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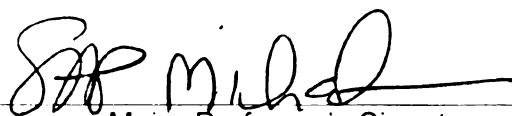
LET'S WORRY THE LINE:
BLACK RADICALISM AND THE BOURGEOIS IDEAL

presented by

Phyllis Lynne Burns

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LET'S WORRY THE LINE:
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By

Phyllis Lynne Burns

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
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ABSTRACT

LET'S WORRY THE LINE:

BLACK RADICALISM AND THE BOURGEOIS IDEAL

By

Phyllis Lynne Burns

This dissertation addresses the influence of Black Radical theory and activism on African American literature and Black culture in North America. A theoretical analysis of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army provides space to critique the ideals of "racial progress" advocated by the Black bourgeoisie. Thus, the dissertation questions readily assumed theoretical frames espoused through Black middle-class ideologies. I argue that the Black bourgeois ideal is based on the foreclosure of the possibility of self-defense in response to racial violence, and, more generally, the marginalization of the Black majority based on an ideological collusion between white America and the Black "elite." Through a comparative examination of chattel slave narratives and neo-slave narratives/novels, the project connects these texts by critically engaging late twentieth-century Black liberation activism and its opposition to mainstream and Black bourgeois models. An examination of ideas emerging from the Black Power Movement provides a comprehensive investigation of underrepresented texts within the Academy. This project looks at the insights of Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown, Huey P. Newton, George L. Jackson, and Robert F. Williams along with the testimonies of Frederick Douglass, Harriet A. Jacobs, and Mary Prince in addition to the

literature of Gloria Naylor, Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Sam Greenlee. This array of texts in turn creates space to re-formulate traditional investigations of chattel-slave narratives and African American literature and, further, to analyze the continuum of liberation efforts historically and their link to Black youth culture in the contemporary context of North America.

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2006

For My Parents
Elaine and Johnie Burns
&
Janet Elaine, John Martin, Alan Darrell

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Love for

Janet Burns, Tim Christensen

Sherrie Lynn Johnson, LaMonda Horton-Stallings, Tammy Wahpeconiah,

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Your encouragement was always there and cherished.

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Introduction

The Malfunction of “Progress”

In late 2005 America was in mourning. Rosa Parks, celebrated as the “Mother of the Civil Rights Movement” died in Detroit, Michigan at the age of 92. Reports of her life, depicted as a legacy, dominated news coverage for weeks with attention drawn, of course, to that “fateful” day on December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama when Parks was arrested and jailed for violating segregation laws when she refused to relinquish her bus seat to a white man. News agencies worldwide spoke of her single act of non-violent, dignified rebellion that triggered the “Montgomery Bus Boycott” which led to a court ruling desegregating public transportation in Montgomery. It was reported that the body of Rosa Parks, who had received a “Medal of Freedom” from former President William Jefferson Clinton and was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, would lie in state for public viewing at two churches: St. Paul AME in Montgomery, and St. Paul AME in Washington D.C., as well as at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit and in the rotunda of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In further homage to Parks, the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate voted to re-name the Federal Homeland Security Office in Detroit the Rosa Parks Federal Building. President George W. Bush ordered all federal flags across the nation to be lowered to half-mast on the day of her funeral, which took place in Detroit. President Bush did not attend the funeral.

The narrative surrounding the activism and eulogy of Rosa Parks reveals a great deal. It not only speaks to the rhetorical strategy underlining America’s relationship with Black political activism, but it also exposes the objectives of “racial progress” espoused by Black bourgeois ideology. What lurks underneath this narrativization of Parks is a network of sinister duplicity. Park’s death has served the nation well. Although mourned, her demise

was utilized as a symbol to mark the glorious end of an era when the strife of racial discrimination plagued the nation. The national attention paid to this Civil Rights pioneer and the respect bestowed upon this “real apostle of the non-violent movement”¹ indicated for many that racism now only resides in a distant past. Her memorial services, held in both the North as well as the South, were attended by various heads of state. Even the President, who comes under continual fire for his ultra-conservatism, was said to have understood the magnitude of this woman’s passing and ordered the nation to mourn. Finally, Parks holds the distinction of being the first woman and the first person of African descent to lie in state in the nation’s capital. None of these events could have taken place in years past. And so the logic proceeds that America has learned its lesson and as result we now dwell in racial harmony. As for the Black elites, they were vindicated. One of their own had proven them right. The national reverence for the woman who had once served as a chapter secretary of the NAACP, and had toppled segregation with a dignified non-violent defiance, indicated that the nation had realized the error of its ways. Non-violence was the pathway to freedom and contrary to national sentiment, Blacks were worthy and capable.

Both the manner in which Parks has been venerated within the national consciousness and symbolized by the Black bourgeoisie comes at the expense of an absence, if not a calculated dismissal, of key information on the part of both entities. In terms of her refusal to give up her seat, Parks was not the first person to do so.² Instead there were *many* Blacks who had previously refused to give up their seats and *many* others who had violated various Jim Crow laws not only in Montgomery, but in other Southern locales as well. Yet Parks was afforded national attention for several specific reasons. In one instance, her act of rebellion, an embodiment of non-violence, made white America comfortable. Robert Williams (*Niggers with Guns* 1962) is just one of many Black activists to engage the subject of

political violence. Throughout his narrative Williams explains how white America monopolizes violence in that it continually levels physical attacks against Blacks whenever it senses that the racial order is threatened, but when Blacks respond by meeting violence with violence, they are immediately criminalized, killed with impunity, and deemed psychotic for engaging in acts of self-defense. Therefore, political violence is designated as the exclusive right and privilege of white America. Dhoruba Bin Wahad ("Still Black, Still Strong" 1989) provides a similar argument. The former Black Panther leader discusses how historically revenge is the solution when whites are killed by people of color, while "peaceful reconciliation" is called for when Black people die at the hands of whites. Secondly, Williams, who was the NAACP chapter president in Monroe, South Carolina discusses the NAACP's philosophy of political violence and armed self-defense. The national organization suspended Williams for six months when it learned that the Monroe chapter was advocating and using armed weapons to defend the Black community from Ku Klux Klan and local police assaults. Thirdly, Williams also asserts that the NAACP did not look favorably on his particular chapter, because, as he explains, "we ended up with a chapter that was unique in the whole NAACP because of a working class composition and a leadership that was not middle class" (14).

One of the principal founders of the NAACP was W.E.B. DuBois, the African American Harvard scholar whose "Talented Tenth" theory galvanized Black elites into adopting a version of the "white man's burden." According to DuBois, a "natural aristocracy" comprised of ten percent of the Black population in North America would bear the burden of elevating the race. Through their exemplary work in the lofty fields of science and the arts, this "Talented Tenth," defined also as these "exceptional men," would, as the vanguard, demonstrate that Blacks possess the capacity to become full

participants in American society. However, an analysis of this ideology of “racial uplift,” which is based on the presupposition that it is the moral prerogative of the middle class to re-make the working class in their own image, reveals the symbolic reliance of the black bourgeoisie on the continued existence of the “lower” classes. In this dissertation, I argue that the bourgeoisie can envision freedom and equality only according to a paradigm of ownership, which requires the symbolic, and often literal, sacrifice of the “unregenerate” classes of Black Americans. The Black middle class, in other words, is only capable of defining itself and distinguishing itself from the “lower” classes through a psychic economy of sacrifice: once again, a mentality that is fundamentally a variation of the “white man’s burden” tailored to fit Black men. If only ten percent were deemed worthy, the remaining 90 percent of the Black population were envisioned as doomed, and this segment, it seems, could be sacrificed for the good of the ten percent. The theory worked to reinforce an “Us v. Them” mentality among Blacks in North America, and, in turn, the NAACP – the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People – was re-titled by those in the ninety percent as the “National Association for the Advancement of *Certain* People.”

Rosa Parks epitomized this class of Black elites and quelled white America’s psychotic fears of violence-prone Blacks. In her memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It* (1987), Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, former Women’s Political Council president, an organization of Black middle-class women, describes Parks as “a medium sized, cultured mulatto woman: a civic and religious worker, quiet and unassuming, and pleasant in manner and appearance; dignified and reserved; of high morals and a strong character” (579-80). “Cultured,” “quiet,” and light-complexioned,

Parks was, for Robinson, a paradigm of virtue. As a young adult, Parks attended Alabama State College. She found work as a tailor's assistant at the Montgomery Fair department store and worked part-time as seamstress for a local white family in addition to fulfilling duties as an NAACP chapter secretary. She married Raymond Parks who earned his living as a barber, and in 1957 the couple moved to Detroit. Years later she co-founded the Rosa Parks and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, a youth organization that advocated education and participation in the electoral process. Her former pastor at Montgomery's St. Paul AME recalls how Parks often greeted young people at the church where she offered the instruction, "Don't be bitter, be better" (Kurtz 2005).

My dissertation, "Let's Worry the Line: Black Radicalism and the Bourgeois Ideal," provides an analysis of the ideals of "racial progress" advocated by members of the Black elite such as Parks and Robinson and embraced by mainstream America. I argue that this ideal is based on the foreclosure of the possibility of self-defense in response to racial violence, and, more generally, the marginalization of the Black majority based on an ideological collusion between white America and the Black elite, both of which are evident in the elevation of Parks to an icon of racial harmony. My project discusses at length how Black bourgeois sentiment arises out of a need to establish an identity that aligns itself with white America. Therefore, the idea of *class*, as it is discussed in this project, is not grounded exclusively in material wealth, but rather a symbolic identification.

Within this frame I critically engage chattel and neo-slave narratives together with late twentieth-century African American literature and Diaspora Studies to formulate an

analysis of Black liberation struggle and its opposition to mainstream and Black bourgeois ideals of racial progress. My examination of ideas emerging from the Black Power Movement allows a comprehensive investigation of underrepresented texts within the Academy. I call into question readily assumed theoretical frames espoused through Black middle-class ideologies. This in turn creates space to re-formulate traditional investigations of chattel-slave narratives and African American literature and, further, to analyze the continuum of liberation efforts historically and their link to Black youth culture in the contemporary context of North America.

I open my dissertation with “Covering *Condemnation* and *Those Bones*.” The chapter provides a reading of former Black Panther Party leader Elaine Brown’s *The Condemnation of Little B* (2002) together with an explication of Toni Cade Bambara’s novel, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*. While Brown provides a meticulous investigation of the national incarceration rates of Blacks in North America, Bambara’s epic novel addresses the “Atlanta Child Murders.” Both texts are instrumental in drawing attention to the era of “New Age Racism” and the duplicity of “racial progress.” The authors expose how a socioeconomic order in the U.S. is founded on the vilification and eradication of economically poor Blacks. The chapter, titled “Covering *Condemnation* and *Those Bones*,” begins with an analysis of mainstream reviews of *Condemnation* and concludes with an examination of the formal qualities of *Those Bones*.

Through engaging in an analysis of the figural structure of the novel, I demonstrate how Bambara disrupts the difficult gap between “us” and “them” that the figure of bourgeois progress uneasily assumes. In particular, I examine how the narrative voice of the novel’s “Prologue” addresses the reader with the second person singular

pronoun, “you,” while narrating the events surrounding the murders. By addressing the reader in a personal tone that incorporates him or her into the community of poor Blacks, the narrator problematizes the discourse on Blacks and crime that frames popular understandings of the story, effectively forcing the reader to question complacent assumptions about divisions of race and class that determine rhetorical norms of objectivity in the media.

The second chapter, “African American Fiction in Retrospect: Black Radical Thought Examines Black Bourgeois Ideology,” offers a survey of late twentieth-century African American fiction. The discussion here concerns the dismissal of radical political activism by Black bourgeois adherents. I argue in this chapter that African American writers, beginning with narratives of chattel slavery, have traditionally analyzed systemic racism in the United States, but a departure emerged in late twentieth-century when Black novelists began to expand this inquiry. Their focus now included a critique of the collusion of the Black bourgeoisie. I assert that late twentieth-century Black writers expand this theme because they were greatly influenced by the Black Power Movement in North America. The chapter critically engages the theory and praxis of the Black Panther Party (BPP), which takes its philosophical cue, most notably, from Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Contemporary writers such as Gloria Naylor, Sam Greenlee, Toni Morrison, and Sherley Anne Williams produced a body of literature that incorporates the principles of Black radical theory to challenge ideals of “racial progress” and re-define bourgeois understandings of black history and literature. These authors are particularly concerned with re-defining the concept of “slavery” not as a marker of historical progress, but as a concept that meaningfully defines the condition of Blacks in

contemporary America. This re-conceptualization of the relationship of Blacks to both American history and contemporary culture also calls for a re-evaluation of revolutionary violence as vehicle for change.

In “Let’s Worry the Line: Ending the Service of Black Women in the Literary Imagination,” I employ a psychoanalytic textual analysis to destabilize conventional interpretations of “classic” texts, written by men, which have been used to define the African American literary tradition. In the previous chapters I argued that poor Blacks are continually sacrificed in order for the Black middle-class to attain and maintain positions of symbolic equivalence to the white middle-class. Similarly, within Black literary theory, liberation has been positioned as the prerogative of male authors. But scant attention has been paid to how bourgeois theories of male liberation are based on the surmounting of the freedom’s Other, chattel slavery, through the unconscious identification with white male “masters,” particularly during moments of the sexual oppression of Black women. Against this tradition of achieving freedom through the disavowed identification with the master class, I position texts by Black female authors including Sherley Anne Williams and Pearl Cleage, which envision violent acts as potential forms of praxis, mediating the relation of thought and action by performatively re-defining the conceptual frame of liberation.

The fourth and concluding chapter, “‘Our Presence is Felt Like the Black Panther Movement’: Hip-Hop Rides with Black Radical Momentum,” engages an analysis about the generational links that formulate Hip-Hop. The chapter examines Hip-Hop’s affinity with the theory and praxis of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. It situates Hip-Hop as Black youth culture-knowledge. Hip-Hop is the conduit through

which Black youth culture celebrates itself, comprehends its sociopolitical history, and re-creates spaces of defiance and resistance. In this chapter, I reject the mainstream notions that Hip-Hop is “nihilistic noise.” Such blithe dismissals of Hip-Pop in fact reflect a disavowed recognition that Hip-Hop provides a space of self-definition for Black youth that often categorically rejects mainstream definitions of what it means to be Black. Artists such as Dead Prez, Immortal Technique, The Coup and Dave Chappelle produce works that specifically address the socioeconomic predicament of those residing in the nation’s central cities, the birth-place of Hip-Hop. They comprehend and thus define this predicament as war on the Black community at-large and through their artistic expressions offer strategy for liberation. The chapter details the psychic formation of Hip-Hop and proceeds to chronicle the revolutionary ecstasy that defines this cultural tradition.

Covering *Condemnation* and *Those Bones*

A critique of reviews and articles on Elaine Brown's *The Condemnation of Little B* (2002) and an analysis of Toni Cade Bambara's *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (2000), and Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* (2002) is necessary for a discussion of racial progress and the Black bourgeoisie since each text locates its meaning by addressing how the Black middle class, in its aspirations to attain economic and cultural success, are quite willing to sacrifice poor and disenfranchised Blacks. Also, significantly, the events examined in *Condemnation*, *Those Bones*, and *Leaving* take place in Atlanta, Georgia a city that is widely recognized as one of the nation's first "Chocolate Cities." Nicknamed also the "Black Mecca," Atlanta, during the late twentieth-century, specifically during the 1980s, was considered an oasis for young Black northern aspiring professionals, most commonly known as "Buppies" (Black Urban Professionals) who reversed the migration trend of their foreparents by returning South to a region that was supposedly committing "Bubbacide." Atlanta, as Brown cites throughout *Condemnation*, would stand in as a microcosm of North America, in that the city made promises to emerge as the new jewel of the South, a "city too busy to hate," an international city where racism was a thing of the past and Black economic success could be finally realized by the individual. But Brown, together with Bambara and Jones, reveal a reality about Atlanta that unveils the operations of a class/caste system that brutally shuts out a large population of Black citizens. Within her chapter "In the Shadow of the Dome," Brown extensively chronicles the extent to which city officials, both Black and white working in conjunction with predominately white corporate and financial interests, attempt to build this Black Mecca

at the expense of destroying Black neighborhoods they deem poor and thus inherently destructive.

It is interesting to see how *Condemnation* has been defined, or re-defined, since Brown undoubtedly seeks to redefine the language used to analyze the wretched condition of Blacks via the city of Atlanta that ultimately stands in to discuss the condition of Blacks in all of North America. She examines the case of Atlanta-born Michael Lewis, and the incarceration of Black children as adults in general in order to resist the national criminalization of Blackness. Within her chapter, “The Abandonment,” Brown directs our attention to emblems of Black bourgeois “success” who have played a secondary and yet, a highly pivotal role in the vilification of Blacks through careers built on the denigration of Black resistance and struggle even though their positions of power were realized through this legacy. Bambara and Jones direct their sights toward Atlanta’s Black community, which was held under siege when numerous Black children were kidnapped and murdered during what is now called “The Atlanta Child Murders.” Both novels allow space to take on the breadth of city politics and community organizations which all conspired to treat the murder of Black children as a necessity within a quest to maintain the façade of a prosperous Black middle-class haven.

The Condemnation and Abandonment

Dead Prez, or DPZ, rap about the blend between revolution, liberation, and self-determination, and in one of their cuts the duo issues a proclamation from Hip-Hop that leads me to think immediately of Brown’s opening line in *A Taste of Power*, her narrative

chronicling her activism as Black Panther Party leader. DPZ says that “Freedom ain’t gonna come til we regulate em” (“Turn Off the Radio,” 2000b). The duo, consisting of rappers M-1 and stic.man, take their philosophical cue from the Black Panthers who initiated a strategy of self-determination that called upon Oakland, California’s Black community to address police brutality by activating a program to monitor and patrol local police. Panther members, armed with loaded weapons, cameras, tape recorders, and law books, began monitoring police patrols. By regulating cops, the BPP took the first step in demystifying state authority in which “[p]eople would see members of the [Black Panther] Party standing in their defense against the hated representatives of the white power structure” (Abu-Jamal 2004, 43). This critical concept of re-appropriation is often missed, if not dismissed, in popular/mainstream discussions concerning African American resistance in the United States. What DPZ learned from the Panthers and what they reissue now nearly forty years later is that liberation for Blacks in North America, throughout the Diaspora, and on the Continent, must be defined by those held in bondage. Liberation/freedom must be seized by the enslaved, not granted by the enslaver, since the enslaved must determine themselves for themselves.

Brown, the first and only woman to serve as Black Panther Party (BPP) “Chairman,” introduced readers to her 1992 narrative, *A Taste of Power*, with *the* line – the one declarative statement that always manages to annoy mainstream feminists and neoliberals at-large who charge Brown with investing in masculine images of power: “I have all the guns and all the money” (Brown 1992, 3). Yet, Brown’s assertion always inspires me and directs my attention to her re-inscription of the BPP stance of self-determination and self-empowerment. Now, Brown’s *The Condemnation of Little B*.

written ten years after *A Taste of Power*, and more than 30 years following her activism as a Panther leader, again announces her presence and keen comprehension of what it means to be Black in America. Brown chronicles the U.S. Black social condition and, in so doing, she offers a vital strategy of self-determination/self-definition to destabilize racist policy and public sentiment employed to hold Blacks in bondage.

The link between chattel slavery and prisons is outlined clearly by the 13th amendment to America's Constitution. It is a legality that does not abolish slavery at all; it simply *redefines* slavery: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, EXCEPT as a punishment for crime whereof the party has been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." To make *Condemnation's* case, Brown recalls this often misread amendment in addition to quoting W.E.B. DuBois, who wrote in *Black Reconstruction*: "For there began to rise in America in 1876 a new capitalism and a new enslavement of labor." Brown maintains that staggering high numbers of Blacks were "looming as part of a new scheme of convict labor, free labor in America, on which DuBois had so profoundly reflected a century before" (349). The United States has the largest prison population in the world with more than two million people incarcerated, and, as Brown explains: "By the end of the millennium, blacks, about 12 percent of the population, represented 46 percent of all prisoners in the United States of America" (352). According to U.S. Census reports the state of Georgia has the highest prison population. In a state where Blacks make-up 28.7 percent of the population, they represent 34 percent of probationers, 44 percent of parolees, and 66 percent of the people in the state's jails and prisons. Moreover, adhering to a national trend, inmates are exploited as a source of cheap and free labor, and within this insidious

scheme, inmates, who are disproportionately Black nationwide, are enslaved by numerous private corporations that contract with government agencies to hire or “farm” inmate workers. Brown further writes that, in order to create jobs and to attract these corporations, “economically impoverished cities and towns lobby for prison construction – a scheme that necessarily requires more prisoners” (353).

And it is through *Condemnation* that Brown meticulously investigates the conviction of then 13-year old Michael Lewis, nicknamed *Little B*, a Black child born and raised in Atlanta who is held captive in Phillips State Prison in Georgia. Michael serves a life term as an adult on trumped-up first-degree murder charges. He was arrested in 1997 for the death of Darrell Woods, also Black, a 23 year-old husband and father of two sons, who was, after his death, continually glorified by the local press as a consummate “family man.” Woods was fatally shot while sitting in his car as his wife went into a grocery store to buy a soda. But Michael’s case, as Brown reveals, was ludicrous from the word “go.” His conviction, and the conviction of Black youth in North America overall, emerges out of

new social and political policies rife with racism, particularly in relation to crime and punishment. These latter day theories about black boys are rooted in the culture of American slavery, wherein the black male was identified as inherently savage, an immoral or amoral being possessing a bestial nature, and thus by nature inferior to whites and fit only to serve as a slave. (Brown 2002, 102-3)

Brown does more than zero in on the public condemnation of young Black males: she also looks at how mainstream notions work to vilify young Black females. Brown tells us about Shawntello Young, also from Atlanta, who lost her eight-month old

daughter, Tameka, when her child choked to death after swallowing a cockroach. Local news agencies, as in the case of Michael, were quick to condemn 18-year old Shawntello as just another Black teen mother, ill-equipped to take proper care of a child she should not have had in the first place. While Black male youth have been envisioned as criminal, a “menace to society,” Black female youth are made to be criminals in part because they’re perceived to be sexually promiscuous and irresponsible mothers. Brown writes there was a broad public indictment levied against Shawntello since it was readily assumed that Tameka died because her mother either neglected or abused her baby. There was no recognition that Tameka choked to death because of conditions brought about by poverty. The poverty was itself widely ignored, or viewed as a simple inevitability. Brown explains:

This implicit distribution of personal responsibility to black mothers themselves for the death of their babies, a variation on the themes raised in the death of Shawntello Young’s baby, evades the more compelling objective realities. In the case of Shawntello Young, this evasion went not merely to the issue of the gross neglect on the part of the AHA [Atlanta Housing Authority] with respect to maintenance of Perry Homes. It also had to do with the total environment of poverty and neglect to which Shawntello and Tameka and all the other Perry Homes children had been subjected. (98)

The Fulton county assistant medical examiner, John Parker, who performed the autopsy on Tameka’s body remarks how “impress[ed]” he was of Tameka’s cleanliness: a remark that steers the public to assume that the child should in fact be dirty (94). Moreover, on the very day Shawntello buries her daughter, Renee Lewis Glover, AHA executive

director, held a press conference where she presented a police report which was meant to substantiate her claim that not only did Shawntello stand by and watch her daughter play with the cockroach, but even more, Shawntello watched her daughter choke to death. And to drive yet another nail into Tameka's coffin, Perry issued an AHA inspection report "in which the Young family had been given 'failing and unsatisfactory housekeeping grades'" (98). In the case of Michael, the court dismisses the fact that agencies put in place to assist Michael summarily failed him. In the case of Shawntello, we are supposed to ignore the reality of her living in a housing project that federal agencies run as slums. More specifically, as Brown details, the public is also supposed to ignore the fact that the Herman E. Perry Homes project, where Shawntello and her baby lived, was in such wretched conditions that the AHA was, at the time of Tameka's death, seeking approval to demolish it. Perry Homes was surrounded by a battalion of neglected filth; yet, Shawntello is made wholly responsible for the death of her child even as she shares space with a city park overrun with vermin (the site of repeated rapes), a sanitation landfill, and a highly polluted river (99-100).

Overall, Brown targets Michael and Shawntello's cases in order to confront "New Age Racism," and its very emergence. She thus details the link between chattel slavery and neo-slavery, of which the prison industrial complex is an integral aspect. Exposed is the racial brutality inherent in American consciousness, a consciousness that always defines crime as inherently *Black* and "evil"; mainstream media statistics as wholly objective; federal agencies or agendas as compassionate if, unfortunately, overwhelmed; and, finally, presidential politics as culturally inclusive. This is a reactionary consciousness that rests on the idea that racism, when considered "*bad*," no longer exists.

while it defines its very identity through a vilification of Blacks for *being* Black. And in the end, or “in the main” as Brown often writes, this consciousness without fail holds Blacks completely and exclusively responsible for why our communities are besieged by enforced poverty, and violent and racist police that are all supported by a biased judicial system and government policies. Brown explains that Americans “have shifted responsibility onto Blacks by saying ‘Well, if blacks are poor, there must be something wrong with them. If they’re going to prison in these large numbers, it’s because they’re committing the crimes. There’s no more racism in America: they just can’t make it’” (Weaver E1).

Mainstream reviewers of *The Condemnation of Little B*, predictably, fail to address any of these crucial points overall. Several publications miss the connection between the demonization of Blacks and America’s political economic order because of their inability to focus on the socioeconomic conditions that cultivate Michael and Shawntello’s condemnation. News reports of the case of Michael’s arrest are emblematic of this failure. The city’s leading newspaper, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, featured articles and editorials reminiscent of the fictive news reports about Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. Even before he is found “guilty” by a jury of his so-called peers, Bigger is labeled by the press as the “sex-slayer” and “black killer” (323). In like fashion, Michael was immediately rendered guilty through popular representation. As soon as Michael was arrested, Mayor Bill Campbell, the third African American to hold this post in Atlanta, condemned Michael as an “evil” in the city (28) and the *Journal-Constitution* ran such articles as “Teen Suspect a ‘Thug,’ Police Say” and “Slaying Suspect’s Brother: ‘He’s Bad’” (361). The media, by attributing characterizations of

Michael's criminality to sources assumed to be of unimpeachable authority such as the police and the mayor, and sources that provide the experiential and emotional counterpart of this "factual" evidence of his depravity such as a family member, effectively convict Michael at the same moment that they inscribe his accusation in the consciousness of the public. While not technically convicted, of course, the "fact" that Michael represents the larger problem of a degraded Black culture defined by its criminality is established within the public mind. Brown recalls specifically the newspaper's editorial "Keeping Kids from Killing":

Among the proliferation of *Journal-Constitution* editorials written about Michael was one published only a week after his arrest, which developed the syllogistic conclusion, supported by nothing more than its two cited cases, that Michael was the latest exemplar of a new breed of "scary" kids. These were "young killers . . . living outside the bounds of *normal* social interaction, *tiny thugs* who would kill at the slightest insult – or sometimes without any provocation." (29)

By highlighting the fact that these editorials condemn Michael on the basis of (arbitrary) analogies, Brown stresses that the evidence required by the newspaper's editors is not strictly empirical or logical, but the self-apparent sort of evidence that can be attached to Michael through the application of racially-charged language. If Michael is a "thug," we only have to follow the tautology to its conclusion to realize that he "would kill" for trivial reasons. Why, we might ask, does the editor find Michael representative of this trend in particular? How do we know that "a new breed of 'scary' kids" exists if we can cite only two examples of this supposed phenomenon? These obvious questions are not relevant, because the editor has effectively eliminated the problem of the *grounds* of his

comparison – the *arbitrariness* of his analogy – by the invocation of a truth assumed to be self-evident: the inherent criminality of Black culture, from which Michael emerges. If, as Brown argues and extensively documents, the conviction of Michael is an event compulsively repeated throughout America with the effect of sustaining a system of legalized neo-slavery, it is also an event that tells us important things about the representational practices that enable this system. It is a representational practice that need only appeal to the public's self-evident knowledge of Blacks to effectively establish the guilt of a Black defendant. We might therefore posit that there is something that America experiences as inherent in the representation of Blacks that sustains the system of neo-slavery by rendering Blacks guilty at the very moment that their Blackness is inscribed in them – as when Michael is labeled a “tiny thug.”

Thus, as Brown notes, when the police came to get Michael, the entire city, if not the entire country, had already held Michael, like all Black children, to be guilty – guilty for his social condition, guilty for the problem of violent crime, guilty by virtue of representing an inherently guilty condition, being Black. In “LITTLE B REVISITED: Author Decries Tarring of Suspect,” Brown says of Michael and the city's relationship to him at 13: “Nobody was there for him. There was no system in place, no institution in place. So I thought at the time, ‘Now if he killed somebody, why is anybody surprised? You throw him in the sewer and now you want him to act like he's been nurtured and cared for all his life?’” (Weaver E1). During his “trial” which lasted a mere three days, a statement made by Valerie Lewis, Michael's mother, was included as key “evidence” used against Michael. Ironically her statements about Michael were now deemed valid

by the state despite the fact that, only two years earlier, the juvenile court had declared his mother an “unfit” mother in her *third* “deprivation hearing” (83).

Adding to the list of absurdities was the fact that Michael had been declared a ward of the state. At the time of his arrest, he was living on his own, and had not attended school for two years. For his truancy, Michael was found guilty, while the State was deemed wholly innocent of its neglect. We can locate a similar situation in the “disappearance” of four year-old Rilya Wilson, who was declared missing in 2001. As reported in a May 13, 2002 *Newsweek* article, “A Hole in the Safety Net,” the Florida Department of Children Families “somehow managed to lose track of Rilya’s whereabouts for more than fifteen months” (40). No one was held accountable for having lost a Black child. Florida’s Governor Jeb Bush said he was not prepared to blame anyone yet. True to his word, the caseworker assigned to Rilya was allowed to resign, rather than being fired or charged with falsifying government records even after authorities discovered that the caseworker falsified reports of her having visited Rilya who was supposedly living with the grandmother, and for having failed to file a missing person’s report when she discovered that Rilya was no longer living with the grandmother.

