the child is fathered by the mistress’s husband, but the implication is clear. Most likely, the enslaved girl is raped by her master, tormented by her jealous mistress, forced to carry and deliver a child that would follow the enslaved condition of its mother, and offered no treatment or mercy during her excruciating pain and death. The girl has no agency as an enslaved person, her mother cannot protect or save her, and their master and mistress ruthlessly abuse and discard the child for circumstances beyond her control. Thus, the loving mother and piteous child’s only hope of relief is death and the afterlife.

Lest Linda’s readers presume that her anecdotes and experiences are isolated incidents, she explains the universal practice and acceptance of the myriad brutalities and trauma facing enslaved girls and leading to their expedited maturity:

Every where the years bring to all enough of sin and sorrow; but in slavery the very dawn of life is darkened by these shadows. Even the little child. . . will learn, before she is twelve years old, why it is that her mistress hates such and such a one among the slaves. . . . She will become *prematurely knowing in evil things*. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that *she is no longer a child*. If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only *hastens* the degradation of the female slave. (Jacobs 31, emphasis mine)

While one of the most commonly referenced portions of this quote, the statement “she is no longer a child,” acknowledges the denied innocence and childhoods of enslaved black girls, it offers no explanation of what the youth become after others expedite their maturity. Some might argue that the girls automatically enter adulthood, but maturity is not an instantaneous occurrence, and whether their masters or other men perceive or force them to behave as adults, their chronological ages suggest otherwise. Furthermore, when white female youth experience sexual assault or exploitation, society does not necessarily consider them to be women. In a culture where adults customarily decide the limitations and expiration dates of childhood, Linda has no need to determine the ultimate positionality of girls such as herself and the others she presents in the narrative. At this point in history, her depiction of this tendency is sufficient in challenging the status quo and appealing for the abolition of slavery. Therefore, her statement is more of an indictment regarding the denial of black female childhood, and she condemns everyone involved in maintaining this process throughout the novel. She blames the masters who rape black girls, the wives who mistreat the faultless victims and children born to such assaults,

and American society at-large, which turns a blind eye, without challenging the exploitation of black girls. Then, Linda devotes the remainder of her narrative to describing the great lengths to which she must go and schemes she much undertake to avoid being sexually abused as a child, despite her upbringing, her grandmother's protection, and her master Dr. Flint's attempt to exhibit an upstanding reputation in the community. She describes the desperation she feels in attempting to have some agency and control over her body and life, to the point of entering into a sexual relationship with Mr. Sands, a white man, escaping from the Flint home, suffering for seven years in her grandmother's small attic space, and spending many of her subsequent years on the run to avoid being recaptured.

To some degree, Linda's narrative depicts her ability and good fortune of physically making the most of very unfortunate circumstances. As Gloria T. Randle asserts, Jacobs repeatedly depicts her ability "to discover space where there is no space; to identify, over and over again, the narrowest wedge between the rock and the hard place. . . allowing her to function in relative mental health while imprisoned in a culture that constantly threatens her sanity" (43). But once men terminate enslaved black girls' childhoods,<sup>26</sup> and whether the girls resist or reluctantly accept their worsening lives and treatment, they are women neither physically nor psychologically. Instead, Linda and other enslaved girls, who have been declared women, enter the liminal state of black girl-womanhood, in which they simultaneously become aware of society's expectations of them alongside the truth of what they are—immature and powerless youth. For Linda, being a black girl-woman is a traumatizing death of utopian expectations,

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<sup>26</sup> Dr. Flint admits and realizes his power to terminate Linda's youthfulness as he promises to protect her from his jealous wife: "'Poor *child!* Don't cry! don't cry! I will make peace for you with your mistress. Only let me arrange matters in my own way. Poor, foolish *girl!* you don't know what is for your own good. I would cherish you. I would make a lady of you. Now go, and think of all I have promised you'" (Jacobs 39, emphasis mine).

which manifests in her demeanor. As her master meets her “at every turn, reminding [her] that [she] belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel [her] to submit to him,” Linda notes, “The light heart which nature had given me became heavy with sad forebodings” (Jacobs 31). Everyone around her notices her traumatized state (Jacobs 60), and she spends the remainder of her time in the Flint home dodging her would-be sexual offender and deducing ways to prevent him from actualizing his plans to rape her, although her resistance comes at what she considers to be another steep cost—lessened morals and disrespectability.

Linda’s experiences in slavery teach her painful lessons about her status in society, and she suffers a great deal of trauma in attempting to resist further degradation. While some scholars, including Novian Whitsitt, note the improbability of Linda’s ability to elude Dr. Flint’s attempts to rape her, Linda states that she avoids Dr. Flint’s advances and yearns for a person to “confide in” (Jacobs 31); yet, she understands that unburdening herself to fellow enslaved persons would lead to punishments for them. She also longs to discuss her woes with her grandmother but has low expectations that the matriarch will react sympathetically: “I was very young, and felt shamefaced about telling her such impure things, especially as I knew her to be very strict on such subjects” (Jacobs 32). Linda’s apprehensions prove justified when she recounts her grandmother’s harsh response to the news of her pregnancy: “‘O Linda! Has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother.’ She tore from my fingers my mother’s wedding ring and her silver thimble. ‘Go away!’ she exclaimed, ‘and never come to my house, again’” (Jacobs 63). Definitely, Linda’s last resort to exhibit some form of agency in choosing Mr. Sands as a sexual partner is an extremely progressive strategy, especially considering the times; yet, her grandmother seemingly believes the child has more authority over her body than her enslavement allows. Such unrelenting and

unrealistic expectations of agency and respectability seem ridiculous in an environment where nearly none of that sentiment is offered by masters to the people they perceive as chattel, and where her grandmother's own children are bequeathed and sold off indiscriminately. To soften the harshness and express some approval or understanding of her grandmother's reaction, Linda admits, "The mother of slaves is very watchful. She knows there is no security for her children" (Jacobs 63). Yet, both Linda and her grandmother realize that, in many cases, if a master wants to rape an enslaved person, he simply does so without considering the need to groom her or prepare a location away from society for those acts to occur, as Dr. Flint does in order to "keep up some outward show of decency" (Jacobs 32). If anything, Linda's plans reveal the consequences of a young girl pretending to be an adult and attempting to navigate a troubled world without guidance or assistance. Even in her later years, she is not proud of her decision to have sex with Mr. Sands, but she still views it as a necessary evil in resisting Dr. Flint.

Throughout *Incidents*, Linda maintains at least some modicum of what she considers respectability and dignity, and she overcomes black girl-womanhood, to a degree, by sharing her story with others, particularly her grandmother. Although "pride and fear" initially keep Linda quiet (Jacobs 31), eventually she gains true freedom and shares her experiences with readers, a process that gradually weakens the traumas of her past and forecasts a brighter future. By the end of her narrative, Linda admits that she cannot forget the pain and "dreary years" she spends in bondage, but she finds "solace" in "recollections" and storytelling, as she petitions for the rights of other enslaved women (Jacobs 225). "Like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea" (Jacobs 225), Linda hopes for a steady release from trauma and better prospects for her children, especially her daughter, who needs her mother's support and assistance to overcome the sufferings she endures as a young pre-emancipatory girl.

Unlike Linda, abandonment and physical abuse in Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* causes Frado's black girl-womanhood, after her black father dies and her white mother abandons her at age six to a brutal, ruthless mistress of a wealthy white family. Although *Incidents* is autobiographical and *Our Nig* is a fact-based, pseudo-slave narrative about the perils and severity of Northern indentured servitude, Frado's tale is arguably much more violent and less hopeful. Linda suffers physically after enduring seven years in her grandmother's cramped garret, but the bodily and emotional abuse Frado withstands in the Belmont household negatively affects the remainder of her life, preventing her from working, causing her to depend on others' pity and caretaking, and requiring her child to live periodically as an orphan. Although Linda is enslaved in a Southern city for the better part of her narrative, her privileged circumstances and primary concerns for virtue and respectability cause her to regard chattel slavery as a better option than her life experiences. She explains,

I would ten thousand times rather that my children should be the half-starved paupers of Ireland than to be the most pampered among the slaves of America. I would rather drudge out my life on a cotton plantation, till the grave opened to give me rest, than to live with an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress. The felon's home in a penitentiary is preferable. He may repent, and turn from the error of his ways, and so find peace; but it is not so with a favorite slave. She is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous. (Jacobs 34)

While Linda's fear of sexual abuse and mistreatment is warranted, her notions of plantation slavery are uninformed at best. After all, women and girls on plantations were commonly raped, and if she had been enslaved in that environment, Dr. Flint, and nearly any other white man or

black man, for that matter, would have few, if any, obstacles to assaulting her, at will. Frado might also disagree with Linda's preference for back-breaking work since some Bellmonts force and others allow the young girl's treatment as an enslaved person, quite literally, despite her extreme youth, severe illness, and inadequate recovery after the crippling abuses and punishments administered upon her.

Even the vantage points from which Linda and Frado provide insights on the cruelties and complexities facing black girls and women in pre-emancipatory America are starkly opposed. Linda tells her story from much more comfortable circumstances—recalling the struggles of her “unhappy youth” (Jacobs 218) and writing solely to “arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of” enslaved women in the South (Jacobs 3). On the contrary and intent on revealing “that slavery's shadows fall even” in the North (Wilson 285), Frado makes clear her primary purpose of using the book to support herself and child financially. She states further, “Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life” (Wilson 287). Linda fights for agency, freedom, and the abolition of slavery, while Frado simply hopes to survive.

Although Frado's girl-womanhood officially commences once Frado enters the Bellmont home and endures increasingly violent encounters with Mrs. Bellmont, her early childhood years and family circumstances usher her toward that liminal state even before age six. As if to emphasize this point, Frado initiates her personal narrative by prompting readers' pity for her white mother, “lonely Mag Smith,” and the woman's “loving, trusting heart. . . [e]arly deprived of parental guardianship [and] far removed from relatives” (Wilson 289). This choice indicates Frado's perspective that the tragedies in her life begin with her mother's unfortunate youth and

establishes a generational trend in child abandonment and subsequent emotional and socioeconomic hardships.<sup>27</sup> Writing in the third person about very specific, private details that occur years before her birth, but withholding any explanation of how she discovers this information, Frado relates a sentimental tale about Mag's enticement into a sexual relationship with a smooth-talking man, the welcomed loss of her love child,<sup>28</sup> and her subsequent estrangement from white society. Struggling to provide for herself and faced with no better option, Mag marries "a kind-hearted African" (Wilson 291) named Jim, births two bi-racial children, and cares for Jim when he becomes ill "only as a means to subserve her own comfort" (Wilson 294). Although Jim treasures Mag and their young children until his untimely death, Mag is self-absorbed and melancholic since the "respectable" white community forsakes her due to the unseemly choices she makes as a young woman and then completely ostracizes her after she marries a black man. Not long after her husband dies, Mag enters a new relationship with Jim's business partner, Seth Shipley, and the pair struggles to maintain a living after both become unemployed for an extended time. When Seth suddenly proposes, "'It's no use. . . we must give the children away, and try to get work in some other place'" (Wilson 295), Mag neither reproaches him nor considers the harm such an action might cause to her children. Instead, the couple begins discussing the viability of such a scheme. Mag answers, "'Who'll take the *black devils*? . . . Nobody will want any thing of mine, or yours either'" (Wilson 295, emphasis mine), using racist language to describe her own children and what she perceives as

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<sup>27</sup> In "Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and the Labor of Citizenship," Gretchen Short explores how the social stigmas and destitution that Mag bestows upon Frado automatically marginalize the child and lead to further mistreatment. She states, "The unofficial indenture that is the charitable response to her abandonment gives Frado a 'place' that is essentially no place, that denies her full membership in a household, a community, or a nation" (2).

<sup>28</sup> When Mag's baby dies, she exclaims, "God be thanked. . . no one can taunt *her* with my ruin" (Wilson 290).

their devaluation as result of their African ancestry. Meanwhile, Seth concentrates on Frado's "prize[d]" mulatto beauty (Wilson 295) and its appeal to potential takers, almost as if she is enslaved and being assessed and prepared for the auction block. Ultimately, the couple abandons Frado to a family known for its "right she-devil" mistress (Wilson 296), a Northern woman who behaves more like a Southern slave master than the actual slavers in *Incidents*. The couple takes Frado's nameless brother with them as they seek employment elsewhere, strategizing that Frado is a "wild, frolicky thing. . . a hard one" (Wilson 296), who would be strong enough to withstand the ill treatment they undoubtedly expect her to receive in the Bellmont home.

Once there, Frado immediately transitions into black girl-womanhood; her physical body is that of a child's, but every other aspect of her being and treatment reflects the anguish and struggles of an adult woman condemned to enslavement. This sad existence disables her mentally and physically and relegates her to a life of toil and dependency. Unaware of any agency she might possess or retain, Frado, who is also called Nig, which is short for nigger, behaves in a manner more akin to that of an enslaved person subjected to the harsh realities of chattel slavery on a brutal plantation. However, since slavery is technically illegal in northern U.S. states, Frado is officially an indentured servant although the Bellmonts never explain the conditions of her service.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, as an enslaver would claim complete ownership of an enslaved person, Mrs. Bellmont feels that Frado's "time and person [belong] solely to her" and that the girl is "under her in every sense of the word" (Wilson 309). Consequently, Frado's daily responsibilities are reminiscent of both a plantation farmhand and house servant's chores; she feeds hens, drives cows to pasture, washes dishes, and waits on the family hand and foot on her

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<sup>29</sup> Frado's enslavement is indicative of the "collective forgetting" about America's Northern slave system, which Marc Howard Ross addresses in *Slavery in the North: Forgetting History and Recovery Memory*.

first full day, and each day, her responsibilities steadily increase as Mrs. Bellmont “spic[es] her toil with ‘words that burn,’ and frequent blows on her head” (Wilson 302). At times, Mrs. Bellmont even utilizes various torture techniques to punish the young child. For instance, when Frado is seven and Mary Bellmont is thirteen, the older girl lies about the younger pushing her into a stream after school in front of their classmates, when in fact, she falls into the stream while attempting to humiliate Frado. Mary’s tale infuriates Mrs. Bellmont, and Frado’s attempt to dispute the original story only worsens the matter. Within minutes, both the mother and daughter attack Frado “beating her inhumanly; then propping her mouth open with a piece of wood, shut her up in a dark room without any supper” (Wilson 304). Many variations of such abuse transpire over the years that Frado remains with the family, allowing Mrs. Bellmont the “opportunity to indulge her vixen nature! No matter what occurred to ruffle her, or from what source provocation came, real or fancied, a few blows on Nig seemed to relieve her of a portion of ill-will” (Wilson 309). Although a very young girl, Frado becomes the woman’s living, life-sized punching bag and stress reliever.

Even though the family lives north of the Mason-Dixon line, Mrs. Bellmont grooms Frado to be an obedient, voiceless enslaved girl, causing *Our Nig* to resemble a slave narrative more than a memoir or sentimental novel. Even before Frado enters the Bellmont home, Seth and Mag believe the girl’s aesthetic, “long, curly black hair, and handsome, roguish eyes, sparkling with an exuberance of spirit almost beyond restraint” (Wilson 296), will increase the child’s allure as a house servant, as it certainly would increase her value in the South’s slave market. She is so beautiful that on several occasions, Mrs. Bellmont embodies the characteristics of a jealous Southern mistress, who aspires to obliterate any remnant of the biracial child’s beauty, so as to prevent it from overshadowing her children’s splendor and to remove any suggestion of her

husband's impropriety. As evidence of these concerns, the woman states, "I'll not leave much of her beauty to be seen" when one of her sons asks to see the "pretty little Nig," about whom his brother has written in their correspondences (Wilson 311). Therefore, to detract from the child's beauty and reinforce her lowly position in their society, Mrs. Belmont never permits the child to "shield her skin from the sun" when she works outside, so as to "darken the shade which nature had first bestowed upon her as best fitting" (Wilson 307). Likewise, she sends Frado to school in "scanty clothing and bared feet" (Wilson 303), and when all else fails, she cuts Frado's hair when she feels the girl is "getting handsome" (Wilson 325). Yet, Frado's beauty prevails, and Mrs. Belmont admits as much in all of her attempts to destroy it, which only serves to infuriate the woman further.

Another commonality between the novel and slave narratives is its inclusion of runaway sequences, excepting that Frado, the narrator, instead of another enslaved person, is thwarted in her attempts. Twice when Frado finds herself in unbearable or life-threatening situations, she makes an effort to escape, both times through a swampy area in order to elude the people who wish to rid themselves of or abuse her. In her first attempt, six-year-old Frado and a playmate, "another little colored girl" (Wilson 297), run away after Seth suggests that she might have to leave the family home. The children's absence prompts the organization of a search party (read, slave catchers), who locate and bring them back home (read, to the plantation). Once recovered, although the two young children explain that they became lost while simply taking a walk, their parents discover that they have ventured "some miles from home" and "climbed fences and walls, passed through thickets and marshes, and when night approached selected a thick cluster of shrubbery as a covert for the night" (Wilson 297). Being children with an undeveloped plan, the pair does not chart a path or determine a destination. They simply flee and rest when they

become too tired or when the darkness prevents them from continuing their journey, as a runaway might in a slave narrative. At nine or ten years old, Frado attempts another escape after Mrs. Bellmont repeatedly and severely kicks and beats her for fetching the wrong firewood. This time, the Bellmont men (read, white mob) and Frado's dog, Fido, (read, bloodhound) seek out the "frail child, driven from shelter by the cruelty" of her mistress (Wilson 313). Again, Frado travels "far, far into the fields, over walls and through fences, into a piece of swampy land" (Wilson 313), but this time, she has no plans to return (read, wants freedom). Upon her retrieval, her mistress plans to "take the skin from her body" (Wilson 311), a punishment countless slave masters actually implemented to reprimand recaptured runaway slaves, but instead of staging a violent, bloody punishment, the men warm her by the kitchen fire, give her a good supper, and seat her in a comfortable sitting room (Wilson 312). While these accommodations reflect compassion and although the search party believes they are rescuing Frado from the elements and returning her to a comfortable location, they do her a great disservice by restoring her to the most dangerous place she will ever inhabit—the home of an unrestrained, incorrigible mistress. Jack Bellmont, who at times openly condemns his mother's and sister's treatment of Frado, is unsettled by the night's activity, as many white onlookers with abolitionist sympathies might be. This experience even prevents him from visiting and entertaining "old associates and friends" (Wilson 314) for a number of days; however, neither he nor anyone else in the Bellmont home establishes any plans to prevent Frado's future abuse, which continues for many years to come.

At one point in the narrative, Frado reveals the central tenant of Mrs. Bellmont's philosophy that African Americans, particularly black women and girls, should never be elevated from such a life of toil and struggle, which suggests deliberation in the woman's creation of black girl-women. Mrs. Bellmont states, "I don't mind the nigger in the child. I should like a

dozen better than one. . . . If I could make her do my work in a few years, I would keep her. I have so much trouble with girls I hire, I am almost persuaded if I have one to train up in my way from a child, I shall be able to keep them awhile” (Wilson 300). In this regard, her strategy resembles one that she might implement in more altruistic circumstances to “train up a child in the way that [s]he might go” according to her professed Christian values. Yet, evangelism is the furthest thing from the woman’s mind since she attempts to restrict Frado’s access to religion altogether, whether it relates to reading the Bible, attending church services, or becoming a Christian. Instead, Mrs. Bellmont strives to establish a small Southern plantation arrangement in the North, and she realizes that she must begin her oppressive instruction with a black child to ensure that this systematic hierarchy remains intact. Although Mrs. Bellmont “possesses” only Frado and not the team of enslaved people she dreams of overseeing, she begins the girl’s training the very next day with the aforementioned arrangement. To reinforce her perspective, Mrs. Bellmont houses Frado in her version of a slave quarters, the most oppressive area of the Bellmont home, a small storage space, which is difficult to access and subject to extreme temperatures, all of which contributes to Frado’s later debilitation. Additionally, she limits Frado’s movements, education, food rations, and voice, even preventing her from crying or making noises when she is beaten. Additionally, Mrs. Bellmont attempts to restrict the child’s physical and emotional maturity, promises to kick Frado out of the home if she outgrows her small room, but later endeavors to prevent Frado from leaving the home when she turns eighteen. This contradiction further depicts Mrs. Bellmont’s desire to both expedite Frado’s childhood and stagnate her development into womanhood, thereby maintaining her position as a black girl-woman.

To avoid resistance to and condemnation of their actions from would-be saviors in the household, Mrs. Belmont and Mary conduct much of their disturbing cruelty and punishments privately; they beat Frado when others are not present and warn her against exposing their actions, or they strike her when she is in the kitchen and use a leather strap in her mouth to muffle her cries. Still, everyone in the Belmont home easily discovers the evidence of Frado's abuses, but they do little to protect her or relieve her suffering. On occasion, some family members openly express their disgust with Frado's treatment, but none of their intercessions is consistent, making their efforts inadequate if not insincere. Although Jack, one of the Belmont sons, behaves pleasantly toward Frado and realizes that his presence prevents many of the child's mistreatments, he commonly arrives and leaves the home without rescuing her. Daughter Jane, who is physically challenged and "dependent on Mary and her mother for care," yearns to protect Frado, but believes that paying "attention to Nig" will disrupt their services to her (Wilson 311). Mr. Belmont's sister, Aunt Abby, takes pity on Frado and shields the child from her mistress from time to time, but the woman resists advocating openly for Frado despite her empowerment in the household as part-owner of the Belmont homestead (Wilson 311). On the contrary, oldest son James assists Frado more than anyone else, and he plans to rescue Frado and bring her to live with his family, but he becomes ill and dies before doing so. Frado loves James dearly, nearly becoming a Christian due to his evangelistic efforts, but like many proverbial "good slave masters," who hope to free enslaved people upon their death, he makes no arrangements to care for the child or to locate a replacement advocate even though he realizes his impending death. Additionally, since James's wife is wealthy and seems to care for Frado, they could afford to pay whatever debt that leads to her indentured servitude, but neither does so.

At times, Mr. Bellmont instructs his wife against harming Frado, but he continually leaves the home fully expecting the woman to brutalize the child. On one occasion, he states, “How am I to help it? Women rule the earth, and all in it” (Wilson 318), as if he has no power in the patriarchal society. Yet, it is clear that he can do more to assist the girl. After all, one of his few authoritative maneuvers in the home allows Frado to attend school, which offers her at least some “rest from Mrs. Bellmont’s tyranny” (Wilson 308) and permits her a degree of freedom, self-expression, and happiness at least for a time. Once there, her classmates taunt her: “‘See that nigger,’ shouted one. ‘Look! look!’ cried another. ‘I won’t play with her,’ said one little girl. ‘Nor I neither’” replied another” (Wilson 303). Thankfully, the schoolteacher appears and encourages them all to love her, “lay aside all prejudice, and vie with each other in shewing kindness and good-will to one who seems different” (Wilson 303). Frado describes the teacher’s statement as “the most agreeable sound which ever meets the ear of sorrowing, grieving childhood” (Wilson 303), a commendation she never attaches to anyone in the Bellmont home. Like the teacher, other characters acknowledge and rebuke Frado’s suffering, but they accept her mistreatment as status quo in the Bellmont household. Perhaps if Mr. Bellmont and his sympathetic family members had addressed, immediately and consistently, Mrs. Bellmont and Mary’s ill intentions, Frado might have been spared her abuse and allowed to enjoy her childhood and to mature naturally.