A lack of insight appears to generally plague reviews of *Condemnation*. There is little, if any, mention of the racism that made Michael’s arrest or Tameka’s death an inevitability. Brian Gilmore of the *Washington Post* (“The Dispossessed”), together with the reviewer of *Publisher’s Weekly*, instead charges Brown with bogging down her text with too much historical information. Gilmore says that the author

provides so much information and data that at times you almost want to scream, “Enough already!” Layer upon layer of studies, reports and anecdotal evidence from various sources sometimes bogs down her excellent prose. And at the end... there is, unfortunately, no resolution to the story of Little B. (Gilmore T04)

In unison *Publisher's Weekly* cites that Brown: “spins a narrative . . . [in which] [t]here’s too much history and criticism here for a quick breakout, but those same qualities will give the book staying power, particularly on campus” (283). While the review, on first read, may appear positive, it opens with an ill-placed compliment. What Gilmore and *Publisher's Weekly* seem to be missing is the fact that Brown provides extensive critical information *because* this very information has been systematically suppressed and or misread. One of the author’s objectives is to counteract the “stealth history” so commonly and easily disseminated through American history books and media outlets. According to Mumia Abu-Jamal, the term “stealth history” was utilized by Black Studies professor Reginald Moore within his criticism of mainstream examinations of the Black Panthers. Moore writes that “stealth history has a distinctive political objective, to dampen, discredit and demonize the revolutionary potential of African Americans” (Abu-Jamal 2004, 160). With precision reminiscent of Panther strategy Brown’s *Condemnation* demystifies America’s “stealth history” – a glorified narrative spoken through a “rhetorical duplicity” that deliberately reduces brutal conquests and exploitations to an orgasm of American patriotism. In Brown’s words this “rhetorical duplicity” emerges out of “[t]he dawn of a new age of racism in which a new forked tongue would lick the country’s wounds with new lies, as it fashions a new language permitting America to comfortably coexist with a continuum of racism and its horrible

ramifications” (356). Thus, an underlying question in her text, as evidenced by the wealth of information that reviewers predictably bemoan, is what happens when the marginalized and disenfranchised assemble because they understand and articulate the magnitude of their oppression? What happens if we don’t? The battle is already lost if information is deemed a “glaring flaw” (Gilmore T04). As a matter of fact, this very stance works to perpetuate oppression. Socioeconomic oppression positions itself to appear overwhelming, invincible, so that resistance appears futile; victory, within this frame of thinking, appears only as an impossibility. In terms of the *Publisher’s Weekly* review specifically, what is also at stake is venue, or how and where *Condemnation* will and should be read. If *Condemnation* should become a central work in academy studies, as the reviewer asserts, it surely needs to move outside the proverbial and exclusive ivory tower of “academic” study which has a tendency to examine texts with a cold calculating eye, one unconscious of real meanings connected to the Black communities. So how does the Black community engage *Condemnation*? *Essence*, for example, devotes scant attention to Brown’s work in its review. Their reviewer places *Condemnation* within a catalog of reviews:

Elaine Brown’s 1994 memoir, *A Taste of Power* -- which chronicles her rise in the Black Panther Party -- is a perennial best seller. Her latest nonfiction book, *The Condemnation of Little B* (Beacon Press, \$24), takes on the American judicial system and the Black middle class as she analyses the tragic case of Little B, a 12-year old [sic] man-child on death row [sic] in Atlanta for murder. She not only makes a convincing case for the boy’s innocence but sheds light on the corrupt billion dollar prison industry. (102)

In actuality, *Essence*'s review is not really a review at all; it's more of a synopsis, a superficial and flawed one at that. While it mentions Brown's analysis of the Black middle class and the judicial system, it spends little time thinking about why the author is compelled to make this intervention. For this reviewer, Michael's case remains an isolated instance rather than a collective concern for Black youth, for Black people; and there is no mention of Shawntello Young, which, for a publication that touts itself as a Black women's magazine, is surely alarming... and yet perhaps not so alarming if we engage Brown's critique of "New Age Racism" and the collusion of the Black middle class.

New Age Racism and the New Age Negro

Once we begin to seriously engage the history of slavery in the U.S. and the extent to which this "culture of slavery had indeed survived and was still wedded to the socioeconomic structure in [contemporary] America" we grasp the reality that the cruel hostility exacted against present-day poor and disenfranchised Blacks across the country by white America and the Black middle-class is historical (Brown 210). Brown begins by reminding us of Malcolm X ([1965] 1992) who repeatedly warned the community about repeating the corrosive class/caste divisions encouraged by the master and upheld by house slaves during the era of chattel slavery. The conflicts between house and field slaves influenced by the master class is a subject to which E. Franklin Frazier devoted an entire book, *The Black Bourgeoisie* ([1957] 1997). Now writing in the new millennium, Brown opens her "Abandonment" chapter with a theory of house and field slaves which

allows her to explain the machinations of the “New Age Racist Agenda” and “New Age Negroes”:

The House Slave was mostly terrified of being forced into the brutalities of the Field. Thus the House Slave could become the obedient slave, the obsequious slave, the slave collaborator, willing to turn on his slave brothers and sisters in the Field or in the House, to inform the Master of any plans or resistance or uprising.

The only slave more accommodating to the institution was the Black Slave Overseer, sometimes called the Nigger Driver. The Nigger Driver worked the Field Slaves and whipped them as soundly as any white overseer for laziness and other infractions that might slow down crop production and threaten profits. The Black Slave Overseer might even kill another slave to maintain the Master’s Plan. (210)

The author further writes that the agenda of contemporary New Age Racism might collapse without the support of the New Age Negroes, defined also as the Black bourgeoisie, which now embraces and emulates the practices of the former house slave. Although the New Age House Negro, she writes, “owns nothing of significance.” s/he is elevated to the [Master’s] house on the back of black struggle, and finds his significance in his ability and willingness to serve the New Age Racist agenda. Indeed, his very livelihood is dependent on this willingness, a willingness to do even more than his historical counterpart. The New Age House Negro must round up the lazy black Field Slave, the unwed welfare mothers and their children, the criminal predators and the rest of the postindustrial black residue.

and himself open the dikes of social Darwinism that will down this black riffraff, those who will not or cannot swim in the new economic tide – including, and especially, the Little B's. (212)

Brown opens her discussion of the New House Negro by returning to W.E.B. DuBois's theory of Talented Tenth," a theory the scholar himself would later renounce, but that New House Negroes would adhere to with persistence. According to DuBois's theory, a "natural aristocracy" comprised of ten percent of the Black population in North America would bear the burden of elevating the race. Through their exemplary work in the lofty fields of science and the arts, the Talented Tenth, defined also as these "exceptional men," would demonstrate that Blacks possesses the capacity to become full participants in American society. This theory is a cornerstone of New Age Negro philosophy that "clings to the idea of a civilized, primarily white America, to which the Black underclass remains unworthy or incapable of inclusion" (Brown 217).

In "Abandonment," Brown chronicles the careers of several Black women and men "who had now come to be a new crop of Negroes who, positioned to actually influence the outcome of government activity, were actively undermining the cause of improving the lot of Blacks in America" (220). Although the New Age Negroes had secured their position through years of Black struggle, their emergence into public and economic positions of power was gained through a belief that racism is a thing of the past and therefore socioeconomic success can be achieved by the individual. But this ideology frames New Age Racism, and thus, as "collaborators" of a New Age Racist agenda, the New Age Negro is quick to demonize those Blacks who have not "made it"

by disconnecting themselves from the Black community and in aiding in imprisoning and impoverishing Blacks in record numbers.

While Brown looks at the careers of many Blacks, she zeroes in on the politics surrounding the “achievements” of Colin Powell, Clarence Thomas, Condoleezza Rice, and Oprah Winfrey. She offers a comparison between Supreme Court Justice Thomas and Chairman Powell, designating Powell as “Clarence Thomas with a gun” (226). Powell is the first person of African descent to be appointed by the President as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was awarded this post in 1989 by George Bush, Sr. and when Bush’s son, George W. Bush, seized office in 2000, Powell was named Secretary of State, making him, again, the first African American to attain this position. In her analysis of Powell, Brown details his military career, which consists of cover-ups and a dedication to American economic fascism rendered throughout America’s wars in the late twentieth-century. In her consideration of his appointment by Bush, Sr., Brown recalls that until Powell was named “Man of the Year” by *Essence* magazine and a photograph of him appeared on the cover of *Ebony* magazine, Powell had not identified himself as Black. However, she writes,

what was clear, from the time Bush thrust [Powell] into the forefront of the Gulf War public relations campaign, was his readiness to kill for American oil companies and a Texas oilman who was now president of the United States. Of the Bush administration’s campaign of all-out war against Iraq after Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, Powell stated that Kuwait “was worth fighting a war over” because it “measured up” as a “regime, as a nation, and frankly, as the source of 20 percent of the world’s oil.” (More accurately Kuwait was believed to hold 10

percent of the world's oil reserves at the time.) Also clear was Powell's commitment to oversee the thousands of his black brothers and sisters, now represented in a larger percentage in the rank and file of the military than in the population, and send them off to kill people who were not their enemies and die for oil interests that were not their own. (226)

Perhaps his allegiance to U.S. policy, which "brings death, and destruction to people of color around the world" began during Powell's career in Vietnam War with his participation in the cover-up of the My Lai massacre. In 1968 hundreds of South Vietnamese civilians, including women and children, were raped and murdered by U.S. troops. As Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations at America Division Headquarters, Powell was appointed chief investigator of what was then considered an alleged massacre. Following his investigation Powell concluded that the reports of a massacre were "false" and he closed the investigation. Yet "[years] later Powell would defend his participation in the cover-up... by stating that he was 'mystified' by those early investigations and knew nothing of My Lai until years later" (227). But as Brown also reports, Powell would take credit for his commanding the Secondary Infantry Division in Korea. This division, comprised of Black soldiers, was deemed a battalion of "black militants" by the military once the soldiers levied charges of racism. Powell was called in to bring these wayward and disruptive soldiers into line, and he would later define and cherish the assignment "of whipping his Korean battalion into shape" as "the most satisfying ever" (227).

Unlike Powell who seemed to dismiss his position as a person of African descent, Thomas appears to have consciously used his heritage to further his career, and, in the

end, his identity politics have served the New Age Racist agenda well. It is widely known that Thomas, who replaced U.S. Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, earned his education through an affirmation program, having attended College of Holy Cross as a “King Scholar,” and that while at Holy Cross he co-founded the school’s Black Student Union. He continued his education at “Yale Law School in 1971 at the height of black student uprisings around the country when Yale was aggressively recruiting blacks” (Brown 224). Looking back upon his days following graduation, Thomas would lament: “No one would hire me after law school” (Brown 225). Brown recounts, however, that Thomas’s “eagerness to serve and to be included in the status quo” opened doors for him. Thomas’s “first government job came under the patronage of a rich, white Republican” (225). Missouri state attorney John Danforth, who was at the time visiting his alma mater, Yale Law School, was looking for a “qualified” Black to work in his office (225). Hired by Danforth, Thomas would loyally follow the attorney general, who moved to Washington after being elected a U.S. Senator. After Danforth, Thomas worked within the Ronald Reagan administration in the Department of Education and would later be appointed head of the Equal Employment Opportunity Office (EEOC), “the court of last resort for blacks and others seeking justice in job discrimination cases” (Brown 225). During his tenure with the EEOC Brown cites that Thomas “went further than even Reagan could have imagined, nearly imploding the whole EEOC structure, dismissing case after case, and finally reducing it to the nil condition on which grievances could be redressed, sending blacks back to seek employment without even the veneer of equal opportunity” (225). She classifies Thomas as a “New Age ‘Nigger Driver’” who, much like Powell in Vietnam, kept Blacks in check,

and who was “willing to do for Reagan what Reagan could never have really done for himself” (225). Thomas’s servitude was shared by the George Bush administration once Marshall announced his retirement from the U.S. Supreme Court:

Before Thomas was nominated for the Supreme Court, blacks, feminists, and liberals had been ready for Bush, ready to rally the nation to reject the prospective nominee, as they had been with Robert Bork, the previous nominee. They knew what another conservative vote in the Court forecast. Now though, Bush was ready too. He paraded out his Negro, Clarence Thomas, announcing he was the “best qualified,” wielding the whip of racism against whites who might challenge his credentials, carrying a paddle for spanking feminists with accusations of a “high-tech” lynching, and bitch-slapping blacks who did not like it. (Brown 225)

Thomas was nominated only after Bork’s nomination had been rejected, and Thomas, the second choice, was considered by Bush only after he had been recommended by “New Right activist ideologues Thomas Jipping of the Free Congress Foundation and the organization’s president, Paul Weyrich, also founder of the Heritage House” (Brown 224). Additionally, well known “archconservatives”/ “racists” Senators Strom Thurmond (South Carolina) and Orrin Hatch (Utah) supported Thomas.

Thomas’s confirmation hearings were highly contested by multiple civil rights organizations including the NAACP, the Urban League, the National Bar Association, and the National Organization of Women. When the Thomas nomination moved to the Senate, Anita Hill, a law professor at the University of Oklahoma who had worked for Thomas when he was head of the EEOC, came forward with charges that Thomas had

sexually harassed her during her years at the EEOC. Hill testified before a panel of 15 white male senators that Thomas harassed her with inappropriate discussion of sexual acts and pornographic films in retaliation for her having rejected his invitation to date him. Thomas would label the hearings sparked by Hill's charges as "a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks," and Hill would later counter that Thomas's remark was "ironic, given that he had previously chided African Americans for using race as a 'crutch.' I think he did it because he knew how effective it would be" ("Two Years Later, Anita Hill Revisits the Clarence Thomas Controversy" 2002). After his appointment as Associate Supreme Court Justice, Thomas would "do his best to shred the black agenda" as he "vote[d] over and over for the dismantling of affirmative action and school integration programs" (226). Finally, Thomas who owes his lofty status to affirmative action programs, has steadfastly denied this option to others. While his nomination and appointment was founded on a campaign that stressed his identity as an American African man, Hill points out that when she was testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee her identity as an African American woman was deliberately ignored because her identity did not serve the needs of the state.

Condoleezza Rice, according to Brown, is "wedded" to the Bush family in that she has loyally served both presidencies. George Bush, Sr. appointed Rice, the first Black woman as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. Under the George W. Bush administration she was appointed director of Soviet and East European Affairs in the National Security Council and as special assistant for national security affairs. She now serves as the nation's Secretary of State. Rice, who earned a Ph.D. at the Graduate School of International Studies at the University of Denver, and has since

been a Fellow in the Arms Control and Disarmament Program and a National Fellow at the Hoover Institution, has explained of herself, “I’m really a Europeanist” (Sciolino 2000). The former Black Panther Chairman clarifies Rice’s self-assessment in stating that her identification as an “Europeanist” goes well beyond the Secretary of State’s linking her scholarly pursuits to her profession; rather, “[Rice’s] commitment to the Bush men borders on sycophancy and reaches beyond academic interests and Europeanism to a surrendering of self and soul” (221). Speaking before the Los Angeles World Affairs Council in 1999, where she delivered a speech titled “American Foreign Policy for the Twenty-first Century,” Rice informed her audience that there now exists one international economy and warned: “You’d better find your place within it, you’d better succeed, or you’re going to lose and you’re going to lose big time” (Rice 1999). She then, later on in her speech, made clear that an international economy would emerge from the needs of America’s national economic interests and not from the interests of an “illusory international community” (Rice 1999). Brown further reports how Rice “recalls her race as a palliative for Bush’s brand of racism and an exculpation for a history of racist oppression of blacks” (222). Rice often reminds us that she too has experienced racism as when she evokes the memory, “I lost a little friend in that church bombing in 1964, at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church” (Rice 1999). Yet while she was Provost at Stanford University she publicly denounced affirmative action programs – programs from which she herself had benefited as a former student. While Rice instead approves of the “new approaches” initiated by the Republican Party she at the same time recognizes the wretched conditions of urban school systems to which Black and poor American are sequestered. But in a CNN interview, Rice fails to hold government policy responsible

for these conditions. She offers that African Americans need to “[g]et over it, don’t fight last century’s wars and battles... African Americans need to look at what’s happening today” (Brown 223). Within this perspective, Rice continues with a call to Blacks to instead dedicate themselves to hard work and a good education because as she said in the CNN interview, “It really does not matter where you are from, only where you are going” (Brown 223).

Rice can locate a kindred spirit in talk-show host billionaire Oprah Winfrey who identifies her immense financial success as self-actualized and issues this proclamation only through a denigration of the activism of the Black Power Movement of the 1960s. According to the Mississippi-born Winfrey: “The other kids were all into black power and I wasn’t a dashiki kind of a woman. ... Excellence was the best deterrent to racism and that became my philosophy” (242). But as Brown summarizes, Winfrey’s recipe for “excellence” was a well-developed campaign that caters to white suburban housewives and white women working outside of the home, and through an agenda that persistently and consciously ignores issues impacting the lives of Black women and their families “even as the political agenda pounded poor Black women and their children into deeper poverty and degradation” (243). In order to exemplify Winfrey’s politics which would continue for nearly two decades, Brown returns to Winfrey’s first nationally televised program that aired during Black History Month in 1987. To summarize, Winfrey traveled to Forsyth County, Georgia to interview Ku Klux Klan members and white sympathizers who were terrorizing local Blacks within a campaign to maintain an all-white community. Winfrey’s all white, pre-selected audience was allowed to participate in the program while outside a rally of Blacks and whites protested the program’s airing.

Winfrey listened as members of the “Keep Forsyth and Dawson Counties White Committee” aired their grievances about Blacks living in *their* neighborhoods, and one committee member told Winfrey that she would be welcome in his home anytime, while outside protestors waved placards with the message “Like Forsyth, Oprah Goes All White” (243). After the program, Winfrey returned to her home base in Chicago while the violence and protests in Forsyth continued. Winfrey would not involve herself on behalf of the protesters or offer comment about those who were arrested during marches against the “Keep Forsyth and Dawson Counties White Committee,” but she would take the time to speak on the behalf of the good intentions of committee members: “...there [were] members of [Forsyth] who [were] God-fearing but because they’[d] been raised to exclude blacks from their lives, racism [was] a hard thing to erase from the heart. And there [were] people who wanted to try” (243).

Brown writes that following Forsyth, Winfrey shifted her programming to insipid subjects that “provide comfort for her core audience of white women” (243). Winfrey now features almost exclusively “lifestyle” and “glamour ‘makeovers,’ diets, and New Age self-healing readings and practices and endless self-deprecating discourse over her own weight and ‘nappy’ hair” (243). In addition to her talk show Winfrey also owns a production company, Harpo Films, which in 2005 presented a film adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston’s acclaimed 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Set in the rural South during the late nineteenth century, readers meet the protagonist, Janie Crawford, a Black sixteen year-old girl, who lives with her grandmother, Nanny. Janie is warned by her Grandmother who fears that Janie’s sexual desires, if left unchecked and unregulated, will inevitably lead to trouble. As a solution Nanny tells Janie that she must marry Logan

Killicks, a man more than twice Janie's age and whom the grandmother believes will provide her granddaughter with a protected and respectable life within a world that preys upon Black women. When Janie protests, Granny delivers some of the most poignant lines within the novel – a proclamation that will haunt Janie's adult years and will propel her to resist and rebel against the space a white and male-dominated world has carved out for her as a Black woman. Nanny schools Janie:

Honey, the white man is the de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in the de ocean where the black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de mule of the world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you.” (Hurstons 14)

Nanny prays that her granddaughter will not have to endure the hardships and miseries that she, as well as Janie's own mother, has endured. Within Nanny's critique Black women are abused and this abuse is depicted as generational and therefore inevitable. But Janie builds a self-governed life that has at its center a community of Black women, represented by her friend Phoebe Jackson. Phoebe is Janie's confidante and spokesperson. The novel opens with the two Black women discussing Janie's life and ends with Janie telling Phoebe to inform the other Black women about her predicaments and ultimate triumph. In essence, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is the story of a Black woman who as a child is told that there is only one place for her in the world as a Black woman, and yet, this Black woman confronts this disempowerment and finally proceeds

to tell and share with other Black women that they can determine the course of their own lives. What is at stake in the novel is a sense of autonomy, but the ideal of individualism is wedded to and determined by a collective sharing. Without fail, these critical points are obliterated in Winfrey's production of *Oprah Winfrey Presents: Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Her rendition of the novel depicts the "universal" woman, which means ultimately that Janie is stripped of any cultural markers. Rather than a Black woman who eventually matures into an independent Black woman who struggles against and defeats the interlocking discriminations of racism and sexism heaped upon Black women, Janie emerges in the film as "woman," or specifically as "white woman." While the film's official website classifies the novel as "an American classic," which offers a "luminous and haunting" tale about "a Southern Black woman in the 1930s whose journey from a free-spirited girl to a woman of independence and substance," the film dismisses the identity politics so emblematic to the text ("About the Novel" 2005). For example, in the novel's opening Hurston anchors her text with Nanny's warning to Janie of the dangers facing, specifically, Black women. However, in the film Nanny's explicit warning is excised, stripped as it were of her assessment of patriarchal oppression exacted upon the personhood of Black women. Nanny's statement is replaced with a new millennium proclamation: "De woman is de mule uh de mule of the world" [italics added] (*Oprah Winfrey Presents* 2005). Thus, Winfrey via *Oprah Winfrey Presents: Their Eyes Were Watching God* comes to adhere to what Brown announces is a foundational tenet of New Age Racism. In this universalized rendition of Hurston's novel, the Black woman's voice, her persistence in denouncing and rebelling against the conflation of racism and

sexism is covertly silenced and ignored and this silencing is able to take place, because as Brown writes, in *New Age Racism*, racism does not exist.

“... the central objective remained the same: which way freedom”³

A Taste of Power and *Condemnation* are written to target a highly specific audience. Moreover, the very act of story-telling is highly significant in its connection to the ideal of self-determination, a state of consciousness that American society seeks to deny Blacks at all times. Self-determination was *the* key term in George Jackson's formulation for escape from bondage. Jackson explains that “Slavery is an economic condition. Today's new slavery must be defined in terms of economics” (Jackson 1994, 251). Under chattel slavery, he writes, a slave was the property of one man who “exercise[d] the property rights of his established economic order,” and the owner could “could move that property or hold it in one square yard of the earth's surface” (251). Slavery, he continues, is an “economic condition which manifests itself in the total loss or absence of self-determination” (251). Neo-slavery, like its predecessor, is arranged through an economic system that benefits a “small knot of men” (252) who exercise property rights in their established economic order by controlling the acquisition of the worker's (read: neo-slave) wage. “The sense and meaning of slavery comes through as a result of our ties to the wage,” Jackson states, since the wage must be had in order to survive. Because the neoslave's wage is determined by others, neo-slavery is “an economic condition which manifests itself in the total loss or absence of self-determination” (252). The BPP Field Marshal proclaims: “Only after this is understood and accepted can we go on to the dialectic that will help us in a remedy” (252). *A Taste*

of Power and *The Condemnation of Little B* both function as neoslave narratives. Both texts are positioned to address and then resist the socioeconomic condition of Blacks in North America. It is therefore irresponsible and dangerous to read Brown's work as an isolated textual event, as so many reviewers have done. Brown positions *Condemnation* to be read not as the singular life story of a Black teen male, who just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, and who was haphazardly apprehended and incarcerated as a consequence. Rather, *Condemnation* testifies to the political position of *all* Blacks in the United States. The injustice that Michael endures has been or can be endured by all Blacks in America. *He is Us*.

Consider how the "library of congress" officially catalogs the text. For that institution, *The Condemnation of Little B* falls within the following areas:

1. Lewis, Michael, 1983 or -4
2. Murder – Georgia – Atlanta.
3. Murder in mass media.
4. Discrimination in criminal justice administration – Georgia – Atlanta.
5. African American juvenile delinquents – Georgia – Atlanta – Public opinion.
6. Atlanta (Ga.) – Race relations.

Notice that "Race relations" is listed last, and relegated only to Atlanta, as are all other classifications with the exception of "Murder in mass media." By tethering the text to a limited geographic location, this listing contradicts Brown's assertion, proclaimed throughout *Condemnation*, that "in the end, in the main, it would seem that all black people in America live in the Bluff" (Brown 2002, 79). Earlier, Brown identifies the Bluff as the "black ghetto" or more specifically, the "barracoon ...where black people have been quartered since the end of [*chattel*] slavery" (69).

Michael's date of birth is perhaps most interesting here. The year, as written, points to uncertainty. The entry reads: "Lewis, Michael, 1983 *or* 4." What are we to make of this unknown, given the fact that Brown, within the opening chapters of the book, provides an in-depth historical analysis of Blacks in the South, their position as "slaves," and the way in which the rebuilding of the region was dependent on cheap labor born of chattel slavery? What are we to make of this entry when we further consider that Assata Shakur, former Black Panther and Black Liberation Army solider, opens her life story with the following line: "The FBI cannot find any evidence that I was born" (Shakur, 18). We can't even stop there. Frederick Douglass begins *My Bondage and My Freedom* with, "...in regard to my birth I cannot be as definite" (34). Behold these other indefinites:

"I do not know how old I am" – John Brown (*Slave Life in Georgia*, 324).

"I was born May 1815" – Henry Bibb (*Narrative of the Life of Henry Bibb*, 13).

"I was born in the state of Maryland" – James Pennington (*Fugitive Blacksmith*, 114).

"I was born in Maryland, in 1812" – John Thompson (*Life of John Thompson*, 417).

"I was born a slave" – Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 544).

"I was born in the year 1784" – William Grimes (*Life William Grimes, Runaway*, 187).

"I was born. I am not able to tell what year or month" – Moses Roper (*Narrative*, 493).

The entry, “Lewis, Michael. 1983 or 4,” inadvertently reads as point of identification in a chattel slave narrative.

Brown dedicates *Condemnation* to Michael with the message: “For Michael/Until you’re free.” The dedication is an integral part of this discussion as well. I think an essential question is, “What needs to take place “until,” what does Brown require for Michael to be free? It seems as if the author, at this key point, at the very outset, is speaking to her readers about our relationship to Michael as well. She extensively researches Black life in the U.S. for us to understand and effectively engage in the struggle for liberation.

Condemnation continues the analysis Brown began in *A Taste of Power*. With both texts she is able to fix her sight on the every-day socioeconomic predicament of Blacks in a state constructed and sustained by capitalist white-supremacism. Brown powerfully unpacks the mythologies of Thomas Jefferson, and dismantles the widely perceived image of Abraham Lincoln as the “Great Liberator” when she recalls his letter to Horace Greeley, editor of *The New York Tribune*. Lincoln wrote: “Dear Sir ... I have not meant to leave anyone in doubt. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it” (Brown 2002, 141). For Lincoln, the concerns of “slaves” are clearly separate from the concerns of the “union” insofar that the enslaved are not nor can ever be full participating members of the union. What’s more, Lincoln’s statement implies that Blacks in the United States are responsible for the sanctity of this union because Blacks in America can be exploited, and held forever in bondage in order to safeguard the continuation of his union. Just as the “3/5’s Compromise” was a

measure that reduced Black personhood to a percentage and was initiated by the U.S government to appease its southern electorate to preserve their “nation” as a whole, the 13th amendment was guided by the same intent. The amendment was never meant to free Blacks; instead, its intent was to ensure the continued exploitation of Black labor. What essentially took place was a name change. Slavery would no longer be called chattel slavery, for the new slavery, as Jackson writes in *Soledad Brother*, is “updated to disguise” the “plantation,” which in many respects has become the nation’s prisons (Jackson 1994, 251). Just as Lincoln has been erroneously embraced as an American hero for allegedly “freeing slaves,” one of his successors, William Jefferson Clinton, has also been erroneously hailed as the nation’s “first Black president.” Clinton is bestowed with this “honor” because, as Brown points out, most of us are unaware that more Blacks were sent to prison via the U.S. judicial system during Clinton’s eight-year reign than the previous combined twelve years of Republican presidency headed by Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr.

Brown recalls her formative years in *A Taste of Power*, and, of course, she draws parallels between growing up in North Philadelphia and her political activism that leads to her prominent Black Panther politics. Her narrative operates in the same manner as *Condemnation* insofar as she articulates what it means to be young, Black and struggling within a society that continually vilifies Blackness. In the opening chapter of *Condemnation* Brown says that she was anguished when her thoughts turned to how Michael must be feeling, “suspended as he was over an abyss of absolute abandonment in the universe he occupied” (10). She then connects her childhood to Michael’s:

I could remember feeling something like that myself as a child. I could remember trembling in fearful aloneness, feeling unwanted in a world into which I had been born, black and female and poor, circumscribed to a Philadelphia ghetto and predestined to isolation from the mainstream of society, a whites-only preserve.

(10)

The kinship between her and Michael is keenly strategic. *A Taste of Power* illustrates how the BPP was able to name and actively confront racial oppression. Panthers understood that racism does not function individually or anomalously; racism works well as an socioeconomic that institutionalizes itself as “white supremacy.” According to the BPP, a critical step toward liberation requires a recognition of the relationship between oppressive social conditions and the racist economy of state power. This position is clearly articulated in *Condemnation*. An essential point of the text is for the reader to comprehend that Michael’s captivity, masked as legal punishment for a crime, works to serve a specific purpose. Michael joins the ranks of over one million incarcerated Blacks whose status as inmates (i.e., *legal slaves*) guarantees a steady work force within the ever-growing prison industrial complex. On this note, Brown writes:

If blacks would survive, it seems we must first wake ourselves from this nightmare and come to grips with its reality. If blacks would ever finally march out of the hell of Monticello, where we have lived for seemingly time immemorial, we must look away from the brutal master of this house and become masters to ourselves. We must seize our lives and destinies and collect our dues. The goal of *freedom* must return to the top of our agenda. For it is the only business of the slave. (357)

When Brown proclaims, “Little B is not one in a million. Little B is one of millions of children like him in America” (84), are we really to believe that the text is meant to speak only of Michael’s freedom *as an individual*? Narratives by Black writers have never been so exclusive in their intent. Nor have they been written without making the audience a central part of the text, which is to say that Black narratives have always been consciously political. They seek to impact – or better yet – activate the reader.

This “until” Brown points to in the dedication is definitely linked to the wealth of information the author presents for our consideration. How can Michael be made free if we don’t understand the point of his enslavement and how *his* status in the U.S. is *our* status in America? How can Michael be made free if we don’t liberate ourselves from mainstream discussions about Blacks in America that are generated by, and made circular through a “rhetorical duplicity”?

In the end, *Condemnation* has earned the attention of many reviewers; however, we need to be concerned about how the text has been read or misread thus far. *Condemnation* provides every indication that the author continues the radical politics she began during her Black Panther years. This is not a book to read and then put aside. It’s very clear that Elaine Brown writes for liberation. The text is a call to arms, activism, and resounds throughout her latest offering. She knows the history of Black struggle, and that America as we know it lacks the capacity to accommodate the freedom of Black people.

Covering Those Bones

Toni Cade Bambara’s *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, the 609-page novel that took Bambara nearly twelve years to complete, and that her editor Toni Morrison defines

as the novelist's "magnum opus," opens with a "Prologue" that in itself is complex and demanding because its formal qualities meticulously attend to the novel's sociopolitical intent. The novel's title, a proclamation, is attributed to a Black mother summoned to Atlanta's medical examiner's office to identify the "remains" of her child. From the outset the book's title provides voice to a parent gripped by terror who is expected to be silent because the death of her child has been deemed inconsequential. Moreover, the mother has not only lost her child, but she has also endured the nightmare of being treated with suspicion. It is whispered and implied throughout, that this parent, along with other Black parents, are said to be responsible for the disappearance and murder of their children. And while the title of Bambara's novel can easily be identified as a response to an "official" query, it also suggests that the parent resists the terms in which the state defines her child. By declaring, "Those *bones* are not my child," the mother refuses to reduce her child to an objectified "thing."

In its entirety, the novel addresses what James Baldwin would designate in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* ([1985] 1995) as "the Terror," or what the general public now calls the Atlanta Child Murders. On July 20, 1979 Edward Hope Smith, age 14, was reported missing. Edward's body was found eight days later near the body of 13 year-old Alfred James Evans. From September 1979 to June 1981, 40 Black children were kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and brutally murdered in Atlanta. Multiple theories about who, or what, was doing the killing were widespread. While some believed a lone serial killer had descended upon the Black community, others thought the murders were either cult motivated, child-porn thrill killings, the work of the Ku Klux Klan, or that Vietnam veterans who suffered from flashbacks of Vietnamese children hurling grenades

were now killing Black children as part of some form of psychotic retaliation. If these theories were not insidious enough, the Atlanta Police Department (APD) was tenacious in targeting the parents of slain children who had voiced criticism over the APD's investigation of the murders. The APD listed these parents, as "prime suspects," and forced them to take lie detector tests, tapped their telephones, and dogged their every step.

There were, and still are, however, many theories about who was killing the children and why, and although Atlanta resident Wayne Bertram Williams was tried for the murders and is now serving a life sentence, after his incarceration the bodies of murdered Black children were still being discovered. Most importantly, as Baldwin points out, Williams was never convicted for the murder of any of the children. Rather, Williams was convicted for the murder of two men: Jimmy Ray Payne and Nathaniel Cater, who both died in a manner the prosecution claimed fit the pattern of how the children were slain. Approximately a year after the murders began parents

staged sit-ins where they camped out in media and law enforcement offices, demanding a special investigation of the 'epidemic' of child murders... charg[ing] that the authorities were dragging their feet because of race; because of class; because the city, the country's third-busiest convention center, was trying to protect its image and was trying to mask a crisis that might threaten Atlanta's trade dollars. (Bambara 15-16)

Thus, the parents of the slain children and other adults who had organized the Committee to Stop Children's Murders (STOP), and then Baldwin who made a trip to Atlanta to speak with the parents of the children, understood the political implications surrounding

the conviction of Williams, a Black man, then 23 years old, who was arrested but never convicted for the deaths of the 40 children. Within the city's Black community it is widely believed that Williams was and remains the scapegoat whose conviction and incarceration both protects and exonerates the economic interests of a city that advertised itself as the "leader of the New South" that was simply "too busy to hate." Equally critical, Baldwin writes that Williams's "guilt" was entirely assumed, never proven since he was not charged with killing any of the children, and the person, or persons, who murdered them – all of whom were the daughters and sons of poor Black families – was never-brought-to-trial. What is clear, Baldwin charges, is that whoever is murdering the children wants them to be found as they are, since this "brutally indifferent treatment of the child's corpse is like spitting in the faces of the people who produced the child" (6). And, Bambara is decisive on this point in that she addresses the extent to which economically poor Black children who were then brutally murdered were treated as an inconvenience if not a menace, and their parents were dismissively scolded and denigrated by virtually every aspect of city operations.

Bambara writes the "Prologue" of *Those Bones Are Not My Child* in a second-person-singular narration that blends the voices of an unnamed mother and father within their narration. The mother, primarily, discusses how community activism quickly mobilized because, as she explains, "when mumps have been replaced by murder, alarm is no longer a private affair" (9). But this activism is seemingly crushed under the weight of public policy, the circular relationship between rumor and the "news," as well as the collusion between state and local agencies and mainstream media. It is only later that we learn that the mother who speaks in the "Prologue" could be one of the main characters.

Marzala “Zala” Rawls. Zala and her husband, Spencer “Spence” Rawls, a Vietnam vet, have three children: a daughter, Kenti who is seven, and two sons, eight year-old Kofi, and 12 year-old, Sundiata, nicknamed “Sonny.” Although Zala and Spence are separated, when Sonny does not return home from a youth center camping trip, the couple eventually reunites when it becomes clear that their son is missing and has possibly been kidnapped.

But again, the author delays our introduction to the Rawls’, and this move, of course, is strategic. For example, we are given the following dialogue in the “Prologue”:

Your eyes strain, stretching down the block, searching through schoolchild chatter for that one voice that will give you ease. Your eyes sting with effort to see over bushes, look through buildings, cut through everything that separates you from your child’s starting point – the junior high school. (3)

The author immediately situates *you*, the reader, in the center of the “Terror” – “you” become the parent who anxiously awaits the return of your child, and you need to know that your child is safe, unharmed and will return home. The use of this specific pronoun is essential. Bambara seeks to establish empathy for the parents who were otherwise alone in their efforts. By utilizing the second-person pronoun, she situates the reader within the text of the “Terror.” The fear and anxiety experienced by the parents becomes your own. Also, as the passage indicates, you also take on what are imagined as superhuman capabilities since you are now able to “see over bushes,” to “look through buildings,” and to “cut through everything.” These superhuman powers are vital for the parents who were made to feel alone because of a lack of support from virtually every other entity outside of themselves. They were forced to fight alone against what seemed

to be insurmountable odds, thus they had to undergo a self-transformation. As you continue your search for your child, the likelihood of any outside assistance quickly diminishes since you know you are up against a political / historical reality that reiterates, time-and-time again, that your very existence, and, by extension, your child's, is perceived by other forces as serving only the needs of others, or more specifically the state. So your demand for help goes unheard since it falls on the proverbial deaf ear, because as Baldwin explains of Blacks in America, represented here as the parents of the slain children, "[n]o one is compelled to hear the needs of a captive population" (36). Thus, in the novel's beginning the parents speak to themselves, and sometimes not even to each other. Instead they are made to feel isolated and excluded. The mother and father each holds a private conversation with him/herself and oftentimes, this conversation is further spilt as if the parent disconnects from, alienates, him/herself.

During the murders, the APD, taking its cue from city administrators and economic interests, absolutely refused to examine how it played an integral role in the disappearance and death of the children. The APD refused to listen to the parents pleas and outrage "because, as police logic went in the summer of '79, [the year the United Nations designated 'The Year of the Child'] seven or eight deaths did not constitute 'an epidemic' of murder" (Bambara 5). But when the city did begin to investigate the deaths as a collective under the Atlanta Missing Children's Case, investigations preceded from the premise that the parents themselves killed their children and as result, this official assumption created a chasm between the parents who oftentimes, as Bambara depicts, became suspicious of each other. Yet, for the most part, the Black parents knew, having grown up in United States, that "the spirit of the South is the spirit of America" (Baldwin

7). STOP launched an independent investigation, because its organizers did not accept the official line that the murders were disconnected, and they refuted the belief that their children met their death because they were either abused or discontented/ungrateful children who ran away from inherently dysfunctional Black homes.

Bambara brings to light how STOP also confronted news agencies, which customarily portrayed Black parents as “monstrous” and their children as “street hustling hoodlums” who eventually got their comeuppance (15). It is through the mother that we learn that local newspapers handled its coverage of the murders carelessly and with contempt. To begin, the press was slow in reporting on the killings, and when the press finally decided to grant coverage reporters and editors repeatedly misspelled the children’s names, and printed continuous discrepancies in the children’s ages and their dates of disappearance. As a rule, the press did not speak to the parents, but instead gathered all its information from the police. And the police, and the emergency response department, as Bambara recalls through her depictions, were disruptive and callous. When Zala first calls “911” to report her son, Sundiata, as missing, the operator tells her that her missing son is “Not an emergency” (60). Zala then makes a trip to police headquarters where she encounters the “Youth Division of Missing Persons” and it is completely unorganized in virtually every detail. An elderly man in speaking to Zala signifies on the headquarters: “You could spend your life in here and they couldn’t even find you here” (63). Zala finds no comfort in the environment. The sunlight desperately tries to penetrate the “murky” windows whose panes are encrusted with “mold” (63). Even the condition of the photographs and photocopies of the missing children, evidenced by the passage’s language, indicates yet another series of attacks against the

victims who, personified by the photos, have attempted to retreat from the onslaught. The pictures of missing children “are *pinned* to dirt-streaked corkboards *gouged out* by pushpins. Some pictures were *cracked* and dusty. Where pushpins were missing from corners, photos had *curled up*, covering the faces of the missing” [emphasis mine] (63). Yet despite how the police treated the cases of missing children, news accounts, both televised and print, labeled the parents “opportunistic,” “lime-light greedy,” and their motives “mercenary” for their having traveled to other cities to raise funds for searches and to prompt national awareness. Later on in the novel, eight year-old Kofi, “couldn’t understand why such a big thing as somebody knocking over little kids was crammed between a lot of furniture ads” (57). Adding even further injury, one editorial, the mother notes, described the murderer as the “ ‘gentle killer’ – the man or woman who’d wash some of the victims, laid them out in clean clothes, and once slipped a rock under the murdered boy’s head ‘like a pillow,’ a reporter said. Like a pillow” (5). The mother condemns the reporter, the newspaper, and the readership for accepting the depiction of a Black child’s death as comforting, which provides space for her to confront why the murder of the child is situated in sentimental terms, and why this description, unchallenged, has been welcomed, since the child, according to the reporter, was not, in the end, actually harmed, but *cared* for. She adds also to this list of charges what the reporter is saying about the parent(s). The murderer, or the “gentle killer,” replaces the parent as a caring surrogate who tucks the child into bed – an image which is insulting to the parents because again it is, “like spitting in the faces of the people who produced [and love] the child.” For the mother, these points are self-evident. The question now becomes, why and how are these points not self-evident to the journalist, editors, and the

many faithful readers who will all undoubtedly vigorously defend the existence of an objective press.

For example, in the pre-trial of coverage devoted to Michael Lewis, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* classifies him a “thug” who was an “evil in the city.” The mother who speaks in Bambara’s “Prologue” is repeatedly outraged by how the city, even through its seemingly mundane operations and activities, defines Black children. Take for example two key images the mother sees as she begins her search. In the first instance she sees a truck parked in front of a store and later on she’s threatened by a dog rummaging through the trash. As she walks down the street toward the school, she sees an exterminator’s truck. The driver, who is no longer behind the wheel and is unseen, has double-parked the truck in front of a dry-cleaner. Neither the driver who is unseen, nor the exterminator’s truck, nor its juxtaposition to the dry-cleaner, would prompt any alarm under “normal” circumstances. Rather, what first catches her attention is how someone has placed a “STOP” bumper sticker on the truck’s door. The bumper sticker reads: “HELP KEEP OUR CHILDREN SAFE” (4). Yet, the word “CHILDREN” is aligned directly under the term “Pest” which is part of the exterminator’s logo. This alignment parallels “Children” to a “Pest,” and even more chilling, the vehicle’s proximity to the dry-cleaning business doubly conveys the idea that the children’s extermination as “pest” is a cleansing. These images are no longer mundane, or even accidental. Instead, Black children are not “murdered” since their death falls under the category of pest extermination, which is then aligned with cleaning, and then made parallel to an image of comfort, according to the daily news. Also, what are we to make of the invisible driver of the truck? Surely he must have seen how the “STOP” bumper

sticker was aligned on the truck and realized the implications of the sticker being placed anywhere on an exterminator's truck. Why did he not remove it? But more importantly Bambara writes that "an exterminator truck pulled up and double-parked." This absence of a driver lends the impression that the truck was moving of its own volition, or that it moves through an unseen, if not an immaterial force. If this is the intent of the truck's description we can then relate it to the forces rallied against the parents. What Bambara foreshadows in her "Prologue" is the difficulty Zala and Spence have in being able to identify not only who can best assist them with their search, but also who or what is the driving force behind the circumstances that have created the dilemma that they must overcome in order to retrieve their son. The exterminator's truck was driven by "someone," and Bambara deliberately makes this driver unseen, if not elusive.

For the Black parent the journey is always arduous and she is attacked on all fronts. She fights against a city that redefines the murder of Black children as a necessity, and this assault affects her mentally and physically. But the parent has not yet made it to the school, and the speaker, again depicted as "you," continues. You reach what is the "only half-way clear path" to the school and your body is besieged by "nettles and briars" growing in the "brambled lot" (11). At the end of the path, your way is blocked:

Up ahead a rawbony mutt is nuzzling a pile of trash. The dog looks up, bares its teeth. Hackles stiff, it shivers itself sideways and blocks your way. Skin that bags below its ribs puffs out a few times, but you don't hear the bark, you're breathing that hard. The dog plants a paw on a baby doll facedown in the trash. The doll's *ma-ma* box tears through its gauze-cotton skin. You growl at the dog,

you're feeling that crazed. It moves its rump aside to let you pass. The doll lets out a croaked *ma-ma* that catches you in the back of your knees. You plow through a tangle of weeds and renegade vines looping up from clumps of kudzu and scrub grass. Now that you've passed, the dog is woofing at you. Your ears are cocked for attack. But the mutt resumes its raid on the trash and you concentrate on the bobby traps the kudzu has set for your feet. (11)

The passage is both disturbing and mythic. The dog has snatched the doll from the trash and has ripped its throat out. The doll, though inanimate, is nevertheless depicted as crying out in horror and pain, and the doll stands in to represent a child as it cries pitifully for its mother, who is unable to protect it. Moreover, the child is utterly objectified, reduced to a mere piece of trash on which the dog feasts, nourishes itself, and defends as its prey. The mother witnesses this obscenity. And because the doll/child's anguish is transferred to and registered on the body of the mother: a "croak that catches you in the back of your knees," she is rendered powerless in defending herself and the doll/child against the ravenous attack of the dog. In addition, the mother's very body is besieged as if the natural elements have joined forces to rally against her. She must maneuver a safe passage through a "tangle of weeds and renegade vines," as well as "concentrate on the bobby traps set" by the kudzu. Finally the "woofing" dog itself takes on mythic proportions. It bars her pathway to the school and guards its terrain. It is a re-configuration of Cerberus. For the parents and their children their daily life and routines are now submerged within a hellish world.

Parents and children quickly become the damned through a police, judicial, and educational system that criminalizes them all. City officials mandate a curfew, and

countless children are arrested for violating the policy. When parents are ordered to appear in court because their children have defied the curfew, parents are detained or arrested even before they can enter the courthouse. To protect their children, fearful mothers have begun carrying arsenals in their handbags. Equipped with either handguns, knives, or mace, they forget to remove these safety measures from their bags before they enter the courthouse and they set off the metal detectors stationed at the courthouse entrance. When parents begin to keep their children home from school in order to keep them indoors, close-by, and safe, truant officers call the parents and threaten to report them to the police. And the schools become a site where children are terrorized and made to feel even more unsafe.

This point is made painfully clear in *Leaving Atlanta* (2002). The novel's author, Tayari Jones, grew up in Atlanta, where she attended elementary school during the "Terror." Her novel focuses on several fifth-graders at Oglethorpe Elementary and details how, in 1979, the students attempted to cope with the disappearance and murder of their classmates and a school system that offered little if any comfort. In one scene, the students are accosted by a police officer whose school visit is totally disruptive because his presence only confirms the students' assumption that the police cannot and do not want to protect them. As soon as "Officer Brown" enters the classroom, the narrator offers: "No child in this room had felt safe since Jashante disappeared" (94). Thinking to himself, Rodney Green, a student who is later abducted and murdered, cannot take the police officer seriously and he questions his ability: "Officer Brown is softer and rounder than you imagine a police officer should be. His wide toothy smile is naggingly familiar. Was he the man inside the clown suit at [my] sister's birthday

party?” (92). Rodney’s question is startling because it conjures memories of John Wayne Gacy, Jr., known as the serial “Killer Clown.” Gacy, a Chicago resident, was convicted and executed in 1994 for the rape and murder of 33 boys and young men who he buried in a crawl space in his house. He was labeled the “Killer Clown” because he entertained children at block parties and hospitals where he dressed as a clown. Although of course, given the time frame, Rodney cannot make any mention whatsoever of Gacy, the author may be evoking this serial killer in hindsight. If this is the case, the memory of a clown that she links to Rodney and then attributes to Officer Brown who visits the school to talk with the students about children being murdered is absolutely frightening. Brown we recall discusses at length the duplicity inherent in New Age Racism, wherein racist motivations are cleverly disguised in order to present a façade of racial acceptance and inclusion. The clown, as evidenced by Gacy, affects a light-hearted persona that is then used to deceive children he considers his prey. Officer Brown, standing in as a representative of law enforcement, presents himself as a protector who serves the people, but the students are able to unmask this disguise. Officer Brown’s insincerity is exposed by Rodney’s classmate, a student the author tellingly names Cinque Freeman. When the officer asks the students about safety and what they’ve learned from watching the “news” with their parents, it is Cinque Freeman who responds with, “Everybody knows somebody is killing black kids” (92). Of course the student’s name is meant to immediately convey a sense of rebellion and resistance since the student is named after Cinque, the West African who was enslaved and who in 1839 gained his freedom by successfully leading a rebellion aboard the slave ship *Amistad*. And while the student’s first name connects him to a specific historical moment in Black resistance, his last name,

Freeman, read of course as a “Free Man,” is meant to define the objective of this resistance. Moreover, the character Cinque appears to remind us that mainstream “news” refused to address the full implications that is specifically Black children who are being murdered. When he reminds Brown of this point, the officer “looks suddenly taken aback as if he only now notices that he is white” (92). And when he reacquaints himself with this realization, the narrator says that Brown “looks away from Cinque” (93). The students, Black children who are now abandoned by the police, know that the police, represented by Brown, have “nothing useful to share. As a matter of fact, [the children] are more fearful than ever to know that this man is all that stands between them [their] generation and an early death” (93).

Finally, Bambara offers a critique of the Black bourgeoisie. Bambara does not touch on this subject in her “Prologue.” Rather it appears most clearly in the chapters, “The State of the Art” and “Foxglove and Tannia Leaves.” In the first chapter we encounter an unnamed and unseen woman who has just left STOP offices. When Zala climbs the stairs to the office she smells and immediately recognizes “a wave of floral perfume, left, no doubt, by one of the many self-appointed spokesladies who were forever volunteering their services for the poor unfortunate mothers who could not possibly be regarded as spokespersons of even their own tragedy” (318). This woman resembles many who have visited the STOP office before, and as the wife of a judge, she stands for those who envision themselves as honoring the hierarchy once espoused by DuBois. These women are proud members of the “Talented Tenth,” for it is only through them that poor Black mothers can hope to articulate and overcome their collective tragedy. The narrator explains that according to the woman in the hallway, “good speechifying [is]

done by the gentry” (318). A bourgeois ideology dictates that a “formal” education creates social status and this social status carries with it the exclusive responsibility and privilege to speak on behalf of the “race.” Within this frame, the woman also believes that the poor have remained poor because they have not endured much; they have not extended themselves to their limits, they have not made the necessary sacrifices to attain material success and social prestige. Thus, when she thinks about the mothers and their predicament she is easily able to dismiss their suffering by noting that their “drama” or how they will speak about their “drama,” will be of little consequence. Also, the woman, resembling Ivy Webber, the judge’s wife who appears in “Foxglove” chapter, is not all concerned about the mothers. Rather, their motives are assumed to be selfish, and she is therefore able to condemn the parents who have joined together in order to safeguard themselves and their families. Mrs. Webber, just like the woman on the stairwell, cannot believe that these parents do not want her assistance, that they, of all people, had the audacity to turn her away. Mrs. Webber is outraged that the parents see her as a “paragon of aristocratic uselessness” (398). Instead, she believes her money and social status would benefit their cause, and, according to her, history has proven her right: “Where would the race be if not for the conscientious men and women who’d built the schools, the banks, produced the art, the wisdom, and saw to it that the laws were passed that guaranteed continual *progress*?” [emphasis mine] (401).

Undoubtedly, this is where the parents and the Mrs. Webbers part company – on the very ideal of “progress.” Because at the heart of the matter, how is *progress* being defined when Black children are murdered in record numbers and their families are terrorized and vilified when they proclaim their outrage? To paraphrase Brown, how is

progress defined when the 13th Amendment clearly re-established slavery under a new economic order rather than abolishing it, and as a consequence millions of Black men and women are convicted and incarcerated? How is *progress* being defined when, although Black men, women, and children, more than ever before, are able to influence American culture and have been appointed to positions in the upper-echelon of U.S. government, the numbers of economically disenfranchised Blacks steadily and rapidly increases? The underlying message in *The Condemnation of Little B*, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, and *Leaving Atlanta*, through their critiques of Atlanta, “the city too busy to hate,” which represents all of North America, is that “progress,” the fetish of the bourgeoisie, is bought at the expense of poor disenfranchised Blacks.

African American Fiction in Retrospect:

Black Radical Thought Examines Black Bourgeois Ideology

Late twentieth-century African American fiction provides an intriguing examination of the dismissal of radical political activism by the Black bourgeoisie. Traditionally African American novelists analyze systemic racism in the United States, but late twentieth-century novelists expand this inquiry by drawing our attention to ideals of racial progress espoused by the Black bourgeoisie. This expanded theme is due in large part to the activism of the Black Power Movement in North America and its attention to Black conservatism's steadfast allegiance to a doctrine of "racial progress." A doctrine of racial progress or an ideology of "racial uplift" is framed by a set of assumptions that Black bourgeois culture either refuses to acknowledge or categorically repudiates. The Black Panther Party (BPP), taking its philosophical cue most notably from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, addressed Black bourgeois ideals and linked them with political collaboration among U.S. Blacks that according to the BPP helped perpetuate racial oppression. The BPP targeted how ideological divisions within the Black community inevitably deter liberation strategy. For the Panthers, Black radical activism could never emerge from the Black middle-class because of its allegiance to power structure which vilifies Black culture by adhering to a hostile and confrontational relationship with the working-class and economically poor.

In company with Fanon, a reading of E. Franklin Frazier (*The Black Bourgeoisie*), Elaine Brown (*The Condemnation of Little B*), Toni Cade Bambara (*Those Bones Are Not My Child*), and most recently Michael Eric Dyson (*Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?*) provides the groundwork to understand the formation

and continuance of the Black bourgeoisie. In both his introduction and opening chapter, “The Roots of the Black Bourgeoisie,” Frazier establishes the group as first emerging during chattel slavery wherein some enslaved, working as they did in the master’s house, lived in a situation in which “lives of the masters and slaves became intertwined in a system of social relationships” (10). Frazier begins by explaining how house slaves were subject to a type of discipline that escaped those who were slaving in the fields: “This discipline included both moral and religious instruction. The slaves participated in the religious life of their white masters – including family prayers and attendance at the white churches, where a section was reserved for them” (12). According to Frazier’s description, house slaves, while “disciplined” in what he refers to as “European culture,” were also taught to stay in their place, and this “reserved space” was then deemed exclusive and special insofar as the house slave constructed a social hierarchy built on a “deep-seated inferiority complex” which prompted this bourgeois class to begin “rejecting identification with the Negro masses on the one hand, and suffering from the contempt of the white world on the other” (24). This social hierarchy was further cultivated by the class of enslaved who were then selected to learn a skilled trade and become artisan apprentices. The selection “further broadened a division of labor on the plantation in which the intelligence and talents of the slaves found expression” (13). What therefore emerged from this skilled labor pool in conjunction with a clear sense of inferiority to whites was a sense of superiority to other blacks, as if a “skilled” trade required inherent intelligence and talent, as opposed to field work, which was readily and simply assumed to be the result of pure physical labor. Novelist Edward P. Jones, author of *The Known World*, addresses this assumed split between intellect and body through his

character, Moses, an enslaved field hand who regularly eats dirt “to discover the weaknesses and strengths of the field” (2). It’s through the knowledge of the body, through a physical acumen of several senses: sight, touch, taste, and smell, that Moses is able to productively manage the fields. There is neither differentiation nor ascendancy here between body and mind; they are one and the same. In terms of the body, Frazier also takes into consideration color consciousness among the enslaved. A fixation on complexion gave way to an exclusive kinship, or allegiance to the master class, whose white skin was erroneously cherished and thus envisioned as a distinct marker of superiority. The enslaved “mulattoes,” or “mixed bloods,” who had been permitted to hire their time and work as semi-free laborers, perhaps thought they had control over their lives, that they were engineers of their own fate, bonded as they were by “blood” to their masters who were the free and independent individuals. Frazier also outlines how enslaved women and men, sometimes able to save a portion of their wages, purchased their freedom. We can count at least two dilemmas emerging from the act of purchasing one’s freedom. First, it gives credibility to a “boot-strap mentality;” the belief that one needs only to work hard enough in order to access liberation. Secondly, we can easily argue that purchasing one’s freedom engages a complicit act – a contradiction of liberation since to purchase freedom upholds and legitimizes the institution of chattel slavery. To buy one’s freedom allows the enslaver to define “freedom,” as it also invariably accepts the idea that a person can be owned, that a person is chattel/property.

Malcolm X, in 1965, also looks to chattel slavery when speaking about definitions of freedom: in making his classic distinction between house and field slaves, he excoriates racial progress devotees. In his address to young Civil Rights fighters at

Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama. Malcolm urged young people to “read the history of slavery” in order to understand the conflicts of a Black bourgeois ideology and its definitions of liberation. According to Malcolm the “master” will always look to derail liberation strategy. Oftentimes this objective is realized through the involvement of the Black bourgeoisie, who will emerge as in the form of the “old house Negro” who speaks the language of the master to the field slaves in hopes of unsettling their quest for freedom: “When the field Negroes got too much out of line, [the old house Negroes] held them back in check. He put ‘em back on the plantation” (X *Final Speeches*, 27).

Malcolm’s instruction to “read the history of slavery” in order to understand class divisions among Blacks in late twentieth-century North America distinctly links the socio-economic order of chattel slavery to that of the America in which he lived; furthermore, Malcolm directly links the self-understanding of Blacks, and of the Black middle class in particular, to the symbolic order of slavery. Slavery, in this formulation, is not conceived as a thing of the past, but as a conceptual framework of vital importance to present-day America, and to an understanding of Black psychology. Such an assertion implies that the examination of slave narratives is necessary in order to gain a meaningful comprehension of Black American history and literature. To satisfy this corollary to Malcolm’s concept of what I will call “neo-slavery,” we can turn to Harriet A. Jacobs’s nineteenth-century text *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself*.

In explaining her quest for freedom, Jacobs describes to a white Northern audience how her family’s position within the socio-economic order of slavery influenced her ideas about liberation, and within this re-telling we hear Frazier and Malcolm’s explications of Black bourgeoisie mentality. To begin, Jacobs effortlessly

conflates skin color with intelligence through her description of her parents, described by Jacobs as a “light shade of brownish yellow,” which follows immediately on the heels of her description of her father’s trade. He was, Jacobs states, “considered so intelligent and skillful, in his trade” as an carpenter, which enabled him “several times” to “offer [to use] his earnings to free his children” (5). Jacobs never reveals whether or not her father ever contemplated escape; but, we do know that her grandmother, a “free” woman who purchased her freedom, and earned a living as a baker (yet another “skilled” trade), vehemently opposed the idea of escape. Jacobs describes her grandmother as a woman much loved and respected by the white society she served for many years as a faithful and honest servant/slave. Moreover, it is the grandmother who repeatedly attempts to teach Jacobs to understand “the will of God: that He had seen fit to place [the enslaved] under such circumstances and though it seemed hard, we ought to pray for contentment” (17). Jacobs frequently provides evidence of her grandmother’s devotion to the master class – a woman who has been well disciplined as a slave and who, as reward, is affectionately nicknamed “Aunt Marthy” by her enslavers. The grandmother wholeheartedly embraces the doctrine of obeying her master in all things. She chastises Jacobs for not only becoming pregnant out of wedlock, but later for wanting to escape and for “abandoning” her children. Furthermore, “Aunty Marthy” tries to dissuade her enslaved son, Benjamin, from escaping. She instead wants Benjamin to go back to his master and beg for his forgiveness for having escaped. This same reasoning appears in Mary Prince’s 1831 narrative, *The History of Mary Prince: A West African Slave, Related by Herself*. Prince has escaped, but her father finds her and returns her to the master and begins to apologize for his daughter’s flight.

Each of these examples also emphasizes that Black bourgeois ideals operate through a symbolic identification. Although Frazier draws our attention to the origins of the Black middle-class and its roots of color consciousness, and Malcolm's parallel between house/field slaves illustrates class divisions among contemporary middle-class and working poor Blacks, the Black bourgeoisie cannot be defined solely by either skin color or economics. Consider the definitions Michael Eric Dyson employs as he attempts to define Black categories of Black identity. Dyson writes that "class in black America has never been viewed in strictly literal economic terms; the black definition of class embraces style and behavior as well" (xv). In his introduction to *Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* Dyson introduces readers to the terms "Afristocracy" and "Ghettocracy." He categorizes the Afristocracy as "composed of lawyers, physicians, intellectuals, civil rights leaders, entertainers, athletes, brokers, and *the like*" [emphasis added] (xiv). And according to his evaluation, the Ghettocracy "consists of the desperately unemployed and underemployed, those trapped in underground economies, and those working poor folk who slave in menial jobs at the edge of the economy" (xvi). More specifically he places in the latter category "single mothers on welfare, single working mothers, and fathers, married and poor working folk, the incarcerated, and a battalion of impoverished children" (xvi). Notice how the Afristocracy, with the exception of "intellectuals" and "civil right leaders," is defined by exact occupations and that these occupations are supposed to be readily esteemed and certainly understood, as evidenced by his use of the end phrase "and the like." What should also grasp our attention is the way in which he repeatedly defines the Ghettocracy through a set of qualifiers that do not apply to his description of the Afristocracy. The

Ghettocracy is directly described in terms of an economic lack (e.g.: “welfare recipients,” “underemployment,” “underground economics,” and “at the edge of economy”).

According to Dyson’s reading of class divisions among Blacks in the United States, with the exception of athletes and entertainers (including Hip-Hop artists), an intellectual or a civil rights leader cannot be a member of the Ghettocracy. In his categories Dyson, unfortunately, re-inscribes the differentiation Frazier outlined between work and professions during chattel slavery, and contrary to what he may attempt to do, his analysis reinforces a socio-economic hierarchy where the Ghettocracy exists as the base and is defined in terms of socio-economic stigmata. While Dyson does an excellent job of pointing out the obvious contradictions and erroneous information underlining Cosby’s rant against Blacks, or to use Cosby’s repeated term, “these people,” whom he says are “dragging [him] way down,” Dyson’s analysis raises more problems than it solves (58). Dyson, a self-proclaimed member of the Black middle-class, and thus the Afristocracy, says he wants “to provoke black folk into serious consideration, the sort [the Afristocracy] claim[s] the black poor should undertake, but one we in other classes may seek to avoid” (xv). But his introduction closes with a benevolent air that ultimately subverts the intent of his analysis. To begin, Dyson repeats the presupposition that the Black middle-class is somehow invested with the mission of economically and morally redeeming poor Blacks. The poor must be saved and protected by the Afristocracy, which, whether the latter has or has not lost its mind, has a moral and cultural duty to save poor Blacks from themselves. From the Olympian moral altitude of his privileged Black bourgeois standpoint, he condescendingly pronounces: “I hope to lay bare the vicious assault of the Afristocracy on the Ghettocracy and offer a principled defense of

poor black folk, *one rooted in clear-eyed acknowledgement of the deficiencies and responsibility, but anchored by an abiding compassion for the most vulnerable members of our community*” [italics added] (xvi).