Without such advocacy, Frado has hardly any resources that she might access to assist her in overcoming her black girl-woman state. So complete is Mrs. Bellmont’s indoctrination into Southern slavery on Northern territory and so effective is her curriculum of brutality and pain that the option of rebelling never occurs to Frado, until Mr. Bellmont notices how sickly she appears and gives her permission to avoid being beaten “when she was SURE she did not

deserve a whipping” (Wilson 344). With this new instruction and agency, fourteen or fifteen-year-old Frado defends herself and refuses a beating Mrs. Bellmont plans to administer for sluggishness in bringing in firewood. This move surprises both Mrs. Bellmont and Frado, who “did not know, before, that she had a power to ward off assaults” (Wilson 345). While this turn of events empowers Frado momentarily, it alters little in her slave-like working conditions, which wrack her body with pain and illness throughout a large portion of her adult life.

Her experience in the Bellmont household also debilitates Frado emotionally and psychologically, although it is her mother’s desertion that initially cripples her and causes her to believe and confess openly that she feels unloved and unwanted. At times, she openly expresses this pain, stating, “I ha’n’t got no mother, no home. I wish I was dead” (Wilson 311), and “Oh, I wish I had my mother back; then I should not be kicked and whipped so” (Wilson 313). While it is unclear whether the dream of remaining with her mother would result in an improved reality for Frado, the sentiment reveals a constant yearning for love and security and causes her to believe that others’ well-being is more important than her own, even in extremely hazardous circumstances. For instance, in describing an occasion upon which she mounts a barn’s “topmost board” while repairing its roof (Wilson 316), Frado downplays the danger she faces and instead cites the Bellmont family’s reaction to her life-threatening undertaking. After explaining her ability to humor the family, Frado states, “Mr. Bellmont called sternly for her to come down; *poor Jane* nearly fainted from fear. Mrs. B and Mary did not care if she ‘broke her neck,’ while Jack and the men [working on the Bellmont farm] laughed at her fearlessness” (Wilson 316, emphasis mine). Even in describing a reckless event that she considers “the work of a boy” (Wilson 315), Frado draws readers’ attention to her mirth and playfulness in the action and encourages more concern for Jane’s frailty than her own safety. Beginning with her mother’s

decision to reject her and protect her brother, life experiences have trained Frado to believe that her existence and perspective are less important than others'. This emotional and psychological damage remains with Frado after she departs from the Belmont home, and it appears repeatedly in her narrative, most obviously in her decision to offer her story as a distant third person narrator rather than in the intimate first person.

Thus, Frado's story ends the way it begins, with her fixation on people who care much less for her than she does for them. After offering an update on the Belmont family members, she states, "Frado has passed from their memories, as Joseph from the butler's, but she will never cease to track them till beyond mortal vision" (Wilson 358). As suspected, the Belmont family no longer thinks of Frado, primarily because most of them are dead; however, the entirety of her pain-filled life and mental state is consumed with and stagnated by the difficult years she has spent with them. By Frado's estimation, her life and well-being is worth nothing more than a forgotten memory in the minds of the dead.

In Colson Whitehead's fantastical neo-slave narrative, *The Underground Railroad*, Southern plantation slavery and ever-fluctuating fugitive slave laws cause many black girl characters to endure the sexual abuse of *Incidents*, the grueling labor requirements and brutal punishments of *Our Nig*, and the mental trauma of both. These assaults blur the lines between the characters' childhoods and adulthoods and confine them to black girl-womanhood, sometimes throughout the duration of their lives. Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning novel reflects what Ron Eyerman describes as the retrospective, collective, and cultural trauma of slavery<sup>30</sup> and charts the life of Cora, an enslaved young woman, who, by way of a

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<sup>30</sup> According to Eyerman, "The notion of an African American identity was articulated in the later decades of the nineteenth century by a generation of black intellectuals for whom slavery was a thing of the past, not the present. . . . If slavery was traumatic for this generation of

literal underground railroad system and the assistance of its station managers and conductors, escapes a violent plantation as a teenager after a seemingly unending succession of traumatizing events. Traveling from Georgia to the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Indiana, and experiencing “different state[s] of American possibility” (“Colson Whitehead”), Cora struggles to acclimate to new environments while eluding a famous slave catcher named Ridgeway, who risks all in order to destroy every section of the Underground Railroad and return Cora to the man who claims her as his property. In her journey, Cora must adjust to the hardships of living in pre-emancipatory America beyond the plantation—working as a wage-earning employee, gaining a traditional education, realizing the underlying thread of American racial prejudice even among those with abolitionist sentiments, witnessing the deadly intensity of white supremacist extremism, and participating in and understanding the complexities of maintaining an all-black community in a country that supports, or at least sanctions, chattel slavery. Yet, the psychological trauma of her enslavement, abandonment, and rape, as well as the abuse she witnesses or ascertains from stories passed down by her grandmother Ajarry, overshadows any of the success she achieves and prevents her from enjoying the freedoms she discovers along the way.

Cora’s narrative begins with references to Ajarry’s experiences during the Middle Passage, a hardship that establishes a direct link to Cora’s African lineage, which is privileged information for an enslaved person since slave trade practices provide so few opportunities for retaining ancestral records. But rather than provoking feelings of perseverance, accomplishment, and cultural pride, as it might in a white child, Cora’s family history represents a nearly insurmountable burden, an initial source of generational trauma, and a reminder of

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intellectuals, it was so in retrospect, mediated through recollection and reflection, and, for some, tinged with some strategic, practical, and political interest” (2).

dehumanization and mindboggling sufferings. At a “tender age” (Whitehead 4), Ajarry enters the slave trade after “Dahomeyan raiders” (Whitehead 3) invade her entire village, kidnapping and murdering most of its inhabitants, marching survivors to the seashore, and trading them for rum and gunpowder. Once aboard a slave ship ironically called the *Nanny*, slavers confine Ajarry and other victims to the “noxious air of the hold” below deck, except when the ship’s mates repeatedly “drag” her out and rape her, despite her youth (Whitehead 4). Initially, these abuses make the young girl suicidal, but after slavers separate her from her family and then repeatedly buy, sell, and violate her, Ajarry develops “a blankness behind her eyes” (Whitehead 7), learning quickly to “adjust to. . . new plantations” (Whitehead 6) in order to survive the brutality she experiences and witnesses in the American slave system. Acutely aware of the dangers of resistance and convinced of the impossibility of improved circumstances, Ajarry submits completely to her bondage, focusing any remaining energy on maintaining the three-square-foot garden plot of “simmering brown-red dirt”<sup>31</sup> (Whitehead 14) that she manages to secure in the slave quarters and teaching her five children to behave similarly. In a world in which “you knew where and how your children would die” (Whitehead 8), Ajarry hopes to offer her family the best chance of survival by exhibiting unadulterated obedience, although only one child, Mabel, Cora’s mother, lives past age ten. All of these incidents traumatize Ajarry, and when her burdens “splinter her into a thousand pieces” (Whitehead 4), she copes with her trauma by fantasizing about her long lost African relatives living free somewhere up north, even though readers know

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<sup>31</sup> The narrator refers to the small garden as the “family’s plot” (Whitehead 14), a phrase that usually signifies a burial site in a cemetery. In a way, the plot signifies death since Ajarry wholeheartedly surrenders to enslavement and she expects to and does die on the plantation. However, for Mabel and Cora, the land yields life and sustenance, as both uproot their vegetables to sustain them during their escapes. Also, the further Cora is from the plot and the plantation, the more independently she begins thinking.

they all die of plague on a slave ship not long after it sails toward the Americas.<sup>32</sup> Although the narrator describes Ajarry as indomitable and persevering (Whitehead 294), the loss of her homeland and family and her multiple sexual assaults greatly affect her mentally, and this trauma is exacerbated as she experiences firsthand the stark differences between the life of her younger years spent in Africa and the harshness of the American slave system. Her indoctrination in this new existence occurs so early and completely that she not only succumbs to the masters' reprogramming, but she also passes it down to her children, attempting but failing to save them from greater peril.

While masters commonly and unrepentantly sell children, called pups and pickaninnies in the novel,<sup>33</sup> and separate them from their mothers, Cora is fortunate enough to live with her grandmother and mother, which affords her at least some level of comfort and protection during the early years of her enslavement. Her family further ensures her wellbeing, as much as possible, as Ajarry grows vegetables to supplement their rations, which lessens the amount of additional labor Cora must complete, and Mabel shields Cora from sexual abuse by sacrificing her own body to Moses, a boss who demands sex from either the woman or her then eight-year-old child indiscriminately. But, when Ajarry literally works herself to death in a cotton field, and Mabel vanishes in the night in an escape that becomes a legendary tale of the only uncaptured runaway from Georgia's famously depraved Thomas Randall plantation, ten- or eleven-year-old

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<sup>32</sup> The novel is filled with these types of disclosures, revealing the despondency of the slave system and the obliviousness in which enslaved people are kept in order to maintain their subjugation. Even the narrator participates in this process, most notably as most characters consider Mabel's disappearance to be a legendary escape when she dies unremarkably in a swamp not far from the plantation after a snake bite.

<sup>33</sup> At times, characters use this language to describe black children, but in some cases, the narrator refers to the children as pickaninnies, an act that seems insensitive considering that the book was published in 2016.

Cora<sup>34</sup> must forgo any lingering childhood hopes and remaining innocence. The loss of her mother shocks and depresses the girl, casting her into a “world drained to gray impressions” (Whitehead 14), but eventually Cora decides to “to hold on to her stake [her family’s garden plot], even though she [is] young and small and [has] nobody to look after her anymore” (Whitehead 14). Left utterly alone, Cora guards the land against pests, small children, and even adults who have no apprehensions about stealing the family plot from a child claiming it as her inheritance. Although Cora never admits it, she believes that Mabel will return to rescue her, as she has in the past, but over time, Cora’s depression and yearning transform into anger and unforgiveness, sentiments which strengthen after she escapes and realizes how refreshing life can be off the plantation. Yet, she cannot resist looking for her mother and imagining ways that they might meet again, all of which sparks more depression since, for Cora, a mother who understands the brutality of the slave system and still forsakes her child is unfathomable.

Cora’s life after her abandonment offers a shocking illustration of the dangers awaiting motherless enslaved girls, who various members of society subsequently perceive or expect to behave as adults. According to the plantation’s standards, Ajarry and Mabel’s absence makes Cora a “stray” (Whitehead 14), a powerless, unprotected young person, with no respectability,

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<sup>34</sup> The narrator estimates Cora’s age at times and altogether omits it in others, symbolizing the unimportance of accurately documenting an enslaved person’s birthdate and age. Whitehead reinforces this practice by including in the novel authentic runaway slave reward announcements, which rarely offer specific ages for the escaped girls—“a negro girl by the name of LIZZIE” (10), “a negro girl named MARTHA. . . about 21 years of age” (142), “his Negro Girl PEGGY. . . about 16 year of age” (198), and “my negro girl SUKEY. . . about 28 years of age” (238). One enslaved man named Jockey, said to be “the oldest colored man” (Whitehead 25) ever known to the other enslaved people despite his being only about fifty years old, simply declares his birthday. Nevertheless, the slave masters completely dismiss this information since “[e]verybody knew niggers didn’t have birthdays” (Whitehead 11). These conditions cause readers either to estimate their ages or to participate in practice of ignoring the youthfulness and innocence of enslaved female characters such as Cora while simultaneously perceiving them to be more mature than childlike.

even in slave quarters politics. Therefore, shortly after Mabel runs away, enslaved men and women begin infringing upon Cora's space, but not suddenly, as adults might command a child to surrender something to their elders, although this practice commonly occurs on the plantation. For instance, Moses, a boss man and self-appointed "broker of cabin intrigues" (Whitehead 15) and perhaps the same person who threatens to rape Cora as an eight-year-old, exhibits no apprehension in suddenly relocating Cora's belongings from her mother and grandmother's cabin to a building called Hob, which is solely devoted to housing traumatized women, "the wretched [women and girls]. . . those who had been crippled by the overseers' punishments, . . . those who had been broken by the labor in ways you could see and in ways you could not see, . . . [and] those who had lost their wits" (Whitehead 16). Then, the adults campaign against Cora's claim to the land, and they become more emboldened in this effort over time as if it requires a consensus in the enslaved community to justify their actions. Eventually, Blake, a "big oak... double ration" man (Whitehead 17) "three times [Cora's] size" (Whitehead 19), stakes his claim, uproots the girl's vegetables, and replaces them with an elaborate, handcrafted doghouse. To fend off the man's attempt, Cora beseeches support from other community members but receives none, so she retaliates against Blake's invasion by destroying his handiwork with a hatchet and partially severing his dog's tail in the process. So foreign is the idea of a young girl protecting herself that others on the plantation credit her strength and actions to insanity, lasciviousness, and witchcraft. They create legends of her standing over Blake with a hatchet as he sleeps, threatening to scalp another man if he refuses her sexual advances, and "slink[ing] away from the cabins on the full moon, to the woods, where she fornicate[s] with donkeys and goats" (Whitehead 21). The people exhibit no apprehension in thus referring to an abandoned pre-teen girl, and their gossip further isolates Cora, eliminating any remnants of concern for her

innocence or the possibility of her “respectability” (Whitehead 21), which only heightens her vulnerability.

In most cases, enslavement itself expedites the maturity of children, whether by the work they must perform at early ages or the unfathomable violence and cruelties they witness and endure. At one point, Cora matter-of-factly notices the physical maturity of a boy named Chester in whom the cotton “rows trigger something in his lithe body” (Whitehead 24) and make him appear to be more grown-up, a process that also calls to mind the gender-specific concerns that early physical development might cause for enslaved black girls. At any rate, while the children complete various duties alongside enslaved adults and witness their punishments, the youth also observe and, at times, experience the worst of slave punishments. In Cora’s plantation experiences, “She had seen men hung from trees and left for buzzards and crows. Women carved open to the bones with the cat-o’-nine-tails. Bodies alive and dead roasted on pyres. Feet cut off to prevent escape and hands cut off to stop theft. She had seen boys and girls. . . beaten and had done nothing” (Whitehead 33-34). At one point, she is so desensitized to such violence that she views a still hanging, rotting corpse of a woman with a curved belly and contemplates whether the woman was pregnant prior to her hanging, since Cora “had never been good at knowing if a body was with child” (Whitehead 152-153). She is far from singular in her familiarity with these horrors. As children, Mabel and another enslaved woman named Ava are “treated to the same [type of] hospitality, the travesties so routine and familiar that they were a kind of weather, and the ones so imaginative in their monstrosity that the mind refused to accommodate them” (Whitehead 15). Often, such shared experiences and mistreatments bond its victims in a communal racial trauma, but they just as easily invoke “shame of one’s powerlessness and [make] all witnesses into enemies” (Whitehead 15). So prevalent are such cases that the Randall

plantation slave quarters must include a building like Hob, for “strays” and others who have “lost their wits” (Whitehead 16). Largely, such danger causes both the youthful and elderly enslaved population in *The Underground Railroad* to focus on submission and self-preservation rather than organizing and rebellion, as Ajarry’s life demonstrates.

In addition to these concerns, Cora’s abandonment increases her susceptibility to the rampant sexual abuse that enslaved girl and women suffer, principally at the hands of slave masters and overseers; however, her youth, seclusion, and unprotectedness increase her powerlessness to resist the advances and whims of virtually any man, including the enslaved, who often mimic white men in their belittlement of and cruelty towards enslaved women and girls. Some women are so broken by these abuses that they become psychologically unstable: “White men and brown men had used the women’s bodies violently, their babies came out stunted and shrunken, beatings had knocked the sense out of their heads, and they repeated the names of their dead children in the darkness: Eve, Elizabeth, N’thaniel, Tom” (Whitehead 16). Once Ajarry dies and Mabel leaves, Cora lives with the Hob women and her fate becomes aligned with theirs. Although plantation owner Terrance Randall, overseer Connelly, and several other white men express interest in raping Cora, as they have many other enslaved women and girls, these men’s attention is not Cora’s greatest threat. As the narrator states, “White men eat you up, but sometimes colored folk eat you up, too” (Whitehead 54). Consequently, when she is fourteen, four black men drag Cora behind the smokehouse and rape her so violently that the Hob women must “sew. . . her up” (Whitehead 21) afterwards. Since the enslaved community is so accustomed to such brutality, “[i]f anyone heard or saw, they did not intervene” (Whitehead 21). Eventually, her body heals, but her subsequent psychological injuries are so severe that she avoids the touch of men and boys and feels unsafe in large crowds. One symbol of Cora’s

ongoing trauma is her unwillingness to dance under any circumstance, whether on the plantation or later in the novel when she escapes to freedom. The narrator describes this condition, by stating, “She was wary of how sometimes when the music tugged, you might suddenly be next to a man and you didn’t know what he might do. All the bodies in motion, given license. To pull on you, take both of your hands, even if they were doing it with a nice thought. . . . she shrank from the idea of loosening her leash on herself” (Whitehead 28-29). After the attack, Cora can neither become comfortable around others nor minimize her awareness of their movements and actions. By her estimation, this attentiveness protects her from future violations by both white and black men.

At times, even the narrator displays insensitivities to Cora’s youthfulness, plight, and sufferings. When describing her rape, the narrator posits that her assault occurs “not long after it became known that Cora’s womanhood had come into flower” (Whitehead 21), as if menstruation automatically transforms girls into women. But most egregiously, in updating readers about Cora’s age and the progression of her life, the narrator matter-of-factly states that it has been “[t]wo years since Pot and his friends had *seasoned* her” (Whitehead 25, emphasis mine). Using a word such as “seasoned” to describe the brutal gang rape of a young girl left both physically and mentally disabled by the event reflects inexcusable callousness and tactlessness, especially since “seasoning” is commonly used in reference to an improvement to meals in the African American community and elsewhere. Surely, the narrator is not suggesting that Cora’s rape is necessary, that it somehow improves her, or that it is symbol of womanhood; yet, the use of this term in this context is reckless, at best. This negligence becomes even more abhorrent later in the novel when a doctor informs Cora that she might not be able to become pregnant or carry a child, as a consequence of the assault. Incidentally, the narrator’s asinine, unsympathetic

explanation further highlights a comfortability that is commonplace with regard to black girls' lives and sufferings.

Despite such societal norms, the traumas that project Cora into black girl-womanhood, and the seemingly innumerable and insurmountable odds mounted against her survival and success beyond enslavement, she refuses her grandmother's strategy of submitting to unjust authorities and succumbing to her conditions as an enslaved black girl. Instead, Cora channels what she and others on the Randall plantation believe to be her mother's strength, and she dedicates her life to avoiding as many traumas as possible while eking out an improved existence both on the plantation and throughout her travels along the underground railroad. Cora begins this resistance even before she escapes the plantation, although her original attempts emerge from some otherworldly strength instead of any purposeful resolution on her behalf. Initially, she seems overcome by "spell[s]" (Whitehead 19) when someone threatens her or a person for whom she cares deeply. In these episodes, Cora reacts to injustices almost mindlessly or in a trance-like state, without regard for the potential consequences of her actions. The first spell leads her to destroy Blake's doghouse with her infamous hatchet, which she holds in the air afterwards "in a tug-of-war with a ghost" (Whitehead 19). It is unclear whether this haunt is the ghost of Ajarry influencing Cora to calm down and maintain the status quo or Mabel encouraging the girl to continue fighting, but the spell is sufficient in warding off any of the man's retaliatory efforts. Her second "spell" transpires as she uses her body to shield a young enslaved boy from the master's brutal beating, an act that results in her own nearly blinding thrashing and several subsequent whippings for the pair. Perhaps Cora's "spells" emerge from some deep desire to protect others as she wishes someone might have protected her; however, the narrator correlates these episodes to a psychological battle between Cora's humanity and conditioning as an

enslaved person since the narrator states that she defends the boy “before the slave part of her caught up with the human part of her” (Whitehead 34). This explanation seemingly and problematically suggests a mental separation in enslaved people’s treatment and their humanity, or that they somehow become less than human in bondage, which mimics the masters’ language and justifications for their mistreatments. On the contrary, neither Cora nor any of the enslaved onlookers lose their humanity, as any thinking person knows and as the storylines of Ajarry and so many other characters reveal. Nevertheless, Cora might not have decided overtly to act out as she does, but each of these spells costs her dearly since the first sparks mythmaking about her heightened sexuality, which culminates with her rape, and the second causes the loss of an important friendship with the young boy she protects.

Throughout her enslavement, Cora adjusts as best as she can to black girl-womanhood, becoming adept at back-breaking labor and tolerating physical abuse despite her young age, but when the threat of further sexual abuse spurs a third out-of-body spell, in which her “attention detach[es] itself” (Whitehead 48), her resistance becomes increasingly more purposeful. This change occurs when Cora’s notorious slave master, Terrance Randall, publicly fondles her breasts, and she recognizes the gesture to be his announcement of plans to “taste [one of his] plums” (Whitehead 30), as he jokingly describes his predilection for raping enslaved women and girls. Randall’s proclamation provides Cora with the strength and drive to abandon her grandmother’s voice and training and instead pursue her mother’s example of escaping the plantation, despite the terrifying risks associated with recapture. After all, in the past, “No one [but Mabel] had escaped the Randall plantation before. The fugitives were always clawed back, betrayed by friends, they misinterpreted the stars and ran deeper into the labyrinth of bondage. On their return they were abused mightily before being permitted to die and those they left

behind were forced to observe the grisly increments of their demise” (Whitehead 41).

Remarkably, Cora and every other character, white and black, believes that Mabel is the first to avoid this fate, and while this idea both traumatically affects Cora and empowers her escape, Mabel’s death in the swamp shortly after Mabel leaves the plantation seems somehow less traumatic since Randall likely would have forced Cora to watch her recaptured mother endure extended torturing before succumbing to an excruciating death.

After her escape, Cora struggles against her traumatized mental state, and as she travels further away from the plantation, her spells transition to flashbacks of the brutalities she experiences and witnesses in previous years. For instance, while she and two fellow escapees, a man named Caesar and a young girl named Lovey, travel through the woods to an Underground Railroad agent’s home, a group of white hog hunters intercepts them, hoping to earn the “unprecedented” reward from Randall (Whitehead 62). Two of the men drag Lovey away, but when one of the would-be slave catchers grabs Cora, his touch reminds her of “the night behind the smokehouse when Edward and Pot and the rest brutalized her” (Whitehead 59); however, instead of mindlessly reacting, she considers how she might escape his grasp. In that moment, Cora’s fear causes her to fight “as she had not been able to then” (Whitehead 59), but when in the scuffle she loses her trusty axe, which assisted her to avoid a previous assault, she locates a rock and uses it to deal fatal damage to her would-be kidnapper. Cora’s new weapon symbolizes her fresh perspective and new consciousness, one keenly aware of her intention to resist bondage and future abuses, come what may. Life as a black girl-woman has hardened Cora, and she feels little remorse for her actions, choosing instead to believe that the boy “should not have laid his hands on her” (Whitehead 64). Therefore, despite Cora’s visions of the boy in her dreams and her eventual knowledge of his death, she is more concerned about how others might perceive her

when they discover she has killed another person. More than being labeled a murderer, slavery haunts Cora, and she must constantly “put the plantation behind her” (Whitehead 96), whether performing schoolwork, enjoying moments alone, or exploring the sites in and reflecting on the customs of new locations. At times, these memories paralyze her, but she continues working to gain more control over herself and her thoughts.

As countless black people are murdered, enslaved, escaping, attempting to overcome the physical and mental traumas of their pasts, or resisting new forms of oppressions throughout the novel, Cora is not alone in this trauma. Their personal experiences and those of others haunt them and generate records of suffering since “[t]here was an order to misery, misery tucked inside miseries, and you were meant to keep track” (Whitehead 22). Such memories and constant threats effectively produce feelings of undefeatable timelessness in the slave system, which seems as if it will forever restrict black life. Even after they escape the plantation, formerly enslaved people are “haunted by the plantation. . . It still lived in all of them, waiting to abuse and taunt when chance presented itself” (Whitehead 106). The narrator’s explanation of Mabel’s escape further reveals a persistent hopelessness in Cora and others’ circumstances, thereby reflecting the impossibility of physical and psychological freedom for many, if not most, other enslaved girls. Mabel’s life reflects this condition as she leaves the Randall plantation attempting to escape her own traumas, “patrollers. . . bosses. . . cries of anguish to induct her into another’s despair. . . cabin walls shuttling her through the night seas like the hold of a slave ship” (Whitehead 294), all of which signifies and links her miserable conditions in chattel enslavement to the Middle Passage. Consequently, it is not until Mabel attains a sliver of freedom in the swamp that she decides to return to her daughter and tell the child that there is “something beyond the plantation, past all she knew. That one day if she stayed strong, the girl could have it

for herself” (Whitehead 294). Alas, she can never deliver this message since a snake bite kills her and the swamp swallows her body up, erasing any trace of her life and unfortunate demise, as well as the new knowledge that she acquires.

Left alone to navigate plantation life and freedom, Cora must derive her own cures for black girl-womanhood, but she cannot return to the site of her original trauma to make peace with her past, as post-slavery black girl-women might. After all, Terrance Randall is a brutal slave owner, who takes pride in administering extended, theatrical punishments for runaways. For instance, when the hunting party returns Lovey to the plantation, Randall demands that the girl be hooked through her side and suspended in the air until she dies, a tormenting process that takes several days to complete and that ultimately adds more miseries to the mental records of other enslaved people. Randall’s unspecified, but “generous bounty” for Cora’s capture (Whitehead 208) proves that he would relish even more so the opportunity to reclaim and punish the daughter of the only enslaved person to escape his grasp. For Cora, revisiting the plantation would result in a fate worse than death, until Randall gave her permission to die.

Instead, Cora must rediscover her voice and share her stories with others to deal with her traumas, and over time she becomes more comfortable in doing both. In South Carolina, her first stop along the underground railroad, Cora discovers the U.S. government’s ongoing medical practice of sterilizing African American women and infecting black men with syphilis, and she questions her doctor’s suggestion for her to undergo the birth control procedure. Then, as she spends many hours working as a living prop in the museum of natural history, which offers racially stereotypical and historically inaccurate vignettes of black life, she musters the courage to inform the white curator that the depictions are incorrect. Although these assertions already contrast her primarily contemplative demeanor up to this point, Cora begins voicing her

perspectives wholeheartedly when she travels to her second stop along the underground railroad to a township in North Carolina where officials outlaw and publicly execute black people, afterwards displaying their corpses on spikes along the city's main thoroughfare. Since Cora's arrival in the town is unexpected, the underexperienced and reluctant underground railroad conductor basically imprisons her in his attic to avoid her discovery and his family's implication and ensuing execution for breaking the town's strict ordinance. Cora's tenure in the attic is reminiscent of Linda Brent in *Incidents*, but unlike Linda, Cora is not patient in enduring her situation. The further she is from the plantation, the stronger her voice gets, and remaining in the attic for an extended period provides a great deal of time to think about her past and current conditions of bondage. Therefore, in nightly chats with him, she addresses the man's hypocrisy in keeping her imprisoned, and she belittles his excuses for doing so.

When famous slave catcher Ridgeway discovers her hiding place and seizes her from the conductor's home, they travel further West on another runaway mission. Then, as the distance from the plantation increases, Cora becomes more discerning in her choice to either communicate openly her disgust with the man's rambling or retain her words so as to deny him the pleasure of her voice and thoughts, electing instead to reflect on her life and other matters while he pontificates. For instance, Cora rejects Ridgeway's explanation of the American ideal of progress and manifest destiny, as well as his justification of murdering a captured enslaved man, accusing the slave catcher of using words to "pretty things up" (Whitehead 221). Although she receives many updates from Ridgeway about the fate of people she cares for from the days of her enslavement, some that hurt her deeply such as the killings of Lovey and Caesar, she ignores many of his statements and devotes her brainpower to considering her life and circumstances, creating "a thick braid of her misfortunes" (Whitehead 214) since leaving the plantation. As she

locates her voice, she realizes that empowerment can exist and be displayed without saying a word.

As black men in an enslaved black community cause Cora's original trauma, her greatest freedom from black girl-womanhood occurs when Royal, a black male Underground Railroad agent, rescues her from Ridgeway, delivers her to a free black settlement in Indiana, and treats her lovingly. Eventually, Cora becomes emotionally attached to Royal, but she cannot feel safe enough with him to touch him or express her feelings until she assumes the role of storyteller and relates the circumstances of her rape. Eventually, she relates her miseries to him, and as she cries, he "folded his body into hers to quiet her shaking and sobs" (Whitehead 280). Probably the greatest indication of her healing is her ability to fall asleep in his arms, a monumental accomplishment for a person who could not tolerate any man's touch not long before. Still, while the novel ends with Cora making great strides in overcoming her trauma and travelling West with a racially diverse caravan, it is unlikely that this interaction relieves her suffering completely since it cannot erase the difficult memories of the brutalities of enslavement.

Cora, Linda Brent, and Frado carry the traumas of their bondage with them, but they never truly escape slavery. Despite all Linda's attempts to simply claim her freedom as a matter of principle, she must still be purchased in order to escape the Flint family. Similarly, Frado bears the brutal handiwork of the Bellmonts in her body and her mind, and Cora watches Ridgeway murder Royal soon after she begins disclosing her feelings to him. Time and distance improve these black girl-women's situations and help reduce their trauma, but healing is a long, difficult process that may never come. Ultimately, depictions of pre-emancipatory black girl-women such as Linda Brent, Frado, and Cora help us understand the long-standing marginalization and intersectional complexities facing African American female children and

adolescents. Portrayals of their vulnerabilities and abuses are tales as old as time, not new phenomena. Even as authors and scholars sought and still seek to address the larger societal imbalances and injustices of that era, such as slavery, discrimination, and racial traumas, black girl stories inform those narratives and must be considered.

## CHAPTER 2

### “SHE GET IT FROM HER MOMMA”: MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS, FAMILY DYNAMICS, AND THE CREATION OF BLACK GIRL-WOMEN

*“ . . . this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know you very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming. . . .”*

— “Girl,” Jamaica Kincaid

Society often expects black mothers to behave as archetypically strong, self-sacrificing, eternally benevolent shields between their daughters and the perilous world<sup>35</sup>; yet, occasionally, in attempting to make the best of bad situations or to power through their own pain and trauma, these women can present physical or psychological dangers to their children, at times further harming those already at risk. Various studies reflect this trend as researchers have established generational links between parents’, and particularly mothers’, adverse childhood experiences and their children’s behavioral health (Schickedanz et al. 1), as well as the effects of black mothers’ parenting styles and strategies on their daughters’ sense of self-worth, self-esteem, resilience, and coping (Everett et al. 334). As art often reflects life, literature also reveals similar connections as some African American mother characters exhibit a harmful strength toward their children in attempting to raise and protect them. In *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature*, Trudier Harris addresses the potentially detrimental effects of such women, who attempt always to be “strong, nurturing, and physically enduring in

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<sup>35</sup> Various sociological studies highlight these perspectives, especially one by Denise A. Narcisse entitled “Pride and Joy: African American Mothers’ Influences on their Professional Daughters’ Success,” which features one participant’s explanation that her mother is “one of the strongest people” she knows (164).

spite of everything” (8), and she notes how these choices can lead to “dysfunctionality in literary families, where the strong dispositions and actions of black female characters have negative impacts upon the lives of their relatives” (10). In this regard, one might consider Sethe, who kills her child in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, although she intends the infanticide as a loving act to save her baby from enslavement, or Mama Lena Younger, who emasculates her married son and coddles her adult daughter in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, even if her greatest hope is to offer them lives better than the one she has experienced. At times, strong mothers’ efforts reflect and complicate their desire to raise well-rounded, resilient daughters, able to navigate a troubled world safely and successfully. In other instances, a mother’s guidance can be flawed, short-sighted, and accidentally harmful, at best, or purposely restrictive and damaging, at worst. William Wells Brown’s *Clotel, or the President’s Daughter* (1853), Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Getting Mother’s Body* (2003), and Delores Phillips’s *The Darkest Child* (2004) present several variations of these parental strategies and the ways in which mothers, either inadvertently or purposely, expedite their daughters’ maturity and force them into black girl-womanhood.

Scholars often discuss Brown’s *Clotel* as an abolitionist novel about the tragic mulatta/mulatto,<sup>36</sup> colorism,<sup>37</sup> racial politics, romance,<sup>38</sup> or gender identity and appropriation<sup>39</sup> due to the prominence of such ideas within the text. In “The Case Against Whiteness in William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*,” Katie Frye even notes validly the “destructivity, fragility, and instability

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<sup>36</sup> In “Fluidity Without Postmodernism: Michelle Cliff and the ‘Tragic Mulatta’ Tradition,” Suzanne Bost charts and complicates various readings of mixed-race characters such as *Clotel* written by various writers, including Brown, Frances E. W. Harper, and Pauline Hopkins.

<sup>37</sup> Candice Marie Jenkins references *Clotel* and the tragic mulatta to expand discussions of skin privilege in *Black Bourgeois: Class and Sex in the Flesh* (2019).

<sup>38</sup> In his 1980 article “*Clotel*: A Black Romance,” Gerald S. Rosselot discusses “Brown’s indebtedness to the romance tradition that pervaded the American novel in the nineteenth century.” In 2016, Christopher Stampone discusses the romantic elements of *Clotel* in analyzing the historical allusions present in all four of Brown’s editions of the novel.

<sup>39</sup> See Richard O. Lewis’s “Literary Conventions in the Novels of William Wells Brown.”

of white ideologies” as white characters repeatedly fail to “make good on their promises. . . lead[ing] to the deaths of black men and women” (528); however, few scholars, if any, focus on the complexities of black mother-daughter relationships and the ways in which efforts to protect their children often negatively affect the girls’ maturation and overall well-being. Granted, the mothers in Brown’s novel are enslaved, and the American chattel slave system deliberately and ruthlessly restricts the opportunities and agency of black women and girls, even when their racial history and physical aesthetic offer the ability to live in “comparative luxury” (120), as Curren, her children, and grandchildren do for a large portion of the narrative. Yet, mother characters’ decisions either to acknowledge and educate their daughters about their tenuous positionality within the slave system or to consider racial heritage as irrelevant often determine whether the girls will overcome or succumb to their inevitable traumas.

Although her demeanor seems more aligned with a white woman adhering to the tenets of true womanhood, Curren is one of the too-strong matriarchs in Brown’s novel as she raises her daughters, Clotel and Althesa, to be “fancy girl[s]” (Brown 122), a term designating a “light-skinned [enslaved person] purchased for the purpose of providing sexual pleasure” (Frye 530). One might read Curren’s “great aim” to “bring up Clotel and Althesa to attract attention . . . especially at balls and parties” (Brown 120) as a concerned mother’s attempt to secure an acceptable and profitable marriage for her daughters. However, considering the illegality of miscegenation and the illegitimacy of white-quadroon unions, Curren’s honest and straightforward approach to survival better reflects a potentially avoidable form of child prostitution,<sup>40</sup> especially since she realizes that, at best, her enslaved children will become “play

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<sup>40</sup> While one might argue that enslaved people ultimately can avoid nothing during slavery, Curren appears to have a great deal more agency than other enslaved women even though she is sold eventually. After all, her situation is reminiscent of Linda Brent’s grandmother, Aunt

wives” to their procurers, who might discard them without warning, explanation, or repercussion despite the girls’ “very superior” upbringing (Brown 119). After all, Curren’s life begins in this manner, and she “hire[s] her time” for more than twenty years, paying her “owner” to allow her the freedom of “keeping house” for Thomas Jefferson, her daughters’ father (Brown 119). After Jefferson moves to Washington to advance his political career, Curren continues hiring her time as a “laundress or washerwoman,” but despite her high-level connection, her owner sells her and her children alongside “mechanics, able-bodied field hands, plough-boys, and women with children at the breast” (Brown 119). In such a world where the long-term mistress and children of a president can be sold so indiscriminately, Curren shamelessly hopes to provide her children with the best outcomes for as long as possible, and she willingly brings her daughters, age sixteen and fourteen, to quadron balls to begin the process of attracting a suitor, or long-term john.

Curren witnesses only one portion of her plan come to fruition before the narrator almost completely neglects her maternal perspective and reduces her to an insignificant narrative element. After a ruthless slave trader buys and later separately sells Curren and Althesa, Horatio Green, Clotel’s wealthy gentleman caller from the quadron balls, purchases her for fifteen hundred dollars. Even before the family’s misfortune, Curren is “delighted beyond measure at her daughter’s conquest” (Brown 120) in attracting Green’s attention, and although the narrator neglects any reference to Curren’s reaction to her daughter’s acquisition, readers might safely imagine her pleasure in Green’s loyalty to her child. Despite the narrator’s attentiveness to a great many other details, including the brutality and absurdity of slavery, colorism among

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Marthy, who certainly refuses willingly to submit her daughter and granddaughter to such conditions. Additionally, the novel suggests that Curren brings her daughters to the quadron balls of her own volition.

enslaved people, and hypocrisy of white Christians, he allows Curren only one further expression of a mother's love when she begs her new owner also to purchase Althesa, a request he coolly refuses. From that point forward, Curren exists as if she is somehow no longer a mother, having no further conversations or thoughts about her children while supervising her owner's kitchen and interacting with other enslaved people before dying years later of yellow fever. Considering her initial devotion to her daughters' well-being and futures, the latter portion of Curren's life seems more an afterthought than a probable conclusion because it is unlikely that she would never again speak of her beloved children. Perhaps Brown simply ignores Curren in order to fulfill his larger purpose of telling *Clotel's* story. Maybe Curren perfectly reflects the narrator's initial explanation, "Indeed most of the slave women have no higher aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man" (Brown 119), enjoying her lavish lifestyle and willing to prostitute her daughters in order to maintain those conditions. However, based on the information provided in the novel and despite any bias or contempt Brown might have harbored against enslaved women and girls who participated in quadroon balls, Curren represents a strong, aware mother, who both dreads and expects this conclusion all along. Her wariness allows her to muster the complicated and at times problematic strength to provide her daughters with the best life possible, even if it requires participating in an unjust social and economic system, which thrives on the exploitation of young black girls.

Regardless of her motivations, Curren's parental choices do not debilitate her daughters because the girls understand and, at least for a time, enjoy the perks of their enslaved, but opulent conditions, giving them no reason to believe that their circumstances will end unfavorably. After all, when her tenure with Jefferson culminates, Curren uses her professional skills and ingenuity to maintain the family's privileged circumstances, and she resolves "to bring her daughters up as

ladies, as she termed it, and therefore imposed little or no work upon them” (Brown 120).<sup>41</sup> This arrangement affords the girls opportunities to live as high-classed white citizens both before and after their experience on the auction block, an ordeal that, although traumatic, reinforces their high value in a slaveholding society. Clotel’s case, after being separated from her mother and sister, immediately and eagerly enters a loving home with Green, a bond that might warrant a natural separation from extended family in both newly married black and white brides. Due to her mother’s training and the fact that Green must purchase her to begin their “outward marriage” (Brown 136), Clotel demonstrates an acute awareness of her status as an enslaved person despite her amorous relationship and comfortable life. Therefore, when Green forebodingly jokes that he might run away, Clotel replies, “If the mutual love we have for each other, and the dictates of your own conscience do not cause you to remain my husband, and your affections fall from me, I would not, if I could, hold you by a single fetter” (Brown 137). Her progressive perspective about romantic relationships, being willing to accept her husband’s abandonment without resistance, likely originates from her mother’s strength, candid instructions, and past union with Jefferson. Like her mother, Clotel knows that white men eventually tire of their enslaved mistresses and quadroon unions and that she has “no legal hold on [Green’s] constancy” (Brown 136). Yet, as Curren does, Clotel chooses to enjoy the comfortable, rewarding arrangement while it lasts.

Contrarily, without a loving beau to purchase her, Althesa nearly becomes a black girl-woman at fourteen years old after a slave trader separates her from Curren. The teenager is so traumatized by the abrupt shift from her pampered treatment and the loss of her mother that the

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<sup>41</sup> The narrator’s inclusion of the phrase “as she termed it” when referring to Curren’s estimation of her daughters’ capacity to become ladies continues his condemnation of the woman’s perspective and disregards the specific brand of oppression facing her and other mixed-race women during their enslavement.

narrator notes, “It seemed as if poor Althesa would have wept herself to death, for the first two days after her mother had been torn from her side by the hand of the ruthless trafficker in human flesh” (Brown 129). Although young women and girl characters of Althesa’s genetic makeup commonly adhere to the tragic mulatta trope and succumb to such trauma, Althesa has little time to consider suicide because white savior Henry Morton quickly rescues and purchases her. The union is better than any Althesa could have hoped to secure at the quadroon balls because Morton is willing to “marry” publicly Althesa and raise their children as white. Ultimately, Althesa passes as white and raises her daughters, Ellen and Jane, without the awareness of their blackness, which suggests Althesa’s lingering discomfort with her past, although her speedy rescue prevents severe traumatization. The same cannot be said for her daughters, who, deprived of their racial identity, societal positionality, and apparently a white savior, have no means of dealing with the unexpected revelation of their blackness after both of their parents die from yellow fever and slavers eagerly reduce the aesthetically white girls’ status from respectable, virtuous young women to high-priced sex slaves. Neither girl can withstand the revelation of her heritage and the reality of her subsequent degradation, so rather than becoming black girl-women, they fulfill the tragic mulatta trope, both soon dying—Ellen by drinking poison and Jane from a “broken heart” (Brown 250).

Although *Clotel* employs her mother’s straightforward approach to parenting and her daughter Mary survives their eventual separation, no amount of truthfulness, strength, or shrewdness Clotel musters prevents her child from becoming a black girl-woman once Green’s white wife and family discover his connection to “the beautiful quadroon and her child” (Brown 193). Soon, Green’s father-in-law sells Clotel down South, and his wife enslaves Mary in the Green household in order to humiliate her husband. Reminiscent of Frado in the Belmont home,

Mary, at only ten years old, is “put to the meanest work that could be found, and . . . she was often compelled to perform labour, which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been thought too hard for one much older” (Brown 193-94). Unaccustomed to such toil, often orchestrated to allow the sun to darken her white skin, Mary regularly passes out from heat exhaustion and receives no sympathy even from other enslaved people. Brown’s narrator attributes this callousness to some black characters’ covetousness of white-ish black people; however, it is also likely that they are aware and jealous of the lush life Clotel and Mary have experienced. Eventually, the white Mrs. Green tires of tormenting Mary and begins befriending the girl, which allows her more freedoms, even to the point of beginning a romantic relationship with a fellow enslaved man named George, who Mary helps escape from prison.

It is difficult to know how traumatized Mary is and how she overcomes black girl-womanhood since the narrator offers few indications of her emotional and psychological state throughout the novel. Aside from presenting an unenthusiastic account of her life after parting with George, Mary experiences few opportunities to explain her state of mind beyond any romantic association. Despite her earlier brutal physical abuse and later sale in the New Orleans slave market, where immorality and vice often fall “to the lot of a [female] slave sold” there (Brown 141), seemingly Mary’s white skin protects Mary against even the threat of sexual abuse, since purchasers believe she is too fair and able to “run away and pass as a free white woman” (Brown 277). This perspective starkly differs from the value slavers originally place on Mary’s female family members, as they pay exorbitant prices for the characters’ whiteness and cultured upbringing.

Yet, further attentiveness to Mary’s narrative reveals more evidence of her traumatized state. First, as Mary describes her presentation in the New Orleans slave market, she expresses

no previous reservations about being “examined by many persons” (Brown 277), despite the narrator’s earlier mentioning of Althesa’s fortune in avoiding “the pain of undergoing such an examination” (Brown 141). One might safely assume that Mary’s early childhood abuse suffered in her white father’s home acclimates her to the exploitation and degradation of enslavement, and her emotionless recounting of these events suggests desensitization to her trauma.<sup>42</sup> Mary is accustomed to mistreatment by white people and other enslaved persons since “one so white seldom ever receives fair treatment at the hands of [her] fellow slaves; and the whites usually regard such slaves as persons who, if not often flogged, and otherwise ill treated, to remind them of their condition, would soon ‘forget’ that they were slaves, and ‘think themselves as good as white folks’” (Brown 262). Further still, the slave trader offers no assurance of Mary’s chastity, either because her lowered enslaved status warrants no such explanation or because she has already experienced a sexual encounter, whether willingly or otherwise. As for consensual sex, Mary describes a romantic connection with George so advanced that she helps him escape the noose, being “willing to die if [George] could live” (Brown 276); however, neither she nor the narrator offers suggestions of a physical relationship between the couple. Considering her vulnerable position in the Green home and transport to the New Orleans slave market, it is reasonable to suspect that Mary could have been violated previously. This is certainly one of Clotel’s major concerns for her young daughter dating back to when the pair live happily in their cottage with Green: “when she looked at her beloved Mary, and reflected upon the unavoidable and dangerous position which the tyranny of society had awarded her, her soul was filled with anguish. . . . in the deep tenderness of the mother’s eye, there was an indwelling sadness that

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<sup>42</sup> Articles such as “Profiling Psychopathology of Patients Reporting Early Childhood Trauma and Emotional Neglect: Support for a Two-Dimensional Model?” and “The Impact and Long-term Effects of Childhood Trauma” reveal psychologists’ continual attempts to determine how childhood trauma affects their patients.

spoke of anxious thoughts and fearful foreboding” (Brown 137). Believing such a fate to be unavoidable in America, Clotel asks for Green to move the family to France or England, but he refuses. Even after the pair’s selling and enslavement in different areas of the country, Clotel still worries for Mary and goes to great lengths to escape her captors and return to Virginia to rescue her child, but as slave catchers thwart her plans, she commits suicide to avoid being re-enslaved. In the end, perhaps Mary experiences at least some of the traumas of Clotel’s worst fears, but Brown’s narrator completely avoids this portion of her life, choosing instead to focus on the romantic reunion of two star-crossed lovers rather than Mary’s long-term suffering and need for healing.