African American novelists who carefully analyze Black bourgeois ideology do not readily become academy standards. Numerous African American authors and theorists continually urge a discussion of the Black bourgeoisie and how its ideals of racial progress reinforce reactionary rhetoric and invest in mainstream vilifications of Black culture and the criminalization of the Black poor. Most recently we have the works of Elaine Brown and Toni Cade Bambara. Brown’s *The Condemnation of Little B* charts the rapidly increasing national incarceration rates of Black youth alongside an investigation of the Black middle-class. Bambara’s epic novel, *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, delves into the socio-economics of what James Baldwin (*The Evidence of Things Not Seen*) would label “The Terror” and that the public would classify as “The Atlanta Child Murder” case. Through her re-telling of the horrific event in which numerous Black children who lived in the central city of Atlanta were kidnapped and murdered, Bambara depicts the rampant apathy of state and federal agencies, and their affiliations with Atlanta’s Black officials who were equally quick to label the missing children as delinquent and their parents as criminally negligent. We can add to the list Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, which is deemed a canonical text, and his companion essay, “How Bigger Was Born,” which closes the novel, and often goes unread. In the essay Wright shares how he was initially fearful of and anticipated the criticism of both whites and African Americans. While a reactionary white readership could easily employ Bigger’s character to justify virtually every racist stereotype of Blacks, Wright estimated that the

Black bourgeoisie, “did not want people, especially white people, to think that their lives were so much as touched by anything so dark and brutal as Bigger” (Wright 525). A refusal among the Black bourgeoisie to acknowledge that historical and institutional structures create Black oppression is a mirrored reflection of white racist paranoia and this socio-political detachment is examined in the works of Gloria Naylor (*Linden Hills*), Paule Marshall (*Brown Girl, Brownstones and Praisesong for the Widow*), Sam Greenlee (*The Spook Who Sat By the Door*) and Toni Morrison (*Song of Solomon, Paradise, and Love*). Collectively these novels map out a terrain detailing the reactionary presuppositions of Black ideals of racial progress. Each of these texts, in its examination of the Black bourgeoisie, critiques how a systematic disengagement perpetuates racial strife.

Although it may be common knowledge within Black studies that Newton and Bobby Seale created the Panthers to defend the community against rampant police brutality in Oakland, California, through a strategy of armed-self defense as a means to establish systems of self-determination within the community, we also need to consider Newton and Seale’s engagement with Frantz Fanon’s theory of the colonized subject put forth in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Engaging Fanon, Newton writes, was particularly pertinent since the theorist frames colonialism by highlighting, first and foremost, the colonized subject as he pays particular attention to the strained relationships among colonized groups. For the Panthers, Fanon’s articulation of the battle between the colonized town-dweller/intellectual and the colonized that inhabit the country districts was applied to the relationship between America’s Black middle-class, who live in the suburbs, and Blacks who are trapped in the nation’s central cities. Moreover, Fanon

defines the interplay of factors responsible for maintaining this strained relationship. The city dweller will clash in her/his manners of confronting the socio-political situation, and from these comparisons, Fanon outlines the conceptual difference between progress and liberation. To begin, according to Fanon, Black town-dwelling intellectuals only form a miniscule percentage of the native population, and they have been, in some small measure, “pampered by the colonial regime;” and like the settlers, the town dwelling intellectuals pass judgment on and scorn those who reside in the country districts (Fanon *Wretched* 108). Also, the town-dwelling colonized population that considers itself the intellectual vanguard harbors a “deep seated mistrust” of those who live in the country (Fanon *Wretched* 109). And while this self-appointed intellectual elite is keenly interested in heightening its position of privilege within this colonial situation, the tremendous majority of Blacks set their sights on dismantling the system, and it is this “antagonism” that exists between the native who is excluded from the so-called advantages of colonialism, and her counterpart who manages to turn colonial exploitation to her account. Greg A. Thomas, writing for *Présence Africaine*, examines the continuity and discontinuity of Fanon and Frazier and their theories about the “Bourgeoisie Noir” (78). Thomas cites how Fanon articulated pivotal distinctions and differences between “total liberation” and “independence” as opposed to “decolonization,” “pseudo-independence” or “puppet independence.” For Fanon, puppet or pseudo-independence, as well as decolonization, are a

constitutional charade that keeps the structure of empire intact. [and Fanon] defined liberation as the total destruction of the colonial system from the pre-eminence of the language of the oppressor and ‘departmentalization,’ to the

customs union that in reality maintains the former colonized in the meshes of the culture, of the fashion, and of the images of the colonialist. (Thomas 74)

Equally critical, colonial rule savors opposition and fragmentation among its colonized subjects since it feeds on and replenishes itself by establishing systematic friction and conflict, or what Fanon refers to here as the “compartments,” contained within the “Manichean world” that is the colonial situation.

The political construction and maintenance of the antagonism between colonized subjects is discussed at length in Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* and Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Within these novels class is not exclusively determined by economics, since to be bourgeois is not simply a matter of earning a designated yearly income. George L. Jackson (*Soledad Brother*) and James Baldwin (*The Fire Next Time*) both work well to introduce what happens when middle-class ideals are adopted. Jackson’s concept of “neo-slavery,” a term he uses to understand North America’s socio-economic hierarchy, sheds light on Sylvia Wynter’s depiction of Blacks who exist as zombies – those who are controlled and trapped within a nightmarish world. Together, Jackson, Baldwin, and Wynter set the stage for an analysis of linguistic control that ensures the vilification of Black radical theory and practice. While Sam Greenlee’s *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*, together with Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and *Love*, illustrate the maintenance of racial hierarchies, a reading of Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose: A Novel* reveals how the colonizer / master’s language can be radically recast, rather than mimicked or embraced, in order to subvert and dismantle racial borders.

The strained relationship Fanon outlines is mapped out extensively in Naylor’s *Linden Hills* through her depiction of an exclusive Black suburban community of the

same name. Naylor analyzes how the Black bourgeoisie not only distrusts, but despises Black culture. Linden Hills inhabitants establish their identity by disclaiming a connection to urban Blacks by, among other things, initiating a campaign to align themselves with the Wayne County Citizens Alliance. The organization, described as “the Ku Klux Klan without the southern accent or sheets,” is a northern version of the Jim Crow South’s White Citizens Council (134). Linden Hills residents and Alliance members both want to increase zoning restrictions that will invariably, as one Linden Hills homeowner explains, help to “keep the dirty niggers out of our community” (135). Linden Hills, single-minded in its perspective and collective consciousness, views poverty as self-inflicted rather than an inevitability of national economic power structures that collapses race into class. For those living in Linden Hills, African Americans living in the neighboring Putney Wayne district, in addition to being ungrateful and simply incapable of attaining any level of “success,” squander the good intentions of Linden Hills. Residents of Putney Wayne, according to those in Linden Hills, abuse the good intentions of the latter by deliberately mismanaging social assistance programs such as food stamps and subsidized housing – Putney Wayne has no one to blame but itself.

Disconnection defines and maintains Linden Hills. The community cannot exist without this detachment, without a cultural divide that is depicted throughout the novel as historical and thus not only permanent, but undeniable. Those who seek entry into Linden Hills and those who believe their presence in the community readily exemplifies achievement have fenced themselves within a political consciousness that mimics that which they seek to escape. Linden Hills was constructed to serve as a safe haven for Blacks who sought escape from white American racism. Morrison also explores the topic

of post-Thirteenth Amendment escape in *Paradise*. Here a hostile white world is recalled by the residents of a Black town named Ruby, who are the descendants of “one hundred and fifty freedmen who were unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith” (13). Morrison’s narrator describes the “Out There” to recall how North American racism, defined as an all-encompassing terrorism, lurks everywhere since it’s embedded in virtually every aspect of American life.

Ten generations had known what lay Out There: space, once beckoning and free, became unmonitored and seething; became a void where random and unorganized evil erupted when and where it chose – behind any standing tree, behind the door of any house, humble or grand. Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled, where congregations carried arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of whiteness looked like a posse, being alone was being dead.

(16)

Therefore, in order to survive, to simply stay alive, it was strategically essential for the “freedmen” to create a secure space that could only be formed by deliberately and consciously removing oneself from a hostile and terrifying space. I am well aware of how the above passage from *Paradise*, with its ideas about escape and freedom, is defined as decidedly male-centered. It is a world where women and children, the objects, are thought to belong to the men. For the men, this sense of ownership seems necessary in order to maintain their own sense of humanity; without it, they fear that their “very person could be annulled” [italics mine]. Morrison’s Black towns, “Haven,” then “New Haven,” and finally “Ruby,” are all envisioned, constructed and maintained by Black

men and equally, Naylor's Linden Hills is created and supervised by four generations of Luther Nedeads. Each of the towns furthers mainstream ideas about the family, which means that although women and children are present, they are backdrops within societies managed by men. In the end however, for Linden Hills, its death and radical transformation is activated by a woman who is literally held captive by the community's founder.

I want to also establish a discussion about the connection between a maroonage and Haven, New Haven, Ruby, and Linden Hills. We don't know much about the former communities since they were clandestine outposts for escaped captives during chattel slavery. What we do know is that in many cases the maroonages – independent, self-governed societies established by escaped women and men – were situated in areas deemed inaccessible, were located near plantations, and were the bases of resistance and rebellion. Members of these communities often staged raids on nearby plantations to acquire needed provisions such as foods and arms or to disrupt the organization of the plantation and the institution of chattel slavery at large. Naylor, to a greater degree than Morrison, establishes an interesting comparison between a maroonage and Linden Hills, and in doing so offers a critique of the absence of real self-empowerment within the Black middle-class. Linden Hills, to begin, is considered by residents and founder to be a place where escape is possible from the horrors “Out There;” yet, what is cultivated within the borders of Linden Hills is a nation-state whose foundation is not based on an actual annulment of white supremacist oppression, but rather a re-inscription of such thinking. Linden Hills is neither an outpost of, nor a flight from America; instead, Linden Hills desperately seeks to establish a definitive cultural difference among Blacks

because Linden Hills believes what white supremacist thought has to say about Blacks. Unlike a maroonage, which could be poised to effectively disrupt chattel slavery through its activism of resistance and rebellions against the master class, a community such as Linden Hills embraces what it claims to have escaped. This “greedy little caste system,” to use Fanon’s term, is a “get-rich quick middle-class that shows itself incapable of great ideas or inventiveness. It remembers what it has read in European textbooks and imperceptibly it becomes not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature” (175). The Black bourgeoisie, as we can infer from Fanon, lacks the capacity to be revolutionary, although it envisions racial progress as revolutionary, as a radical transformation. However, Naylor cleverly disguises the community as a maroonage. Its location is secret and unknown to the reader, for the geographical location of Linden Hills is never named. The narrator tells us in the novel’s opening line: “There had been a dispute for years over the exact location of Linden Hills” (1). Consider also that Linden Hills, like a maroonage, is situated on land deemed inaccessible. Naylor situates the community on a sharp incline, where she placed it next to a cemetery and the land itself is comprised of tangled briars.

In essence Linden Hills is designed to be inhospitable for “certain” people. It continuously signals a concept of exclusion that dictates an “Us v. Them” mentality. For example, a marble fence separates Linden Hills from Putney Wayne and the mission board of the church of the former community for years has refused to sponsor a Christmas party for Putney Wayne children because “all allocations for *foreign* communities [are] already tied up building mission homes in South Africa” [emphasis mine] (163). A neighboring Black community is designated as “foreign,” thereby re-

asserting a distinct differentiation between themselves and Blacks of Putney Wayne along the lines of white nationalism. Linden Hills, a community comprised of “imitation Swiss chalets, British Tudors, and Georgian townhouses,” is unable to locate any value in Black culture; rather, the community’s barometer for affluence and prestige, as we will see later, is set by Eurocentric/white cultural standards (10). The idea that structures racial superiority espoused by the KKK – reworked as the White Citizen’s Council, transported *up south* as the Wayne County Citizen’s Alliance, and finally embraced by Linden Hills – is the establishment of a definitive division between the good, educated, responsible *Negroes or African Americans* who are better than the decidedly threatening, criminal, ungrateful, lazy Blacks, or *niggers*, who, if not controlled, will destroy everything. As result, Linden Hills residents have two immediate goals that set them in deliberate opposition to Putney Wayne. Linden Hills homeowners want and steadfastly believe they must work collectively with the Alliance in order to maintain the community’s exclusivity. Their plot to isolate and contain their community against the assumed destructive tide emerging from the central city is strategically designed to compel White Alliance members to acknowledge that Linden Hills cannot possibly be placed in company with *those* people from Putney Wayne.

Naylor is able to examine the distance between the suburban Linden Hills and the central city community of Putney Wayne through her protagonist, Willie K. Mason. Willie lives in Putney Wayne and his best friend, Lester Tilson, owns a house in Linden Hills that he inherited from his grandmother. Willie’s role as the novel’s catalyst recalls Newton’s formulation of the “brothers on the block” – the great untapped political energy and thus vanguard of political activism. Through Willie we can see Fanon’s and BPP

theory at work. Willie lives on the outskirts of Linden Hills and he is our guide through both societies. In addition to Willie's commentary about his life in Putney Wayne, his friendship with Lester allows us to hear conversations taking place within Linden Hills. Willie's critique of these exchanges reveals the racial hatred and alienation espoused by Linden Hills.

Lester has inherited from his grandmother, Mamie Tilson, the most modest home within the community. In turn, Lester's relationship with his grandmother formulates his attitude about the community and his place within it. Lester's house is located on First Crescent Drive, which is the last street of Linden Hills before entering Putney Wayne, and it is Grandma Tilson who cautioned Lester not to ever sell "the mirror in your soul" (59). But, unfortunately, Lester exists on the border of two worlds where he sustains an identity that has proven difficult for him. While Grandma Tilson meant to protect her first grandchild from losing himself in materialism, her investment in Linden Hills did little to deter her successive generations from escaping the bourgeois nightmare. Grandma Tilson may have detested and voiced her contempt for Luther Nedeed, but she was one of the first families to sign a "thousand-year-and-one day lease," a contract that all but guaranteed her family's connection to Linden Hills for an eternity. Although Lester continually complains of Linden Hills to Willie, we soon learn his complaints are unfortunately only self-serving because he suffers from a keen sense of displacement. The Tilson clan now consists of Lester, his mother, Mrs. Tilson, and his older sister, Roxanne.

Lester, much to mother's disappointment, vows never to be like his father, who, he says, essentially gave his life to maintain a status quo. As result Lester does not help

to maintain his mother, sister or the house. All that is required of Lester is his presence. His mother and sister cannot remain in the house without him because he is a Linden Hills heir. More so, Lester need not do anything because he has already been defined and determined. Lester's life was organized for him even before he was born. For example, we learn that his full name is Lesterfield Walcott Montgomery Tilson – a name given to him by his mother: "I gave you a name that I thought would fit the heights I hoped you would climb. It was a great name for what I dreamed would be a great man" (50). The name, intended to inspire what she believed to be a sense of prestige, is also intended to stand in direct opposition to names "uneducated" or "Black Southerners" give their children that Mrs. Tilson says sound too frivolous and not well thought out. For Mrs. Tilson, Willie, whose mother gave him the letter "K" as his middle name, becomes representative of the poor Black practice of naming. Yet Lester is really unsure about his birth name for as he sarcastically asks his mother: "Or is it Lester *Field*walcott Montgomery Tilson, Mom? They had to type those letters so close together on my birth certificate that it's hard to make them out now" (50). Lester's name as well as the misplaced positioning of his name on the birth certificate, an "official" document, is designed to squeeze him within a given and prepared space – a space that he says is "hard" to understand. While his mother uses his name to expressly call attention to the family's cultural ideals, which work to separate him and by extension the Tilson family from those whom his mother deems synonymously uneducated and Black, the misspelling on his birth certificate, again, an "official" document, symbolically misspeaks his name and prompts for Lester a sense of self-alienation. The misspelling operates as a form of self-alienation literally at the moment of his inscription within

language/culture that he comes to represent to himself explicitly in the terms of someone who accepts standard English as an intellectual and moral standard – not only a linguistically regulative/normative standard, but an ethical standard, as though one arrangement of letters might not only police other arrangements, but pass judgment on them as well. For Lester, his name represents the failed attempt of his family to interpellate him as white. Even his skin-tone, described as “milky-yellow,” like his birth name and place of residence, conspires to exclude Lester from rightfully claiming what he believes is a true Black identity. Lester’s identity crisis is further illustrated. His bedroom is comfortably outfitted with a king-size bed and a large window, situated at the house’s front that provides a panoramic view of Linden Hills. As a matter of fact, the front of each Linden Hills home faces away from Putney Wayne. With the exception of Nedeed’s house, which faces up the hill, all the other houses not only look downward, but more critically, their backsides face Putney Wayne. But it’s Lester’s possessions that reveal his struggle with political consciousness, since he has decked his room with what readers are expected to perceive as conflicting cultural markers. The focal point of Lester’s room is a four-foot poster of Malcolm X taped over his dresser. We know that posters are flat, one dimensional, manufactured objects designed for mass consumption. The Malcolm poster operates here as mere dressing: a decoration, a commodity representation that fails to capture the multiple dimensions and complexity of Malcolm’s life and lived experience. We learn early on that as a child Lester “wanted to grow up and be like Malcolm X, his favorite person in all of history” (26). Whereas Malcolm is admired for his keen ability to accommodate new information within his revolutionary struggles, we are given clues to recognize how Lester has remained obstinately myopic

and transfixed when it comes to engaging Malcolm. In addition to the Malcolm poster, the dresser is littered with old newspapers and a *half*-set of the Arno Press Black History book series. His entertainment center boasts a color T.V., stereo, tape deck, and a collection of cassettes featuring Malcolm X's speeches. When Willie comes to visit Lester, we begin to understand the irony of Lester's political convictions. Lester urges Willie to listen to Malcolm's speech, "Message to the Grassroots," so Willie can hear Malcolm condemn "those Toms who sold out the March on Washington" (56). Lester resents his sister borrowing his Malcolm X tapes because he's uncomfortable with the possibility that they may have something in common since it's no secret that Roxanne is Linden Hills incarnate. Roxanne, who holds a bachelors degree from Wellesley, and who for years has religiously applied "bleach creams" and hair "relaxers," claims Eleanor Roosevelt and Diana Ross as her heroines. She considers herself to be politically conscious and she has paid her dues to the Civil Rights Movement by wearing an Afro for six months and by taking Black history courses at Wellesley. Lester became completely disgusted with Roxanne when she refused to give money for the Liberation Front in Zimbabwe because "she reached the conclusion that the people of Zimbabwe weren't ready for liberation" (57). This last revelation about Roxanne is akin to the same "logic" the first Nedeed applied to the Civil War when he financed guns for the Confederacy believing that the enslaved were not ready for liberation.

As a whole the Tilsons introduce us to the hostility that frames bourgeois ideals and formulates Linden Hills as they also typify Fanon's formula concerning the antagonism between the native town dwellers and those from country districts. We cannot ignore the sense of entitlement and benevolence each Tilson member exemplifies.

Mrs. Tilson's antagonism toward Blacks who live in Putney Wayne is indicative of how she relates to all Blacks to whom she feels superior. I find it interesting that Mrs. Tilson and her daughter classically adhere to the belief that racial progress must also include a regulation and denial of the body since the body, for the Tilson women, is defined as not only vulgar, but more so a "thing," which they easily equate with the poor. Its very presence acts as a marker of some of social/cultural deviance. Roxanne finds it obscene to bring attention to her body and her mother scans Willie's body as if his physical being will reveal all his cultural malfunctions and pathology. Mrs. Tilson insists on calling Willie "William" and then speculates out loud: "Willie is a derivative of William. Lester. Surely his birth certificate doesn't have Willie on, and I like calling people by their proper names" (49). When Willie informs her that his birth certificate does indeed include the name "Willie K. Mason," she then asks what the "K" stands for. In response to his answer that the initial alone is his middle name, Mrs. Tilson "darted her eyes over his body" (49). She regrets that her son is friends with Willie, who she considers "that scum," because she harbors resentment for Willie, a Putney Wayne dweller who had the audacity to cross the border and subsequently invade her home and corrupt her son who otherwise would have attained the great heights she imagined for him. Roxanne and her mother set themselves apart from Putney Wayne, and their disconnection illustrates the extent to which they both view themselves as members of an exclusive class. They are the minority vanguard whose "achievements" will help elevate the entire race – an ideology steadfastly adherent to W.E.B. DuBois's early concept of the "Talented Tenth."

Grandma Tilson sold herself and by extension her family to Linden Hills, and thus the Nedeeds, for a parcel of land. Four generations of Luther Nedeeds have been in

control of Linden Hills and each Nedeed maintains and adds to the family's wealth as the community's first and only Black undertaker and funeral home director. Since the second Nedeed, who founded the Tupelo Realty Corporation, the Nedeeds also decide who receives a Linden Hills mortgage. And for the Nedeeds, being bourgeois is not exclusively tied to economics:

Entrance obviously didn't depend upon your profession, because there was a high school janitor living right next door to a municipal judge on Third Crescent Drive. And even your income wasn't a problem, because didn't the realty corporation subsidize that family of Jamaicans on Tupelo Drive who were practically starving to put two of their kids through Harvard? (15)

What does qualify a family to earn a mortgage is a deep abiding "desire *to rest* in the soft shadow of those heart-shaped trees" [italics mine] (15). Because only in Linden Hills could a Black person "forget that the world spelled Black with a capital nothing" (16). Supposedly, Linden Hills is a cultural oasis wherein a Black family can elect to remove itself from the racism and oppression of a white and hostile outer world. Yet, the Linden Hills families esteem whiteness, and in doing so they vilify themselves within their supposed retreat from whiteness. Actually it's Lester's explanation to Willie about the "fences" surrounding universities that encapsulates the Linden Hills ideology:

"Fences. White, fences. Even at the university: big, stone fences – why? The gates are open, so it's not to keep anybody out or in. Why fences?" He looked at his friend's blank face. "To get you used to the idea that what they have in there is different, special. Something to be separated from the rest of the world. They get you thinking fences, man, don't you see it? Then when they fence you in

from six years old till you're twenty-six, they can let you out because you're ready to believe that what they've given you up here, their version of life, is special. And you fence your own self in after that, protecting it from everybody else *out there*." (45)

They have no desire to change the world; rather, they come to Linden Hills to rest where a collective acquiescence resides and does not offer any type of confrontation with the world from which they supposedly escaped. Nedeed men, undertakers all, profit from sorrow and misery as they control both life and death or as The Right Reverend Michael T. Hollis says to Willie, Nedeed "gave them a box to live in and a box to die in" (165). The community itself is situated *below* and beneath Putney Wayne. Also, the community is located on a hill and "the land didn't slope down on a smooth incline --- it was steep and jagged ... The hill seemed to slope for about three hundred feet and then fall into an abyss" (47). Moreover, the houses are situated on seven circular avenues that descend in order. Ironically, the more expensive homes, which are deemed the most prestigious, are located at the hill's base. Thus, Black upward mobility is depicted here as a downward spiral into the abyss as one travels through Dante's seven circles of Hell. The Needed men have lived at the bottom of Linden Hills where each one, named Luther (an echo of "Lucifer"?) has been able to survey the land and those whom they have selected to live within the community. Add also to this Christian reconfiguration of Hell the fact that the first Nedeed created the community in seven days. When Nedeed learns of the city's plans to seize his land, he visits each family in Linden Hills and offers them a "thousand-year-and-a-day lease – provided only that they pass their property onto their children" (7). Each of these factors conspires to reveal the founder's duplicity and corruption.

Linden Hills, while presented as a vanguard of racial progress and material affluence, instead emerges as the site where Blacks are doomed and eternally trapped and sealed within, much like the coffins provided by the Nedeeds, a hellish world.

Each generation of Nedeed men spews racial uplift rhetoric as they feed off of the socio-economic predicament of Blacks. The first Nedeed, as rumor had it, or quiet as it's kept, used the sale of his family to finance his migration North where he could realize his entrepreneurial dreams. Nedeed sold his wife and six children to a salon owner, and used the money from the sale to purchase the land that would become Linden Hills. Several years later when Nedeed wanted to establish a home once his funeral service proved profitable, he returned to the South where he purchased a Black woman, married her, brought her back to Linden Hills, and then refused to grant her freedom. The second generation Nedeed earned the title "the rebel loving nigger" (6). This Nedeed, the first to attend college, became the wealthiest man in all of Wayne County due in part not only to the family business, but also from Southern investments. The second Nedeed financed gunrunners to the Confederacy and in "putting on airs with his blood money," added a third level to his house (6). Finally, we cannot ignore the point that Linden Hills, as the narrator tells us, was designed by the second generation Nedeed to serve as a "beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of America" (9). He may have envisioned Linden Hills to be confrontational, to defy America's belief in Black inferiority, yet, Nedeed profits from Blacks who he said "were always out of step" and forever "crying about slavery" (8). Within his vilification of Blacks, Nedeed pays homage to whiteness and exalts its standards as he imagines the creation of homes within Linden Hills and who might earn the privilege to live within them. As Nedeed dreams of Linden Hills's future,

he says to himself that the community's success would rely on its ability to "stick an 'er' on it" while at the same time he promises Linden Hills will "cultivate no madmen like Nat Turner or Marcus Garvey – that would only get them all crushed back into the dust" (11).

Yet, Naylor presents the community as a dying society already surrounded by as well as defined by death. The community's financial base derives from the Nedeeds' work as funeral directors. Also there are no children in Linden Hills so, in a very conventional sense, family lines will die off. For example, the son of Luther and Willa Nedeed, an only child, was murdered by his father because he believed the child was not his. We learn about the childhood of another Linden Hills resident, Laurel Dumont. Laurel did not grow up in Linden Hills; however, when she married and her husband moved them into the community within a house that been in his family for sixty years. Laurel begins to isolate herself from family and friends and she commits suicide. By the time we enter the story it is made clear that children do not live there and independent women cannot remain. A healthy family structure within the confines of Linden Hills is determined by and for men and so Linden Hills women meet their demise by losing themselves under male dominion. The first Mrs. Nedeed, formerly Luwanna Packerville, was an enslaved woman purchased by the first Nedeed who refused to free her. The subsequent Mrs. Nedeeds: Evelyn Creton, Priscilla McGuire, and finally Willa Prescott, are all driven insane as each becomes the consummate "Mrs. Luther Nedeed." Their disappearance is so complete that the wedding ring, handed down to each woman, is imagined as a small shackle. The ring's metal eerily matches the women's skin tone, as does the bridal veil, which is also a Nedeed legacy.

Naylor's *Linden Hills*, in company with other African American novels which draw our much-needed attention to Black middle-class structures, allows us to examine how this community acquires its definition by refusing to acknowledge a connection with the socio-economic plight of Blacks in America, while at the same time, the community, as Mason observes, "feasts on [the] human heads" of the poor (133). Also, while the Black middle-class proclaims as its driving force an enterprising, independent, non-confrontational, and righteous spirit, it desperately waits in eager anticipation of the moment(s) when white America will accept Blacks. Progress for the Black middle-class is depicted here as occurring only through the recognition of white America, or, more specifically, only to the degree that Blacks are deemed worthy to mimic white American standards. When Willie and Lester, for example, encounter Linden Hills resident and mimic man Maxwell Smyth, Willie says of the encounter: "[Maxwell's] eyes seemed to stop at the green tile on the floor in front of [my] feet. Why, it was the same feeling that you get talking to some white people... [I] suddenly felt very invisible" (113). Maxwell does not see him because Maxwell dismisses *Black*. Maxwell, a Dartmouth graduate and the first Black to serve as assistant to the executive director at General Motors, has lived a calculated life. He disavows an identity as a Black man and has replaced it with the persona of a colonizer. Maxwell felt it necessary to make his body and by extension his "blackness disappear" (102). His entire existence is based on a disavowal of his body because he "had discovered long ago that he doubled the odds of finishing first if he didn't carry the weight of that milligram of pigment in his skin" (102). Like Mrs. Tilson, who believes she can simply look at Willie in order to see a cultural abnormality inscribed on his body, and her daughter, who religiously applies facial bleach to lighten

her “too dark” complexion, and relaxers to straighten her “bad” hair, Maxwell has attempted to erase his body, which he believes is a hindrance. Rather than challenging or out-right rejecting the notion of racial inferiority, he accepts the stereotype, and so he creates a body designed specifically to contradict the stereotype. For example, to counter the racist notion that Blacks are inherently lazy, while in college he survived on only three hours of sleep each night. This regimen then provides him with more hours during the day, which he uses to further serve interests that are now aligned with those of the academic institution. In addition to maintaining a 4.0 grade point average he served as student government president and editor of the campus newspaper. Maxwell eventually speaks to Willie but only to make his point about the existence of Black progress and for Maxwell, again, progress means being accepted by whites on their terms. Maxwell shows Willie an-eight page *Penthouse* spread of a Black woman, dressed in high-heel leopard print boots whose grasp on a chain controls a white man dressed in a safari outfit. Maxwell closes the magazine with a flourish as he states: “And I don’t have to spell it out, this picture is worth a thousand words. Today the *Penthouse*, my friends, and tomorrow the world” (115-16). As Maxwell explains to Willie how an image of a Black woman emblazoned within the pages of *Penthouse* heralds the advent of racial advancement, Willie’s critique of Maxwell’s gaze is a formulation of what Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* describes as that terrible moment when the colonized comes into direct contact with the colonizer: “And *already* I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed” (116).

We can locate a community of Maxwells in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstone*, through which she critiques the manner in which the “American Dream”

determines how Barbadian immigrants define Black migrants. Maxwell refuses to recognize the systematic racism that pushes him to work much harder than white students whose sense of achievement is considered a foregone conclusion. Maxwell, while he may understand on a very minimal level how he's held back because he's Black, makes the huge mistake of altering his life in order to oppose the stereotypes he embraces. The Barbadian immigrants accept America's exalted vision of itself as well as its conceptions about Blacks life, but in this case, it is the migrants from the South who must be kept at a distance and ostracized. Set in Brooklyn during the period between the world wars, Barbadian immigrants see themselves as tireless and industrious; Blacks who are decidedly worthy of equal opportunity and success. Because they work and save paychecks from several low-paying subservient jobs (they clean the houses of whites and work as nannies and factory workers) in order make a down-payment on a brownstone, they exalt themselves in comparison to Black migrants who mostly rent and who the Barbadian immigrants say lack a work ethic. According to the novel's Seifert Yearwood, a Barbadian shop owner, the poverty of African American migrants is self-inflicted, since, as Yearwood points out, the migrants "work for the Jew all week and give the money right back to him on Sat'day night like it does burn their hands to keep it" (38). Once again, a clear division exists among Blacks in the Diaspora. Those who migrated from the Southern states are not allowed to join the Barbadian Association for fear that their very presence will undermine the Association members' efforts to attain political and social status within North America. As the Association member Cecil Osbourne explains to the membership at a weekly meeting: "We ain't white yet... But we got our eye on the big time" (221). Association members joyously applaud Osbourne's

statement, and in their acceptance of his words they share a belief of “whiteness” being acquired, attained, or as his words indicate – *achieved* – as a position of honor and prestige. Being Black, for the middle-class Black community in Marshall’s novel, as the Association’s position implies, means being nothing, a non-entity. Just as Association members deny rather than ignore the struggle of migrant Blacks and refuse their membership, Naylor’s Putney Wayne resident Willie K. Mason repeatedly talks about how during his encounters with middle-class Blacks he becomes faceless and invisible and yet, at the same time, he’s perceived as a dangerous threat.