While white saviors provide the only method of assistance for strong black mothers and daughters in *Clotel*, storytelling is the curative for black girl-women in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Getting Mother’s Body*. Although some editors and authors historically have challenged, suppressed, and dismissed black narratives and their time-honored importance, when allowed and unfiltered (and, at times, even when restricted and altered), the very act of storytelling functions as a palliative for both African American authors and their female characters, who endure various trauma and need an artistic outlet to grapple and make peace with their painful past. Parks’s novel embraces and advances the African American storytelling tradition, offering black girl-women room to speak and be heard, in a process that helps them deal with their complicated mother/daughter relationships, voice their concerns, and process their traumas.

In recent years, psychologists such as Lynne E. Angus and Leslie S. Greenberg have discussed the effectiveness of using narrative expression as a therapeutic approach to address childhood trauma, in particular, noting that “stories help us make sense of our emotions” (4). Some of the pair’s research specifically focuses on restoring what they describe as “trauma-

based broken stories,” which are incoherent or incomplete memories or understandings of the past, often formed in childhood after experiencing sudden traumatic events, including the loss of a parent. According to Angus and Greenberg, many people who have experienced this type of emotional trauma exhibit the following duplicity:

On the one hand, there is an urgent desire to rid the self completely of the traumatic memory that disrupts the emotional plotlines of one’s life and to avoid the painful emotions that are connected to the experience. On the other hand, an array of ordinary, everyday experiences inexplicably cue memories of the trauma and/or unbidden emotions, such as fear, rage, sadness, and anger, that evoke maladaptive emotional schemes and are residues of the trauma. (120)

Consequently, this condition often manifests in literary characters, as authors attempt either to reveal the secrets of their souls “which are common to all,” as Leo Tolstoy stated (328), or to “familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar,” as Toni Morrison declared in *Playing in the Dark*. In *Getting Mother’s Body*, teenaged Billy Beede contends with this duality after her mother’s problematic parenting choices and sudden death cause her an emotionally crippling trauma, which simultaneously stagnates her mental development and expedites her maturity, restricting her to existence as a black girl-woman. As a young, female African American character living in the early 1960s, her ability and opportunity to become a storyteller is crucial in determining whether she will overcome her trauma and develop into a fully actualized adult.

In Parks’s polyphonic debut novel, pregnant, unmarried, sixteen-year-old Billy is the only child of deceased, but infamous Willa Mae Beede, a beautiful, fair-skinned, free-spirited woman, whose rash decisions and con artistry fractured her personal relationships and resulted in her degradation and ill-timed death. Billy is one of twenty narrators in the novel, nearly all of whom

are black. Although her chapters far outnumber the multitude of secondary characters, most of the others know the legend that Willa Mae's now heartbroken and bitter transgender former lover, Dill Smiles, buried her with "gold in her pockets" (Parks 9). Yet, few of them realize that Willa Mae bled out over several days in a hotel room in front of then ten-year-old Billy after a botched late-term self-abortion attempt. This traumatic event leaves Billy without a parent and the ward of an impoverished uncle and aunt living in rural Lincoln, Texas. Yet, none of Billy's family or community members directly addresses her tragic circumstances or her increasingly apparent similarities to her mother, effectively denying the young girl the opportunity to process her mental anguish or make sufficient plans for her unborn child. Left to her own devices, Billy decides to abort the baby when her much older lover jilts her, but she must first travel to her mother's final resting place, LaJunta, Arizona, to exhume her body and claim the buried treasure to fund the procedure.

On the outset, Billy Beede is a scheming, inconsiderate, pregnant teenager from a notorious and financially unstable family, and she is often read in that manner. In "Rewriting the Corpse in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Getting Mother's Body*," Rhonda Jenkins Armstrong describes Billy as an empowered, "savvy. . . [girl who] has definite plans and the will and wiles to achieve them" (46), a perspective that makes Billy seem more adult than child. Jenkins also states that "Billy is conscious of the parallels between her life and body and Willa Mae's life and body" (46); however, this thinking is elementary, at best, since Billy initially believes that she hates her mother after the woman's risky lifestyle eventually ends her life and leaves Billy motherless. Other scholars also read the most obvious elements of Billy's condition—pregnancy, inherited con artistry,<sup>43</sup> and her ability to lead a team of people across several states—as a display of

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<sup>43</sup> See "Casting the Bones of Willa Mae Beede: Passing and Performativity in Suzan-Lori Parks's

maturity and adulthood, and Billy certainly sees herself as an adult; yet, however determined she is to unearth her mother's jewels, she, a child, is almost completely unaware of how complicated the process will be physically and emotionally. Willa Mae's parenting and death completely alter the trajectory of Billy's life and interfere with her ability to mature properly, causing her to manifest simultaneously as both child and woman despite her chronological age.

Although a teenager, Billy navigates the world as an adult woman might, unashamedly having sex in public spaces, working in a hair salon, negotiating purchases and services in places of business with random strangers, and traveling from one area of the country to another unchaperoned. Although she demonstrates a similar kind of reckless abandon she has witnessed in her mother,<sup>44</sup> Billy exhibits a naiveté and rebelliousness indicative of a gullible, inexperienced, helpless child. The novel opens with Billy having sex with Snipes, the older man she hopes to marry; however, she exhibits no passion or arousal during the tryst, functioning more as a reporter than an equal participant. She considers the location of her missing underwear, describes the make, model, and color of Snipes's car, relates the sounds Snipes makes "as he goes at it" (Parks 4), and wonders about the positioning of her unborn baby, all while attempting to alleviate the pain in her head as Snipes's thrusts cause her head to hit the door handle repeatedly. She sees the connection between herself and her unborn baby—both children, both having their heads bumped during the sexual encounter. After he climaxes, climbs off her, and begins adjusting his clothing, she considers all of the "little seeds" he sows in her (Parks 4), which displays an understanding of reproduction, but when she attempts to start a conversation with Snipes, he easily ignores her. Billy is not satisfied with their arrangement, but

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*Getting Mother's Body*" by Laura Wright.

<sup>44</sup> Willa Mae gets herself, and Billy by extension, jailed for negative interactions with police officers so often that Billy describes the situations as "doing a Willa Mae" (Parks 172).

her recurrent attention to the volume of her voice and how she speaks to Snipes proves her discomfort with initiating any serious discussion with him, especially one about the state of their relationship. Eventually, she attempts to convey her desires for marriage, but she sounds more like a child approaching a stern father than a young woman appealing to her lover. She prompts him to ask for her hand in marriage and awkwardly states, “The man’s supposed to ask the girl” (Parks 6). By her reasoning, Snipes is a man, fully grown, with a job, a shiny car, and nice clothes, and she is a “girl” under his authority. Therefore, she assumes the child’s role, expecting and deferring to a “real” adult’s leadership. Billy wants security, not sex, but she realizes her youth and powerlessness to make demands of the man with whom she is sexually involved.

Although Billy understands how to manipulate people by identifying their innermost desires (their “holes,” as Willa Mae termed them), she also reasons naively as a child would. She easily justifies or convinces herself that her fiancé, who drives around with another woman’s panties wedged in his car seat, would agree to marry her in two days but still drop her off a mile from her home immediately after their sexual encounter on the side of a road. It is equally reasonable in her mind for Snipes to give her sixty-three dollars to “buy a wedding dress and some shoes and a one-way bus ticket” (Parks 8) to his hometown instead of driving back to Lincoln to have the wedding near her family, or at the very least transporting her to his home for their wedding. She also embraces childish, romanticized views of marriage—thinking that “being sweet” to each other comes easier and that “lovemaking feels like lovemaking once yr [sic] married” (Parks 53)—despite witnessing no other openly affectionate married relationships during the six years she has lived with her aunt and uncle. Strangely, Billy considers the tale of her mother’s jewels to be nothing more than a “good story” (Parks 9); yet, her naiveté prevents

her from seeing how outlandish Snipes's story is until she reaches the doorstep of his home, wedding dress in hand, and faces his wife and children.

Ultimately, Billy's status as black girl-woman leaves her emotionally incomplete with the kinds of "broken stories" that Angus and Greenberg identify in their research as a consequence of childhood trauma. The pair states, "A defining characteristic of a trauma-based broken story is the feeling of being trapped in an emotionally exhausting, unresolvable dilemma" (Angus and Greenberg 120), and Billy appears confined in an uncomfortable existence throughout much of the novel. However, unlike the psychologists' theories about the important and curative role of having a community of support with open lines of communication in such situations, these circumstances do not resolve the black girl-woman condition. In Billy's case, her mother's death deprives her of one of the most important relationships a person might experience in life, but she easily connects with close family members—Uncle Roosevelt, Willa Mae's brother, a former preacher who lost his church, and his wife, one-legged Aunt June, whose family leave her without warning at age seventeen to marry a perfect stranger.<sup>45</sup> The couple dutifully cares for Billy, as they have throughout the six years following Willa Mae's death, but the three of them seem no closer to the status of loving family than they were in their initial bereavement. In one

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<sup>45</sup> June's family abandons her as they travel in a "beat-up Ford truck" (Parks 132) to California. After her father stops the vehicle to watch then-preacher Roosevelt Beede baptize people in a river, the man carries June over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes to Roosevelt, conducts a short private conversation with him, shakes hands as if in a deal-making agreement, and leaves June without warning, explanation, or the benefit of telling her family goodbye. In the same way that Willa Mae's sudden death expedites Billy's maturity, June's father's decision to abandon his young daughter so abruptly denies her innocence and traumatizes her even well into adulthood. Reflecting on the situation many years later, June states, "At first I thought I had died. . . . My husband and my father made a deal in the river," one that she imagines is "so shameful that it couldn't bear resaying" (Parks 133). June never knows the terms of the men's agreement or how her family, and especially her mother, could forsake her so easily, but she still yearns for them in adulthood. This desire is so strong that she relishes the opportunity to help raise Billy since she has not been able naturally to have a child.

instance, after Billy speaks disrespectfully to her aunt while contemplating whether to exhume Willa Mae's body, Aunt June reflects on Billy's refusal or inability to bond with them:

Me and Teddy thought, if we loved Billy the way our mothers and fathers had loved us, if we put food on the table for her and clothes on her back and took care of her when she was sick and told her to go to school and helped her as we could with her homework, that she would be ours. All ours. But she wasn't never ours no matter what we said or did. (Parks 44)

Aunt June attributes the teenager's actions to bad manners, Willa Mae's teachings, and a predisposition to rebelliousness rather than to a post-traumatic stress disorder. Soon, Billy's emotional unavailability to her guardians leads to a seemingly unbridgeable gap between them. Billy also rejects other community members' attempts to connect with her, except to manipulate them for her personal gain.

While Uncle Roosevelt and Aunt June's care helps Billy to some degree, their actions cannot alleviate trauma or overcome black girl-womanhood. Only storytelling and facing the past can achieve those goals. As Cedric Gael Bryant claims that *Getting Mother's Body* affirms "the possibilities of language to both reveal and conceal meaning through the multiple first-person voices" (177), Billy's narrative reveals how a character's language, when crafted into stories, becomes simultaneously an art form and a therapeutic process. In Parks's novel, Billy is the most well-represented storyteller, and the majority of the other chapters feature narrators who focus on their connection to her, including close and distant relatives, neighbors, and various people she meets as she travels to LaJunta, Arizona, the original site of the trauma that transformed her into a black girl-woman. Billy's voice easily overshadows all secondary characters since she narrates thirteen of the seventy-one chapters in the book, and this attention

and agency offer her a significant creative lens and outlet with which to address her traumatic past, just as the act of storytelling achieved for countless African Americans throughout their history. Over time, as Billy reveals more of her inner thoughts and progresses through the details of her life, the content of her narratives, along with her perspective, shifts from the immediate, day-to-day issues she faces to broader ideas and reflections.

Initially, Billy reports the various events in her life journalistically—having sex with Snipes, recollections of her mother’s instructions on conning people, buying (swindling a storekeeper out of) a wedding dress, traveling to Texhoma to get married, and meeting a larger-than-life white woman named Myrna Carter who offers Billy information about an abortion doctor. During this portion of her narrative, Billy provides observations but fails to understand how her memories apply to her life and experiences. For instance, when she remembers her mother’s description of other people’s “holes,” meaning their innermost desires and weaknesses, Billy easily identifies the dressmaker Mrs. Faith Jackson’s longing for a daughter and desire to provide a motherless, young girl with a “once-in-a-lifetime [wedding] dress” (Parks 27), as the woman’s mother had for her. Billy learned this skill by watching and listening to Willa Mae, and she uses the ability to manipulate the vulnerabilities of nearly anyone, white or black, to achieve her goals. Yet, at this point in her storytelling, Billy does not realize that she also has a hole, particularly a longing for a mother to participate in the wedding dress selection process. Instead, Billy denies her connection to her mother, announcing from time to time, “I ain’t no Willa Mae” (Parks 18) and “I ain’t no goddamned apple” (Parks 19), when others see similarities between the two. This tendency prevents Billy from facing the truth of her past and healing the psychological wounds her mother’s death causes. Yet, even at this point in the narrative, Billy’s recollections of her mother, as reflected both in the chapters she narrates and her statements depicted in others’

chapters, seem contradictory, suggesting that her public and private thoughts are quite inconsistent. Nevertheless, she ends her encounter with Mrs. Jackson by modeling the dress and hearing her say, “You as pretty as you can be. . . Just as pretty as you can be” (Parks 29), as her mother might have remarked if she were still alive. Either she fails to realize that Mrs. Jackson has identified and filled her “hole,” at least for a time, or she refuses to admit it to herself at this point in her storytelling.

Further complicating Billy’s ability to evaluate herself accurately and heal from past trauma are Willa Mae’s twelve chapters of blues songs, explanations, and instructions in the novel, which intersect with, predict outcomes for, and in some ways challenge Billy’s storytelling, from the grave. Willa Mae directs her thoughts to no one in particular, including Billy, seeming instead to perform for a nightclub audience, which she indicates by beginning some of her chapters with statements such as, “This next song I’ma [sic] sing is a song about a man I used to know” (Parks 30) or “This song’s called ‘Willa Mae’s Blues’” (Parks 66). Having been dead for six years, Willa Mae’s voice resembles a haunt, a ghostlike apparition, who speaks to issues outside the novel’s original storyline. After all, she is a corpse throughout the narrative, but she refuses to stay dead and buried, or even remain silent, as the living expects corpses to do. Willa Mae is more of a presence, a wild, uncontrollable, supernatural force, than a person. She torments nearly everyone who loved her, interrupting their storytelling and offering opinions on various matters; yet, her story most often intersects with Billy’s narrative. For instance, immediately after Billy identifies Mrs. Jackson’s hole, Willa Mae sings her song, “Big Hole Blues,” and then declares that “Everybody’s got [a hole], just don’t everybody got one in the same place” (Parks 31). In another instance, as Billy approaches Snipes’s home for their impending wedding, Willa’s Mae chapter and song, “Willa Mae’s Blues,” seem to predict his

existing marriage before his wife, Alberta, confirms that information. In this way, Willa Mae represents Billy's ever-present, unresolved past, the physical embodiment of Billy's childhood trauma, which Billy refuses to address and has not been able to overcome.

Then, as any good storyteller must do, Billy's narration moves beyond avoidance or omission of problematic themes and ideas, simple observations, and disjointed memories to analysis of the events in her life that cause her significant and enduring trauma. She begins gaining strength, locating her voice, and expressing herself more freely both in her own chapters and those of others, which suggests more truthfulness in her interactions with them. As Billy attempts to recover from the crushed dream of marrying Snipes, she reflects on the past in a more meaningful way and later decides to return to Willa Mae's grave, although her sole plan is to collect her mother's jewelry and use it to fund her own abortion. Prior to this decision, Billy has no trouble speaking to others, but her most personal thoughts are concealed from herself and readers the further away she is from her mother body's. For instance, when June, Teddy, and Dill initially discuss Willa Mae's buried treasure, Billy "closes her mouth and shuts her eyes. . . [l]ike all Billy's got to say is cusses and she got to close up every place so the cusses won't come out" (Parks 45). By this action, she physically cannot or refuses to face the past except to use it as a tool of manipulation; however, once she decides to travel to LaJunta, Billy begins expressing herself more easily in intimate settings, especially with men. She cons Fat Junior Lenoir, a lustful storeowner in Texhoma, into buying an empty box for ten dollars, and she haggles with Dr. Parker about performing her abortion, even selling him her mother's pearl earring for another ten dollars. But her greatest change with men occurs after her encounters with her cousin, Homer Beede Rochfoucault, who hopes to profit from Willa Mae's exhumation and have sex with his "hot and wild cousin" (Parks 170). Initially, Homer propositions Billy by putting his hand on her

thigh, saying, “[m]aybe you could be my woman” (Parks 183). Billy’s initial response to him seems similar to her childlike interactions with Snipes, which suggest a discomfort with her sexuality, or sex in general. She describes the movement and temperature of his hand, considers whether her unborn baby likes Homer’s actions, notes the changing terrain outside of the car window, and discusses the spelling of and inspiration for her name; yet, she fails to describe or indicate a physical reaction to his touch (Parks 183). She only expresses arousal after he kisses her hand, a move that feels “better” and “smarter” to her than Snipes’s kisses (Parks 184). But when Homer expresses anger over Billy’s indifference about his plans with her and Willa Mae’s treasure, she is undaunted by his reaction and simply states, “Let’s stop and get gas” (Parks 184). This is a seemingly small gesture on Billy’s behalf, but as they travel closer to LaJunta and her mother’s body, she becomes more empowered and less like a traumatized girl-woman. Eventually, she tells Homer, “I don’t wanna get with you” (Parks 221), and refuses to let him touch her between her legs as he had earlier on the trip. This action marks Billy’s first prominent attempt at sexual agency, a monumental progression for a girl who only a few days earlier cannot tell a man with whom she is having sex to adjust their bodies in a car seat to protect her head from smashing against the door handle.

After the incident with Homer and as the family approaches the site of her original trauma, The Pink Flamingo Motel where Willa Mae died and is buried, Billy is quiet for several chapters, and her voice is only heard through those of other narrators. Billy enters their conversations but does not direct her own chapter, which suggests deep contemplation and the internalization of her thoughts rather than openly functioning in her role as storyteller. Parks, who is most celebrated as a playwright, calls such silences “a spell . . . where a character experiences their true inner state so they have an incredibly large moment with themselves . . . or

an exchange of energy. It often precedes an emotional turn, an emotional change-up. It is that incredible exchange of energy that explodes into the clearing . . . where we are in our true mythic state” (Roach 114-115). In her silence, Billy is preparing for a major transition from girl-woman to fully actualized, untraumatized individual. Once Billy recommences her storytelling, she contemplates the days prior to her mother’s death and the way her mother died, and her memories become more personal and detailed. She recalls the various ways Willa Mae attempts to execute the late-term abortion considering that the baby is already “big in her belly” (Parks 220), and Billy begins to behave more like a young woman than a child. She is honest with Homer about the amount of money he will receive if Willa Mae’s treasure actually exists, and she refuses his sexual advances. This type of truthfulness with a man is a first for Billy since the only other man she opposes is Laz, who appears to have some type of mental disability, which allows Billy to feel comfortable and be more honest with him. All of these actions suggest emerging emotional maturity, a characteristic sorely lacking from Billy’s initial chapters in the novel.

During this “spell,” Billy’s attitude about her mother changes drastically. She recalls their unorthodox, but close relationship, signified most acutely by the long trips they took even though these experiences often culminated with Willa Mae being jailed for drunk driving. Billy remembers that before Willa Mae attempted the abortion, she promised they would “be free of [their] troubles and looking at palm trees by the end of the week” (Parks 221). As several narrators note, Billy refers to her mother by her proper name, but after the spell, she confesses to Aunt June, “I callt [sic] her ‘Mother’ in my head, but not out loud. . . That was the way she wanted it” (Parks 174). This statement reveals the respect and love Billy holds for Willa Mae, although many of her previous comments about her mother seem disrespectful and

contemptuous. These memories also alter her reason for wanting to exhume her mother's body. Previously, Billy solely wants to acquire Willa Mae's treasure, but once she reinitiates her storytelling, Billy is interested in achieving clarity and peace with her past. She offers Dill no indication that the treasure is at all a part of her consideration for wanting to relocate her mother's body. A verse from Willa Mae's song, "Promise Land," in the previous chapter, seems to foreshadow this adjustment in Billy's disposition: "You keep your riches / You keep your castles / They'll turn to dust and sand" (Parks 245). However, Billy seems most affected by a later verse of the song:

Can't tell you right from wrong  
Cause wrong looks right to me.  
The game yr [sic] Mamma's playing  
Keeps her full of misery.  
Wise up, child, turn yrself [sic] around. (Parks 247)

Willa Mae's voice urges her to reconcile her feelings and beliefs with the truth, and Billy understands the need to process her emotions concerning her mother's death. Billy appeals to the hole in Dill's heart since Dill goes to great measures to prevent the family from exhuming Willa Mae's body,<sup>46</sup> and eventually Billy acknowledges the hole in her own heart. She states, "When them tractors start working they're gonna dig Willa up and scatter her all which away. . . . Her legs'll [sic] be over there, her head over there, her body someplace else. . . . My mother don't

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<sup>46</sup> While the other characters in the novel do not fully understand Dill's aversion to exhuming Willa Mae's body, readers know that Dill has already confessed in one of his chapters to stealing Willa Mae's jewelry before burying her. He then uses the pearls from Willa Mae's necklace to fund his pig farming business.

deserve to be scattered to the winds like that” (Parks 248).<sup>47</sup> By publicly calling Willa Mae “mother,” Billy embraces her mother’s memory and importance in her life, which reveals emotional development and maturation.