Actually, there are a few characters in Linden Hills who, like the outsider Willie, are considered “invisible” and are erased by the community because they refuse to base a sense of self on a white standard. Nedeed, as explained, is only interested in allowing families into Linden Hills who desire to “rest” and “forget” that “the world spelled Black with a capital nothing” (16). A few, those who do not adhere to his doctrine of escapism, for a brief moment have slipped into Linden Hills. The Right Reverend Michael T. Hollis who, much to the disbelief and disgust of Linden Hills residents insists on sponsoring a Christmas party each year for Putney Wayne children, is ostracized. Hollis, a graduate of Harvard’s Divinity School, is now pastor of the Linden Hill’s Sinai Baptist Church where he soon learns that his congregation is just as “cold” as the theology lessons he received at Harvard. Both lack what he sought as a preacher: “What had drawn him to the pulpit in the first place was the power between people; together they created ‘God’ – so real and electrifying...” (177). And so, still desperately clinging to the belief that he can construct bridges to God by uniting people, he suggests upon arriving in Linden Hills that Sinai Baptist sponsor Christmas parties for Putney Wayne

children. But for thirty years Hollis has financed the celebration himself because the church board repeatedly claims not to have the needed funds since all allocations are used to build mission houses in South Africa. Also, Hollis continues to invite people from Putney Wayne to Sinai Baptist Sunday service. The invitations, like the Christmas parties, are intended to foster fellowship between the two communities. However, just as the Linden Hill congregation identifies Putney Wayne as foreign and assumes the role of colonizer within South Africa by constructing mission houses, the congregation reinstates Jim Crow law when it expects visitors from Putney Wayne to sit in the back pews or in the balcony during Sunday service. What solidifies the congregation's contempt for their pastor is his performance at the Lycentia Parker funeral. Rather than separating himself, the church, and in turn the community, from Putney Wayne, he instead, through the funeral sermon, chooses to bring the destructive element within their midst. Linden Hills is the community where the residents, we must recall, seek refuge from the stereotype of Blackness. Lycentia is a model Linden Hills citizen who, among other duties, serves on the Linden Hills Beautification Project, and is secretary of the Tupelo Realty Corporation. What is most revealing about Lycentia is her tireless work on gathering petitions to keep the city from building a housing project adjacent to Linden Hill's. Her husband, Chester, fondly recalls how his wife often said to him: "Chester, I'm going to do everything in my power to keep those dirty niggers out of our community" (135). The community honors Lycentia's legacy by organizing her funeral, but Hollis attempts to undermine their designs. Nedeed has instructed the choir to perform a Bach requiem, but Hollis, who got his calling from visiting storefront churches in South Philly while a University of Pennsylvania undergraduate, instead instructs the church organist to play

and sing "Amazing Grace." The hymn, of course, shocks the congregation, especially because everyone in the church is aware that the church's musical director has repeatedly admonished the organist for subjecting the congregation to her "inappropriate passion" (178). Hollis digs an even deeper hole for himself with his sermon. He preaches how Lycentia, like all those within Linden Hills, can never hope to be resurrected as was Lazarus who escaped eternal damnation. Hollis steps down from the pulpit and shakes Lycentia's coffin urging her to rise, and to take her place beside Jesus. When she does not, Hollis explains that Lycentia is not ready and as he glares at the congregation he asks: "Will the fancy houses, fancy clothes, and fancy cars make you ready? Will the big bucks and the big jobs make you ready? No. No" (182). The status quo is restored only when Nedeed reads the obituary and re-gains control. As a defeated Hollis steps aside, Nedeed reads an obituary that heralds the greatness of one of their own and Sinai Baptist is saved. The gospel according to Linden Hills, read by their own savior, Luther Nedeed, is what they yearn to hear and the very words they lean toward to repeatedly define their world is encapsulated at a funeral, a setting that once again affirms the community's impending demise. Linden Hills, believed to be a community constructed to alter the socio-economic predicament of Blacks in the U.S., is instead and inevitably a site where political collaboration is camouflaged, the status quo maintained and honored, and any semblance of what could be perceived as "Black" is deemed destructive and slated for destruction. Linden Hills is a community that can only envision liberation in terms of its own death, and insists that its undertaker serve this spiritual need by steadfastly constructing Linden Hills as a site not of resistance, but of sterility and self-annihilation.

To further highlight this ideological gap, this space of self-annulment that defines Black bourgeois political consciousness, I must include a re-telling of an incident experienced by the late Safiya Bukhari. Well before Bukhari was named vice-president of the PG-RNA (Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika), co-chair of both the Jericho Movement and the Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition, and co-founder of the prison advocacy group, MILK (Mothers Inside Loving Kids), she, like many other Panther and Black Liberation Army (BLA) members, recalls her awakening; the point at which she realized that to be Black, in North America, was to be categorically denied access to the “American Dream,” a dream built not only on your economic exploitation but your symbolic annihilation. Bukhari began to understand her status within the confines of the United States when she worked as a volunteer for the Panthers. Her sorority, in its attempt to help “at-risk” children through a community service project, volunteered with the BPP’s Free Breakfast for Children Program. When her sorors initially wanted to lend their financial support to a charity with foreign interests, the chapter president instead suggested they could start at home by assisting children in Harlem. Bukhari, formerly Bernice Jones, who, as a college student, supported the Vietnam War, and was busy writing essays for the campus paper in support of the war, believed it was ridiculous to apply the term “disadvantaged” to anyone living in the United States since people who did not “make it,” or realize the “American Dream,” were simply “too lazy to work” (Bukhari *Coming of Age* 125). Bukhari says she came to terms with the position of what it means to be Black in the U.S. – to be faceless, lost in the “rabble,” at the moment when, as a BPP volunteer, she challenged a police officer who was harassing a Panther member as he stood on a street corner selling the organization’s

newspaper. In recalling the incident that prompted her to finally join the BPP she states: “When I asked what was going on the police said to me that my asking questions was obstructing a governmental process and then I said that [the Panther] had a constitutional right to disseminate political literature” (14). Bukhari was told to shut up and when she did not she, along with her soror and the Panther, were arrested. Mumia Abu-Jamal shared a similar experience as a high school student in Philadelphia. After participating in a rally to protest the Presidential campaign of Southern segregationist George Wallace, he was attacked by a group of whites. When he appealed to a police officer who was watching the assault, the cop in turn beat Abu-Jamal. The ordeal, he recalls “kicked me right into the Black Panther Party” (Abu-Jamal, *All Things* 104). Both activists abandon a blind acquiescence to state authority through an experience that forces them to come to terms with what Abu Jamal defines as the “undeniable reality of America” (Abu-Jamal, *Death Blossoms* 140).

Most often, this dramatic transformation in political consciousness is figured as being startled or jolted out of a deep and sustained sleep. Sylvia Wynter (“Towards the Sociogenic Principle”) examines the colonized psyche, and how the mindset framing Black bourgeois ideology can be perceived as a form of “zombification” – the walking dead who remain trapped within a nightmarish world where their thoughts and actions are controlled by a linguistic force, where, as I have argued, their “progress” can only be envisioned in terms of self-annulment. Drawing on Fanon, Wynter engages the theorist’s discussion of language and the colonizer. Fanon determines that “one must recognize that ‘to speak’ does not mean only to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language. It means, above, all, to assume a culture, to support

the weight of a civilization” (*Black Skin* 17-18). The colonized subject, therefore, is not simply speaking the language of the oppressor, but assuming the “weight” of a system of meanings, which, in turn, determines how existence and being are conceptualized.

George L. Jackson, writing from the confines of prison where he served as Black Panther Party Field Marshal and rallied the cause for prison reform and radical transformation, opens his narrative *Soledad Brother* with “I am pressed for time – all the time” (3). In a later passage he writes of how he continually sent out an “SOS” [Save Our Souls], which his family ignored. Jackson knew he was a marked man and his days had been numbered because of his activism to reform prison conditions from a “unlivable hell to a livable hell” threatened the very nature of the prison system, which derives a great deal of its license from public sentiment concerning the treatment of inmates (36). Jonathan Jackson, Jr., Jackson’s nephew, in his “Foreword” to his uncle’s polemical text, explains the enormous task his uncle faced to transform the prison system’s treatment of inmates when he writes:

Deep down most people believe that all prisoners, regardless of their individual situation, really did do something wrong... The bottom line is that a majority of people simply will not believe that the state openly or covertly oppresses without criminal *cause*. (xix-xx)

Jackson’s letters, as well as his analysis within *Soledad Brother* and *Blood In My Eye*, read as if he were writing personally and in isolation to family, friends, and attorneys, but of course his letters are intended to speak directly to the Black community since he strategically parallels his incarceration with the Black experience in general. Jackson’s critique of his crisis should remind us immediately of Newton, who says prison is a

“microcosm of the outside world” (Newton 54). Black Liberation Army leader Assata Shakur similarly notes that the “only difference between [prison] and the streets is that one is maximum security and the other is minimum security. The police patrol our communities just like the guards patrol here. I don’t have the faintest idea how it feels to be free” (Shakur 60). Elaine Brown, the first and only woman to serve as BPP chairman, extends the connection between prison, captivity and slavery along historical lines when she refers to America’s Black communities as the “barracoon” (Brown 2000, 69). The term is certainly fitting when we consider that incarceration rates throughout the nation are highest among Blacks and continue to increase as private corporations make millions of dollars through the ever-increasing prison-industrial complex which relies on cheap convict labor to produce goods and services for the nation. New millennium Black communities are therefore, according to Brown, designated as holding pens, the barracoon, sites in which enslaved men, women, and children were confined before making the wretched journey across the Atlantic into chattel slavery.

Jackson repeatedly attempts to reach his father, Robert Lester Jackson, a man who came of age during the Great Depression, a period Jackson cites as a time wherein “it was no longer possible to maintain the black self by serving. Even that had dried up” (*Soledad* 243). Moreover, these deleterious conditions were compounded because, as Jackson asserts, his father’s generation did not recognize they “lived in a terrible quandary: none were able to grasp that a morbid economic deprivation, an outrageous and enormous abrasion, formed the basis of their character” (239). His father, Jackson mournfully cites, like the countless men and women who lived through the era (if it can be called *living*), transformed into “zombie[s],” were trapped in a perpetual state of shock

(240). They were, as are successive generations of Blacks, the “neo-slaves”; those whose economic predicament obliterates their freedom and who “shuffle away from any situation that becomes too difficult” (240). Baldwin opens *The Fire Next Time* with a similar revelation about his father when he shares with readers a letter he received from his uncle and namesake who wrote to the younger Baldwin on the anniversary of “The Emancipation Proclamation.” Baldwin’s uncle says of his brother: “Well he is dead, he never saw you, and he had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him” (4).

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, author Paule Marshall, much like Naylor in *Linden Hills*, links Black middle class ideology with death and “zombification” through her story of Avey Johnson. We first meet Avey in her cabin during her escape from the *Bianca Pride* as she gathers her possessions swiftly in the middle of the night “working feverishly, like someone pursued” (16). Avey has finally “awakened” after decades of living a nightmare existence that made her estranged from her husband and herself as well. She now escapes not from a plantation, but from a seventeen-day vacation aboard the *Bianca Pride* cruise ship. Avey’s leaving angers and bewilders her friends, Thomasina Moore and Clarice, both of whom, for Avey, suffer from the Black bourgeois affliction described by Frazier. Thomasina, now in her early seventies and described as once having “good hair” (18), and a skin tone the color of “old ivory,” (24) was “pampered by a husband who been taken with her color” (27). Thomasina is a former Cotton Club chorus girl and proud of it, and she is the one who for three years has planned the vacations for the three women. Thomasina selected the *Bianca Pride* – which, of course, means “white” pride in translation – and, as the narrator tells us, when

she, Avey, and Clarice first saw the cruise ship with all that “dazzling white steel,” they were “awestruck and reverent” before the vessel (15). In the end, it’s Thomasina, with her “colors all up,” who hollers at Avey, “That’s why if I’ve said it once I’ve said it a thousand times: it . . . don’t . . . pay . . . to . . . go . . . no . . . place . . . with . . . *niggers*! They’ll mess up ever’time” (27).

But Avey, not insulted by the former Cotton Girl’s rant, instead “[t]o her surprise found she was smiling... as if, instead of an insult, the woman had said something complimentary” (27). Thomasina, as Frazier writes of the Black middle class “rejects identification with the Negro masses” and idolizes whiteness as a fetish, whereas Clarice, in comparison, “has developed a deep-seated inferiority complex” because of her “Blackness” (*Black Bourgeoisie* 24). Avey is aware that Clarice will readily assume that her friend’s leaving is her fault and her fault alone. When Clarice hears Thomasina tell her that Avey is leaving the trip, Clarice responds with a reflex. Clarice has learned to move her body into the room’s nearest corner, and when she numbly shakes her head her “shoulders slope down and the burdened look adds years to her face” (23). Clarice, we learn, has endured a husband leaving her, her only child, a straight-A student, dropping out of a predominately white college, and the long and painful illness and death of her mother. Now hearing the news of her friend’s departure, as with all of life’s other disappointments, Clarice’s first and only reaction is to feel responsible: “Wasn’t she in some way to blame? Her dullness, her rampant flesh, her blackness...” (24).

Before leaving the cruise ship Avey wrestled with the dilemma of not knowing herself. She didn’t miss the idea of her family struggling to survive: she in no way romanticized her family’s poverty; her husband’s daily despair trying to find and

maintain work, or the cold apartment that always threatened the lives of her baby girls. Rather, what finally urged Avey to leave and try to snatch her life back was her dream about her great Aunt Cuny. What made the dream so startling in the first place was that the last time Avey dreamed was in the mid-sixties. She experienced her last dreams, or more specifically nightmares, when they were conjured as a “rerun” of the “nightmare images from the “evening news” (31). Years later, in her sleep she saw, yet again,

The electric cattle prods and lunging dogs. The high pressure hoses that were like a dam bursting. The lighted cigarettes being ground out on the arms of those sitting in at lunch counters. . . The bomb that exploded in the Sunday school quiet of Birmingham in '63 went off a second time in her sleep several nights later.

And searching frantically amid the debris of small limbs strewn around the church basement she came across those of [her daughters] Sis, Annawilda, and Marion.

And it was the Sunday in her dream when Sis was to have recited “The Creation” in the annual program. She had learned all twelve stanzas by heart: “...*And God said I’m lonely still...I’ll make me a man...!*” Avey Johnson had ceased dreaming after that. (31)

The horror and crisis of life in North America plagued her sleep, until the nightmares abruptly stopped. Years later Aunt Cuny appears and prompts Avey to remember how, as a child, her aunt took her to the shore and shared the re-telling of the “The Landing” of the Ibos. The Ibos: women, children and men, Aunt Cuny tells Avey, were enslaved Africans brought to the shores of the United States. The captors had shackled the Africans with leg irons and when the Ibos came ashore they all stopped and each took a long hard look around. What they saw, Aunt Cuny said, was all that was to

come: “The slavery time, ‘mancipation and everything after that right on up to the hard times today. Those Ibos didn’t miss a thing. Even seen you and me standing here talking about ‘em” (38). The Ibos also looked at the captors “and when they got through studying ‘em, when they *knew* just from looking at ‘em how those folks was gonna do, do you know what the Ibos did? Do you. . . . ?” (38). They decided to return home and so they turned around and began to walk on water. When the Ibos reached the large ship that brought them from the Continent, which was now anchored in the deep water, they just kept “stepping” (39). Avey remembers asking her aunt how it was possible that the Africans didn’t drown, and the wish that she could have “reached up that day and snatched the question like a fly out of the air and swallowed it whole” (40). Aunt Cuny responded: “Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday school book your mamma always sends with you?” (40). Aunt Cuny is of course signifyin and Avey understands the lesson being imparted here. Signifyin, a “speech act,” operates on several levels within Black English. The speech act of signifyin, Geneva Smitherman writes, relies on a verbal “indirection” (26) “delivered with a definite purpose in mind” (229). Thus signifyin operates on at least two distinct levels. The act is most often employed, as in the case of Aunt Cuny, as a way to pronounce a “social commentary on the actions or statements of someone who is in need of a wake up call” (Smitherman 26). Avey’s question reveals that she has learned to unconsciously privilege Christian folk tales as truth and therefore exempt them from interrogation. As such, Avey questions why the Ibos did not die, which it would not have occurred to her to ask of Jesus’s walk on water. Her query also calls into question the integrity of her aunt, and by extension her foremothers, who passed the account of the Ibos from one

generation to the next. And, finally, Avey's question misses the entire point of the re-telling. Smitherman, like Wynter, turns to Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* to provide a connection between language and culture. Again, according to Fanon, to speak a language means to speak a culture, to support a particular "way of thinking." He continues with the assertion that "in every country of the world, there are climbers, the ones who forget who they are, and in contrast to them, the ones who remember where they came from" (qtd. in Smitherman 66). A system of language can work to distinguish the climbers from those who remember, and Avey's question signals how she has been taught, by her mother, to forget, or more specifically to forget in order to embrace a belief system that erases her culture. The point of the story of the Ibos was not to settle the empirical question of whether or not it is possible to walk on water; instead, what is essential in this re-telling is how the people understood the impending predicament and decided not to endure the horrors. The Africans were themselves self-determined and in control of their own fate and destiny.

Avey for a long period failed to remember her time with her aunt, and in the interim, she grew older, married, and built a life centered on acquiring material possessions. Her husband, Jerome, who she once fondly called "Jay," also became unknown to her during the family's struggle for economic security. Jay's passions began to dissolve. Where he once looked forward to coming home after working several jobs each day to listen to his music and dance and make love with Avey, he later began to admonish other Blacks for "cuttin up and having good time" as if he no longer recognized the necessity of a break from life's hardships (132). Speaking to Thomasina and her husband, Jerome, not Jay, once remarked: "If it was left up to me I'd close down

every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum! That's the only way these Negroes out here'll begin making any progress" (132). It was during these moments that Avey no longer recognized her husband, and when she looked at him, she carried with her the eerie feeling that she was bound to a stranger – an entity that had taken over her husband's body whose soul was dead and forever lost. Jay's long years training as an accountant afforded Jerome the means to move his family out of a small apartment in Brooklyn into a large suburban home in "*White Plains*" [italics added] and it was during this time that his "change" became most visible to Avey. She recalls how even though his voice was the same the things he said, and tone he used, changed dramatically, and she often wondered "who had slipped in when he wasn't looking and taken up residency behind his dark skin: someone who from the remarks he made viewed the world and his fellow man according to a harsh and joyless ethic" (131). In the end, for Avey, Jay had died long before Jerome, and when she looked into the face of Jerome as he lay in the casket, Avey's last thought was a fear of looking into the "sealed" face of the man who everyone thought was her husband. As they offered her condolences, they also "congratulated her on how well she had held up in the face of her loss" (133).

As he closes his critique of his father, Jackson poses an essential question – a question infused with an urgent hope – a question Jackson longs to find an answer to, but at the same time, he appears fearful of the answer. He asks, of his father: "How do you console a man who is so unapproachable?" (*Soledad* 241) Jackson, not willing to let his father's generation be lost forever, is able to wrestle from the crisis some consolation when he reflects, "I forgive them. I understand, and if they will stop their collaboration with the fascist enemy, stop it now, and support our revolution with just a nod, we'll

forget and forgive them for casting us naked into a deleterious world” (Jackson, *Soledad* 243). Jackson underscores, here, that the Black bourgeoisie is formulated not only in terms of economics, but, even more fundamentally, in terms of social ideals. Consider, for example, that the Barbadian immigrants of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* were working-class and poor, as were the first inhabitants of Linden Hills. Their economic status, however, does not preclude them from adopting middle-class sentiments. Again, how we speak reveals an ideology, a system of belief that defines our perception of society as it determines our position within society. To speak a particular language ultimately means to support the weight of a particular culture.

In order for this lost generation of Blacks to offer the nod Jackson seeks, this generation, must, on a critical level, begin to acknowledge how an enforced system of language has conspired to effectively camouflage the reality of their socio-political condition and how the structures of this language must, to ensure its continuation, forbid the activation of a new language, a new terminology, designed to help us re-define the socio-political reality of North America. Thus, we cannot miss the significance of Baldwin’s uncle, who says that Baldwin’s father was defeated because he really believed what white people *said* about him. Baldwin’s father was crushed under the weight of a system of language. This aspect of linguistic captivity is a central theme within Black radical theory and strategy. If language has the capacity to construct or (re)arrange a sense of being, language can also be reformulated and used as tool, a course of action, to (re)articulate a subject position. I am reminded here of how it has been pointed out that the possibility of freedom was made an impossibility because of a lack of definition. I speak here of Harriet Tubman, who reportedly said that she could have freed countless

others if only they realized they were enslaved. Similarly, Black Liberation soldier Assata Shakur points out that “to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave” (Shakur 262).

According to Black radical theory, even the bare formulation of the problem of self-determination, or self-definition, is beyond the Black middle-class. Many theorists have noted that this segment of the community privileges the ideals and values of the ruling class. Malcolm X’s critique of the 1963 March on Washington details how the event lost its urgency and explosiveness once the Black bourgeoisie seized control of it. Malcolm X, on the occasion of the formation of the Organization of Afro-American Unity, called for a re-wording of the predicament of Blacks in America. He asserted that Blacks should begin to fight for human, rather than civil, rights. Within this context and similar to Jackson, Malcolm criticized Civil Rights Movement adherents who “follow[ed] the rules of the game laid down by the big bosses in Washington, D.C., the citadel of imperialism” (X *Final Speeches* 42). In his autobiography, Malcolm re-classifies the 1963 “March on Washington,” as the “*Farce* on Washington” (284). The March he writes, began as a

“black powder keg” created out of a national bitterness [that] was militant, unorganized, and leaderless. Predominantly, it was young Negroes, defiant of whatever might be the consequences, sick and tired of the black man’s neck under the white man’s heel. (X 284-85)

The event, he continues, lost its sense of urgency. The government, fearful of the March, wanted “Negro leaders” to stop the event, and when the “leaders” explained they were powerless to stop the March, it was hijacked. Instead of a “powder keg” or an “angry

riptide” the event became a “gentle flood,” an “outing,” a “picnic” (X 286-7). The focus shifted, he continues, due in large part to the intervention of the Black bourgeoisie who initially rejected the event because they wanted to disconnect themselves from poor blacks – the angry revolutionists. Secondly, he explains, since the March in its inception was designed as an open confrontation, the event, according to the Black middle-class, would validate white America’s fear of Blacks and this validation would disrupt the possibility of integration and progress. Thus, under the complete supervision of Black leaders who worked under the direction of the government, the March’s spontaneity was completely stripped away. Malcolm reports:

The marchers had been instructed to bring no signs—signs were provided. They had been told to sing one song: “We Shall Overcome.” They had been told how to arrive, *when*, *where* to arrive, *where* to assemble, when to *start* marching, the route to march. (X 286)

Malcolm’s critique of the March, like his 1965 speech in Selma, tells us that a position of power and authority is maintained by the ruling class. This class constantly monitors and attempts to define Black political strategy and it is able to do so with the help of the Black middle-class. When Black activism emerges from the Black working-class poor it is conceptualized by the ruling class and the Black bourgeoisie as pathology: a diseased mental state poised to corrupt an otherwise healthy social order. Thus, Black rebellion within this system of language is deemed utterly senseless and essentially criminal. Therefore, it is not surprising that Naylor’s Luther Nedeed is fearful of his community of Black elites producing a Marcus Garvey or a Nat Turner. Such individuals in his estimation “would only get [Linden Hills Blacks] crushed back into the dust” (11).

The same mentality rears its head in Toni Morrison's *The Song of Solomon*, when Milkman admonishes his friend Guitar for joining the secret society, "Seven Days." The "Seven Days" is a fictional counter-terrorism group first established in the South, and then transported to the northern states. The "Seven Days" consists of seven Black men. Each man is assigned a day of the week and he must respond to the random murder of Blacks by whites. If a Black woman is killed by a white man on a Tuesday, the Seven Day member who is assigned to Tuesday must on the same day of the following week randomly kill a white woman. Guitar explains that the group "help[s] keep the numbers the same" (155). Milkman is immediately appalled by the Seven Days. Just as Nedeed, without question, defines a Turner or a Garvey as a "madman," Guitar instantly labels the Seven Days as deviant. Milkman urges Guitar to let the authorities handle the murders instead of the Seven Days.

Added to the list of examples of middle-class Black complicity is Joy, of Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat By the Door*. Joy, whose husband "is the only Negro doctor in the white hospital in Chicago," is angered by the "damn Freedom Fighters" who she says have prompted several Blacks, including her husband, to lose their integrated jobs (Greenlee 237). Although Joy is married she rekindles the love affair she had with Dan Freeman. She and Freeman dated when they were both undergraduates at Michigan State University. But Joy, without hesitation, in order to maintain her status as a "doctor's wife," turns Freeman over to the police as soon as she learns Freeman has re-organized the street gang of Black youth into a paramilitary group. Finally, I think it interesting how Morrison depicts Black revolutionary groups and/or individuals as either insane or envisioned through the eyes of Black middle-class characters who are

positioned as insane. This configuration appears in her most recent novel, *Love* (2003).

To summarize, the character May who is the daughter-in-law of Bill Cosey, a wealthy Black hotel owner, projects her madness onto the social protests of the 1950s and 60s.

Through May, Morrison adds an interesting critique of the Black middle-class.

Morrison's narrator explains that in times past, May

had been merely another loud defender of the colored-owned business, the benefits of separate schools, hospitals with Negro wards and doctors, colored-owned banks, and the proud professions designed to service the race. Then she discovered that her convictions were no longer old-time racial uplift, but separatist, "nationalistic." Not sweet Booker T., but radical Malcolm X. (80)

May mourns the passing of Booker T. Washington's "sweet" era of racial uplift that calls for Blacks to prove their worth to white America, and she is troubled by the similarity of her beliefs to the emergent and potentially dangerous philosophy of Malcolm X. She designates Malcolm as abnormal, or more readily, a deviant distortion of racial progress. May's insanity is directly linked to a misreading of Malcolm X's philosophy. To drive the point further, May lives her life based on the ardent belief that someday, and very soon, hordes of poor Blacks will senselessly storm the hotel, burn it down, and kill all the "Uncle Toms" within. As the Black Power Movement gains momentum, May's insanity increases in equal measure. She begins to hide "money and silverware in sacks of Uncle Ben's rice," and in a pitiful and desperate attempt to safeguard her bourgeois life, which is represented as trivial and frivolous, she also squirrels away "useless packets of last New Year's cocktail napkins, swizzle sticks, paper hats, and a stack of menus" (Morrison 81-82). May's pointless hoarding of useless items uncannily mirrors the bourgeois

consumerist attempt to achieve liberation through consumption, manifesting itself finally in an insane belief that such hoarding of goods can protect her from danger and ward off the (imaginary) revolution.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon writes that the oppressor's status emerges out of the dispossessed body of the oppressed, and in the hopes of realizing its full potential, the oppressed must dismantle/kill the enslaving sociopolitical order since violence, he writes, is a "cleansing force" (94). For Fanon the language of violence must take on a new definition – one created and reconfigured by a new system of language that will bring into being "the veritable creation of new men" (Fanon 36). And since, as he continues, the ruling class comes into being and ensures its identity through "a great array of bayonets and cannons," (36) it "understands nothing but force" (84). Fanon thus identifies the dialectic according to which death generates life as he proclaims: "For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler" (93). Fanon's call to arms, this "onward march" if you will, brought about through the formation of a new political consciousness with deliberate effort, abandons a pacifist doctrine, which is also a stance reliant on acquiescence (132).

Fanon says the bourgeoisie, who reside in the "enemy's camp" perhaps more mentally than physically, have been reared to adopt the language and, by extension, the culture of the colonizer. When faced with the dilemma of confronting the limits of the regime, the Black bourgeoisie are beaten at the outset. Their persistent inability to recognize the social reality of what it means to be Black in the United States allows them to disconnect themselves from poor Blacks and to believe that the use of violence (by anyone other than the government) is impetuous and unlawful. This abhorrence of

violence is, in reality, a stupid belief that the government, no matter how oppressive, must be granted an absolute monopoly on violence, a belief so ideologically ingrained that the Black bourgeoisie is unable to even recognize government violence as violence. Violence in the hands of the United States government is somehow transcendent, a different sort of thing altogether, whether it involves the imprisonment and forced labor of Blacks at a rate that makes them the most highly incarcerated population in the world, or the slaughter of an entire village of Vietnamese in the name of freedom. Instead of settling for the language of oppression, which is characterized by this refusal to recognize official violence as violence, this rhetorical duplicity through which violence masquerades as a repudiation of violent means, or a belief in non-violence, Black radical theory seizes and re-signifies the language of violence. Black radical theory instead recognizes that, in reality, violence is not only materially, but symbolically, necessary to establish and maintain the racial status quo, yet this same violence, by its very nature, exceeds the racial order that it enables, and therein exists its revolutionary potential. A language that disavows this disruptive truth is exchanged for one that highlights it, that unceasingly forces a recognition of this dirty secret that is necessary for the continuation of an oppressive racial order.

Let's Worry the Line:

Ending the Service of Black Women in the Literary Imagination

My examination of literature by Black female writers proposes to understand how Black women writers, according to Cheryl A. Wall (*Worrying the Line* 2005), “worry the line.” As a popular expression “worrying the line” means to destabilize, or to restructure the boundaries of identity, culture, or tradition through the introduction or recognition of voices which have been too readily dismissed and classified as different, or as “other.” Through this process of recognition we effectively restructure a given discourse, which has been constituted through such exclusions, and in doing so we privilege a new way of speaking, looking, and thinking. While the phrase is most commonly used in relation to Black musical traditions, Wall turns to Stephen Henderson (*Understanding the New Black Poetry* 1972), who clarifies that worrying the line is “the device of altering the pitch of a note in a given passage... A verbal parallel exists in which a word or phrase is broken up to allow for affective or didactic comment” (6). Sherley Anne Williams (“The Blues Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry” 1978) defines “worrying the line” as changes in voice and pitch, the addition of exclamatory phrases, changes in word order, and the repetition within the line itself... As a technique worrying the line may be used for purposes of emphasis, clarification, or subversion (6). Wall reads acclaimed late twentieth-century writers Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, and Alice Walker, whom she situates “on the cusp of the new century” – a time wherein Black women’s intellectual genius concerned itself with the “recuperation and representation of the past four hundred years of black peoples’ lives in the United States and throughout the African diaspora” (5). These women writers persistently offer

sociopolitical critiques that would otherwise go unacknowledged by the mainstream in that they create a much needed, and for many of us, a long-awaited, “rereading” of cultural mores and their affinity with American literary traditions. Wall is interested in the ways Lorde, Marshall, Morrison, Naylor, and Walker engage “in the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (6). Walls’ approach is highly reminiscent of bell hooks’s “Oppositional Gaze” (1992) where she discusses the importance and necessity of Black female spectatorship and how the very act of looking and defining (speaking and affirming) or for that matter, refusing to look and categorically dismissing (speaking and denouncing) all create spaces for confrontation and transformation. Putting her theory into play, hooks revisits Sapphire, the Black female character of the *Amos n’ Andy* radio and later television series. Sapphire, a serviceable character, was there to soothe an audience steeped in white patriarchal ideals. She was used only as a foil to “soften the images of the black male characters that, in each episode, were depicted as “vulnerable, easy going, funny, and unthreatening to a white audience” (120). While Sapphire, hooks continues, served as the consummate “bitch – nag” for an American listening and viewing public, Black women embraced Sapphire on their own terms. Rather than allowing themselves to be manipulated into envisioning Sapphire as a woman to be despised and laughed at, they instead understood Sapphire’s frustrations and resented the manner in which she was mocked, and the extent to which depictions of Black women were used as a violent assault against their own personhood.