This scene culminates (or explodes, as Parks might say) when Billy touches her mother’s body, and she is able to cry as no one has ever seen her cry before, as she might have been expected to cry when her mother was dying in front of her or once she finally did die after all those days of suffering. Laz, who has been in love with Billy from the beginning of the novel, documents this heart wrenching moment:

I ain’t never seen Billy Beede cry. And I ain’t never seen no one cry like she’s crying now. She may as well be fighting someone, the way her arms move around in the air and the tear-water washing her face like sweat and the stuff coming out her nose. She’s saying things I don’t understand. Words threaded through with a long private string of god-damn yous [sic], the kind of curses that’s said between mother and daughter, I guess. She goes on like that till she can’t breathe. (Parks 253)

This moment is traumatic, but mostly cathartic for Billy, and she is finally able to evolve beyond the state of black girl-womanhood, but only after physically, emotionally, and verbally confronting her trauma through storytelling. After this episode, Billy locates her mother’s diamond ring in the hem of her dress, but her real treasure is the peace she gains in her life. Willa Mae’s song, “Don’t the Great Wheel Keep Rolling Along,” in the following chapter encourages Billy to continue her progress into womanhood, and the mother’s concern for her child seems to

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<sup>47</sup> The Rising Bird Development Corporation in Phoenix, Arizona plans to build a shopping center behind The Pink Flamingo Motel, and therefore must plow up and pave over the land where Willa Mae is buried. Her body must be exhumed and removed to avoid this fate (Parks 40).

end with the line, “But tonight, this gal, she’s gotta be gone” (Parks 254). It is only after Billy’s emotional outburst and subsequent peace that Willa Mae stops speaking, effectively ending Billy’s haunted past which affects her present condition and restricts her future growth. Billy must, and does, overcome her girl-womanhood to have any hope of a fulfilling adulthood.

In Phillips’s *The Darkest Child* black girls exist in a much more volatile predicament than Billy’s, and mothers, fathers, law enforcement, the community at-large, and even many immediate family members do little, if anything, to ensure their safety or survival. While most other characters in the novel view the youngest of these girls as children, at any moment, one adult’s hasty decision might change the entire course of their lives, or possibly end it. Even when individual black girl characters manage to avoid such injustices directly, they all learn from each other’s debilitating lessons, which countless people unceasingly administer to exploit their vulnerability. Consequently, various abuses and trauma swiftly adultify these African American girls, expedite their maturity, and force them into black girl-womanhood. Originally, black girl-women in the novel “do not retaliate, for [their] victory is inconceivable” (Phillips 15), but increasingly traumatic abuses force them to reconsider their powerlessness and learn to depend on themselves and their sisters for protection and salvation.

*The Darkest Child* presents a jarring extravaganza of violence towards young black females who must survive, endangered and unprotected, on the lowest rung of their patriarchal society, if and when they survive at all. Narrated by teenaged Tangy Mae Quinn, the novel presents the story of her single-parent, ten-child<sup>48</sup> family living in 1950s Pakersfield, Georgia, at a time before the establishment of domestic violence and child protection laws. Tangy Mae’s

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<sup>48</sup> Rosie’s children are Mushy (twenty-two), Harvey (twenty), Sam (eighteen), Tarabelle (sixteen), Martha Jean (fourteen and deaf), Tangy Mae (thirteen), Wallace (eleven) Laura Gail (five), Edna Pearl (four), and Judy (newborn).

recollections commence when she is thirteen, span a three-year period, and detail the perilous positionality of young black girls as men emotionally abuse, beat, and rape them at will. Yet, the novel's most oppressive and tyrannical force is neither Jim Crow living conditions nor toxic masculinity. Rozelle "Rosie" Quinn, an exceptionally beautiful but extremely brutal mother, earns that title, and she strikes, stabs, brands, prostitutes, sells, and murders her female children in what Tangy Mae describes as a "curriculum of intimidation and pain" (Phillips 13). Rosie's seemingly insatiable desire for control, reinforced by the shocking and unrestrained cruelty and violence Rosie executes mostly on her seven daughters, damages them physically and psychologically and disallows their childhoods. Simultaneously, she maintains their existence as black girl-women by sustaining a suffocating grip on every detail of their lives, even killing two of her daughters without remorse. Although the older Quinn sisters struggle to overcome their mother's abusive propensities, they assist their younger sisters, at times, when no other saviors emerge.

Whereas fathers might be considered the first line of defense for girls, most of Rosie's children grow up without even the knowledge of their fathers' identities, since Rosie conceals and cunningly discloses this information to others to serve her manipulative purposes. This ignorance creates a void in her children's lives but leaves Rosie's daughters particularly vulnerable to abuse since she instinctively cares for and protects her sons but regularly abuses her female children. Even when Rosie reveals a father's identity, the men fail to make a consistent investment in their daughters' lives, leaving them to fend for themselves against the world and their mother. For instance, toward the end of the novel Rosie's seven-year-old daughter Edna discovers that her father is Mr. Frank, the husband of Rosie's closest friend, Miss Pearl. Yet, Frank seems more angered than surprised when, during a heated argument, Rosie

shoves Edna toward Pearl and confesses, “This all I got left belong to Frank” (Phillips 322). Frank reacts by shouting, “Rozelle, you get the hell on outta here!” (Phillips 322), suggesting that he is neither dumbfounded, questioning, nor distrustful of the information. Clearly, he has prior knowledge of his paternity, but he never intervenes on Edna’s behalf even though he lives within walking distance of the Quinn family home and openly disagrees with the way Rosie raises her children. Instead, Frank relegates his child’s future to the whims of a mother that he knows might as easily and equally command Edna to bring in hot water for a bath or to serve as a living sex toy for grown men in Bo’s farmhouse, the local whorehouse where Rosie prostitutes herself and pimps her older daughters to local white and black men. Rosie’s oldest daughter, Mushy, further reveals Frank’s awareness of Rosie’s character when she confesses, “Mr. Frank know [sic] all about that place [the farmhouse]. . . . I musta been ‘bout ‘leven or twelve when Mama tried to get Mr. Frank to screw me” (Phillips 321). But, rather than expose his infidelity to his wife, who also apparently worked as a prostitute at the farmhouse and periodically performs abortions on Rosie’s daughters, Frank remains disconnected from his child until Rosie quite literally abandons her in his living room.

Tangy Mae’s father, Clarence Otis Yardley, or Crow, is the only other daughter’s father revealed in the narrative; yet, he is transient in her life at best despite his prior knowledge of her birth. Tangy Mae is thirteen when the two initially meet, and Crow enquires of her, “Rozelle never tol’ you nothing ‘bout me. Never tol’ you how I used to sit for hours just holding you and looking down at yo’ face” (Phillips 165). Despite his claims of fatherly affection, Crow abandons his child, reappears more than a decade later, and leaves again, this time giving her \$25, instructions to buy herself “something fit for a queen,” and no indication of his interest in staying connected to her in the future (Phillips 166). Two years later, after Rosie forces Tangy Mae into

prostitution, Crow and his daughter cross paths at the farmhouse as she exits with white, self-appointed lawman Chadlow and as Crow enters the facility with an older prostitute. Initially, Crow does not recognize his daughter, but later he locates her with the primary goal of expressing his fury over what he believes is her choice to become a prostitute. Knowing so little about Tangy Mae's home life and still smitten with her mother, he asks, "Do you need money, sugar? Do you need it that bad?" (Phillips 335). His first reaction is to question his daughter's motives and ignore her weaknesses and limitations, which reveals his perception of her as much older and more independent, although she is a child sex worker.

Perhaps other Pakersfield community members who are privy to the Quinn girls' involvement in prostitution believe as Crow does that they work at the farmhouse by choice as a means of providing for themselves or their family. After all, the Quinns consistently receive food donations from local students during the Thanksgiving holidays, and Rosie demonstrates her willingness to manipulate church members into providing them with meals and money. But, like Crow, none of these people, who Tangy Mae believes gossips about her and her sisters, investigates further to validate their perceptions. Instead, Crow chastises Tangy Mae: "Ain't no daughter of mine got no business out to Bo's. If I'da known you was doing that, I'da cut your throat before I left here last time" (Phillips 336). He subsequently admits that he could not hurt her but essentially threatens more violence on an already abused child, feeling no remorse about his previous departures. This interaction causes Tangy Mae to reconsider her understanding of fatherhood: "I thought a daddy would offer love instead of anger. A daddy would soothe me and tell me that everything is going to be all right. A daddy would understand that I am just a child in a grown-ups' [sic] world, trying to do what I am told, trying to survive" (Phillips 336). Crow's anger over his daughter's lifestyle prompts these thoughts, but Tangy Mae is clearly considering

how having an active father or some other protector would have positively influenced her upbringing and potentially saved her from much of the abuse she has already suffered. Even Martha Jean's husband, Velman Cooper, indicates that Crow's absence negatively affects Tangy Mae's life, and Velman attributes her adultified and exploited condition to the fact that "she ain't never had no daddy to help her out" (Phillips 338).

Dysfunctional and absentee parenting allows others to partake in and enjoy Tangy Mae's abuse, at times at the behest of her mother. In one farmhouse encounter, Chadlow savagely beats Tangy Mae with "pure rawhide" to the point where he shreds and bloodies her "arms, legs, buttocks and back" (Phillips 332), supposedly to help Rosie "straighten [the then fourteen-year-old girl] out" (Phillips 332). Having her mother's permission and realizing her father's absence, Chadlow, who habitually behaves as a Klansman in terrorizing random black folk throughout the novel, foresees no hindrances in living out his sexual fantasy. After a short preemptory speech about Tangy Mae being disobedient to her mother, resisting his touch, and thinking she is better than him, he "brandishe[s] the [strap] with expertise" (Phillips 332) and whips Tangy Mae as an overseer would have beaten an enslaved person a century earlier. That night, instead of paying to rape Tangy Mae, he compensates Miss Frances, the brothel's madam, to replace bloody sheets and provide a shirt with which to cover the girl's mangled back. Once Crow discovers Chadlow's brutality and Rosie's complicity, he no longer denies the danger facing Tangy Mae; yet, he states his desire to kill Chadlow but never confronts Rosie about forcing his daughter into prostitution or ordering Tangy Mae's beating.

Crow is not alone in this type of detachment or indifference toward the sufferings of young African American girls since none of the other people in the farmhouse during or after

Tangy Mae's beating approach Rosie.<sup>49</sup> On the night of the assault, Crow's female companion states, "Somebody need [sic] to put a foot up Rozelle's ass" (Phillips 334) for sending such a visibly young child to work in a whorehouse, but there is no indication of a later confrontation between the two women. In fact, other people are present in the farmhouse while Chadlow abuses Tangy Mae, but none intervenes. At one point, Tangy Mae recalls that although Chadlow gags and handcuffs her, which prevents her from screaming or fighting back, "Someone downstairs must have heard the whirr, hiss, crack of the strap as it struck [her] defenseless body, but if they heard, no one came to investigate" (Phillips 332). Afterwards, the madam of the facility expresses her discontent to Chadlow about his brutality, stating, "It's a shame you beat this child like this" (Phillips 333). She recognizes Tangy Mae's youth and has witnessed Rosie bringing her other young daughters, Mushy and Tarabelle, to the farmhouse over the years, but she is more concerned about her ruined bed sheets and shirt than Tangy Mae's predicament or physical condition. Eventually, Crow murders Chadlow for brutalizing Tangy Mae, but he still fails to rescue his child. His confessions to Tangy Mae, "I did it for you" and "it needed to be done" (Phillips 358), suggest that revenge and pride dictate his actions, especially since he realizes that murdering a white man requires his speedy departure from Pakersfield, and by extension, the repeated abandonment of his abused child. However, he declines to approach Rosie about her awful parenting choices, preferring instead to wonder about her motives from afar. His phrasing to Tangy Mae, "I ain't never heard of no mama doing the kinda things y'all say Rozelle do" (Phillips 343), suggests that he doubts the information he has learned about Rosie even after seeing the evidence of her brutality towards his daughter and killing the man

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<sup>49</sup> Consequently, the racial atmosphere and Chadlow's status in Pakersfield prevent the farmhouse sex workers or patrons from expressing their disdain to him directly.

who assists her in that regard. Consequently, Crow leaves Tangy Mae to continue suffering as a black girl-woman at the hands of her heartless mother and countless other Chadlows.

Even the Quinn brothers refuse to assist their sisters, although they realize the depths of the girls' traumatic experiences, which are instigated by the same mother who treats them as kings. One of Tangy Mae's first revelations in the novel is the impotence of her brothers "who seemed to breathe at [Rosie's] command" (Phillips 1). In an environment where most of Rosie's female children consistently face varying degrees of brutal abuse, Tangy Mae recognizes the difference in how her mother dotes on her boys and their utmost desire to please her. Rosie's second oldest son, Sam, is the ultimate *momma's boy*, who wants to feel like a man in Pakersfield, as evidenced by his outspoken discontent about racism in the town; yet, he can never truly detach from his mother except when self-preservation supersedes his devotion to her. Sam cares for his sisters and their safety, but his connection to and concern for them is subordinate to the rest of his thoughts and desires. For instance, when twenty-two year old Velman begins dating fourteen-year-old Martha Jean and appears at Stillwaters Café, a local juke joint where several of the Quinn siblings are dancing and having drinks, Velman enters the club and immediately begins kissing Martha Jean. Seeing this interaction, Sam barks, "Hey, wait a minute, man! . . . Who the hell . . .?" (Phillips 86). However, he is quickly calmed when Mushy intervenes and invites Velman to sit next to her, leaving his friend, Hambone, to interrogate Velman as an older brother might be expected to do. Mushy realizes her interruption will calm Sam since she notes that he lets women "run all over" him (Phillips 105). Consequently, since Sam is unable to defend himself against his mother, there is virtually no chance of his questioning her behavior towards his sisters. In a rare instance of his defending a family member, Sam attacks two white male siblings who fight Rosie and Tangy Mae as they attempt to secure

housekeeping work for Tangy Mae with a wealthy family. However, Sam's protective and retaliatory response is more a display of his devotion to his mother since he offers no other reactions to people who harm his sisters.

While oldest brother, Harvey, and the youngest brother, Wallace, are not quite as attached to Rosie as Sam, they also offer no assistance to their sisters. When Mushy confesses to her siblings that Rosie had her "screwing in every hayloft, field, and back room she could find" (Phillips 93), Harvey asks, "Do you have to talk so nasty in front of Wallace?" (Phillips 93). He focuses on protecting Wallace's purity and avoiding being overheard by their mother rather than comforting his exploited sister, protecting the innocence of his other underaged sisters, or questioning his mother's decisions to force her child into such activities. This reaction also suggests prior awareness of his mother's child prostitution business, but Harvey still leaves the home to live with his wife, Carol Sue, without attempting to save anyone but himself. Wallace also reveals very little concern for anyone in his immediate family. For example, when Rosie discovers that Tangy Mae has received mail from Mushy without Rosie's knowledge, she brutally beats Tangy Mae with a belt causing what appears to be a concussion, but Wallace still disturbs Tangy Mae's recovery to inform her about their younger sisters who are making a mess in the family living room (Phillips 248). Later, he awakens Tangy Mae again despite his realization of her pain and confusion and requests that she make coffee for their mother since he must go to work. When Tangy Mae can not arise to complete the task, Wallace storms off exclaiming, "I'll get the doggone coffee, but when I leave outta here today, I ain't coming back. I'm tired of *this*" (Phillips 248; emphasis added). By "this," he most likely means that he is weary of the disruption his mother's behavior costs him personally rather than his weariness in

seeing his sisters suffer. Overall, the Quinn brothers seem only superficially concerned about their sisters, and merely when it does not interfere with their plans or other activities.

Completely unprotected, the Quinn black girl-women become prey for men in the Georgia town, who realize that few consequences, if any, exist for their actions. Velman Cooper is a grown man when he begins pursuing teenaged Martha Jean, but Tangy Mae is the only character who attempts to protect her sister from him. She rebukes his advances toward Martha Jean, who is also deaf, by giving Velman the sign language name “V straight from Hell” (Phillips 26) on one occasion, repeatedly informing and reminding him of Martha Jean’s age, and eventually stating outright, “You’re a grown man. You should find yourself a girl your own age” (Phillips 56). Undeterred, he replies, “A girl my age is called a woman. . . and that’s just what Martha Jean is—a woman” (Phillips 56). Velman’s comment again reveals the incredibly subjective and steadily fluctuating positionality of black girl-women in this society, where a person can simply declare a girl to be an adult despite her chronological age. His persistent pursuit of Martha Jean reveals that aside from expressing her discontent with his actions, Tangy Mae, and by extension, other young black females have no agency or options for truly protecting their sisters or themselves from grown men who are interested romantically or sexually in a child.

Martha Jean’s starry-eyed interest in Velman and the fact that he eventually marries and cares for her and their children downplays and diminishes his predatory actions. However, he is still a grown man, and she is barely a teenager, which constitutes a clear power differential in their relationship. Besides this, his intentions with Martha Jean do not seem altogether altruistic until after he observes the physical damage she suffers when her mother beats her severely for courting him without her knowledge. Rosie wants to maintain control over Martha Jean and use

Velman's interest in her as a financial advancement opportunity, and eventually she sells Martha Jean to Velman for a car and an undisclosed amount of money. Aside from Tangy Mae, no one else feels inclined to prevent Velman from having his way with the teenage girl. Even when Tangy Mae falsely reports to Charlie Nesbitt, the town's white postmaster, and his buddy, Chadlow, that Velman, not their mother, beat Martha Jean causing the "horrid rainbow of black lumps and blue bruises encircled by thin rings of lime-green and yellow discolorations" on her face (Phillips 121), Charlie replies, "I reckon this boy knows how to handle his own affairs. Seems to me this here's a private matter. Don't need no meddling from me or nobody else, gal" (Phillips 124). Charlie and Chadlow care little for the affairs of black townspeople and especially black girls. Clearly, they would have responded much differently to the beating of a fourteen-year-old white girl, but the two men are not even slightly disturbed by the idea of a black girl being terribly abused.

Nevertheless, Tangy Mae is not as fortunate as Martha Jean in her interactions with men. This is at least partially due to the community's fascination with and preference for "white" skin, which Martha Jean possesses and which causes men to approach and treat her with more respect. A pigmentocracy also exists in the Quinn home since Rosie separates her children by their skin color, as Tangy Mae explains: "She took pleasure in categorizing her children by race. Mushy, Harvey, Sam, and Martha Jean were her white children. Tarabelle, Wallace, and Laura were Indians—Cherokee, no less. Edna and I were Negroes" (Phillips 16). Rosie's newborn baby, Judy, is also dark-skinned, and may become darker than "the darkest child" Tangy Mae. No doubt, this appreciation for whiteness and rejection of blackness contributes to Rosie's rejection of the baby and her eventual decision to kill the child by throwing her into a gully.

Decidedly, some men express interest in Tangy Mae, but usually their attraction is sexual in nature, and they seem to respect her less than her other female siblings. Sam's friend Hambone is the first man to violate Tangy Mae, and he begins expressing his desire for her when she, only thirteen years old, and some of her siblings accompany him to Stillwaters Cafe, which Tangy Mae describes as "a place for adults" (Phillips 79). She realizes Hambone is inappropriately noticing her when he flirts with and stares at her "until [she] began to feel uncomfortable" (Phillips 81). He continuously compliments her beauty while referring to her as "little girl" (Phillips 81), both recognizing and ignoring her youth. Ironically, Tangy Mae sings "God Bless the Child," a song about a neglected adolescent, while at the juke joint later that night, having no idea that she would soon begin losing her innocence when Hambone attempts to rape her the very next time he sees her. Despite his previous reference to her adolescence and the two of them standing in her mother's kitchen with her family and other people within shouting distance, Hambone follows Tangy Mae to the rear of the Quinn home under the auspices of wanting her to give him a glass of water. Then, he attacks her: "His chest pressed against [her] back, pushing [her] against the ice box door, as his tongue made wet circles up and down [her] neck" (Phillips 131). On this occasion, Tarabelle is able to save Tangy Mae from being raped by hitting Hambone across his back with a milk crate; yet, afterwards, she expresses "neither surprise nor anger," and instead "matter-of-factly" informs Tangy Mae about the state of blackberries growing in the area (Phillips 131). Tarabelle's ability to protect Tangy Mae one moment and shift abruptly to the mundane discussion of plant life in the area reveals her awareness of the regularity of such abuse against young black girls. Tangy Mae's friend Mattie, who is also unalarmed by Hambone's actions, states, "They can smell the scent when we women. You just lucky nobody ain't came after you sooner than this. . . . They don't have to ask, stupid.

They men. They can do what they want” (Phillips 132). Such statements suggest that these adolescent girls understand their positionality in society and realize that these types of abuses can occur at much younger ages.

The fact that Hambone is an early civil rights activist in the community who understands oppression and rights violations does not prevent him from attempting to defile a young, innocent black girl. Perhaps the lack of societal or legal repercussions prevents this correlation. After all, weeks later, he feels perfectly comfortable entering a church to condemn the inaction of churchgoers, who he believes waste time “singing and praying [while] white people are busy figuring out ways to get rid of [them]” (Phillips 141). Then, after Rosie kills her baby and Sam and others are in a stand-off with Sheriff Angus Betts, Hambone reminds an enraged Sam to “think about your sisters, man” (Phillips 179). Remarkably, he was not thinking about Sam’s sisters when he attempted to rape Tangy Mae. Later, after a white mob attacks a black crowd gathered at the county fair to discuss their oppressive conditions in Pakersfield, Hambone seems to forget completely his actions toward Tangy Mae. The next day, he tells her, “You’re just a little girl, Tangy. You don’t understand that people don’t have the right to treat you any old way they want” (Phillips 236). As is often the case in the black community, Hambone recognizes and opposes the injustices of racism against African Americans in general, but he overlooks the rampant sexism and violence some black men exercise against women and girls within that community. When Tangy Mae reminds him of his transgressions and the correlation between his words and actions toward her, he answers, “You shouldn’t flirt with people if you don’t wanna be bothered. If you remember, you led me to that kitchen. I didn’t realize until later that I’d scared you halfway out of your mind” (Phillips 236). Even if initially he does not realize Tangy Mae’s aversion to his sexual advances, once that perspective becomes clear and even much later,

he still feels no need to acknowledge his actions or apologize. Instead, he minimizes his role as assailant and her role as his victim and even paints her as an enticer, all of which portrays his adultification of her.

Tangy Mae's abuse reaches its pinnacle as Rosie simultaneously forbids her daughter to date but forces Tangy Mae into prostitution two days after her fifteenth birthday. Her first customer, Mr. Ruggles, is a lawyer who promises to help free Sam from prison after he attacks the white brothers who attack his mother and sister. The man asks Tangy Mae's age, the knowledge of which fails to affect his plans, and then he threatens to harm her if she does not submit to his wishes: "If you scratch me one more time, I'll break your little black neck" (Phillips 265). Tangy Mae attempts to fight Ruggles off, and eventually begs him not to rape her but to no avail. Soon, she becomes a regular at the farmhouse, pimped by her mother. Later, Tangy Mae realizes her black girl-woman positionality, and she begins to see herself as someone straddling both childhood and adulthood. She explains: "I go out to that farmhouse at night and pretend to be a woman, then I go to school during the day and pretend to be a child. Sometimes I get confused" (Phillips 305-306). At certain points, she feels as if she is having an out-of-body experience, and she refers to herself as another person, stating, "She was just a child, really, who collapsed from pain, only to be hoisted up by her mother. Night after night the men came, and the gentle ones were the worst, for they assumed they could coax life into a girl who died each night before they even touched her" (Phillips 274). Tangy Mae's life as a black girl-woman becomes a bleak existence somewhere between childhood and adulthood. She has no protectors and feels powerless to fight against her mother or the abuse.

Despite all of the men who mistreat black girl-women in *The Darkest Child*, their actions are secondary to Rosie, who is the antithesis of the universally accepted, loving, and supportive

black mother. Although at one point Tangy Mae reminisces about the mother who gently cared for her during a particularly difficult illness, a woman whose “delicate hands had dampened [her] fevered brow with a cool cloth, stroked [her] lips with ice chips, and wet [her] palate with the delicious juice of a peppermint-flavored orange,” Tangy Mae realizes that she must abandon this perspective of her mother and accept the woman’s true nature (Phillips 249). Most often, Tangy Mae’s memories of her mother highlight Rosie’s extreme psychological manipulation of her children in general and the brutality towards her daughters specifically. Tangy Mae recalls the extensive mind games Rosie plays, the time when her mother insists she is dying when, in fact, she is experiencing labor pains and the occasion when Rosie makes her children sit on the floor for hours as she attempts exorcise Satan from the Quinn home by being “real quiet so he’ll think there ain’t no bodies to get into” (Phillips 70). Tangy Mae also remembers the harsh lessons Rosie teaches her daughters to prevent their disobedience—training ten-year-old Tangy Mae to resist fear by branding her ankle with a hot poker and instructing seven-year-old Martha Jean not to touch a special metal box by stabbing her in the hand with an ice pick, among countless other cruelties. In order to survive Rosie’s mercilessness, Tangy Mae learns to study her mother as she does her school books (Phillips 8), but Rosie’s violent episodes are unpredictable and nearly impossible to avoid. To her female children, Rosie is so controlling and ruthless that she, more so than the systematic, institutionalized white oppression and persistent sexual abuse and violence, drives her teenage daughters to leave her home, and in the case of Mushy and eventually Tangy Mae and Laura, to escape from the entire state of Georgia.

Yet, when Tangy Mae becomes aware of Rosie’s upbringing, it is clear that she is also a black girl-woman. Rosie is born the unwanted child of Miss Zadie Grodin, an African American woman who was raped by a group of white men. Consequently, Rosie’s mother perceives her to

be evil in utero and treats her as such after birth. As Miss Zadie describes Rosie's conception to Wallace and Tangy Mae, she states, "I knew I had the devil's seed growing in me" (Phillips 189). Miss Zadie's language and her description as a snuff-dipping, hunchbacked, "shriveled. . . high-yellow colored woman who wore thick-lensed, brown frame glasses" (Phillips 40) seems more akin to that of a witch than a woman. However, her devout church attendance suggests she is simply an older lady with bad posture and an affinity for dramatic storytelling. Nevertheless, her predisposition to hate the proof of her brutal assault causes her to view all of Rosie's actions as evil, down to her very existence. This dysfunctional mothering expedites Rosie's maturity during her childhood years and provides an unhealthy parenting pattern for Rosie, who alternately believes that she must put a spell on her children to keep them with her while also daring them to leave. When Rosie is forced to leave her mother's house, pregnant at age thirteen, she changes her name to Quinn and learns to survive the best way she knows how. Consequently, she teaches her daughters the same skills—stealing, fighting, manipulation, prostitution, and inexplicable brutality if and when necessary. Rosie expects complete and enthusiastic obedience, and she takes seriously the African American mothering cliché, "I brought you into this world, and I will take you out." She exhibits a savage brutality toward her children, particularly her daughters, for the slightest inconveniences or misbehaviors.

In a society that often expects black mothers to accommodate and support others tirelessly to the detriment of their personal needs and dreams and to exhibit a fierce, unselfish devotion, which, at its core, seeks to safeguard and provide for their children above all else, Rosie's actions might seem unnatural, evil, alien, or even animalistic. Phillips's novel contains countless examples of her violence towards her children—spontaneous, extensive beatings with random objects, bloody shaven heads of some children to punish others, manipulations and

mental abuse, exposure to the elements even while indoors, and a barrage of piercing, destructive language. Yet, the most disturbing events of the novel are the callous murders of two of her daughters. Nearly everyone in the family considers Judy, Rosie's newest baby, to be "Martha Jean's child," and Rosie continuously endangers the baby's health with her antics, causing Martha Jean and the other Quinn sisters to shield the child, with their bodies at times. Yet, the Quinn siblings are shocked continually by the depths of Rosie's violent behavior. While the family is experiencing one of its few happy moments one Fourth of July, Rosie dangles her baby over the side of their porch railing and flings her into the rock-filled gully below (Phillips 175). Seemingly, Rosie warns her children of her intentions with baby Judy when she, like Miss Zadie, asserts that Judy is evil and telling them, "Satan. . . done crawled in that baby. Gotta get 'im [sic] out my house" (Phillips 71). Yet, she still shocks the family when, with a flick of her wrist, Rosie tosses the baby girl to her death as easily as a person might dispose of a piece of trash. Even her reaction to the infanticide amazes them. Martha Jean wails and dives into the gully after the baby, but Rosie "peer[s] down from the porch. At some point she had lit a cigarette, and smoke, barely visible, rose toward the porch ceiling and seemed to settle as a halo above her head" (Phillips 176). Rosie is unfazed by the murder she has just committed, and as people in the neighborhood gather around the house, mostly to discover the reason for Martha Jean's gut-wrenching wails, Rosie states, "'The baby fell off the porch'. . . with no remorse or grief in her tone" (Phillips 176), according to Tangy Mae.

Later, Rosie experiences some sort of mental episode, which prevents her from speaking or caring for her own basic needs, and Tangy Mae wonders if her mother is seriously unwell or faking her illness as a final attempt to force her children to stay with and care for her. Nevertheless, as Tangy Mae and the rest of the family prepare for her high school graduation,

Tarabelle takes Rosie for a walk which results in Tarabelle's burning to death in the Quinn home and Rosie dancing in the sparks from the flames. According to Mushy, Rosie admits to setting the house on fire as Tarabelle pours gas all over the family home, but it is unclear whether the girl had planned simply to burn the house or burn her mother with the house, or if any of Rosie's story is truthful since she frequently lies and exaggerates. When Tangy Mae asks her superstitious mother whether she is worried about Tarabelle coming back to haunt her, Rosie states, "[I]f Tarabelle comes back, she'll come as a fireball. . . . That's what she was the last time I seen her" (Phillips 386). Though nearly unfathomable, these are not isolated instances of Rosie's heartlessness toward her daughters' suffering, and Tangy Mae realizes the futility of resisting her mother's brutality, choosing instead to save herself and her younger sister, Laura, by fleeing from their mother and the town of Pakersfield.

Without intervention and left to fend for themselves, black girl-women in *The Darkest Child* never develop fully, and any maturation they face is dysfunctional at best. Rosie is the worst possible iteration of a black girl-woman, an unguided, unprotected child thrust into adulthood too soon, one who later inflicts unthinkable damage on her daughters, who in turn might perpetuate the same cycle in their adult lives and with their own children. Mushy becomes an alcoholic, who at one point must leave her younger siblings to escape from her mother, and Tarabelle acts violently and indifferently toward her siblings before her murder. Yet, some of Rosie's daughters, Martha Jean, Edna, Tangy Mae, and Laura, seem to have some potential to overcome their black girl-womanhood and flawed conditioning. Velman rescues Martha Jean and constantly expresses his love for her, and Frank and Pearl are raising Edna with the resources and ability to provide her with a better upbringing. Yet, Tangy Mae's future is uncertain. At the end of the novel, she and Laura leave town on a train, and Tangy Mae's

exceptional aptitude for success in education offers some hope that their trajectory in life will change. At the very least, neither of them ever again must participate in or fear working as a child sex slave. Nonetheless, whether Tangy Mae and Laura can overcome the trauma they have observed and experienced is unclear, as is their ability to leave their mother and Georgia without returning to more abuse, as Mushy does. The futures of these exploited and adultified black girl-women are uncertain, and if the events depicted in *The Darkest Child* are any indication, those circumstances won't change any time soon.<sup>50</sup>

Many examples of complicated and sometimes dangerous mother/daughter relationships exist throughout literature, and often, these traumatic experiences can transform happy female children into voiceless, naïve, emotionally underdeveloped black girl-women. Once altered, no white savior, romantic connection, family members' intervention, or level of education can replace what is lost or stifled. To escape this state and metamorphose from black girl-women to adult, these characters must (re)discover their voices, return to the past, particularly the site of their trauma when possible, and share their stories with others, or they will perish. Perhaps this condition also implicates black women's creative output through the ages, from its earliest iterations and texts to the social media #BlackGirlMagic movement of today, in which women commonly participate and encourage others to share stories of struggle and triumph.

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<sup>50</sup> Prior to her death, Phillips was composing a sequel to *The Darkest Child*. The first few chapters of that narrative are available on Audible.

## CHAPTER 3

### BACKWOODS AND BIG CITY: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF LOCATION AND BLACK GIRL-WOMEN'S PERCEIVED RESPECTABILITY

*"[S]he ain't no stranger to hard work."*  
—Alphonso, *The Color Purple*

If the most disrespected, unprotected, and neglected person in America is the black woman, as Malcolm X stated in his 1962 “Who Taught You to Hate Yourself” speech and as Beyoncé reaffirmed in her 2018 Coachella performance, where do black girls rank in this realm of respectability? Further, since many people of various races and ethnicities wrongfully associate rural living with backwardness, ignorance, and suitability for hard labor and correlate inner-city life with differing forms of disrespectability and laziness, how do such stereotypical perceptions affect African American girls in these locations? Literature such as *The Color Purple*, A. J. Verdelle’s *The Good Negress* (1995) and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) offer insight regarding these questions by prominently featuring Southern, Northern, rural, and urban black female children and adolescents and the struggles they face during their formative years. Addressing the correlations between respectability politics and black girlhood, these texts reveal the complications associated with adults’ indiscriminate application of black respectability principles and expectations upon and within a community without regard to the complexities posed by certain members’ ages and genders. Portrayals of African American female children and adolescents in these novels disclose how such intersections often contribute to the denied innocence, expedited maturity, and trauma of black girl-womanhood that the characters must struggle to overcome.

Recent scholarship enriches discussions of these complications by highlighting society's longstanding generalized perceptions of black girls' respectability, or lack thereof. In a 2015 study, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw describes how negative perceptions of black girls result in zero-tolerance policies and "other factors that seriously undermine [the] achievement and well-being" of girls of color (8). To "increase awareness of the gendered consequences of disciplinary and push-out policies<sup>51</sup> for girls of color, and, in particular, Black girls" (5), Crenshaw outlines the lack of research on marginalized girls, the omission of their voices and needs in the current discourse, and the "educational, social, and economic factors that funnel black girls and other girls of color onto pathways to nowhere and render their academic and professional vulnerabilities invisible" (16). Similarly, a 2017 study by Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia Blake, and Thalia González identifies and describes the adultification of black girls, meaning the tendency to view them as "less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, especially in the age range of 5-14" (2). In this phenomenon, adults "from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and different educational levels across the United States" (7) believe that black girls need less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort and perceive them as more independent and knowledgeable of "adult topics" and sex (1). Using differing criteria, these studies simultaneously reveal the damage society can inflict upon African American female children and adolescents regardless of their location and challenge notions of black girls as disrespectful and disrespectsable, which are often accepted and communicated even in the African American community. Yet, such data offers no distinctions as to the girls' geographical locations—whether they live in the North or South or in urban or rural areas—even though that information

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<sup>51</sup> In Crenshaw's "Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected," push-out relates to "disproportionate rates of disciplinary action taken against girls of color" (14) and the "distinctly gendered dynamics of zero-tolerance environments that limit their educational achievements" and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (8).

contributes significantly, and often negatively, to assessments of black girls' respectability, and lends itself to the previously described mistreatments and traumas.

Since Celie is the archetypal black girl-woman, analyzing the depiction of respectability politics and girlhood in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is essential in this analysis. In the novel, adult male and female characters expect, or at the very least overlook the fact that, Celie and other young black girl characters living in the rural South must forgo their childhoods in order to perform extensive manual labor for their families and to serve as sexual outlets for men who rape and abuse them beginning at early ages.<sup>52</sup> Although these community members demand and tolerate<sup>53</sup> the expedited maturity of black girls in the rural South, they expect young female characters living in the North to possess and express a level of social and sexual maturity, disallowed or at least discouraged in respectable Southern female youth. For instance, when Celie finally leaves Albert to move "up North" (Walker 203) to Memphis with Shug and her husband Grady, Albert berates Celie by noting his perceptions of her—physical unattractiveness, lack of artistic talent, shyness, and submissiveness—which he believes are shortcomings that will prevent her success in the new urban environment. As she attempts to leave Albert, Celie recalls his reaction: "You'll be back, he say. Nothing up North for nobody like you. . . . You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is be Shug's maid. Take out her slop-jar and maybe cook her food" (Walker 203). Ironically, the positive manifestation of such attributes are precisely the

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<sup>52</sup> Celie's struggles are detailed in the introduction of this dissertation. Other examples of such characters include Sofia, who is assaulted by several male family members as a girl; one of Alphonso's fourteen-year-old wives, who "walk[s] round like she don't know what hit her" (Walker 4) after marrying the much older man who also repeatedly and shamelessly rapes his stepdaughter; and Nettie, Celie's younger sister, who witnesses Celie's and her new stepmother's abuses.

<sup>53</sup> As previously mentioned in this project, neither Celie's teacher nor the community church women attempt to assist her even though they are aware of her traumatic home life.

characteristics and abilities that, by his estimation, account for Shug's success up North, although they inhibit her acceptance and respectability in Southern black society. Also, despite Albert and Alphonso's proclivities for bold and sexually enticing female companionship,<sup>54</sup> behaviors that might be viewed as disrespectful in this setting, both men—who are extensively or ostensibly respectable landowning, churchgoing, financially stable employers—expect their daughters and child-wives to be silent, submissive servants. Following suit, Harpo hopes to coerce Sofia and Squeak (Mary Agnes) into similar postures. Sofia immediately and Squeak eventually reject such treatment, but in order to survive, Celie surrenders to the restrictions that respectable Southern society members place on her. With her sister as a shield, Nettie narrowly escapes many of the traumas Celie and other black girls suffer; however, even after experiencing some fulfillment in Africa where she teaches students and assists an older black male American missionary—arguably two of the most respectable undertakings professionally, religiously, and personally—she realizes the trauma she has suffered. In a letter to Celie, a loving sister to whom she knows she can relate her most intimate concerns and experiences, Nettie states, “My life here is nothing but work, work, work, and worry. What girlhood I might have had passed me by. And I have nothing of my own” (Walker 184). Whether at home in the American South or on the mission field in an African village, Nettie realizes patriarchal societies' abuse and disregard of black girls' youth, innocence, and powerlessness in the name of respectability and traditions.

While *The Good Negress* protagonist and narrator Deneese Palms manages to avoid the sexual abuse facing African American female children and adolescents in *The Color Purple*, she endures physical exploitation from the very adults who should protect her as a budding teenager,

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<sup>54</sup> Albert loves Shug who wears makeup, dresses sexy, and sings in a juke joint. Alphonso is sexually attracted to Celie when she dresses in a manner that she believes is sensual, although he beats her for it.

and she spends a large portion of her formative years battling against the respectability politics of both the North and South. Verdelle's novel charts Deneese's life beginning at age seven, slightly before her father dies suddenly of a heart attack, and it spans her difficult teenage years as she attempts to broaden her education and improve her life while maintaining a household filled with apathetic adults obliged to have her behave as an enslaved person. In her storytelling, Deneese, also called Neesey, shifts abruptly between memories and present events and offers no specific details about dates and times, giving her narrative a timeless appeal and suggesting her liminal mental existence in the past and present as she simultaneously worries about her future. In one moment, she might experience a portion of the five years she spends "down home" with her maternal grandmother in rural Virginia, and in the next, she will relate events occurring in the two-bedroom apartment she shares with her two older brothers, David and Luke Edward [sic]; mother, Margarete; new stepfather, Big Jim; and the couple's baby, Clara, in 1960s Detroit.

The novel begins as Margarete leaves Deneese with her Granma'am, which initially seems to be a matter of convenience for Margarete, who chooses to continue raising her sons but sends her daughter away after their recent bereavement. Later, Deneese divulges that her mother is so depressed after her beloved husband's death that she can neither afford nor summon the mental or emotional energy necessary to care for her young child. Despite Deneese's great love for her grandmother, her father's death and mother's decision leave her feeling abandoned, as she notes, "Both my hopefulness and my faith in my mother went flat. I felt so completely betrayed" (Verdelle 3). From this point forward, Deneese displays an apprehensiveness toward and emotional distance from her mother, who she usually calls by her proper name, and their once strong bond deteriorates. Yet, unlike many other black girl-women characters, neither of these early traumatic events denies Deneese's innocence nor expedites her maturity, since her

grandmother skillfully and therapeutically shifts the child's focus from her unhappiness to activities that occupy her mentally and physically, teaching her important life skills, exposing her to various educational activities, and allowing her to express herself creatively. As Deneese explains, "I wanted to take to bed, in the spirit of my mama, but Granma'am's ideas did not allow that. Granma'am didn't rush me to be happy, but she didn't permit no aimless layin round" (Verdelle 4). The matriarch's strategy for overcoming sadness is simple: "The best way to make y'self feel better is to get y'hands to workin. When you put y'hands on somethin and make it somethin else, that will heal you lower places than you cry from" (Verdelle 8). Her tactics work for Deneese, and from that point forward, Grandma'am becomes the most important maternal figure in her granddaughter's life as the pair work as a team cooking, cleaning, and participating in social activities and church events.

Ironically, Deneese's transformation into black girl-womanhood occurs when she returns to Detroit to rejoin her family in anticipation of assisting Margarete after she gives birth to Deneese's stepsister, Clara. While such an arrangement is not inherently traumatic and could be a healing experience for the disjointed, bereaved family, their selfishness and exploitation of twelve-year-old Deneese quickly expedites her maturity and causes her to feel and behave more like an enslaved adult servant than a welcomed, underaged member of the household. As Lisa Day notes in one of the very few articles written on the novel, this correlation between Deneese's situation and enslavement is purposeful as Verdelle "depends on and undermines the literary tradition of the slave narrative" causing her readers to "keep the slavery tradition in mind" (411). To read Verdelle's narrative in any other way would require a tremendous amount of oversight. After all, immediately upon returning to Detroit, Deneese seems to be in severe danger of the types of sexual abuse previously addressed in relation to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of*

*a Slave Girl* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. Within minutes of setting foot in the Detroit apartment, Jim, "a big house of a man" (Verdelle 9) who Deneese's mother marries while the girl is Down South, stares at Deneese with "piercing eyes" (Verdelle 85) and casually references her pants and how grown up she appears (Verdelle 86). Although Deneese expects her mother to introduce properly the two new acquaintances in order to establish and support her daughter's position and importance in the family, Margarete treats her daughter more like a newly hired house servant, allowing her to stand by awkwardly as other family members talk around and ridicule her without allowing space for her to participate in the banter. At one point, Jim shakes the girl's shoulder in a way that one might equally perceive as friendly toward and supportive of his new stepdaughter or as a sign of his hasty comfort with invading her personal space. When Deneese wonders, "I guess about what Big Jim may be thinkin because I don't know him (either), and so I don't know what his hearty shake of my shoulder means" (Verdelle 86), her trepidation is reminiscent of the concerns maturing enslaved girls face as they encounter both white and black men, especially since Granma'am warns Deneese to "be nice to him" and avoid walking around the house "half-naked" (Verdelle 84). Granma'am sends her Deneese to live in the big city, although she understands the potential dangers for a young girl, even in her own home.

This initial encounter prompts reasonable concerns as to whether Jim will sexually assault the child eventually, and several details offered throughout the narrative seem to support this possibility. Rather than replicating Granma'am's apprehensions, Margarete appears nonchalant about Jim's stares and peaked interest in her physically developing daughter, and she constantly encourages Deneese to dress more fashionably in tight-fitting sweaters and skirts. As Deneese explains, her mother's clothing choices "look like I am doin things I ain't got no

business doin” (Verdelle 39). Also, Deneese’s typical responsibilities maintain her vulnerability as she navigates potentially dangerous conditions, traverses the streets of Detroit alone both day and night, and sleeps on a cot in the family’s living room where they regularly host liquor-fueled adult parties. Although Margarete insists that Deneese is her “little girl,” Jim declares boldly, “Neesey, you a young woman” (Verdelle 86), publicly setting the tone for her subsequent adultification and attempting to situate her in the position of woman and potential sexual partner or victim, despite her young age. This declaration concerns Deneese, but thankfully, an assault never occurs.

Instead of sexual abuse, the burden of solely running an entire household expedites Deneese’s maturity when the family realizes her Southern-trained expertise in cooking and cleaning. Initially, these activities seem to be an obsessive, compulsive reaction prompted by Granma’am’s charge to “get y’hands to workin” when dealing with sadness and stress, and Deneese’s family members repeatedly express their confusion and concerns about her meticulousness when she begins cleaning quite literally every surface in the apartment. On one occasion, in a chapter titled “Once I Start to Cleanin, It’s Hard for Me to Stop,” Luke Edward finds her scrub brushing the walls underneath the kitchen table, and he asks, “What’s the matter with you, Neesey?” (Verdelle 27). Deneese recognizes his challenge to her mental stability, and she deflects his question, which causes him to ask whether their mother has commanded her to complete such an extreme chore. Yet, he is too distracted with eating the food Deneese has prepared to concern himself truly with her well-being, and he soon leaves her to her work. Likewise, Margarete suggests that Deneese’s extreme cleaning might be the result of her anxiety about attending school in Detroit (Verdelle 32), but instead of reassuring her daughter and attempting to help her overcome those feelings, she simply commands the child to go to school.

Nevertheless, all of their concerns seem insincere, at best, because everyone in the family, and even those outside of it,<sup>55</sup> realize that Deneese handles all the cooking, errand running, and cleaning responsibilities in a home filled with adults who come and go as they please, while she attends school and awaits the arrival of a baby sister, for whose care Margarete has summoned her back to Detroit.

In many ways, Deneese's condition is reminiscent of Frado's in *Our Nig*; both are black female youth in the North, living in other people's homes, which are filled with the owners' luxuries, feeling like strangers,<sup>56</sup> slaving away to make everyone else's life comfortable, and receiving no compensation and very little compassion in the process. Although Deneese's narrative avoids Frado's physical abuse, the two girls must always concern themselves with determining and anticipating other people's needs and schedules so as to avoid their ill will and carve out a little time for themselves.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, Deneese's Southern training, rather than her African ancestry (in Frado's case), causes her family to envision her as a servant and to treat her as if she is much older than her twelve to fourteen years. Margarete initially praises Deneese for her hard work after realizing how exceptionally well the girl cleans her room, and she pulls Deneese's plaits and gives her a kiss to express her satisfaction (Verdelle 26). This is a rare display of love for her daughter, but like Mrs. Belmont in *Our Nig*, once Margarete realizes just how much work Deneese can manage, her appreciation transforms into stern expectations and

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<sup>55</sup> Josephus, Deneese's friend and love interest from Arkansas, buys her a set of industrial kitchen mitts stating that they are made for "all-the-time cooks" like her (Verdelle 239). He has witnessed the extensive amount of work that she must complete, and he knows that she is also the primary caregiver for baby Clara.