Within their literature Black women writers worry the line by adhering to an Oppositional Gaze, and in doing so they have taken on the enormous task not only of

displacing or disrupting the imaginary continuity of a tradition, but of simultaneously establishing a new continuity. As the women of whom hooks writes took Sapphire in as their own, Black women writers most often create cataclysmic breaks that seek to overturn not only degrading images attributed to Black women, but within this frame to unsettle their readers who may be unable to deconstruct images of Black women because they have been taught to be comforted by these images.

But degrading depictions of Black women are bound neither exclusively to television nor have they remained perpetually transfixed only within the era of chattel slavery, nor, for that matter, can they be ascribed as an affliction from which only white Americans suffer. They have also appeared with nagging persistence throughout the African American literary canon. Toni Morrison writes at length about America's literary traditions in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1990). She asserts that when we think about the beginning of America's literary history we need to consider that

nothing highlighted freedom – if did not create it – like slavery. Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free, but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. (38)

The quintessential American traditionally identified as white and male has been largely formulated and reinforced through a literature written by white males for a predominately white reading audience. And Morrison asserts that the quintessential American identity is based on ideals of "autonomy, authority, newness, difference and,

absolute power,” and that these collective ideals “became not only the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism” (44) that she defines earlier as “strongly urged, thoroughly serviceable, companionably ego reinforcing, and pervasive” (8). Morrison identifies an Africanist presence as endemic within the American literary tradition, stating that for a long time she has been interested in the way Black people ignite critical moments of “discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them” (7).

And it is here where I am able to establish a kinship between the theories set forth by Walls, Morrison, and hooks, and to extend their ideas by offering an analysis of the African American literary imagination. I want to understand in what ways Black women characters are configured by Black male writers when critical moments of discovery are ignited. What happens to and what is done to the Black woman when a quest for freedom is attempted by the Black man who seeks autonomy and individuality amidst a sociopolitical order that categorically denies Black personhood. Moreover, within this context I want to think about how, in turn, Black women standing at the crossroads of race and gender will signify on the language of freedom and liberation and its assumed kinship with ideas of masculinity and patriarchal authority which are central within the African American literary canon.

Returning to Wall and her contemplation of the African American literary tradition, she considers how scholars have set forth competing theories: “Where one perceives texts as responding to their precursors or as signifying on them, tradition constitutes a theoretical line in which texts produce and are produced by other texts” (11).

Robert Stepto (*From Behind the Veil* 1979) asserts that the African American literary tradition is bound “historically and linguistically” to a “pregeneric myth” where mediations about “the quest for freedom and literacy” are played out (xv-xvi). We can also allocate space here for Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In her reading of Gates’s *The Signifying Monkey* (1987), Wall argues that African American texts “revise, contest, and parody elements in preceding texts” (11). If we proceed from the premise that a tradition is an on-going conversation wherein texts speak to or against each other, and that the African American literary canon has devoted specific attention to ideals of liberation and freedom, in what register is this conversation spoken? When we think about the trope of liberation within the history of African American literature, which spectatorship has been privileged and at whose expense? Wall provides an answer when she outlines the extent to which Black women writers engage in a call-and-response to a Black literary tradition where a male perspective is made not only normative, but exalted “through classics which have ignored or dismissed as insignificant the experiences of Black women” (11).

In order to understand how Black female writers situate characters in order to look back with fresh eyes and see old texts from new critical directions, we can examine the canonical texts of Frederick Douglass’s chattel-slave narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and Richard Wright’s twentieth-century neoslave novel, *Native Son* (1940). In comparison to these works I include a reading of Sherley Anne Williams neoslave novel *Dessa Rose* (1987). I argue that within Douglass’s influential contemplations about literacy as “the pathway to freedom,” the symptomatic suppression of the role of his mother, Harriet Bailey, in instigating an interest in literacy distinguishes his evaluation of Black women throughout the text. Douglass’s ambivalent relationship

to Black women marks a crisis of patriarchy. It is a crisis that is felt through the erasure of Black women's agency and realized through Douglass's reiterative identification with white "masters" as they commit acts of violence on the bodies of black women. Wright, like Douglass, defines liberation as the domain of the individual esteemed as male and Wright's Bigger Thomas envisions liberation as a variation of slavery. While Bessie Mears cannot be self-determined because her subjugation defines the license and freedom of others, Bigger's attempt to achieve ownership of self, to attain mastery, repeats the terms of his own enslavement in his acts of violence against the one he envisions as "other"—the Black woman, Bessie. But, as I will show, Bigger's life experience is inextricably and undeniably linked to the "other" he attempts to master. Finally, I select *Dessa Rose* not simply because the novel features a Black female protagonist, but because Williams honors the necessity of Black female resistance, not only to white power, but to the tradition represented by the texts of Douglass and Wright. The protagonist, Dessa, refuses to merely serve as sublimated backdrop for the staging of male-centered performances of liberation, instead becoming a lethal warrior in the cause of self-definition.

Douglass and Wright

Douglass's mother is a ghostly presence throughout the text, with her appearances taking on a spectral quality both literally and figuratively. She first emerges in the narrative in distinctly otherworldly terms, as an absent presence that haunts, of all things, J. C. Prichard's anthropology text *The Natural History of Man*. Douglass's interest in this text focuses on a specific illustration that he describes indistinctly only as

a “figure” that has “features [that] so resemble those of my mother, that I often recur to it with something of the feeling which I suppose others experience when looking upon the pictures of dear departed ones” (52). That he should identify his mother with a characteristic illustration of an African in an ethnology text indicates not only that he has a merely generalized or idealized notion of his mother, which could be explained by the fact that he barely knew her as a child, but tells us something about his own psychic investment in her that goes far beyond any such empirical explanation. We learn from Frederic May Holland’s (*Frederick Douglass the Black Orator* 1895) biography of Douglass that the picture to which Douglass refers is the picture of a man, “King Rameses the Great.” The fact that Douglass identifies his mother with the picture of a man, and an African king, underscores the fact that her appearance in the text occurs in order for Douglass to cover an absence, that of a father to whom he can attribute his “love of letters” as a Black man. That is to say that Douglass, as a man of the Victorian era, understands tradition as a patriarchal inheritance passed from father to son (we should remember, in this context, his refusal to allow his first wife, Anna Murray, a Black woman, to learn to read). Because his father is, according to his narrative, white (and, also according to Douglass, quite possibly his “master”), and Douglass’s avowed purpose is to proclaim the intellectual capacity of Blacks in the face of a racist tradition that refused to acknowledge Black intelligence, Douglass is caught in a bind. In short, Douglass’s ideological coordinates regarding patriarchy and race are clearly at odds in his attempt to formulate his identity as a Black intellectual. This problem first enters the text with the introduction of his mother:

I am quite willing, and even happy, to attribute any love of letters I possess, and for which I have got – despite of prejudices – only too much credit, *not* to my admitted Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated *mother* – a woman, who belonged to a race whose mental endowments it is, at present, fashionable to hold in disparagement and contempt. (58)

In Douglass's opening clauses of this passage, we can read a distinct reluctance to concede that he inherited his literacy and intelligence from his "uncultivated" mother, despite his evident need to do so due to his "admitted" white paternity. Perhaps we should note not only his palpable discomfort in attributing his literary prowess to his Black mother, as opposed to his white father, but add the observation that the only two words he italicizes in the passage are "not" and "mother" – *not mother*. Combined with the fact that he wistfully identifies his mother with the image not only of a man, but an African king, we must conclude that Douglass's comments about his mother are defined by the symptomatic effects of the crisis of a properly racial patriarchy.

Such effects are echoed in especially violent form in passages in which Douglass narrates acts of violence inflicted upon black women by white men. While such passages, like the passage in which he introduces his mother, have a clear polemical purpose in the context of the abolition movement – the lurid imaging of instances of sexual depravity induced by the institution of slavery, intended to shock a Christian audience – Douglass's own psychic investment in such scenes exceeds and to some degree dismantles such a rhetorical explanation. In a scene with just such a professed purpose, Douglass describes the brutal abuse inflicted upon his aunt, Esther, an enslaved

woman. Douglass attempts to distance himself from the fiendishly excessive pleasure of “old master” (Captain Anthony), but through an examination of the formal qualities of this passage, we get a distinct sense of Douglass’s participation in this scene of desire that problematizes such an absolute distinction between the pleasure of old master and that of Douglass. From a hiding spot, Douglass secretly observes old master whipping a half-naked Esther. The voyeuristic Douglass’s detailed description of Esther’s body as it is being whipped is troubling, and throughout the scene Douglass focuses his narrative gaze on her naked “breast” and her “back and shoulders, naked to the waist,” the viewpoint that he attributes to and shares with the master. While Douglass assigns an obscene “delight” to old master during this sexual abuse, it would seem that it is not only old master who is delighted with the scene (87). We see a distinct slippage between the personas of Douglass and old master in Douglass’s identification with old master’s thoughts and gaze – Douglass locates himself “in” old master’s consciousness, both in describing the entire scene from old master’s vantage point, and in interpreting the scene exclusively through old master’s thoughts. For Douglass, as for old master, Esther becomes a mere body in this scene. Her pain is rendered exclusively through the view of Douglass/old master. There is no attempt to enter the viewpoint or thoughts of Esther. Her pain is rendered only through the materiality of her “shrieks and piteous cries,” and interpreted only from the vantage point of old master’s pleasure (87). Moreover, old master’s joy in this act of sexual torture bleeds into Douglass’s voyeuristic pleasure in narrating the events when Douglass describes the “tantalizing epithets” that old master hurls at Esther as he whips her (87). In this odd choice of words, given Douglass’s professed purpose of moral condemnation, we witness Douglass’s full participation in the

sadistic pleasure of master – not only assuming old master’s viewpoint, but seemingly fully identifying with the pleasure that defines it.

Douglass’s voyeuristic description of the lurid details of the scene not only disrupt the straightforward condemnation of the sexual violence he witnesses, but additionally reveal his own difficulties in producing a clear identification with either the black woman or the white man. On one level, he condemns this sexual violence in the most adamant terms and is troubled by his inability to intervene. On this level, he identifies himself consciously, morally, with the enslaved woman. On another level, however, he identifies with old master. He assumes old master’s gaze on Esther’s body, and relates the scene exclusively from this vantage point and through old master’s thoughts. As Esther is reduced to a brutalized body, her pain is interpreted through the lens of the pleasure it affords to old master, a pleasure which Douglass assumes as his own when his terminology blurs the boundary between himself and old master – are old master’s epithets “tantalizing” to himself or to Douglass? I assert that Douglass’s confusion in this scene, identifying on the level of form with old master, an identification that conflicts and even contradicts his identification with Esther on the level of content, is the same confusion of identification that we witness in the passage about his mother. His attribution of his “love of letters” to his mother is reluctant to say the least – why does he need to affirm his “willingness” to do so at the start of the passage? Why does he only acknowledge his white father with the grudging term “admitted”? Why does he identify his mother with an image of a man in the same passage? The strange use of italics – to emphasize the words “not mother” – a term that obviously undermines the conscious intent of the passage – seems to play the same role as the description of sexual abuse as

“tantalizing” in the passage about Esther. That is to say, these words strikingly emphasize the other formal resistances to Douglass’s professed message in each passage. Douglass’s crisis of patriarchy, first evident in the passage about his mother which is simultaneously about his lack of a proper father, reiterates itself in the passage about Esther, and in other passages which involve violence against Black women. A Black father, whom Douglass seems to require in order to lend a firm sense of continuity and propriety to his intellectual inheritance, makes itself felt in his uneasy and disavowed identification with white male violence against Black women. Douglass is able simultaneously to experience horror and pleasure in such situations because he is confronting the trauma of a lack at his own subjective origins.

One of the most telling repetitions of this originary trauma occurs in Douglass’s fight with Covey, “the negro breaker” (205). Despite Douglass’s claim that he achieves individuality and freedom through literacy, it is through an act of violence that Douglass claims his “manhood.” In an episode that Douglass interprets as a sort of primal scene, the crucial point of his empowerment and his ascendancy into manhood, the adolescent Douglass must claim his birthright by beating Covey in a fight. In a telling turn-of-phrase, Douglass claims to have “*mastered*” Covey (248). Douglass elaborates that “I was a changed being after that fight. I was *nothing* before: I WAS A MAN NOW” (246). Douglass confronts his lack of a proper father – or paternal function – from whom to claim his manhood in this fight. If his mother gave him a love of literacy, this gift amounted to “nothing” in Douglass’s words, until Douglass becomes what he describes alternately as a “man” and “master” through his defeat of the brutal white father figure, Covey. Douglass figures becoming a “man” as assuming the explicitly white male

function of “master.” Significantly, becoming man/master can only take place in the noted absence of Caroline, a woman enslaved on Covey’s farm, who, according to Douglass, “could have *mastered* me very easily” had she chosen to intervene on the side of Covey [italics mine] (245). Douglass’s *mastery*, and his subsequent assumption of manhood, is dependent upon the absence of the Black woman, who could “easily” have overcome and *mastered* Douglass, thereby preventing his own *mastery*. His *mastery*, in short, is once again cast into question with the re-entry on the scene of struggle of the Black woman.

The attempted erasure of the Black woman is also centrally evidenced via the pairing of Bigger Thomas and Bessie Mears within Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. While Douglass’s ambivalent and perhaps unconscious relationship to Black women invariably reveals a crisis of patriarchy made apparent throughout his quest for freedom, Wright’s protagonist instead proceeds with deliberate malice and forethought. The incessant brutality inflicted on Bessie is glaringly deemed throughout the text as justifiable, if not necessary, for Bigger to escape a racist North American reality and for the State to maintain its repressive control of a Black population. To begin, Bigger and Max’s conversation about Bessie’s death is exceedingly short, and, within his comments, Bigger explains and Max readily accepts why Bigger has murdered Bessie. Bigger says simply: “I knew I had to kill her and I did it. I had to get away” (408). But Bigger’s justification and the attorney’s reaction to Bigger’s justification for her murder is not considered alarming. Consider the narrative perspective. After Bigger has raped and murdered Bessie, the narrator explains that Bigger “walked to the window and stopped, waiting to hear someone challenge *his right* to do what he was doing. *Nothing happened*” [italics

mine] (275). Overall, Bessie's rendering displays a collective utilization and sharing of the Black woman's body in that Bessie not only haunts and feeds the imaginations of others but, also, this repeated psychic investment is used by and against Bigger in his quest for sociopolitical autonomy. Bessie repeatedly emerges as a presence used to either persuade Bigger of his authority or to instill a sense of privilege in others. This management and control of Bessie is made more apparent through the fact of her proscribed alienation. Although multiple characters interact with each other, and through conversations voice their thoughts and insights, Bessie is not afforded this opportunity. An alienated Bessie functions within the narrative only as a site at which others can articulate their freedom: she exists only within definitions determined by others, and while she is restricted to speaking only with Bigger, he always dictates the conditions of their meetings. Equally, while Bigger murders Bessie to ensure his flight, "to secure his own individual fate and goal, his own peculiar and untranslatable destiny," her murder simultaneously serves the needs of the State (528). Mainstream media, law enforcement, and the judicial system, all working in collusion, seize Bessie's remains and place her body on public display to convict Bigger of what a reactionary, hate-fueled America deems a "greater crime" (528). By entering Bessie as "mere evidence" in the case to convict Bigger of Mary's murder, the State attempts to reinforce the belief that Blacks are both criminal and savage. On one level, Bigger is deemed a threat who must be executed in order to ensure public safety. More importantly, however, Bigger is a necessary sacrifice to the institutional economy of racial oppression – he must be destroyed by the state not because he is really a threat to the sanctity of white womanhood, but in order to reinforce the stereotype of Black savagery that is necessary for an economic order based

on racial oppression. We see Bigger's sacrifice of Bessie re-doubled at the level of the criminal justice system. Just as Bigger can only come into a sense of his own existential destiny through the destruction of Bessie, the state must destroy Bigger in order that the economic "freedom" of men like Dalton can be assured. But whites extend no compassion whatsoever to Bessie. Bessie merely operates as evidence in a murder case that validates a white psychic need to maintain a psychotic fear of Blacks.

Within this male-centered text addressing themes of liberation and freedom, readers are expected to not only forget about Bessie, but to accept what she endures as commonplace as if she is created only to be written out of existence and obliterated from the text without consequence. Consider for example, the unavoidable focus on her body, the manner in which her corporeal being is envisioned by others. Bigger, together with other characters, think of Bessie only when their own sexual dreams of "future" possibilities arise. Recall the clipped but nonetheless revealing conversation between Mary Dalton and Bigger. Bigger, Mary and Jan are in the closed quarters of the car after having left Ernie's Kitchen Shack where Bigger saw and grudgingly spoke to his girlfriend, Bessie. Bigger is now alone in the car with Mary and Jan, and the drunken Mary who is being kissed and held by Jan and who knows that Bigger is watching them through the rearview mirror asks Bigger about his girlfriend:

"You got a girl, Bigger?" Mary asked.

"I got a girl," he said.

"I'd like to meet her sometime."

He did not answer. Mary's eyes stared dreamily before her, as if she were planning future things to do. Then she turned to Jan and laid her hand gingerly on his arm. (86)

Bigger denies Bessie. He may answer that he has a girlfriend, but does he not tell Mary her name or for that matter explain to Mary that she inadvertently met Bessie who was also at the restaurant and that Bessie came over to their table in order to speak to him. Bigger has effectively erased Bessie, but her presence, the *idea* of Bessie is made possible through a verbal silence and physical absence. Bigger does not speak her name, and Bessie is not physically present, but Bessie dramatically emerges once she is conjured within the drunken sexual desires of Mary Dalton, whose thoughts of a Black woman prompt her to imagine "future things to do" as she makes out with her white boyfriend.

It is important here to return to Douglass. As Douglass witnesses his aunt Esther being tortured, he identifies not with her, but with her tormenter, the white male master. Before Douglass begins to recount the sexual torture carried out against Esther at the hands of Anthony, Douglass goes into detail about his aunt Esther's physical beauty by comparing Esther to the white daughters of another "master." This comparison is significant in terms of our present argument because Douglass seems only to think about the white women sexually through the prism of Esther, and, more specifically, on the occasion of her sexual abuse. Douglass evaluates the white women erotically only when two things occur to the black woman: first she is reduced to a physical object, as discussed above; next, having been made into a purely material presence, she is tortured, and Douglass voyeuristically enjoys her torture through an identification with her

torturer. Only when she is reduced to body, and this reduction to body is emphasized through her agony, can she be sublimated to serve as a catalyst for Douglass's erotic evaluation of white women. We can say that the same scenario takes place in the scene with Mary, Jan, and Bigger. It is the erasure and sublimation of Bessie that allows them to engage in their sexual imaginings within the closed quarters of the automobile.

In both of these canonical texts, *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Native Son*, the Black woman, unlike the white male or for that matter the Black male or the white woman, is the one who ultimately lacks sexual authority because she is denied this authority, and it is this denial that replenishes the authority of others. Esther's pain, her lack of control, her silencing and her forced submission "delights" the white master, and the voyeuristic Douglass aligns himself with this master. As Bigger watches Mary and Jan, and Mary becomes aware of Bigger's witnessing, he is drawn into this sexual dynamic in which the Black woman is made silent and is controlled because she exists only in the imaginations of others who possess the power to dream of "future things to do." This configuration appears early in the text during the theater scene when Bigger masturbates as he *thinks* of Bessie and immediately afterwards he watches a newsreel which features a shot of Mary and Jan on vacation in Florida where the camera catches the white couple on the beach hugging and kissing. What ties this scene to the one that comes later is that Bigger acts as a voyeur who thinks of "future things to do" when the newsreel voiceover enters to speak Bigger's sexual desires aloud: "Oh boy! Don't you wish you were down here in Florida?" (35). Moreover, Bigger masturbates before watching Jan and Mary, and as he does so he refers to his penis a "nightstick" as he thinks, again, of Bessie. Within these sexual dynamics, one aspect remains a constant –

the Black woman is put into service and these “future things to do” always signal the empowerment of others brought about through a destruction of the Black woman, via Bessie, in various forms. Buddy, for example, informs Bigger that now that he has a better job, he can get a “better gal” than Bessie. And when it appears that Bigger’s plans to toss Bessie aside may be ruined by Vera, who says that she will warn Bessie, Vera’s fate, without hesitation, is linked to the older Black woman when Bigger threatens to break Vera’s neck if she dares to do so. It is apparent throughout that Bessie simply cannot exist as an equal. Any act of authority on her part, or on her behalf, will simply not be tolerated, or any expression of personhood emanating from or for Bessie is not only deemed unacceptable but, more so, her destruction is defined as vitally necessary. Bessie cannot be self-determined because her subjugation defines the license and freedom of others. In perhaps the most telling moment, the narrator explains that Bigger “feel[s] the worth of himself in [Bessie’s] desperation” (168). In an earlier passage readers are told how Bigger despised and was threatened by Bessie when she thought only of herself: that he “wished he could clench his fist and swing his arm and blot out and kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie’s face and leave the other helpless and yielding before him [to] know that she was his and to have and to hold whenever he wanted to” (159-60). There is an explicit and unambiguous splitting of Bessie within Bigger’s mind at this point, and the act of murder, through which he claims his existential freedom, or his “own peculiar and untranslatable destiny” in Wright’s words, is directly attributed to his awareness of this splitting. He seeks, in killing her, to “sweep away the Bessie on Bessie’s face,” which he attempts to do through her murder, in order to liberate the imaginary Bessie, “the other” who would be “helpless and yielding before him.” Bigger

murders Bessie in order to liberate himself through the catalyst of the sublimated Bessie: he must kill the actual Bessie, it seems, in order to guarantee his possession of the imaginary Bessie, through whom his fantasies of absolute domination can be envisioned, through whom he can imagine himself to be free. The paradigm of ownership through which Wright depicts this moment of existential freedom prompts us to recall that Douglass's own imaginings of freedom are based on an identification with the "master" as he tortures Esther, and that his own ascension to "manhood" is also imagined as a form of "mastery."

Bigger literally tosses Bessie's body down an airshaft, and the narrator tells us that this act is Bigger's "right." When Bessie's remains are brought into the courtroom, Bigger confesses to himself that not once had he thought of her because he was concerned only with how a white public would react to his having murdered a white woman. It is not that Bigger thought of Bessie second to Mary; rather, as Bigger reveals, he had not thought of Bessie at all. Moreover, the State does not conceive of Bessie's murder as crime in-and-of-itself because her remains appear only as evidence to convict Bigger of murdering Mary Dalton, the white woman. Moving "outside" of the text, consider also that Bessie is effectively excised from the author's essay, "How Bigger Was Born." Wright makes at least passing reference to virtually all his other characters, but Bessie is absent in this text. Yet, despite, or rather because of, all the evidence concerning Bessie, and the extent to which she appears as one who is rendered paradoxically as an absent presence, a close reading of *Native Son* reveals that Bigger's quest is inextricably tied to and defined by Bessie. Therefore, we need to "worry the line" by understanding Bessie's significance within this canonized text about Black male

liberation. For it is Bessie, the Black woman, through whom Bigger's sociopolitical predicament is articulated; and, it is Bessie who, throughout the novel, is held in perpetual bondage.

Native Son reads as a narrative about a young Black man living in twentieth-century North America who "felt the need for a whole new life and acted out of that need" (527). The life of the protagonist and his need for escape and self-emancipation, as well as his relationship with every character, is determined by a psychological state of alienation. George Jackson (*Soledad Brother* 1990), like Richard Wright, understands this sense of self-alienation that largely defines what it means to be black American as being essentially linked to an economic order that Jackson designates "neo-slavery." A variation on the Marxist concept of wage slavery, the psychological predicament of the neoslave is that of relating to himself as an object. Marx, in *The Grundrisse*, argues that a person becomes a wage slave under capitalism because he or she comes to experience the process of "living labor," or the creative process through which one interacts with the world and transforms it to meet human needs, as an object to be bought and sold, at which point living labor is transformed into "objectified labor" (259). This leads the laborer to experience his or her own essentially human activity as a reified thing, for under capitalism "the fact that surplus labor is posited as surplus value of capital means that the worker does not appropriate the product of his own labor: that it appears to him as *alien property*" (260). Her own activity appears to her as an object, separated from the "totality" of her being, which is "owned" or "appears as the property of capital" (260). The laborer therefore comes to view this part of herself as an object separate from herself, which finds its "*animating unity* elsewhere," in "the *machinery* of fixed capital" (260).

This process leads to experiencing oneself as an object, or “posit[ing] oneself as an other”: one experiences oneself as an “alien objectivity,” and locates one’s subjectivity elsewhere, as “an *alien subjectivity* (of capital)” (261). The wage slave therefore experiences his relation to himself as that of an object being regarded by an alien consciousness. Jackson, like Marx, defines the condition of the laborer under capitalism as essentially that of the slave: the wage slave is simply a slave subjected to a more efficient system of alienation. Grouping both “chattel slavery” and “neo-slavery” under the broader category of “slavery,” Jackson states the “slavery is an economic condition which manifests itself in the total loss or absence of self-determination” (251). This total loss of self-determination is enabled by a total loss of the self, for the “cultural links to the established capitalist society have been a lot closer than we like to admit,” adding that “we are bonded to the fascist society by chains that have strangled our intellect” (254). Neo-slavery is a state of alienation, of being an object, or chattel, under the scrutiny of an alien consciousness.

Bigger’s job as a chauffeur exemplifies such alienation in that the objectification of his labor defines him and, though it, his “owner” controls virtually every moment of his life. Even the “surplus” money he receives for his labor is controlled by his employer, Henry Dalton, who uses Bigger’s salary to dictate Bigger’s life and the lives of his family members. Bigger lives in a one-room, rat infested apartment with his mother and younger siblings. The apartment building is managed by the South Side Real Estate Company, which is owned by Dalton. According to Dalton’s instructions, Bigger will be on twenty-four hour call as the family chauffeur. So that Dalton will have ready access to his service, Bigger will sleep in a back room above the kitchen in the Dalton house, and

his clothes and food will be provided for him. In terms of his weekly wage, Dalton will pay Bigger \$25, and it is Dalton who determines how Bigger will spend the money. As Bigger's owner instructs, "The extra \$5 is for you ... You can give the \$20 to your mother to keep your brother and sister in school" (57). Bigger exists in a state akin to chattel slavery because his labor is property owned by another, and the predicament in which this leaves Bigger is that he can only envision liberation as an act of violence against another reified being, Bessie, that elevates him to the class of owners. Like Douglass, who believes that "[e]verybody... wants the privilege of whipping somebody else" (73), and who can only envision becoming a man as an act of violent "mastery" that is based explicitly on the absent presence of a black woman (Caroline, who is present but who refuses to intervene, although she "could have mastered me very easily" [245]), Bigger can attain freedom only through an act of violence that is simultaneously an erasure of the Black woman, or "the Bessie on Bessie's face" (260). Bigger defines freedom in terms of an individual, esteemed decidedly as man whose authority and privilege determines and directs the lives of others. As the narrator informs us, Bigger "[o]f late had liked to hear tell of men who could rule others, for in actions such as these he felt that there was a way to escape from this tight morass of fear and shame that sapped at the base of his life" (130). Bigger's act, like that of Douglass, is one of ownership and mastery. Furthermore, his regard for Bessie would seem to precisely mirror his experience of himself, as an object under the scrutiny of an alien consciousness, and the act of violence by which he seeks to attain a state of freedom – keeping only the part of Bessie that is absolutely submissive to his desires – reveals that he can only envision this state of imaginary state, this attainment of liberation through an

escape from alienation – as an act of ownership. If Bigger's violence against Bessie is an acting out of the psychological violence of his self-alienation, of his regarding himself as an object subject to an alien power, he can only envision his escape from this state, ironically, as a more perfect state of ownership, somehow cleansed of self-division. Bigger can only picture his liberation as a purified version of his enslavement: purified through separating that part of himself that he regards as an object owned by another from himself; projecting it from himself onto Bessie; and then annihilating it by murdering Bessie. His liberation is, from a psychological standpoint, structurally identical to his alienation, distinguished only by a mystical well-being and self-fulfillment that he imagines will result from his act.

If Bigger does ever accede to a greater wisdom in the novel, or come into a sense of his own existential uniqueness, it is through an awareness of exactly this sort of irony: Bigger, the neoslave, can only envision liberation as a variation of slavery. Early in the novel, he expresses an awareness of this predicament that simultaneously foreshadows his murder of Bessie: "He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough" (9). The act of self-recognition is, for Bigger, simultaneously an act of murder. Alternately, the act of murder holds the possibility for Bigger of coming into a full knowledge of himself. Self-recognition is, even more tellingly, the equivalent of suicide, or self-annihilation. We can decisively state, then, that his violence against Bessie is not only a murder, but a suicide, an act of violence against himself, an act of self-annihilation that is identical for Bigger to an act of self-recognition. Yet, an act of suicide is also, for Bigger, an act of violence against an other, an other that is

himself. Perhaps this is Toni Morrison's meaning when she writes that Black slavery provides the condition for "the projection of the not-me" (38). The act of violence against Bessie through which Bigger comes to an awareness of his unique destiny is, according to this assessment, the psychological equivalent of the act of violence of the slaveholder against the slave: it involves the creation of the self through projecting and then attempting to destroy that part of the self that is irredeemably other. And it is, of course, through Bessie, the Black woman, the "serviceable other" to borrow Morrison's phrase, that Bigger comes to the self-annihilating recognition of his predicament. Bessie had often described to Bigger, on returning from long hours of

hot toil in the white folks' kitchens, a feeling of being forever commanded by others so much that thinking and feeling for one's self was impossible. Not only had he lived where they told him to live, not only had he done what they told him to do, not only had he done these things until he had killed to be quit of them; but even after obeying, after killing, they still ruled him. *He was their property; heart body and blood; what they did claimed every atom of him, sleeping and waking; it colored life and dictated the terms of death.* [emphasis mine] (383-84)

Bigger's status as "their property," it would appear, dictated not only the terms of life and death, but the terms of self-recognition.