<sup>56</sup> Deneese repeatedly refers to the apartment as Margarete's house, and she refers to herself as "the stranger in the house. . . who sleeps on a cot in the front room" (Verdelle 23).

<sup>57</sup> Deneese uses her time to complete school work and educate herself in various disciplines.

demands. Early on, Margarete subtly suggests the type of work she would like her daughter to complete:

Oh, Neesey, you wouldn't believe what a time I have keepin this house clean. . . .  
I can get help with the heavy work. I can get David or Jim or Luke edward to get up on a ladder for me. But by the time I pick up all these cups and glasses and socks and things and wash them up, and dust and wipe all the furniture, and sweep the rugs and floors, too, I'm tired, and I still have to go to work. Lord have mercy, I'm so glad you here to help me. (Verdelle 20)

Interestingly, these are precisely the duties Deneese undertakes so intensely in the home and one must wonder if her initial cleaning frenzy is her attempt to fulfill her mother's wishes. Then, in a relatively short span of time, Margarete shifts her perspective from encouraging Deneese's labor and education to telling the girl that she must quit school once the baby arrives. In the meantime, as if to preserve her own energy and youth,<sup>58</sup> Margarete reads magazines, reclines in her bedroom, paints her nails, or parties with her friends, while Deneese, like an enslaved person, must remain willing and ready to complete her regular chores and any additional ones that might arise based on the family's needs and activities.<sup>59</sup> At times, she even washes her mother's back

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<sup>58</sup> Upon reflecting on a well-to-do Southern family, Deneese notes, "ease in life makes you seem even younger than you are" (Verdelle 236). As if to confirm this perspective, when Granma'am sends Deneese a picture she has taken before leaving Virginia, Margarete tells Deneese that she already looks older (Verdelle 235), and undoubtedly, the change in her appearance is due to the severe labor she has been completing.

<sup>59</sup> Even Deneese's teacher, Missus Gloria Pearson, who insists that Deneese's family is making her "a good little negress" (Verdelle 209), piles additional work on her, letting the already overextended child "cut up two hundred and twelve paper bags and cover fifteen crates of school books," which she must take home to complete (Verdelle 193). Deneese makes no mention of how she transports the boxes and books to and from Missus Pearson's home, but since Deneese is Clara's primary caregiver by this point, it must have been a difficult feat.

while she is taking a bath (Verdelle 226), and until more help arrives, she assists her mother as she prepares for the baby's delivery, which her mother insists must occur in Deneese's bed.

In a way, Granma'am has groomed Neeseey for service by telling her she is "a good little cook" (Verdelle 12) and "just be a worker bee, like I taught you" (Verdelle 21). However, Deneese's grandmother toils alongside her, usually doing much more work than her granddaughter, which suggests teamwork and shared responsibilities rather than exploitation. Also, unlike Margarete, Granma'am wants Deneese to continue her education, and she plans to help her attend college, a dream that apparently comes true as Deneese describes a trip home from Hampton Institute later in the novel. Unlike the North, where physical labor jobs signify lowered socioeconomic status and respectability, hard work in the South is a sign of decency and godliness, respectable traits whether or not its practitioners are sincere in their religious fervor.<sup>60</sup> However, Deneese sees the South as a link to memories, folk knowledge and remedies, language, and identity; it is a source of strength and love, all of which her grandmother teaches her in increments. In Virginia, everyone in the community notices her relationship with Deneese, who they consider to be a good, respectable girl. For instance, the Kinsey family, who Deneese considers to be "the best people" in their community (Verdelle 234), allows her to travel to Richmond with them for a photography session (Verdelle 233), and Mister Fitzwilly, the teacher at the "outside Richmond Negro school" in Virginia, tells everyone "how he depended on

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<sup>60</sup> While Granma'am and Deneese attend church and participate in its various events, their connection to religion seems more ritualistic or an amalgamation of various spiritual beliefs than exclusively Christian. For instance, Granma'am "murmur[s] religion" rather than prays a sincere prayer for a lady in the community when her son dies (Verdelle 55), and Deneese, who repeatedly notes that her brother Luke Edward is her God, tests "the limits of religion" when petitioning her grandmother to allow her to play drums with the boys rather than marching with the girls during a church parade (Verdelle 60). Also, Granma'am uses and shares folk remedies, such as the liquid she sends to Margarete to help her deliver her babies (Verdelle 65), and Margarete brings her mother "black hog's hair" from a farmer who specializes in smoking meats, presumably for some other natural remedy or supernatural concoction (Verdelle 145).

[Deneese] to help him teach” (Verdelle 162). Everyone in Virginia holds the utmost respect for Granma’am and Deneese by extension, and even though she participates in both children’s and adult activities, her childhood is unquestioned and unchallenged.

However, although her age is still twelve when she arrives in Detroit, the same obedience, industry, and positionality causes Northerners to overlook completely Deneese’s innocence, need for protection, and respectability. This process begins even before she has an opportunity to re-acclimate herself to the family, as Big Jim jokes about her old-fashioned purse, a quip designed to draw attention to her difference from most young girls her age up North. Remarkably, the same man who declares her a young woman when she is not even a teenager is the person who begins the process of ridiculing her for having a direct connection to the South, the area of the country from whence many African Americans in Detroit and other Northern metropolitan areas originate. From that point forward, every reference to Deneese’s Southern roots is negative, even though she has lived longer in Detroit than in Virginia. In addition to her family’s jokes about her “remade” clothing (Verdelle 38), they collectively diminish and disregard her hard work, convincing themselves that she likes to cook and clean rather than admitting that they treat her like a workhorse who is more capable or accustomed to domesticity.

Yet, the people who make Deneese feel most like a “Cakka Lakky” (Verdelle 104), or a country bumpkin, are her classmates and teachers. When her first seventh grade instructor, Missus James, tells Deneese to introduce herself to the class, she states, “My name is Deneese Palms an I come up from Fuhginia” (Verdelle 40). The children laugh at her use of vernacular English and mispronunciation of Virginia, but her teachers’ actions make her feel more like an outsider than their ridicule. Missus James seats Deneese and Josephus, a teenaged boy from Arkansas, in the back of the classroom, an action that he believes is an acknowledgement of their

country-ness, and as Deneese walks to her desk, she explains: “I get to the back desk and try to disappear, but country sand had trickled from my socks and marked the path I took to the back-desk chair” (Verdelle 41). Although she appreciates the classroom with all of its useful furniture, textbooks, and learning opportunities, she realizes that others see her as an unintelligent rural person, more suited for physical labor than education. Her next teacher, Missus Pearson, who subscribes to W. E. B. Du Bois’s Talented Tenth philosophy, in which the more privileged ten percent of the black community seek to uplift the lower ninety percent, recognizes Deneese’s intelligence and passion for education, and she sacrifices a great deal of personal time to work with Deneese and Josephus to help them overcome the deficits in their education. Yet, the teacher often notices and emphasizes what Deneese describes as her “backwater bad habits” much more often than she praises her for her dedication to education despite her challenging home life. Eventually, when Deneese must stop attending both school and Pearson’s after-school tutoring sessions to take care of baby Clara, and then when Margarete forces Deneese to add a Christmas job to her extended to-do list, Pearson warns her, “They got you in there cleaning toilets, making you a *good little negress*, and your mother’s response to it is that you should buy the Christmas turkey. . . . Your mother is very shortsighted about your future” (Verdelle 209-210, emphasis mine). Pearson’s use of the term “negress” magnifies the suggestion in the novel’s title, which negatively identifies a subservient “black woman” (“negress,” emphasis mine); however, initially, Deneese takes pride in the work she completes for the family with which she hopes to connect. However, her satisfaction in hard work and cleanliness has unexpected consequences, which eventually lead to her oppression and near imprisonment in the home as adult family members come to demand her unceasing labor. Yet, with her teacher’s assistance and challenges and her continued connection to her Granma’am through letters, Deneese,

although only thirteen or fourteen, begins to dream beyond her circumstances and decides to “write [herself] to a future” (Verdelle 175). Although she omits the details as to how it occurs, this process apparently works because she eventually returns to Virginia to attend Hampton Institute.

Like Celie and Deneese, protagonist Winter’s depiction in *The Coldest Winter Ever* reveals the complexities of respectability politics and her overall positionality, but unlike the other black girl-women analyzed in this dissertation, readings of Winter are complicated further, on a more metacognitive level, since her story exists in the subgenre of urban street literature. Although many young African American females profess to read, share, and relate to street literature, current scholarship reiterates the genre’s positionality outside the realm of traditional respectability. First, neither scholars nor readers, for that matter, can agree on a particular designation for the genre, interchangeably applying the terms street, hip-hop, ghetto, gangsta, or urban with lit, literature, or fiction. However, several scholars cited in “Street Fiction: What Is It and What Does It Mean for English Teachers?” define it as

the genre of novels whose plots, characters, and settings focus on everyday life in contemporary urban neighborhoods. . . . In addition to their ghetto contexts, street fiction novels are also distinguishable by their subject matter, hip-hop aesthetics, independent production, and authorship. Although their storylines deal with familiar Western literary themes such as romance and tragedy, street fiction novels are often marked by a heavy focus on drugs, sex, and violence. (76)

Further, various scholars discuss the historical relevance of street literature and acknowledge its growing popularity in African American communities, particularly with “black women and girls between the ages of thirteen and thirty” (Rosen), and some even explain how such texts might be

utilized in classrooms alongside traditional literature. Nevertheless, even the most progressive educators struggle to understand how to (or if they should) approach these texts. Karin Van Orman and Jamila Lyiscott explain this conundrum: “We fall for the seduction of the safe distance and sanctioned lessons ‘classics’ provide. . . We are afraid to indoctrinate, to lift off the thin veil of neutrality we adopt as a habit of ‘professionalism’” (60). Likewise, Elizabeth Marshall, Jeanine Staples, and Simone Gibson convey the contentiousness “teachers and other academic gatekeepers” feel towards urban street literature due to its sexually explicit and violent material (29). For many, the negative conclusions about this genre are strengthened by the frequency at which authors self-publish and distribute these novels since major publishers often reject their work. According to Vanessa Irvin Morris, “[t]here are many titles that are sold literally just on the streets—on the tables of street vendors across American cities” (13). Similarly contributing to this perceived disrespectability are the authors’ dependence on what traditionalists might view as substandard endorsements, comments that often originate from smaller publications, celebrities with “street credibility,” or previous readers’ book reviews<sup>61</sup> rather than validations from more renowned (read, reputable) periodicals or literary scholars. Overall, the adoption of a new nontraditional art form within an underappreciated or underrepresented group does not translate necessarily to widespread approval, even for those seeking to be more inclusive and culturally relevant in academic spaces.

All of these characteristics link urban street literature to activities, behaviors, and ideologies that counter those perceived as respectable; and by extension, the characters portrayed in such texts are often viewed through the same lens. In many cases, the lower the positionality

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<sup>61</sup> Souljah’s book is endorsed by music producer Sean “Puffy” Combs and actress Jada Pinkett Smith, as well as *The Source* and *Essence* magazines. Also, *Black Issues Book Review*, a formerly published bimonthly magazine, noted, “Souljah adds a new voice to the most marginalized of the marginalized” (n.p.).

of those characters, the less they adhere to or acknowledge the principles of respectability. Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* provides one of the earliest examples of this condition and the precarious positionality of adultified, underprotected, and overpoliced African American girls in this genre as they attempt to navigate complex urban environments and carve out acceptable existences and futures for themselves. These young black females are girl-women, and as Harriet Jacobs notes in *Incidents*, "prematurely knowing" of adult matters and trapped in a liminal state between their age and society's expectations and constraints, but nevertheless refusing to succumb to defeat and victimization. Although the novel is published by Simon and Schuster, a "respectable" publishing house, it is credited with sparking or rekindling the urban street literature movement, which often includes such characters. This effort, by its very nature, counters notions of respectability; yet, its influence on subsequent publications in this genre sets a problematic precedent for depictions and perceptions of black girls in this type of fiction.

In the novel, teenaged Winter Santiago, the self-proclaimed queen of the ghetto, is the eldest daughter of high-level, drug dealing Ricky Santiago, who treats his wife and four daughters (Winter, Porsche, Lexus, and Mercedes) to a life of indulgences, as three of his daughters' names imply. The centers of Winter's world are money and power, but after Ricky moves the family from their beloved Brooklyn projects to a more affluent area in Long Island, he is arrested and imprisoned on a litany of criminal charges, and her mother becomes a drug addict. Quickly, Winter's world begins unravelling, leaving her alone to strategize how to protect her father's and family's reputation and reestablish her standard of living. In doing so, she recalls the life lessons and survival skills her parents taught her over the years and devotes her time and efforts to scheming and manipulating everyone in her path, which costs her some very important relationships with her family, friends, and love interests. To those who subscribe to traditional

respectability politics, Souljah's unapologetic portrayal of young Winter might seem foreign or more akin to a tale from an alternate reality than to the recollections of a young adult woman living in America. Yet, wide scale popular acceptance of Souljah's novel reveals an antithetical outlook on black respectability in urban settings, one that glamorizes criminal activity as a viable and justifiable employment option and violence and sexuality as displays of power. Various book reviewers described Souljah's novel as "a vivid portrait of a girl you'd rather have as a friend than an enemy" (Boyle), "a tour de force of black English and underworld slang. . . like a black Godfather family saga" (*Kirkus Review*), and a portrayal of "a harsh and accurate account of the problems faced by young adults in an environment with little resources and lawlessness: an environment that is overburdened by sexual promiscuity, drugs, and violence" (Nadeem 86). Others like Arin M. Lawrence described the groundbreaking literary impact of Souljah's book by stating, "When first published, it opened the door to a very well-known world that few had the gall or desire to write about. . . . From the youngest teenager to the 40-year-old, readers were awestruck by Souljah's ability to fill the pages with such brutal truth and reality." To popular readers, the novel garnered "a cultlike following" selling more than one million copies (Ofori-Atta). At one point, the Home Box Office (HBO) network and actress Jada Pinkett Smith expressed a desire to produce the novel as a movie (Doyle 191), but the adaptation never came to pass.<sup>62</sup>

Despite such commendations, some reviewers focused more on the disrespectful elements of the novel. One described Winter as a "ruthless hood rat" who "somehow. . . remains

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<sup>62</sup> According to a *Chicago Defender* interview published Jan. 20, 2009, Souljah provides the following explanation for not creating the film: "Jada and I were the executive producers of the film. HBO bought the option and the film rights. Down the road. . . HBO decided not to do the film. . . . I bought the film rights back. Jada still wants to be involved on the production side, so now I'm back in talks about the film version, but I'm still at the contract stage."

a sympathetic character” (*Publishers Weekly*) while another interviewer questioned Souljah about whether the book perpetuated stereotypes or painted Winter as “selfish or lazy or a victim” (Rehak 13). Clearly, these critics perceive Winter more as an adult than a child. Still, Souljah encouraged a more classical reading of her novel and drew correlations between street respectability and its traditional counterpart. She told *The Root*, “I’m not in sync with this street-lit genre. . . . I think that when European authors or Euro-American authors write about urban, suburban, or rural areas, it’s just called literature. So, I call my work literature, and anyone who reads my books knows that it’s literature” (Ofori-Atta). Likewise, in a *Time* article, Souljah states, “I’m a college graduate, and if I read something like *Romeo and Juliet*, I’m reading about a gang fight, I’m reading about young love, young sex, longing. I’m reading the same themes that I’m writing in my books. So if somebody comes along and says, ‘Yours is street literature’ - what was Shakespeare’s” (D’Addario). Souljah also lists similar explanations regarding her protagonist, Winter. In a May 1999, interview with *New York Times Magazine*, Souljah seemed to counter traditional notions of respectability politics by challenging readers to view Winter as “the quintessential American”: “She’s very intelligent, she works very hard, she hustles like anybody who believes in the American rags-to-riches story, she uses people the way America teaches you to use people” (Rehak 13). The interview, entitled “The Drama of the Ghetto Child,” includes Souljah’s explanations of her personal background, apathy towards white Americans’ response to her novel, and advocacy work on behalf of inner-city children, which like her other explanations, appeal to society’s expectations of black respectability. Yet, in her responses to negative criticism, Souljah challenged the reviewers’ racialized language, and, like her critics, overlooked Winter’s age, upbringing, and misguided desire to achieve a version of the American dream.

*The Coldest Winter Ever* paints a very grim portrait of black girlhood in urban environments, and like the aforementioned studies and the premature knowing described in *Incidents*, black female childhood and innocence are not valued or supported in the novel. At age seven, Winter admits to understanding the rules of the street and the details of her family's business perfectly. She describes her father as "the next Big Willie," or most powerful figure, in the neighborhood (Souljah 4), stating, "He was respected for his product, which was never watered down, always a fair cut for your money. . . . Santiago was the number one businessman in our area by the time I was thirteen, running thangs" (Souljah 4). Many years before age thirteen, Winter is heavily indoctrinated into the drug-dealing lifestyle, and she recalls various lessons her parents teach her through the years—how to behave towards jealous people, how to strategize and stay on top, and how to understand "the game"—all of which are designed to make her more mature, cunning, and strong in an already dangerous assignment. While Winter's perspective seems self-imposed, she is a product of her parents' making. As most children might, Winter accepts her parents' lessons as unadulterated truth; this attitude is clear as she commonly interweaves her thoughts into the lessons she has learned from them throughout her narrative. Winter's parents also adultify her when she is barely a teenager by requiring that she behave more like a guardian to her siblings than as one of the children, since her mother's responsibilities often fall to her. In one of her recollections, Winter states, "So my peeps kept me busy by giving me things to do all the time. I had to watch my baby sisters Mercedes and Lexus, the twins. . . . Then I had to look out for my other little sister Porsche, who was four" (Souljah 6). Meanwhile, her mother spends hours pampering herself and telling Winter that "beauty [is] . . . a full-time occupation that left no room for anything else" (Souljah 3) and informing her that "beautiful women are supposed to be taken care of" (Souljah 3). Prior to this revelation, one

might read Winter's circumstances as the typical occurrence in many families or a lesson in responsibility, but it becomes clear that her parents' primary activities—drug dealing and extensive beautification—consume their time, causing them to appoint Winter to care for their other children instead. Consequently, the couple gives little thought to Winter's childhood and caretaking.

Possibly the most disturbing proof of adultification in the novel is the oversexualization of inner-city girls like Winter, and men's presumption that their bodies should only provide amusement or pleasure, despite the girls' ages. Understanding this tendency, Winter's physical development is Ricky's primary concern: "He loved me like crazy but was getting nervous about the way men, young and old, was checking for me. . . . But anybody who stared my way for more than a few seconds was in danger of catching a critical beat down" (Souljah 5). Ricky's worries are valid since Winter faces several situations in which adult men express their desire to have sex with her; yet, Ricky depends on his power and reputation in the neighborhood to keep her safe and untouched. While Ricky wants to protect his then thirteen-year-old daughter, her mother wants him to allow Winter more freedoms, and the woman places the sole responsibility of Winter's sexual activity in the hands of a barely teenaged youth. In her petition to Ricky, Mrs. Santiago states, "When a woman wants to get fucked, she gets fucked. She gets fucked whether it's in a car or a closet" (Souljah 6). Strangely, Mrs. Santiago is the only unnamed character in the novel, which suggests insignificance to the overall plot. However, that is not the case, since many of Winter's beliefs and actions are informed or inspired by her relationship with her mother. Although her daughter is thirteen, Mrs. Santiago believes her daughter is a woman. Ricky reminds his wife that Winter is "not a woman yet"; nevertheless, Winter accepts her mother's perspective, explaining "Every teenage girl wants to cut loose and get close to the fire,

but I was like a pot of boiling milk with the lid on” (Souljah 6). So, despite her father’s flawed vigilance, Winter confesses unabashedly that she and her “razor-ready” (Souljah 19) friends have sex at age twelve, an action that she considers to be an empowered one, though by her estimations, it occurs late in her development. At times, according to Winter’s descriptions, the group resemble a seductive pack on the prowl rather than a cohort of teenage girls. When the friends go out to a club in Brooklyn, Winter wants to approach Midnight, her love interest who is also one of her father’s most loyal employees, and she only need pinch one of her friends to announce her intentions. Immediately, the young girls “rushed his crew, bumping into all of them, rubbing [their] titties against them, using the excuse that the club was crowded” to provide her with the opportunity to approach Midnight (Souljah 20). Successfully implementing her mother’s training, Winter is proud of her ability to manipulate and entice men at so young an age, and she is respected by her peers for her confidence and shrewdness.

Mrs. Santiago playfully refers to Winter as “a little hooker” (Souljah 26) and encourages her child’s sexual activity as well as the use of her assets—youth, physical attractiveness, and materialism—to attract and secure a relationship with a powerful man like Midnight (Souljah 27). The woman’s lessons include how to be a “bad bitch” (Souljah 3), always wearing “nice clean sexy underwear” (Souljah 36), and controlling romantic relationships “without the man ever knowing that he was being dominated” (Souljah 30), among other topics. Then, as a victim of adultification, Winter subjects her younger sisters to the same expedited maturity as she cares for them. For instance, she combs their hair “in some nice grown-up styles” (Souljah 16) before going to the Long Island mall to find a prospective sexual partner. She even believes her eight-year-old sister Porsche has a crush on Midnight, but this assumption is not seen as a young child’s innocent fondness of an older man; Winter envisions Porsche as a sexually aroused child

since she believes, “Little girls start getting horny at a younger age every year” (Souljah 31). Winter understands the power of the female body even as a teenager, but also she is aware of her own youthfulness and the inherent problems associated with having sex or relationships with older men. While describing her attraction to Midnight, she realizes that being only thirteen, the pair’s five-year age difference might cause him see her as jailbait, a belief that his actions and statements support. Undeterred by this fact, Winter continues propositioning Midnight, at times in the nude, and she considers herself empowered instead of exploited for doing so, which contributes to extra-textual readings of her as more mature.

Like Winter, inner city black girl characters in the novel face the world unprotected, which leaves them vulnerable and desperate, at times. Ricky seems to understand his position as Winter’s armament and tells her, “What makes you special is me. . . Santiago! Your father. Your protection!” (Souljah 24). In his explanation, he touts his ability to witness everything when the family lives in public housing, which allows him to safeguard them, but this belief is problematic at best. Winter’s narration of various events in her life—including a great deal of underage sex, drug and alcohol use, and sneaking around with her friends—reveals Ricky’s overconfidence or oversight. More than likely, he is so deluded about or by his power in the neighborhood that he believes his control of the area is complete, when he is only somewhat aware of the situations occurring around him, which allows Winter to sneak around virtually unrestricted. The fact that he is so easily tracked down, arrested, and imprisoned suggests that his awareness is much more limited than he believes, permitting his belief that he is a better father than he actually is. Like the Santiagas, other parents are virtually absent throughout the narrative, leaving teen girls to congregate regularly at one friend’s apartment and attempt whatever activities appeal to them most—usually drinking and getting high—until the wee hours in the morning when the child’s

mother returns home under the influence of drugs (Souljah 112). Mrs. Santiago knows Winter's desire to have sex, smoke marijuana, and party, but she never restricts her daughter's actions (Souljah 27). Remarkably, the only female character who mentions protective parents is Judy, a young woman who is the girlfriend of one of Winter's sexual partners and benefactors. Judy notes that her parents require her to attend college: "I had no choice except to go to college. My parents made that clear" (Souljah 109). When juxtaposed to Winter's life, Judy's upbringing reads as the better, traditionally respectable choice, which exposes a recurring thread and affinity for such a mindset in the novel.