Williams, Morrison, and Cleage

In the realm of Black women's literature, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* signifies on the dialectic of mastery and liberation as a literary trope. Mae G. Henderson ("The Stories of (O)Dessa" 1997) sets the stage in clarifying this novel's act of

signification by drawing our attention to Williams's "Author's Note," in which Williams explains how her novel enables her "to own a summer in the nineteenth century" (15). Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Henderson adds, is dedicated to "the era of the 1820s [which] was the period of slave unrest, marked by memories of the massive conspiracies led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800 and Denmark Vesey in 1822 and fearfully anticipating events such as those leading to Nat Turner's insurrection in 1831" (288). More specifically, Henderson explains how:

Williams intervenes into a male story of resistance and locates her work within a historical and contemporary dialogue of race struggle. By dedicating her story to a Black woman scholar and activist, Angela Davis, and prefacing it with a quote from Davis's article, "Reflections on Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Williams links her heroine to a tradition of violent resistance to oppression extending from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. (288)

Entering into this conversation, I would add that Williams also takes aim explicitly at Frederick Douglass by choosing to open her first chapter, "Darky," with an epigraph from Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, "You have seen how a man was made a slave..." (15). We can say that the story of Dessa Rose dwells within this ellipsis. The story of liberation continues and liberation cannot be so easily categorized as achieving "manhood." Douglass may attain his liberation through a specific act of violence, as his fight with Covey is intended to illustrate, but Williams understands that this violence can be re-cast as revolutionary because it is not reserved exclusively for men; that is, its meaning is not determined by men, it can be re-signified to provide an entirely different frame for envisioning liberation. And within this context,

in her ellipsis, Williams opens space to signify on Douglass. By exposing the performativity of violence that is disavowed both by the symbolic order of the southern planter class and Douglass himself in his struggles to overcome his missing father by placing himself in the category of “master,” Williams effectively displaces their understandings of the role of violence in sustaining slavery. Rather than simply reinforcing a pre-existing and absolute order of race-based slavery, Williams shows how violence is required in order to *perform* the role of master. With Dessa Rose we witness that a reiterative violence is shown to be necessary to sustain the distinction between master and slave, an insight that exposes the instability of *mastery* – in other words, Williams exposes the act of violence on the part of the master as a crisis of authority because this authority can only be established by an act that simultaneously exposes its absolute contingency. And unlike Bigger, who envisions such mastery as a male-centered gesture meted out against a Black woman at her expense and destruction, Williams’s character Dessa Rose effectively dislocates gender and “racial” designations so readily attached to concepts of freedom and self-determination. Dessa is enslaved only within the psyche of her captors, and we immediately learn that Dessa does not privilege the captors’ conceptualizations. Dessa instead proceeds with deliberate purpose by eradicating any attempt to objectify her being and in the process of doing so she frustrates and dismantles traditional and assumed positions of power. It is also important to note that Dessa has been reared within a community of Black women whose collective resistance is critical. In *Native Son* and in *Bondage*, such a community is made non-existent. Douglass’s aunt is depicted as one-dimensional and flat, and exists only within her “piteous cries and shrieks.” Once she has been tortured we do not hear about Esther

again, since her existence serves a singular purpose. In *Native Son* there may be an attempt to bring about an understanding between two Black women characters, Bessie and Vera, but the two are quickly and forever separated by Bigger whose control and management of his “girlfriend” is envisioned throughout the text as a prerequisite for his individual freedom. In *Dessa Rose*, however, we are given a clear indication that Black women working in unison against a common enemy have re-appropriated the ownership of their bodies and their lives, and within this context, we understand that Black women and men exist mutually not only in love and respect, but in rebellion and revolt as well.

Readers meet Odessa, or Dessa, following her capture for having led a slave revolt in which

the toll in life and property had been horrifying. Five white men had been killed. Wilson [the slave driver] himself had lost an arm. Thirty-one slaves had been killed or executed; nineteen branded or flogged; some thirty-eight thousand of dollars in property destroyed or damaged. (22)

Added to the chronicle of “damages” is Wilson’s insanity. The slave driver slipped into insanity following the uprising since he simply could not endure the idea of Blacks challenging and destroying the authority of white men. To compensate Wilson’s financial loss and to re-establish racial boundaries which will hopefully release him from mental torture, the court delays Dessa’s execution so her newborn child can be handed over to Wilson. The pregnant Dessa now sits shackled in a root cellar where she has to endure the tedious interrogation of Adam Nehemiah, a white northerner who researches slave rebellions for his soon to be published slave management guide. Nehemiah dreams that the publication will afford him an invitation into the wealthy southern planter class.

It is during her encounters with Nehemiah that readers also learn that prior to the revolt, Dessa was sold to Wilson because she attacked her master in retaliation for his having murdered Kaine, her lover. This point is highly significant within our discussion of serviceable Black women when we recall how Anthony responded to Esther's claim of sexual authority and choice, and also how Bigger responds to his sister when he hears her say that she plans to tell Bessie that her brother is going to toss her aside for a "better gal." In terms of their relationship, Dessa and Kaine are in control, not the master who thinks he reserves the right to determine which of his slaves will either to satisfy his sexual desire or be coupled to increase his capital. When Dessa recalls her life on the plantation she makes it a point to tell her interrogator: "[Kaine] chosed me *Masa aint had nothing to do wid it*. It Kaine what picked me out *and ask me* for his woman" [emphasis mine] (19). So Dessa's claim for a lover not only supercedes "Masa's" preference, but also Kaine must acquire Dessa's permission. Following her moment of self-affirmation, which Nehemiah completely fails to recognize because his political ideology simply cannot register Black self-empowerment, Dessa recalls two other critical points. She explains how she and Kaine having chosen each other is no small matter considering how "Masa" would often couple enslaved women with the enslaved Tarver who was "known fo makin big babies on lil gals" (19). She then speaks of Aunt Hattie, the house slave who administered a "root" to Tarver that stops his "seed from touchin Carrie Mae" (19). Nehemiah hears that "negroes actually had some means of preventing conception" (19). And what Nehemiah gleans from this information is the possibility of his obtaining this contraceptive root, which would then allow him to sell it directly to "southern gentleman" who would surely profit from such a root, but who could not admit

possessing such a root (19). While Nehemiah dreams of the possibility of profiting from what can only be considered the rape of Black women, Dessa instead understands that the root affords Black women some measure of power within a system that feeds off the rape and control of their bodies. This reference to women controlling their bodies also appears in Morrison's *Beloved*, beyond the case of Sethe determining the lives of her children. Like Williams, who sets her sights on re-writing slave revolts by designating a woman as the one in charge, Morrison looks back at the case of Margaret Garner. Through her re-telling Morrison is able to provide insight into the lives of enslaved women, and a key point of this re-telling is to confront a historical depiction of submissive slave women who live out their lives as "breeders" and in turn guarantee the financial security of the oppressor. Garner's claim of motherhood bears witness to and levies charges against the system that holds them in bondage. Morrison provides a profile and explains what drew her to Garner:

Margaret Garner, a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than letting them be returned to the owner's plantation. She became a cause *célèbre* in the fight against the Fugitive Slave Laws, which mandated the return of escapees to her owners. Her sanity and lack of repentance caught the attention of Abolitionists as well as newspapers. She was certainly single-minded and, judging by her comments she had the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom. (xvii)

What Morrison does not include in this passage, but what she certainly highlights in her novel, is that Sethe's decision to take the lives of her children is not an isolated act.

Sethe's assumed "single-minded" act, her intellect, ferocity and willingness to risk everything for her freedom, is the continuation of a legacy of resistance handed down to her from her mother. Sethe, we learn, inherits her resistance and rebellion from her mother and from the woman who tells Sethe about her mother. Sethe learns about her mother through "Nan," the African woman who "spoke the same language as Sethe's ma'am spoke," and who was together with Sethe's ma'am "from the sea" (74). Both women were raped during their wretched journey across the Middle Passage, and according to Nan, Sethe's mother who was impregnated several times by white captors, and, in every instance, after giving birth "threw them all away" (74). Nan explains further: "Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the Black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never, Never" (74).

This same configuration of Black women banding together in order to maintain control of their lives appears in a slightly varied form in Pearl Cleage's *Flyin West*, a play whose setting takes place in the early 1900s and is based on the re-casting of actual events. The play offers a re-telling not only of the 1866 riot in Memphis, Tennessee where countless Blacks – women, children, and men – were murdered by marauding white lynch mobs who also set fires to Black neighborhoods, but also offers a depiction of the great Black migration into the western states. In *Flyin West*, a family comprised of Black women attempt to begin a new life. They set about the task of building a town to serve as a safe haven for Black women and their families. Cleage revisits these two events by placing a family of sisters, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie, center stage who, after the riot, decide to leave the city in order to settle out west in Kansas where they establish

themselves as homesteaders in the new, all-Black town of Nicodemus. Once they reach their destination they meet the elderly Miss Leah, who becomes their surrogate mother. Miss Leah was born into slavery and as a child barely out of puberty she was forced by the master to have children. She had ten children while she was enslaved and all ten were sold away from her. Like Nan, who schools Sethe and learns of resistance from her mother's actions, and Aunt Hattie, who assists the Black women in *Dessa Rose* with her roots, Miss Leah is the necessary link to the past for the women homesteaders of Nicodemus. She is the one whose historical perspective informs and reminds the sisters of what Black women have had to endure. Moreover, Miss Leah is also the one who insists that time has not in anyway erased their problems, and she is not at all deterred from using violence to protect herself or her loved ones. When Miss Leah, for example, hears about the lynching of a Black man in New Orleans and how his murderers tossed the victim's dead body onto a street in a Black neighborhood, she quips: "Don't those New Orleans Negroes know how to use to a shotgun?" (37).

When a dilemma arises that threatens to destroy their lives as self-governed women, it is Miss Leah's statement about the lynching that foreshadows their solution. The youngest sister, Minnie, has married Frank Charles, who passes for white and in years past has moved Minnie to London where he believes he can escape his "Blackness." But when Frank and Minnie return to the United States so he can see his white dying father who then refuses to bequeath his "illegitimate" son an inheritance, Frank conspires to sell the land owned by his wife and her sisters. What makes matters worse is that Frank beats Minnie while she is pregnant with their child, and during one of his assaults he forces Minnie to sign over the deed to her portion of the land. The sisters'

frustrations and fears are multiple and mounting. The quickly realize that Frank feels that his "white blood" affords him the right to treat the Black women as if they are his slaves, and his interactions with the sisters grows progressively demeaning. During his visit he refers to the all-Black town as "Niggerdemus," a racist designation he borrows from whites. He refuses to carry his own luggage because he readily expects one of the women to serve as his beast of burden. His wife promptly unpacks his clothes and when the family has finished with dinner, Frank sits at the table with the ease of a master who is catered to. Finally, in his most insidious gesture, he tells white men that Minnie is a Black slave whore that he won in a card game. Like Bigger, whose self-hatred and alienation is channeled into repeated assaults against Bessie, Frank, who aspires to be the white master, denigrates Black women to access his imagined birthright. And Frank believes he can sell their land because, in his estimation, these Black women were foolish in the first place to even think that they possessed the authority to be landowners, let alone engineer of their own fate and destiny. This reversal of fortune is absolutely absurd, unthinkable, and unacceptable for a "white" man who has been unjustly cheated out of his rightful inheritance. The sisters, in turn, fear that if their land is sold they will not only lose their home, but they will have to return to a white and hostile world in order to eke out a meager and degrading existence. Added to this possible nightmare is the very real possibility that Frank, in beating Minnie, may kill her as well as their unborn child. Therefore, Sophie, Fannie, Miss Leah, and Minnie devise a plan and succeed in killing Frank. It is Miss Leah who determines that Frank's crime is only against Minnie, but Black women in total: "We can't let nobody take our babies. We've given up all the babies we can afford to lose. Do you understand what I'm sayin' to you?" (61)

In *Dessa Rose*, it is similarly the battle for the ownership of Black women that ignites Dessa's attack on "Masa" as well as the revolt on the coffle. During her sessions with Nehemiah, Dessa reveals that "Masa" broke Kaine's banjo because Kaine went against his wishes and began a life with Dessa. It is not that "Masa" wanted to choose a partner for either Kaine or Dessa, but rather that he wanted to sustain his position as "Master" by keeping Dessa for himself. When the pregnant Dessa returns from the fields and learns that Kaine, the father of her child, is near death after "Masa" has struck him on the head with a shovel, following Kaine's attack on "Masa" for having smashed his prize banjo to pieces, Dessa attempts to kill "Masa" and nearly succeeds. She also tries to kill "Masa's" wife, but Aunt Lefonia stops Dessa. Dessa turns her rage against the white woman because she called her "Masa's slut," and Dessa and Kaine's unborn child "Masa's bastid" (41). The white woman automatically assumes that her husband has had sex with (raped) Dessa and that the child is his. Although the woman is mistaken, it does not matter that she's wrong in her assessment. Rather, what infuriates Dessa is that the white woman has defiled Dessa and Kaine's relationship. Dessa will not tolerate anyone on any level denigrating and denying her right to choose a lover for herself. Such an act works to profess a claim on her body, ultimately defining her body as an object.

The revolt on the coffle, led by Dessa, is prompted by an attack against a woman. During this rebellion, the slaves are able to critically turn a violent sexual act against their captors. The narrator explains how the women and men planned and succeeded in their escape:

The other white men didn't even rouse up as the guard thrashed off into the underbrush with Linda, but everyone on the coffle was awake. Every night since

Montgomery, one of the white men had taken Linda into the bushes, and [the slaves] had been made wretched by her pleas and pitiful whimpering. The noise from the underbrush stopped abruptly. Then came the rattle of chains and above it a dull thud, startlingly loud in the stillness, and the rattling of the chains again. In his lust and alcoholic daze, the guard had failed to secure the chain after he removed Linda from it. Linda appeared in the clearing, her dress torn and gaping, the bloody rock still clutched in her manacled hands. All hell broke out.

(61)

This scene is significant not only because Dessa and the others successfully exploit a moment of weakness in the slave drivers, turning it into a moment of self-empowerment. More to the point, an act of sexual violence through which the order of slavery is complacently re-enacted is re-signified. The act through which an order of power is preserved is exposed as infinitely fragile not only in physical terms, but in terms of its meaning: the meaning of the act of rape is turned against itself, just as the violence of the act is turned against its perpetrator.

So, even before she meets Nehemiah, we know Dessa has already defied the system that seeks to control her. The dilemma for Nehemiah is that he needs Dessa to tell him how and why she led the revolt. But Dessa's re-telling completely subverts the language on which Nehemiah relies to maintain his assumed position of authority as a white male. Dessa challenges Nehemiah at each turn, and, as is the case with Wilson, Nehemiah, during these confrontations, is slowly stripped of his authority. It is Dessa, not Nehemiah, who sets the parameters of their interaction, and who also dares to make the interaction a battle.

For example, as soon as Nehemiah enters the root cellar Dessa moves into the corner and Nehemiah commands her to stop as he reminds her that her life has been thus far spared only because she is pregnant. He automatically assumes Dessa's move into the corner is a retreat, a surrender, but she "greet[s] Nehemiah's statement with the flick of her eyes almost as though he had been a bothersome fly and her eyes a horse's tail flicking him way" (30). In this passage I am reminded of Frantz Fanon's (*Black Skin, White Masks* 1952) critique of the "imperial eyes." When Fanon, as the colonized subject, is viewed by his colonizers, he feels "dissected under white eyes, the only eyes that see. I am fixed" (116). These eyes are meant to reduce Blacks to a limited, closed state of non-being, a vision seen through a lens clouded by hatred and contempt, or a negation through which one's own essential humanity is established. As with the concept of double-consciousness, Fanon explains that he is consciously aware of the reduction of his self through the gaze. This configuration, however, is reversed when Dessa "flicks her eyes" at Nehemiah, since her gesture marks the white man who dares enter *her space*, *her presence*, as insignificant, non-descript. Dessa's look signals her dismissal of him and marks his verbal threat as empty. Nehemiah, having been stripped of the privilege to see and thus define, retreats and loses himself because the enslaved woman's response totally terrorizes the aspiring slave master's conceptual frame of being.

Again we turn to Fanon for insight. According to Fanon, the oppressor will immediately respond to a shift in power, "[b]ut the possibility of this change is equally experienced in the form of a terrifying future in the consciousness of the colonizers" (36). Dessa's response "outrages" and "infuriates" Nehemiah to the point where he strikes her, and, in doing so, he claims to break one of the cardinal rules of "slave management."

Nehemiah says: "It was seldom necessary to strike a darky with one's hand and to do so, except in the most unusual circumstances, lowered one almost to the level of random violence that characterized the actions of the blacks among themselves" (Williams 30). Samira Kawash analyzes the self-deconstructing nature of such pronouncements in *Dislocating the Color Line*. Kawash's examination draws our attention to how acts of violence are continually used to safeguard the "essence" of the color line. Yet these acts of violence simultaneously call into question the essentialism that frames the concept of race.

I find a striking similarity between the physical violence Nehemiah uses to maintain his *whiteness* as he tries to recapture his authority of Dessa, and an analysis of violence Kawash applies to a scene from the 1959 film, *Imitation of Life*. Within her exploration of the "paradoxical persistence of the color line against itself," Kawash outlines how white men, positioned to be the direct inheritors of state power, rely on physical violence to maintain racial borders (Kawash vii). However, acts of physical violence used as means to preserve racial hierarchies inevitably dismantle the very racial borders they are intended to defend. According to Kawash, if racialized physical violence is used to bring a person back within the boundaries of race, it then follows that the boundaries do not provide the required metaphysical absolute, or are not, in this sense, real, since they can be transgressed, and require acts of violence to safeguard their "essence." In other words, how is it possible for a person to step outside the boundary in the first place if it is closed and sealed? It is possible because racial "essence," propped up as a primary factor to establish and maintain the culture of whiteness and naturalize its sense of authority, is a self-contradictory and self-deconstructing idea. In other words,

acts of violence intended to preserve the assumed natural boundaries of racial hierarchy simultaneously point to the fact that race is a *performance* – if such boundaries were absolute and dictated by nature, such violent acts would not be required for their preservation. The racial essence, then, is always retroactively posited by the performative act – it requires the performative act for its existence, yet it cannot acknowledge such a need without dismantling its assumed absolute necessity and naturalness.

Racial violence plays a similar role in performatively establishing the color line in the confrontation between Nehemiah and Dessa, and Dessa, drawing attention to this disavowed performativity through her actions, enrages Nehemiah. Nehemiah, infuriated by Dessa's look, slaps her because the flick of her eyes draws attention to the profound fragility of his racial authority. Dessa, the enslaved woman, is able to fix and objectify, a right reserved only for imperial eyes, through an act that reverses the process of negation, recognized by Fanon, through which the white male establishes his own essential being. At the moment when Nehemiah slaps Dessa, he shares company with Wilson, the slave driver, who has gone insane as result of the revolt. Nehemiah is crazed by Dessa's blatant dismissal of him. Dessa's response to his command and, in turn, Nehemiah's reaction to her response of his command signifies the moment when Dessa Rose is no longer the *thing*, the objectified, that "darky," and Nehemiah is crazed by this very possibility. Her defiance and immediate refusal to acknowledge, let alone accept, his presumption of power is materialized when his order for her to move out of the corner and into his presence backfires. The would-be slave master becomes the non-being, he is not worthy of Dessa's, a slave woman's, glance or consideration. Nehemiah, in order to

bring Dessa within the borders of the color line, in the quest to secure her within the configuration of what Aimé Césaire calls “thingification,” immediately slaps her. But again, Nehemiah’s violent physical reaction, designed to put Dessa back into the realm of “blackness,” is doomed as soon as the slap is applied. Nehemiah tells us that “to strike a darky with one’s hand ... lowered one almost to the level of random violence that characterized the actions of the blacks among themselves.” An odd figuration of hierarchal borders that seem to be in flux emerges here. While Nehemiah believes violence operates to the extent that it inevitably *lowers* him to the status of being Black, which points to the idea that the borders do actually exist, his ideology, regulated by ideals of racial superiority, informs him that his whiteness precludes him from being Black. He is only able to re-establish the color line upon which his authority rests through an act that simultaneously violates the very racial boundary it instantiates. Nehemiah’s slap can only establish racial hierarchy to the extent that it radically destabilizes it at the same time. Nehemiah’s ineffectual attempt to evade this realization with the qualifier “almost” (an act of violence “lowered one *almost*” to the level of blacks) dissolves in the face of Dessa’s resistance.

The final confrontation between Dessa and Nehemiah takes place during yet another interrogation session when Nehemiah asks Dessa what her story about Kaine has to do with killing white men. The question is repeated since Dessa affectionately and rebelliously recalls her life with and her love for Kaine. Exasperated by Dessa’s story because in his estimation it has nothing to do with the revolt, Nehemiah interrupts her and asks: “And what does that have to do with you and the other slaves rising up against the trader and trying to kill white men?” (20) But before he can even finish the question,

Dessa, who has been described as “the ‘fiend,’ the ‘devil-woman’” because she has “attacked white men and roused other niggers to rebellion,” interrupts the interrogator when she directs her “devil eyes and devil-stare” at Nehemiah and with righteous brilliance proclaims: “I kill white mens...I kill white mens cause the same reason Massa kill Kaine. Cause I can” (Williams 20). Dessa’s proclamation invariably shuts Nehemiah down since her “bald statement seemed to echo in silence” (Williams 21). He is left speechless because his white identity is founded on the foreclosure of any language that would allow him to comprehend Dessa’s appropriation of power and authority. Dessa’s statement bluntly draws attention to the fact that the act of violence that establishes and maintains the order of slavery is conceptually indistinguishable from the act of violence that overthrows the same order, because both retroactively posit their own justification. Dessa claims her self-determination through this act of re-signification and re-definition, through her definitive act of rejecting the rhetorical duplicity defining the discourse of the master.

By looking back with fresh eyes on historical moments, the works of Williams, Morrison, and Cleage address the sexual violence inflicted on women, and demonstrate how the sublimation of Black women as the “other” has been repeatedly employed within the African American literary imagination to define Black liberation as decidedly male-centered. Within the African American literary tradition women have been used to create spaces of privilege and authority for others. But these Black female writers, within their re-creation of historical moments, activate a political consciousness that refuses to render Black women as the voiceless and serviceable other. Their re-signification of a racist and patriarchal tradition is crucially based on the recognition of the fragility, arbitrariness,

and ultimate contingency of the acts that reiteratively construct them in this fashion. The struggle of political authority and self-definition must begin with this recognition.

“Our Presence is Felt Like the Black Panther Movement”:⁴

Hip-Hop Always Rides with Black Radical Momentum

Through *Yes, Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project's Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade* (Fricke and Ahearn 2002) those who lived in the South Bronx during the 1970s tell us how Hip-Hop began. I am especially interested in DJ Kool Herc's comments, since he is recognized as an originator of the artistic/cultural tradition. Herc's recollections about the beginning of this culture work well to open an analysis about the generational links between the tradition's revolutionary origins, its affinity with Black youth culture-knowledge and social history, and its solidarity with the Black Radical Movement, more specifically the theory/praxis of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and its clandestine military component, the Black Liberation Army (BLA). Herc provides the necessary space to focus on Hip-Hop artists who re-appropriate tools commonly reserved for the state. These artists, hailing from economically impoverished central cities, transform these tools into sites of resistance and pleasure that disassemble oppressive political structures. Hip-Hop is the conduit through which Black youth culture celebrates itself, and within these moments of pleasure comprehends its sociopolitical history and re-creates spaces of defiance and resistance. In the *Yes, Yes Y'all's* chapter “Rocking: Gangs and the Beginning of Hip-Hop,” Herc remembers how music became the soundtrack for his moments of joy and acts of defiance which defined his childhood in Jamaica.

My mother was studying for nursing in New York, and she used to bring back records from Motown, Smokey Robinson. And James Brown came to the island one time. “I Feel Good” at the time was a hit record, and I fell in love with that

record. Also, Jamaican music was a big influence on me, because there was a lot of big sound systems they used to hook up and play on the weekends. I was a child, ya know, looking, ' seein' all these things going on, and sneakin' out my house and seein' the big systems rattling the zincs on the housetops and stuff.

(Fricke and Ahearn 25)

His mother, on her visits back to Jamaica, brings home Motown's music, just as James Brown's music is brought to the island. It was James Brown, hailed as the "Godfather of Soul," who, during the Black Power Movement, told us to "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud!" Herc feels Brown's "I Feel Good." Fond recollections of coming home, which include not only his mother, but Motown and Brown's hit as well, are then harmoniously blended with Reggae. All these elements are intertwined within a space of pleasure where, as a child, Herc is able to see "all these things going on" out there when he's "sneakin" out of the house. Herc tells us he remembers the "big systems" owned by his people emitting booming sounds, rattling "the zinc rooftops" of the poverty-stricken area. The music, the very sound of the people, announces their presence and defies their poverty. The Black child sees what's going on "out there" in the world and seeing here is not simply to gaze, but rather to understand, to articulate, to *know*. While this music serves as a cultural prism through which Herc understands the world, he perceives that in the music, in its very being, is also somehow transgressive. The syncretic blending of musical traditions in the Jamaican ghetto produces a music that transgresses cultural, sexual, and musical boundaries that are supposed to define him as poor and Black. You have to appreciate the dexterity of Herc's statement. What we're told here is that Hip-Hop, is fluid, is in constant motion, since it is all at once intimately familial, aspirant,

joyous, perceptive, and defiant. Afrika Bambaatta, also a Hip-Hop pioneer, speaks of the culture in similar terms. The DJ grew up in the South Bronx where he says there was a lot of unity and social awareness. He remarks that James Brown's "Say It Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud," Sly and the Family Stone's "Stand!" and "Everyday People" were inspirational. Bambaataa continues: "being aware of what was going on in the late 1960s [...] just being a young person and seeing all this happening around me, put a lot of consciousness in my mind to get up and do something" (Fricke and Ahearn 44).

But what we hear on contemporary radio, coupled with what we see through weekly-televised video countdowns, perpetuates the prevailing narrative that Hip-Hop has departed from its inspiring and revolutionary roots. For mainstream America, Hip-Hop cultural tradition, if it is grudgingly defined as such, is perceived as having been commercially co-opted. Hip-Hop has been confused with mainstream "hip-Pop," which is a multi-billion dollar industry that sells virtually everything from sugary breakfast cereals to shampoos for natural blond hair, to SUVs for white suburban fathers. This national view of Hip-Hop positions people to assume that *all* Black youth, because they are the creators of Hip-Hop, are obsessed with conspicuous consumption. This logic then dictates that Black youth are categorically apolitical and they lack the capacity to understand and critique their social condition and to formulate tactics designed to address their social condition.

Tricia Rose defines rap music as "a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America" (2). More specifically, in framing an analysis of how the *music* of Hip-Hop operates as a continuum of chattel slave narratives, Quincy T. Norwood, writing for *Proud Flesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics and*

Consciousness, reminds us that “music has always narrated the experiences of people of African descent in the United States” (1). Writing from a global perspective which understands Hip-Hop as a cultural force poised to combat the exploitation of “Plantation America” as it tells the stories “among the Black poor in the cities of African Diaspora.” Greg Thomas alerts the reader to how Hip-Hop “still fits the definition of ‘neo-slavery’ mapped out in *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*” (2005, 2). Hip-Hop is a historical phenomenon that formulates a legacy of survival and resistance. Within this context, to understand Hip-Hop is to comprehend the necessity and daring spirit of “talking back” against the insult and assault of brutal Eurocentric oppression. This spirit of resistance is defined by the Igbo word *Nzagwalu*, a term Ifi Amadiume uses to explain the process of “mov[ing] beyond a critique of racist European anthropologists and their work” (4). A symmetry exists between Amadiume’s call for a “dialogic literature” that will “re-invent” conceptions about Africa and the Diaspora, and the emergence of Hip-Hop. For Amadiume there is a need to stop relying on a Western anthropological episteme, which was

racist from the start and was not intended to serve an African interest. Rather, [anthropology] was intended to humiliate and insult Africans by classifying them as primitive and savage “Them/Other” to the European “We.” Africans are consequently correct in being ashamed of associations with this subject. In this we face a dilemma because, unfortunately, a lot of the archival information that Africans need in order to move forward is trapped in this subject. (Amadiume 3)

Hip-Hop co-pioneer Afrika Bambaataa provides a response to Amadiume’s call. As a child watching the movie *Zulu*, Bambaataa was “inspired” by the sight of seeing “Black

people standing up and fighting at a time when we were only in Heckle and Jeckle roles” (Fricke and Ahearn 130). Bambaataa views *Zulu* not in terms of an imperial iconography that would designate the movie’s violence as African savagery; rather, he understands the violence of Africans as a form of collective resistance to racial oppression. Bambaataa, like Fanon, reverses the imperial gaze, conferring on himself the power to define. Moreover, he is able to engage this strategy of resistance not only because as a Black man he is, in Fanon’s terms, a “negation” of the white man’s being, an integral part of the dialectic of whiteness, but because he is looking at the movie with fresh eyes, from the standpoint of an independent cultural and epistemological perspective created by Hip-Hop. We might add that the eclecticism so evident in Hip-Hop’s roots provides a strategy for overcoming the dilemma of “archival information” formulated by Amadiume. If there is empirical and historical information contained in the annals of a Eurocentric tradition such as anthropology, it might not only be re-defined through an oppositional gaze, but incorporated into the alternative epistemological frame provided by Hip-Hop.

The term *Nzagwalu* continues to define Hip-Hop as a form of resistance. In his memories of the early 1980s, William Eric Perkins says his daughters “ignited [his] interest in rap which “exploded on the subways and throughout the city’s concrete jungles” (1996, vi). Perkins credits Hip-Hop as a generational transition whose jolt pushes the listener to comprehend and define the socioeconomic predicament of central cities. In “I’m Gonna Pimp Whores!” L. H. Stallings introduces her theory of the “Hip-Hop neoslave narrative,” and the self-proclaimed “Black girl living in the 1980’s Southern-fried poverty” reveals how as a child she “lifted” a Donald Goines book from

her aunt (2003, 176). As she read, the then seven year-old Stallings saw the “blunt, violent, sexual, gritty realism” unfold before her (176). More pointedly, during her readings of Goines, Stallings unites the writer’s message with the lines from legendary rap battles.