America's Northern traditional educational systems also fail Winter, and since she prefers lessons learned on the streets of Brooklyn or from within her home, she regularly skips school with no consequences. With no one at home explaining the benefits of an education and without a significant connection to any adults at her school, Winter comes to believe that school is a hustle for the school faculty just as drug dealing is a hustle for her father and being a drug dealer's wife is a hustle for her mother. She explains, "Teachers wanted me to come to school so they could get paid to control me" (Souljah 7). It is difficult to know whether her teachers express any concern for her personally, if she simply perceives their apathy for her education, or if, as an uninformed child, she completely misjudges the situation as she does in various other circumstances. However, it is clear that neither of her parents urges her to attend school despite all of their teachings and survival skills. The only other teacher Winter recognizes and subjects herself to is an older friend, Chanté, who instructs Winter and her friends on how to have sex: "She let us watch while she got down with boys when her mother was at work. She liked the idea of being our 'teacher.' She even taught us how to suck a dick" (Souljah 12). Since Winter prefers and appreciates these lessons rather than those taught at school, which have no impact on her

survival and success as a future first lady of the ghetto, she fails to see how her choices inhibit her goals and potential, until it is too late to change her life's trajectory. Winter is so committed to her parents' and the street version of respectability and success that she refuses or sabotages many other people's efforts to assist her when her life begins spiraling out of control.

Despite the novel's depiction of black girlhood, Souljah's statements about respectability and the general subject matter of the novel reveal a type of ideology present in urban environments, one based on street reputations and positioned in stark contrast to its more traditional counterpart. After all, Winter detests status quo respectability, preferring the projects to the posh environment of Long Island. She considers the other black residents of the Long Island neighborhood to which she and her family relocate as "uptight," saying, "I figured if I asked them a question they'd want me to pay for the answer" (Souljah 14). Ironically, this is precisely Winter's attitude towards everyone she encounters in the novel. She is a ruthless businessperson, only participating in exchanges that personally benefit her, whether they are sexual relationships with men, a shoplifting and retail business she initiates with her friend Simone, or her brief living arrangements with her aunt. Winter also rejects "old stiff bastards complaining about teenage pregnancy" (Souljah 26) and men she perceives as "respectable" suitors. For example, when she cannot find a potential sexual partner at the Long Island mall, she states, "I thought maybe the guys around here are not used to bold women like me. Maybe they were into manners, prissy bitches, and shit like that. Maybe my T-shirt, which read 'THESE ARE NOT MY FUCKING KIDS!,' was too spicy for their precious eyes and ears" (Souljah 16). Instead of men who might approach her in a traditionally respectful manner, she prefers excessively, perhaps toxically, masculine men like Midnight, Bullet, and a rap artist GS, who have hard exteriors and a great deal of street credibility and authority. Winter also loathes Judy, her sugar

daddy Sterling's girlfriend, whose "chubby" appearance, "shapeless" clothing, "motherly" disposition, and traditional aspirations represent everything that Winter finds repulsive (109, 110). She states, "I hate these stuck-up college-type bitches. They think they too cute to get down and have a Brooklyn-style fight to keep they man. They want to do a lot of smart talking like they somehow better than somebody or at least they be thinking they can prove that they are" (109). In her immaturity, Winter almost completely lacks deep self-awareness, and she fails to see the similarities between her and Judy's aspirations. After all, both are involved with the same man and are willing to confront a person infringing on a valuable relationship.

Winter presents a fearless facade and convinces herself that she is not "just a kid," as Judy describes her, in need of adults to help her navigate an especially difficult time in her life. Yet, when she is confronted by a grown woman who refuses to tolerate her manipulation, she loses her ability to fight back and transforms into a child submitting to an elder's correction. For instance, as Judy essentially kicks Winter out of Sterling's apartment, Winter loses her "bad bitch" demeanor and manipulation skills but cannot explain her silence in the face of such embarrassment: "I don't know why I didn't go off, I don't know. I just didn't have anything left to go off with. The whole thing was so unexpected" (Souljah 110). She exhibits the same reaction to her father's words when he tells her "the streets don't love nobody" (Souljah 24) in an attempt to address her naiveté and warn her about the dangers facing the Santiago family. After this cautioning, she acknowledges that his words unsettle her, a feeling that she dislikes and attempts to avoid at all costs. Too immature to face uncomfortable truths and learn from others' mistakes, Winter usually reacts to disturbing situations with rebellion and bravado as many children might when scolded; yet, she cowers when facing true maturity.

Ultimately, Winter's parents condition her to have such a reaction to traditional respectability politics both by their lifestyle and through their teachings. Winter considers her father, Ricky, to be the "smoothest nigga in the world" because he made a difference when he entered a room (Souljah 2). Mainly, this assessment is due to his aesthetic—"light-skinned, tall, with curly black hair and a fine thin mustache to match" (Souljah 2). Ricky benefits, at least partially, from skin privilege since his appearance coincides with the traditional standards of beauty within a colorist hierarchy in African American society.<sup>63</sup> But, to Winter, he is more than the good-looking king of a powerful drug empire; he is the perfect father. To her, Ricky is a smart businessman who loves and protects his family, although he leaves them completely vulnerable in a system that he knows is destined to fail and in a location completely outside of their element. Still, Winter hardly ever questions her father, accepting his lessons and ideas as truth, and none of his failures matter to her until he cheats on her mother. Initially, Winter's discovery of her father's mistress and son seems to be the primary cause of her outburst as she waits to see him in prison, but her previous comments about his extramarital affairs contradict this idea. For instance, when Winter initially offers an explanation of her parents' relationship, she realizes that her father might cheat on her mother. She states, "All the ladies loved him but he wasn't what I would call a ladies' man. He never had no girlfriend, at least no female ever called the house trying to front on my moms" (Souljah 2). This latter detail proves that Winter realizes the possibility and likelihood of her father's unfaithfulness, but since he prevents his extramarital life from impacting his perception as a "family man," she is willing to overlook

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<sup>63</sup> Colorism and pigmentocracy are not explicitly mentioned in the novel; however, Winter commonly mentions the jealousy other women and girls exhibit towards her due to her long hair. She also mentions that Bullet, the young man who ultimately causes her to go to prison, is surprised that her long hair is real. Some interviewers even questioned Souljah as to whether Santiago is black or Latino due to his representation in the novel.

these actions (Souljah 2). These thoughts morph into feelings of betrayal and disappointment when she notices that her father's girlfriend is able to continue living an opulent lifestyle while she and the rest of his family lose everything; however, even this discovery fails to shatter Winter's perception of her father who she considers to be her hero. She notices similarities between herself and Ricky: "We were born to win. And, when we were not winning, it was OK cause we were busy planning to win" (Souljah 152). It matters not to her that he is a criminal in the eyes of the law or that his occupation detrimentally affects others within their community, and eventually his own family.

Winter's relationship with her mother, much like Mrs. Santiago's positionality in the novel, is much more complicated. Initially, she respects her mother and repeatedly recollects her training on how to be a "bad bitch . . . a woman who handles her business without making it seem like business" (Souljah 3), especially since Mrs. Santiago's life seems to depict a page from a ghetto fairytale. Although she has a child at age fourteen, she is fortunate in that Ricky, unlike many other men, stays with and marries her and indulges her every whim until his imprisonment destroys her blissful life. At that point, it becomes clear just how helpless and fragile Mrs. Santiago is, perhaps because she is a stay-at-home mother who depends completely on her husband, but more likely because their premature relationship robbed her of the opportunity to learn self-sufficiency and seek out other options for her life. Since her descent into drug addiction is so swift, and because she previously depends on Winter to care for her children, it is questionable whether her drug use commenced prior her husband's imprisonment. In one sense, she is just one more drug dealer's wife, whose life is destroyed by the very thing that previously offers her opulence. This is particularly remarkable since Winter patterns her life after her

mother's, and ultimately wants to attach herself to a man like her father to care for her, even when she witnesses firsthand the shortsightedness of that expectation.

The tone and storyline of the novel suggest that Winter, like her parents in their final moments of the novel, is not respectable since Sister Souljah, the author, depicts Winter in a very negative light. Moreover, Sister Souljah's fictionalized version of herself, who attempts to help Winter and other misguided people in the community, also suggests, at the very least, an appreciation for the same restrictions and self-policing that Souljah (the author) negates with the creation of this text. This outlook evolves from the very beginning of the novel as Souljah dedicates the book to

the era in which we live.

The era in which love, loyalty, truth, honor, and *respect* has died (emphasis mine).

Where humility and appreciation are nonexistent.

Where families are divided and God reviled. (np)

Without an active verb in these sentences, Souljah avoids assessing the blame of this loss to any particular party; however, the final sentence in her dedication asserts that the era she describes is "The Coldest Winter Ever." Since this era coincides with the name of the protagonist, Souljah presents Winter Santiago as a reaction to some outside force or failing. Yet, throughout the novel, Winter appears to bear the full burden of the responsibility for her choices. She alone is criticized for her actions even though she is a teenager whose parents have taught her time and again how to navigate and survive in their world. As she makes these decisions, she constantly refers back to their trainings. Yet, none of the people who condemns her behavior focuses any of their criticism on her parents or the other people who influence her choices. Moreover, many of

Winter's critics revere her father, whose drug-related activities have condemned his entire family to a life of criminality, imminent danger, poverty, imprisonment, or even death.

Overall, the prospects for inner city black girls in *The Coldest Winter Ever* are bleak. Although Winter exhibits a type of agency, empowerment, and ruthlessness that is traditionally applauded in American culture, she is a marginalized member of American society based in an area considered dangerous or substandard in many cases. At times, she is so adept at navigating the dangerous streets of Brooklyn that it is easy to forget or to discredit the fact that she is merely a frightened, unparented teenager attempting to overcome a traumatic situation in order to protect herself and assist her family. Under different circumstances, Winter might be considered a heroine, an older Meg Murry from *A Wrinkle in Time* or an emerging darker-skinned, more contemporary Jo March from *Little Women*. However, the urban element of her narrative prevents audiences, both black and white, from sympathizing and empathizing with her.

While this novel is celebrated as a break from the normalized respectability politics of years gone by, deeper analysis of it reveals an acceptance or reinforcement of that speak-right, dress-right, and act-right politics, which further isolates and marginalizes young black females who reject these restrictions or who are denied access to that type of lifestyle. From the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Winter has not and perhaps cannot mentally evolve from the selfish (read, protective), manipulative (read, attentive or clever) mindset she develops as a young child, and even though she sees her sister barreling down a similar path, she refuses to warn her (read, believes it is futile to attempt to do so). Winter's friends behave similarly, and they all end up in prison, primarily due to their relationships with men. None of these young ladies has ever been viewed as children. Instead, early in the developmental process society pre-judges and conditions them to be small adults, budding criminals, and manipulative sexual

beings. They have no saviors, not even themselves or each other. Although Souljah has rejected attempts to ghetto-ize her novel, it presents primarily young female characters who suffer this very treatment. Ultimately, urban street literature is established purposely to depict the lives of some of America's most marginalized people, and this novel, while readers credit it with sparking that movement, fails to avoid the confines of respectability politics from past generations.

Whether African American female children and adolescents grow up in the North, South, or some combination of the two, the intersections of their identities can place them in particularly vulnerable situations, often at the hands of the very people tasked with raising and protecting them. Since respectability politics often ignores such complexities in the lives of black girls, adhering to such principles can further harm or ostracize young girls of color who are already marginalized and underrepresented by society at-large. As with any older policy, scholars and communities must continue challenging their perspectives of respectability politics to address its oversight of black girls, despite their geographical location and life experiences.

## CONCLUSION

### IMAGINING UNTRAUMATIZED BLACK GIRLS

“#IDREAMOF a world where girls voices are heard & valued.”

— Marley Dias, founder of #1000BlackGirlBooks

In this project, I address the limited attention African American female children and adolescents receive in literature and scholarship, and I resist and complicate depictions and readings that suggest these individuals are more mature and less innocent than children and youth of other races. By analyzing the prevalence of adultification in black girl characters and engaging recent advancements in interdisciplinary black girlhood studies, I introduce a new theoretical concept called black girl-womanhood. This post-traumatic, liminal positionality, in which many African American girl and women characters exist, stems from various types of traumas and the tendency of other, typically adult, characters to deny black girls' innocence and expedite their maturity during their formative years. I connect black girl-womanhood to post-traumatic stress disorders to challenge the limited understanding and often negative assessments of African American female youth as less innocent, unruly, and sexually charged or promiscuous. This research allows and encourages scholars to consider literary depictions of black female youth in a more comprehensive manner in order to expand academic discourse on a population regularly castigated in or excluded from such conversations. Additionally, this research (re)affirms the importance of African American girls, not as soon-to-be black women, but as individuals worthy of consideration in their own right.

As this project details, the prevalence of black girl-women in African American literature spans multiple genres and eras despite differences in characters' familial background and geographical location. This pervasiveness introduces a new concern—whether or not black girl-womanhood is a condition or rite of passage facing every black girl character. After all, based on the research I conducted for this project, scholars would be hard-pressed to locate more than very few black girl characters who are not suffering from or who have not endured some kind of life-altering trauma that shifts their perspectives, behaviors, and/or responsibilities from those considered childlike to ones perceived to be adult in nature. Yet, as interest in black girlhood studies increases and as various #BlackGirl social media movements emerge, some authors and artists are beginning to offer broader literary depictions of black girls to the general public to both expand and correct nonexistent or limited representations of them in these spaces. Remarkably, many of these less or untraumatized characters appear only in Afrofuturistic and speculative fiction, as if black girls must be situated in supernatural environments and imbued with suprahuman abilities to avoid black girl-womanhood, survive, and succeed in life.

One prominent example in this movement is Ava DuVernay's 2018 motion picture adaptation of Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, as DuVernay quite literally revises the classic American text and imagines black girlhood beyond our current understanding of time and space. Critics already credit L'Engle's novel with "revolutioniz[ing] serious young adult fiction with her clever mash-up of big ideas, science fantasy and adventure [and providing] a geeky girl action hero way ahead of her time" (Escobar 10). DuVernay builds on this momentum and challenges the intersections of race and gender in heroic settings. By placing the traditionally white character of Meg in a black body, DuVernay expands and complicates the original story of three children on an epic and altruistic mission to save a father imprisoned by a dark, oppressive

force. After all, a black child leaving home unannounced and travelling great and dangerous distances might be considered a runaway or a troublemaker rather than a potential savior. Subsequently, Meg's blackness intensifies the storyline about a battle between good and evil because, as the sociological studies mentioned earlier in this project reveal, American society generally considers black children, and particularly black girls, to be inherently bad, which might call into question the idea as to whether evil can fight evil for the greater good. With an African American female protagonist, even the concept of time as explained in the novel holds a very different significance. In L'Engle's novel, Meg's father explains:

Our [earth's] time, inadequate though it is, at least is straightforward. It may not be even fully one-dimensional, because it can't move back and forth on its line, only ahead; but at least it's consistent in its direction. Time on Camazotz [the distant planet where the darkness has taken over] seems to be inverted, turned on itself. So I have no idea whether I was imprisoned... for centuries or only for minutes. (151)

When related to or exerted upon a black girl's body, this impression of time conjures thoughts of age-old and long-term oppressions, such as enslavement, segregation, and discrimination, which present both a historical and timeless trauma for African Americans.

Instead, DuVernay's adaptation creates an extended allegory about a futuristic, intergalactic, intersectional battle to overcome trauma, resist oppression, and save the world (or universe) from the same fate. In the 2003 film adaptation of *A Wrinkle in Time*, a white Meg is a "belligerent" tomboy, who, as her mother states, just needs to find her "happy medium" (Harrison). In the film, Meg is said to have some type of inherent power, although she is called "untamed, undisciplined, and emotional"; yet, others consider her a "wonderful," altruistic,

positive work in progress, especially when she defends her misunderstood young brother (Harrison). In DuVernay's adaptation, when other characters call black Meg "troubled and problematic," viewers might recognize these identifiers as racialized, dog whistle terms, which continue the tradition of adultifying black girls. Descriptions of black Meg as a stubborn, angry, teenaged girl trigger images of school officials and police officers harshly reprimanding those behaviors in African American female children and adolescents, arresting six year olds for classroom tantrums and brutally dragging young teen girls out of their desks and across classroom floors. Further, such words remind us of how often we have seen depictions of disrespectful and disrespected black girls in books and films, the Billy Beedes and Winter Santiagas.

DuVernay's film also differs from the novel and expands black girlhood studies by depicting the magnificence of and modeling a community's support for a troubled black girl character. In the film, when a character named Mrs. Which embraces Meg and tells her that she is beautiful and has the power to be "glorious," viewers see Oprah Winfrey, dressed as a radiant, ancient, intergalactic being, reassuring a 14-year-old, curly-haired, biracial, and bespectacled Storm Reid and encouraging the child to appreciate her unconventional, natural, gorgeous self. At one point in DuVernay's film, as Meg battles negative thoughts in the "darkest mind in the universe," which is hers, she even resists becoming a traditionally beautiful and fashionable, mean-girl, version of herself—a straight-haired, "better," "more popular," smarter, more beloved, "perfect" version of herself, as the darkness would have her believe. Ultimately, 2018 Meg resists the classification of black girl-woman because her supportive, loving family and community structure protects her innocence and maintains her level of maturity, which allows

and assists the child in appreciating her individuality and overcoming hardships and trauma when they arise.

While DuVernay's film certainly advances conversations about depictions of African American female children and adolescents, other futuristic texts, such as LeSean Thomas's Netflix anime (Japanese-inspired cartoon) *Cannon Busters*, push the bar even further as he quite literally challenges a longstanding, established canon of animated films while broadening representations of black girls. Thomas's anime is groundbreaking in many ways as it is the creation of an African American rather than an Asian person, and it features a largely black and brown cast in a genre that commonly presents stereotypical depictions of black folks—huge lips, loud exaggerated voices, ignorance of simple concepts and strategies, essentially racist comedy relief.<sup>64</sup> Although one of the typical features in anime is embellished characters and acting, Thomas's film reads differently since so many variations of black people exist in the world he creates. Interestingly, in an article titled, "*Cannon Busters* is the Black Anime We've Been Waiting For," Jordan Minor notes Thomas's timeframe for developing the series—writing the original comic books in 2005, initiating a Kickstarter campaign in 2016, and releasing the film on Netflix in 2019. Yet, Thomas himself presents his efforts as a natural extension of his previous work, and he downplays the inclusion of diverse characters in the animation, stating, "So there is no agenda behind it, it's just what I like and what I'm used to" (Johnson). However, for black girlhood studies, his series is noteworthy at the very least.

*Cannon Busters* blends many common anime character types, including humans, immortals, cyborgs, robots, cowboys and cowgirls, samurai, animal-human hybrids, and magical beings, to tell the story of how a black girl character named S.A.M. organizes an unconventional

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<sup>64</sup> In *Interpreting Anime*, Christopher Bolton describes the genre's tendency to portray other races, particularly black people, as "monsters" (283).

team to locate her friend, a prince. Although S.A.M. appears to be a young, beautiful, brown-skinned early teen, seeing such a character in anime is certainly an anomaly; her story arc becomes more important for black girlhood studies when she moves effortlessly through a dangerous and violent society and begins revealing details about her life and purpose. S.A.M. is a special associate model robot programmed to be friendly and “of service” (“Squeaking Springs Afternoon”), which is immediately reminiscent of Deneese’s upbringing in *The Good Negress*. Although S.A.M. travels seemingly unprotected as others die violently around and in front of her, in fact, she is a cannon buster, a humanistic weapon, who defends her friends by unhinging her mouth and emitting a large beam of fiery energy that destroys everything in its path. The fact that S.A.M.’s weapon emerges from her mouth, making it the most dangerous part of her body, is especially noteworthy because of the ideas surrounding black girls using bad attitudes and harmful words as defense mechanisms and artillery to protect themselves against traumatic events. Such a character, essentially a fire-breathing, dragon-like black female youth, might inspire inquiries into Thomas’s perceptions of African American girls and women, and whether those ideas coincide with stereotypical views of black girls’ bad attitudes and boisterousness, especially since S.A.M. is unaware of her cannon and the danger it inflicts. Because S.A.M. is generally friendly and cheerful and her transformation into a cannon occurs without her awareness, she both has no understanding of the danger facing her and no recollection of the circumstances by which things go awry. Nevertheless, existing in such a mentally disconnected state prevents S.A.M. from being traumatized and entering black girl-womanhood, but this avoidance is possible only because she is a robot. While this perspective is still problematic for imagining untraumatized black human girls, it offers proof of interest in creating such characters.

Until and even after more authors and directors can imagine untraumatized black girls devoid of supernatural abilities and futuristic settings, scholars and interested persons need to continue research on black girls. To promote this process, I created and maintain a digital humanities online resource entitled The Black Girlhood Project, [www.blackgirlhoodproject.com](http://www.blackgirlhoodproject.com), as a centralized location for networking and encouraging broader, multidisciplinary research on African American female children and adolescents. This digital humanities project offers a growing reading list of print and multimodal texts featuring black girls, a blog highlighting this literature and other relevant information, and announcements regarding upcoming conferences and publication opportunities. As new scholarship on and interests in black girls emerge, the project will evolve continually to meet the needs of interested scholars and writers in this field. Since many scholars speculate about the number of texts featuring black girl characters and the areas from which they originate, in the future, the project will include a geospatial map of black girl characters in literature to provide statistical data on African American female youth included in existing literature. Also, as James Weldon Johnson and other African American leaders promoted and encouraged black writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Black Girlhood Project will offer emerging and established writers opportunities to publish short pieces or excerpts of larger works prominently featuring black girl characters, perhaps with literary prize contests similar to the ones organized by the N.A.A.C.P.'s *Crisis* and the Urban League's *Opportunity* magazines in the 1920s that featured winners such as celebrated authors Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes (Austin 240).

In the meantime, directors and content creators such as DuVernay and Thomas challenge Americans', and the world's, limited imaginations of black girls and their place in canonical and futuristic roles. Their work allows readers to reimagine past literature and to consider the present

impact and potential futures of black girlhood. This type of inclusion corrects the literary and artistic omission and devaluation of African American female youth both in the present and the future, and it prompts us to see black girls in a different light. As new literature emerges, many more opportunities exist for continuing these conversations and (re)considering black girls.

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