In sharing how they came to love and understand Hip-Hop culture, these individuals make links with family members, and out of this personal connection move into a critique of Black life. Both Herc and Stallings mark the beginnings of this knowledge through acts that defy the rules – Herc disobeys the rules of his home, and Stallings “lifts” Goines’s book because she understands that as a child she’s not supposed to engage its contents. Yet, Stallings word choice here, “lifting,” means so much more. When Herc says he loved James Brown’s “I Feel Good,” we have to attend to how the song, its title, and its lyrics, impact the Black child. Just as well, Stallings taking the book, which is *lifted*, also works to lift the reader since the reading elevates her perception of the socioeconomic situation of Black life in the U.S. But these connective relationships did not begin with the emergence of Hip-Hop; rather, they exist within a legacy of the music created by Blacks. Take, for example, Toni Cade Bambara’s portrayals of music, rebellion/resistance, and family in *Those Bones Are Not My Child*. Her novel depicts the Atlanta Child Murders and features parents who search for their missing child, Sundiata. Sundiata’s father, Spencer Rawls, or “Spence,” believes that the forty Black children who have been murdered were killed by white hate groups that have recently been holding conventions in Atlanta. Spence is rightfully frustrated because Atlanta’s police department, the media, and city hall have been withholding information from and lying to the parents about circumstances surrounding the children’s

disappearance and deaths. In addition to the forty murdered children, the Bowen Homes Day Care Center, located within an Atlanta housing project, is bombed. Four children and one teacher are killed in the blast, and many are injured. Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson, the city's first Black to hold the office, "reduces the massacre to a five-word fraud: nothing but a tragic accident" (299). Additionally, the Fulton County medical examiner predicts to reporters that he is certain that the metal fragments found in the bodies of those killed in the blast were not fragments from a bomb. No one is handcuffed because a crime has not been committed and the parents' outrage is exacerbated when it becomes clear that the police refuse to establish a link between the day care center bombing and the serial murder of their Black children. Given these responses by public officials, Spence faces the huge reality that the city, and the agencies which run it, do not consider his child precious or worth worrying about because his child is Black. To regain himself, his strength, to recall a state of mind wherein he feels self-empowered and in control, Spence remembers a 1968 concert he attended as a young man at college campus in Florida, where Nina Simone, "Nina the Nasty, the Black Sorceress," ignited her audience:

[Nina] told the audience slyly that the bookers had begged her not to get "militant," not to sing inflammatory songs. Then she laughed and held up the check, striding across the stage waving it. The suckers had paid her already. Riiight, the crowd roared, "Mississippi Goddamn!" "Pirate Jenny." She looked out from the keyboard toward the administration building, singing, "I don't expect to see anything standing in the morning." (Bambara 300)

Spence remembers this specific performance because he wants to recapture the militancy of the moment that will in turn help guide him through the lies and red tape of city government that has a chokehold on his life and the life of his children. He wants to send the message that he cannot be controlled and so easily lied to. Just as Simone refuses to ignore her political beliefs just because she got paid, Spence refuses to accept all the double-speak about Atlanta's emergence as the economic jewel of the South. Atlanta's re-birth, he knows and cannot ignore, has been bought with the death of Black children, and the general exploitation of the entire Black community.⁵ Spence is charged by Simone's performance and it was Kwame Touré (*né* Stokely Carmichael) of the Student Non-Violent Coordination Committee, who once referred to Simone as the "true singer of the civil rights movement" (Simone 1991, 98). Her cover of the songs "Mississippi Goddamn!" and "Pirate Jenny" are explosive in their indictment of white racism. Again recall Amadiume's use of *Nzagwalu* – Simone's performance, as Spence recalls it, "talks back." In "Mississippi Goddamn!" She asks, "Can't you see it / Can't you feel it / It's all in the air / I can't stand the pressure much longer / Somebody say a prayer." The "pressure" is defined here by the racial injustice enacted throughout the Jim Crow South, and the song issues the warning, "Oh this country is full of lies / You all gonna die and die like flies." In "Pirate Jenny," Simone is the Black woman character working as a maid in whites-only hotel. It is Jenny who fools the patrons as she emerges as the leader and commander of "a ship / The Black Freighter / [that] turns around in the harbor / shootin' guns from her bow." Both songs performed by Simone speak of rebellion and revolt. Both songs speak of self-defense, and in the case of "Pirate Jenny," of armed self-

defense. And “Mississippi Goddamn” and “Pirate Jenny” both help Spence to understand a way out of his predicament.

Black communities, their inhabitants, are under siege, and Black youth are alert and responsive because Hip-Hop is *the* vehicle created by Black youth as a proclamation of their awareness. The police oversee Black neighborhoods, inner-city schools operate as penitentiaries, and Black children, in ever increasing numbers, are tried and convicted as adults. Elaine Brown, former BPP chairman, chronicles the history of U.S. policy and its centuries-long tradition of dealing with Blackness as being inherently marked with criminality. And within this frame, the controlling network also restricts our recreational spaces, the sites of collective pleasure, leisure and artistic expression. As result, Blacks are forced to resourcefully escape the network of control in order to reclaim and establish recreational space. This intervention is marked by the community’s ability to understand that it is held captive within a larger society that constructs and maintains systems of racial control as it refuses to acknowledge the very maintenance of this construction. Hip-Hop, because of multiple restrictions placed on Black youth, is consciously political. It resists mainstream cultural values, and replaces them with its own aesthetics to celebrate Black youth culture. Hip-Hop culture includes rap, as we well know, but there exist other central artistic expressions within the tradition. We cannot ignore the significance of the art of deejaying. When Trica Rose writes that “hip hop transforms stray technological parts intended for cultural and industrial trash heaps into sources of pleasure and power,” we should be reminded of the implications of “deejaying,” since deejays who customarily lacked the funds to purchase the necessary sound equipment were instead resourceful in re-appropriating tools or re-designing the “garbage” of

commodity culture (Rose 22). Although it wasn't "garbage" at that particular moment. Grandmaster Flash remembers that as a child he would hide himself within his house where he would take apart various household appliances in order to see how they worked. He disassembled the washing machine, his older sister's radio and hair-dryer, and his parent's stereo. As a young man looking to create a sound system, he would have to piece it together from discarded spare parts. And if this was not innovative enough, Flash would create a technique that would become emblematic of Hip-Hop music. He was mesmerized by that small space in the song that is referred to as the "get down part" or what is now called "the break." It is that moment in the song, customarily no more than a few seconds, when the music kicks in at full force. Flash dramatically extended this moment of musical pleasure: "And this particular part of the record...unjustifiably, was maybe five seconds or less. This kind of pissed me off. I was like, "Damn, why'd they do that? You know. So in my mind, in the early seventies, I was picturing, 'Wow, it would really be nice if that passage of music could be extended to like five minutes'" (Fricke and Ahearn 58). This musical renovation invariably impacts the rhythm of the dance. Since Flash was able to extend the break of one song, creating "break music," he could then both extend and thread together the breaks of several songs. As result, the "get down part" was greatly accentuated, and for those on the dance floor, their corporeal enjoyment knew no bounds.

Graffiti artists and or writers and break-dancers are equally integral to Hip-Hop. Graffiti writers, creating within the South Bronx and Harlem during the late 70s and throughout the 80s, "altered concrete walls, abandoned buildings and public transportation...creating masterpieces amidst urban rubble" (Kelley 44). Bambara

knowingly incorporates graffiti writers whose “glistening statements” are accompanied by the gospel music floating from the nearby church, Mount Moriah Tabernacle (311). Through “their urgent communiqués to the neighborhood,” the writers “urge the people to unite their wrath and take control of the city before it was too late” (312). In similar fashion, Kelley outlines how through their artwork writers critiqued and confronted New York’s Metropolitan Transit Authority policy, which charged high subway fares and ran substandard trains into the Bronx and Harlem. The writers were not just protesting the high fares and the condition of the trains reserved for their neighborhoods, for these aspects of their relationship to the city government were merely a symptom of a larger problem, the hostile relationship established by the New York municipality with the Black and Latino communities. In *Hip Hop Immortals: We Got Your Kids*, graffiti writer James Top explains the skill required of a successful graffiti artist, and within his explanation examines the defiance that defines Hip-Hop:

The guys back in the days, they use to be real hard-core gangsta guys because you had to remember you had to break into the yards. If you was weak or soft you wasn’t about to be nobody. You had to have heart. We used to call it ‘Rackin Up.’ If you couldn’t steal paint then you wasn’t gonna be in the game and don’t worry about being the King. Now you had to get into the yard. Once you in that yard you breaking the law. There’s a live third rail that adds dangers beside the police. Then what was intimidating was those big ass fuckin trains.” (Top 2004)

Top’s description of how writers had to steal the spray paint in order create their art is reminiscent of Stallings who spoke about lifting the Goines novel from her aunt and Herc who sneaks out of the house despite his mother’s orders. But disobeying the law, as Top

describes it, is a badge of honor. He explains that graffiti artists were able to mark only after they first painted and received praise in their projects. Painting in the yard, where they defied the cops and by extension city government, was the pinnacle and marker of success. There is a definitive resistance here, for graffiti artists re-signify spaces that the city has marked for discipline and control as pleasurable.

Also, Top includes a critique of poverty and the definition of “crime.” Perhaps, Top suggests, it is a “greater” crime not to acknowledge the factors responsible for creating a poverty-stricken area, and why specific residents are forced to pay higher train fares while they ride on substandard and thus, dangerous trains. The writers could not, and therefore would not, pay for the paint and they had no problem in lifting the necessary materials to create their art. The writers were not at all deterred by the idea of breaking the law; instead they sought out the opportunity to do so and took pleasure in the act. In fact, this act not only re-signifies sites of discipline and control as sites of pleasure and resistance, but draws attention to the unlawful pleasure supporting (and required of?) the enforcement of racial discipline.

It is obvious that law here is concerned about property and maintaining financial power, rather than the welfare of Black people. But again, because the writers were Black and Latino and they dared to offer social commentary, MTA responded by initiating an aggressive campaign to denigrate their artistic expression by criminalizing the writers. The MTA deployed attack dogs, arrested artists, and allocated \$24 million to construct, around the train yards, a fence topped with razor-sharp barbed wire designed to ensnare and shred the writers’ bodies. As he recalls the acts of terror directed at the Panthers by the police, Mumia Abu-Jamal (2004) informs us of how Paul Redd, a Los

Angeles Panther who served as the chapter's Deputy Minister of Culture, had his right hand brutally broken by LA cops when they learned Redd's artwork, which appeared in the BPP newspaper *The Black Panther*, received praise from the community. Rather than allowing State brutality to suppress his creative defiance, Redd taught himself how to draw with his left hand.

Break-dancers were also targeted when they were arrested during performances on the charge of either "disturbing the peace or attracting undesirable crowds" (Kelley 68), which, of course means even those who watched and enjoyed the performances were implicated. The breakers knew the score, and as a result altered performances. They preferred to perform on city streets, and sometimes within malls rather than accepting invitations to perform in the gymnasium of the Police Athletic League (PAL). Breakers stayed clear of this venue since activities held at the PAL gymnasium were used by the police as means of surveillance of the community. "Whenever local police were looking for a suspect, kids hanging out in PAL facilities were questioned" (Kelley 67).

According to the culture of American hysteria, the perceived criminality of Blacks stems from the idea that Blacks, as Kelley and Brown clarify, are inherently culturally/racially dysfunctional. This belief supports the rhetoric that poverty is self-inflicted rather than the result of systemic economic oppression. Along these lines, Black activism, whichever form it takes, either pacifist or armed-self defense, is targeted for destruction. The U.S. government automatically assumes that activism initiated by marginalized groups is pathology: a diseased mental state poised to corrupt a healthy social order. Thus, strategies and acts of resistance have historically been judged as seditious and demented. The U.S government's reaction to Nat Turner and John Brown,

immediately come to mind, as well as COINTELPRO's acts of aggression to "neutralize," to name a few, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The BPP, the BLA, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the American Indian Movement (AIM), and the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU). Also, consider that U.S. law, despite numerous efforts to the contrary, steadfastly refuses to recognize the existence of political prisoners in this country.

Abu-Jamal, who became a Panther at age fifteen, orates from the penitentiary on "Homeland Security and Hip-Hop," a spoken word piece on Immortal Technique's CD *Immortal Technique: Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Abu-Jamal raps about the conditions responsible for igniting Black youth to create what we now call Hip-Hop. He states that Hip-Hop arises from a generation that is "at best, tolerated in schools, feared on the streets, and almost inevitably destined for the hellholes of prison" (Immortal Technique 2003b). Abu-Jamal provides a vital link for our discussion of how Hip-Hop carries on strategies activated during the Black Liberation Movement of the late sixties and early seventies. Abu-Jamal zeroes in on Hip-Hop's origins because he knows the experience of today's Black youth repeats the experiences of the young men and women who came together and established the BPP and later, the BLA. Abu-Jamal writes that when he was attacked by the police as a teenager, the experience "kicked [him] straight into the Black Panther Party," and his spoken word piece about the origins of Hip-Hop emphasizes the familiar, brutal relationship between government authority at all levels and Black youth (*All Things Censored* 104).

The current trend is to criticize and dismiss Black youth and its culture as apolitical. Popular opinion generally maligns Black youth on two fronts: either Black

youth culture possesses an inability to comprehend its own deleterious social conditions, or Black youth culture continuously engages in activities that perpetuate its own racial oppression. Either presupposition masks the public's fear of recognizing any continuity between Hip-Hop and the popular liberation struggles of the sixties and seventies. It is interesting, therefore, to discover the similarity of such criticism to criticisms leveled against the Panthers. They were called irrational, politically misguided, and seditious. BPP founder Huey P. Newton writes, "life does not always begin at birth. My life was forged in the lives of my parents before I was born, and even earlier in the history of all Black people. It is all of a piece" (Newton 11). Similarly, Hip-Hop did not simply appear in the late 1970s. Hip-Hop is a progeny of Black musical/cultural traditions: Jazz, Reggae, Blues, Rhythm and Blues, Gospel, Funk and Go-Go. Hip-Hop not only recalls the oral traditions and rhythms of the Continent, but it also emerges out of distinct political landscapes that impact Black life.

Together the BPP and the BLA struggled against racial and cultural oppression to achieve self-determination for Blacks. The organizations were positioned to eliminate the factors responsible for constructing the socioeconomic predicament of U.S. Blacks while they also embraced cultural traditions otherwise denigrated by white supremacist psychosis. Evelyn Williams, Assata Shakur's aunt and attorney, recalls how a teenage Assata (who Williams called "Joey" until she came to comprehend the validity of her niece's activism) responded to her complaints about the racist judicial system: "I would return home with daily complaints about the maze of inequality in which Black defendants were trapped, and [Joey] would listen in complete agreement, designating me the last angry woman" (E. Williams, 1993, 119). It is not that Assata's political activism

germinated solely because of her aunt's critique of the legal system; instead, it is important to reestablish how family works in a significant capacity to spark political awareness which encourages political activism. Later, when Assata appeared in court, Williams explains how Assata put her solidarity with Black culture in full view as a measure to contest state "authority" and its set of restrictions. What Assata wears in court and how she greets her comrades virtually transform the space otherwise controlled by the State to criminalize her political and cultural self-definition. She is supposed to be crushed under the weight of state authority that believes it can dictate not only what she should wear, but also how she should position her body and how she is expected to relate to those in the courtroom who came to support her. Assata appeared in court wearing African dresses and matching head-wraps provided by her mother. Williams writes: "[Assata] walked into the courtroom each day smiling with a power-fisted greeting to her friends and supporters who filled the courtroom at every trial as if they had gathered for a social event" (E. Williams 84).

We can locate a comparison in contemporary society with its vilification of Hip-Hop in terms of how Black youth are continually criticized and admonished for their style of dress. Within Hip Hop, the body itself becomes the site where resistance and a refusal to adhere to what is deemed "proper" and "respectful" is contested. Hip-Hop gear draws attention to the body, makes it the center of a fluid system of signification, therefore dislocating reified mainstream meanings attached to the body, and the Black body in particular. Hip-Hop culture embraces multiple strategies of re-signification, not the least of which is labeled "antitype" by Michael Eric Dyson. Antitypes disrupt mainstream meanings attached to the Black body by highlighting the ambivalence that the Black body

inspires in its role of underwriting this mainstream system of meanings. An antitype will characteristically underscore the fetishistic role that the Black body serves within mainstream American ideology, propping this ideology up at its foundational point, where meaning folds in on itself. In short, an antitype forces a recognition of the role of a given image in concealing a knowledge of paradox within one's ideology. An antitype will confront the viewer with an image that is held as a fetish, or a *self-evident sensual truth* (of Black degradation, for instance) that works, through its "self-evident" nature, to disguise fundamental paradoxes within mainstream ideology. An antitype, in this confrontation, will force the viewer to some recognition of the thing in question as a fetish by confronting the viewer with his or her own ambivalence regarding the sign or object: that is, the very thing taken as a sign of degradation is simultaneously a thing that is irresistibly fascinating. That such logic is at the center of mainstream attitudes toward Blackness seems undeniable – witness the mainstream success, for instance, of "gansta rap," the way that the signifiers of evil within American cultural demonology are at the same time the very objects of fascination for white America. This means, as Dyson points out, that "the line between stereotype and antitype is barely discernible, a point not always lost on its creators" (33). Many rappers, for instance, engage in this complex game of signification through dress and bodily ornamentation, which will confront the audience with images of Black male or female sexuality that simultaneously inspire fear, terror, and fascination in white (and Black bourgeois) America; or embrace signifiers that demonstrate the indistinguishability, on a purely an empirical level, of a sign as a marker of criminality from a sign as a marker of resistance to oppression. As Dyson discerns, such complex representational practices involving the body "seek to play with negative

portrayals of black life in order to explore, and... unmask them" (34). This is a strategy of representation that Hip-Hop shares with the tradition of Black resistance, and that Assata engages in her courtroom performance.

In addition to her choice of clothing, it is also important to note that when Assata is sentenced to life in prison for the death of New Jersey state trooper Werner Forester, the presiding judge tags on an extra thirty-three years to the life-sentence because Assata refused to stand when he entered the courtroom. Again, she utilizes her very body to defy the system.

But the sentence holds no authority in Assata's estimation, and her determination to escape is solidified by her daughter, who tells her mother, "You can get out here if you want to" (A. Shakur 258). Even the circumstances surrounding the conception and birth of her daughter, Kakuya, are defined by defiance. She and her comrade and "co-defendant," Kamau, who is Kakuya's father, refuse to remain silent during court proceedings. As a "punishment" Assata and Kamau are sequestered alone in a room. Now alone, they transform a site of incarceration to one of physical intimacy. The Coup, with vocals by Silk E, has just released a song that could have easily served as a soundtrack for Assata and Kamau. In "Baby Let's Have a Baby," a woman soulfully encourages her lover:

Baby let's have a baby before bush do somethin' /crazy / Baby lets have a baby
before bush do somethin' /crazy / I don't want the world to blow before we get a /
chance to let our love grow / I don't want the world to blow before we get a /
chance to let our love grow / I really don't want to fuss and fight / Baby we might
have numbered nights. (The Coup 2006)

The Coup's song, and the situation between Assata and Kamau, speak volumes about the sexual politics of the Black Power Movement and Hip-Hop. The Movement and Hip-Hop equally address mainstream notions concerning sex and sexual desire. The Panthers were adamant about eradicating "bourgeois cancer" with its conventions and norms that repress physical pleasure. Hip-Hop artists, particularly female emcees, now most notably Lil' Kim, have been categorically denounced within the mainstream media through continual attacks against the sexual politics of their music. For the Black Power Movement, and equally Hip-Hop, sexual empowerment and self-proclaimed pleasure of the body must be present within the perspective of sociopolitical revolution. Returning again to The Coup, they make this imperative clear in the cut, "Laugh / Love / Fuck," the single which also appears on their latest CD, "Pick A Bigger Weapon," and opens with the chorus: "I'm here to laugh, love, fuck, and drink liquor / And help the damn revolution *come* quicker" [emphasis mine] (The Coup 2006). The arrival of the revolution is mated with sexual orgasmic pleasure. The revolution is defined as a physical act and as a release, or more significantly an ecstasy of revolution. We can define Assata and Kamau's union in sentimental terms by saying that the two "fell in love" while sequestered alone in the room. However, their union takes on far greater implications once we take into account the radical politics of sex and corporeal pleasure amidst a conservative and sexually repressed society that thinks it holds dominion over Black bodies.

Assata's sentencing was designed by the state to not only destroy Assata, but to spread wide-sweeping fear throughout the Black community at-large. In addition to facing what was intended to appear to be an endless tangle of state and federal

indictments, arraignments, and trials. Assata was initially confined and isolated for more than a year. She was denied virtually all social contact; received inadequate medical attention, was fed nutritionally deficient food, and was only allowed outside when she went to court. The incarceration is structured to weaken her physically and to make her believe that she is alone and forgotten, but Assata shares life with her daughter. Williams reports how between the ages of three and four Kakuya had

long child-adult conversations during the daily phone calls Assata made during her second stay in Rikers... [Kakuya] also knew the beautiful brightly colored blankets that covered her and her doll's bed, as well as the many dresses and coats she wore, were knitted for her by her mother. Assata's paintings and handmade birthday cards decorated Kakuya's room, and a pillowcase on which Assata has embroidered the words "Break De Chains" was never moved from its special place on her bed. (E. Williams 174)

Assata and Kakuya – the Black mother and her child – are significant. Their relationship directly defies the prison system used by the state to punish those it deems criminal. Assata, as a Black Liberation Army combatant, was made the criminal *because* she confronted racist state power and she knew the officially regulated interactions with her child were designed to disrupt the bond between a Black mother and her child. Yet Assata and her family made sure that where Kakuya lived, slept, how she dressed, and how she engaged art, including greetings celebrating her birth and existence, all came from the mother who sings of liberation. Assata's relationship is political because of its devotion and direction. A woman confronts her captors so she can celebrate Black life, and this confrontation is decidedly political in its intent when we consider how the

reproductive rights of Black women in the U.S. has endured a continuum of exploitation. During chattel slavery the birth rate of enslaved women was exploited to increase the slaveholder's and the nation's wealth, while today, it is presumed that "the key to solving America's social problems is to curtail Black women's birth rates" (Roberts 7).

Abu-Jamal also discusses interactions with his family. When he is first cast into the "bowels of this man-made hell," physical contact is not allowed with visitors. His daughter, because of her age and sensitivity, is not brought to visit him. During Hamida's first visit where she sees her father restricted and out of her reach, Hamida becomes defiant. Abu-Jamal tells us his daughter

burst into the tiny visiting room, her brown eyes aglitter with happiness, stopped, stunned staring into the glassy barrier between us; and burst into tears at this arrogant attempt at state separation....her petite fingers curled into tight fists, which banged and pummeled the Plexiglass barrier. "Break it! Break it!" she screamed." (*Live from Death Row* 22)

Hamida's response to seeing her father held back from her is swift and rebellious. When we juxtapose Hamida's experience to how Assata builds a loving relationship with her daughter, despite state hostility and intrusion, we can begin to see the factors that formulate Hip-Hop. Both Hamida and Kakuya had first-hand experience in seeing their parents criminalized for their acts of resistance. Children who came of age during the seventies and eighties, as did Hamida and Kakuya, often recognize their oppositional status to state repression. Hip-Hop Artist Mos Def, writing in response to the U.S. Department of Justice's May 2, 2005 announcement that it issued a \$1 million bounty for the capture of "Joanne Chesimard," [sic] ⁶ says that as a child his first memory of Assata

Shakur was the “‘Wanted’ posters all over [my] Brooklyn neighborhood” (Mos Def 1). Assata escaped from prison in 1979. Def says he couldn’t believe the information on the posters that informed the community that Assata was “armed and dangerous.” Instead he says, “When I looked at those posters and the mug shot of a slight, brown, high-cheek-boned woman with a full afro, I saw someone who looked like she was in my family, an aunt, a mother” (Mos Def 1).

Tricia Rose says Hip-Hop attempts to “negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of an African American and Caribbean history, identity, and community” (Rose 21). While Rose’s assertion is insightful, the term “negotiates” does not set well here since the term, used in this context, relies on equal shares of control and direction. Hip-Hop understands how negotiation is impossible within a racialized socioeconomic order historically reliant on the subjugation of Blacks. Instead, Hip-Hop culture seizes, rather than negotiates, the tools of the oppressor and re-appropriates them to disassemble and overthrow the repressive forces. And, since Hip-Hop’s defiance can be traced to the Black Power Movement and emerges out of and exists within a technological age, Hip-Hop re-appropriates these venues.

Evelyn Williams recalls, for example, how political prisoners consider their legal situation following an arrest as “simply a microcosm of the larger society’s imprisonment of all its Black citizens, and extrication from it must be defined by stratagems of political correctness” (E. Williams 84). Political prisoners, as Williams also learned from her niece, will not adhere to or recognize the court’s authority, and thus “will not conform to the rules of the court, to rules of criminal and civil procedure, or...rules of evidence, not

to mention rules of prescribed courtroom decorum” (E. Williams 84). However, what does take place is an act of re-appropriation as a means to activate self-determination. Assata Shakur’s statement, “To My People,” broadcasted on Black radio stations in New York and New Jersey, for example, was written on America’s “Independence Day, July 4th.” Assata wrote the statement while imprisoned, after reading newspaper clippings in which it was “obvious the press was trying to railroad [her], to make [her] seem like a monster” (A. Shakur 49). Assata’s statement calls out and then subverts the ideal of American “independence” since she spoke from prison about July 4th. Equally important, her message was relayed through a medium regulated by the state to propagate its agenda. And because her message was broadcast on radio stations formatted to appeal to a Black audience, it “talked back” to the state, signaling that Blacks are keenly aware of state control and that they have the means to oppose this control.

Hip-Hop is a network of artists who innovatively take the same tools available to the mainstream and recast them to create artistic expressions crafted through radical resistance. Comedian Dave Chappelle’s weekly half-hour, “Chappelle’s Show,” on Comedy Central, was unrelenting in its exposure of America’s racism. His program often operated as a form of guerilla warfare. According to Che Guevara, the guerilla fighter “fights in order to change the social system that keeps all his unarmed brothers in ignominy and misery” (Guevara 10). While Chappelle may not brandish a gun, his sketches do, however, set their sights on dismantling “the conditions of the reigning institutions” (Guevara 10). Chappelle’s character Tyrone Biggums, who is addicted to crack cocaine, subverts mainstream attitudes about drug addiction. Americans are most comfortable with maligning and maliciously poking fun at those who are addicted to

crack because they disregard the humanity of those addicted to crack. Yet, Tyrone, the trickster figure, time-and-time again strikes back at these presuppositions. Tyrone is featured in a sketch where he speaks at an inner-city elementary school as part of a national "Drug Awareness Week." He tells the children that drugs and alcohol have ruined his life. As he begins to explain the various ways to get "high" we see the students vigorously taking notes. Tyrone's school visit, viewers are told, has been made possible through funding provided by the Reagan administration. Born in D.C., Chappelle grew up during the Reagan regime. The comedian, no doubt, remembers the administration's anti-drug program that was spawned from Nancy Reagan's shallow response to drug use when she told American children to "Just Say No." Tyrone is a critical character that does not allow us to turn our backs on the horror of crack addiction, and at the same time Tyrone disassembles the national narrative constructed specifically to debase those who smoke crack. We have been programmed to concede crack as one of, if not the major problem, plaguing the Black community, and to also envision crack addiction as the sum total of the individual – as if the drug itself has the absolute power to obliterate a person's worth and possibility. The crack addict, we are told, and sometimes too readily accept, inherently lacks a sense of self-restraint and self-worth. Thus, those who are addicted to crack are perceived as self-destructive, and their crime somehow comes to represent a crime of the entire Black community.

Years earlier, Tupac Shakur resisted and then revolutionized the terminology attributed to crack addiction when he rapped in "Dear Mama" of how his mother's addiction did not preclude her status as "Black Queen." Shakur's mother, Afeni Shakur, as we know, has a long history of political activism as a Black Panther leader. Evelyn

Williams notes that Shakur's activism continued following her work with the BPP. Tupac's song reveals how his mother's love and protection was not destroyed by her addiction. And given this point of information we cannot ignore how her activism influenced the power of her son's political voice. As case in point, Abu-Jamal, within his discussion of the legacy of the BPP, concludes *We Want Freedom* with the heart-felt letter written by the then pregnant Afeni Shakur who, as a member of the Panther 21, was imprisoned in the city jail when she wrote of Tupac, as "the unborn baby (babies), within my womb" (Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row* 244). Within the same frame, as the sketch of Tyrone informs us, a drug addiction does not exclude someone from presenting an insightful social commentary concerning the country's duplicitous policy regarding its assessment of "street" drugs and its impact on the Black community. In yet another sketch, Chappelle exposes the existence of a racially biased U.S. law system, and to do so, he flips the script. The Black man who sells drugs is afforded every single opportunity to beat the charges set against him, as he faces a more than lenient due process, while the white CEO is brutally assaulted at every turn. Also in defiance of his producers, Chappelle featured a sketch where a crew of Playaz travel back in time to the era of chattel slavery where they encounter a group of Black enslaved men and women who ask, "When will we be free?" The Playaz respond: "How bout now?" as they shoot and kill the slave master on the spot. Also, each program features a performance by Hip-Hop artists, and Chappelle extends the connection between activism and Hip-Hop beyond his weekly program. Chappelle is featured as the guest editor of the October 2004 issue of the Hip-Hop magazine *XXL*. The issue features an interview conducted by Chappelle where he speaks with artists M-1 and stic.man of Dead Prez, Common, Talib Kweli, and

Kayne West. Chappelle mentions how he met M-1 and stic.man at a Black August benefit concert. The Black August benefit concerts raise funds and awareness about political prisoners throughout the Diaspora and have been held in New York, Cuba, South Africa, and Brazil. Chappelle, who proclaims Dead Prez as his “favorite group of any genre,” used the beat from the duo’s “Hip Hop” track for his program (121).

Although it is aired on a major cable network, “Chappelle’s Show” is designed for a “core fan base,” as, he says, “our own meeting place once a week” (Comedy Central 2004). The program is unrelenting in its objective to disrupt and dislocate white power structures. It consistently features issues impacting the Black community in order to defy institutionalized and de facto racism. Moreover, the program unites Hip-Hop with a revolutionary perspective. “Chappelle’s Show,” to my recollection, has yet to feature a segment focusing directly on the Panthers, but the program does operate through a Black radical philosophy of resistance. As the Playaz sketch reveals, the program is not afraid to understand the connection between armed self-defense and liberation.

However, as Abu-Jamal writes, the U.S. now, as in the past, is unable to recognize the impact of the Panthers, since the country treats the BPP as an “unwelcome member, sort of like a stepchild,” because Panthers “made Americans feel many things, but safe wasn’t one of them” (Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom* 7). Public outrages directed at Hip-Hop always charge that the culture is sexist and materialistic. But at the same time when the mainstream does pay attention to Hip-Hop it routinely classifies it as nihilistic noise. Radical Hip-Hop is simply not for the mainstream since the genre is an expression of Black self-determination. Also, a core belief in the necessity of rebellion and armed self-defense is the very stance that prompts alarm and pushes these artists into the margins.

But of course these groups and solo artists are marginalized, and seldom appear on video countdowns or receive radio rotation. Their messages resist the exploitation of Black culture as they expose what Elaine Brown has termed America's "rhetorical duplicity"; the language of today's "New Age Racism (Brown *Condemnation* 128). New Age Racism is a language that speaks about racial inclusion through a dialogue based on the belief that the nation has overcome racism, and yet the language relies on the delusion of white supremacy. According to Brown, "New Age Racism" impacts public policy and legislation since its rhetorical strategy is based on declaring racism as a thing of the past. As consequence, New Age Racism "dissolve[s] blacks' unity of purpose, a unity that represents the greatest potential threat to the New World order, to the powerlessness of one" (Brown, *Condemnation* 221).

Just as Assata Shakur's message and Afeni Shakur's letter are written in the hopes that the goal of the BPP/BLA will not be forgotten but carried on by successive generations, Dead Prez (DPZ) tell us in their collaboration with The Coup of their need to "remember Huey [Newton], Bobby Hutton, Fred [Hampton], and 'em" (Dead Prez 2002b). As a matter of fact, Hampton's son, Fred Hampton, Jr., collaborates with Dead Prez on the duo's "Hood News" track. DPZ refers to their message as "gangsta." Yet, with DPZ, there is a deliberate and sustained awareness of the various significations of their use of terminology and phrasing. It may be "gangsta," but the term is based on Black political knowledge, not imperialist consumerism. Gangsta here could refer to the "O.G's," the "original gangstas," read also as the "originators" and innovators of Black liberation struggle throughout the Diaspora. DPZ is paying homage to those countless individuals, women and men, who throughout history rebelled against chattel slavery.

neo-slavery, and now, neo-colonialism. Thus, gangsta, or the “original gangsta” – the “O.G” – could be Assata Shakur, Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Fred Hampton, or Marcus Garvey, all of whom serve as inspiration for their music. Hip-Hop artists are skilled in pulling together a strategy to define the racial nightmare that is America while also providing a message designed to inspire the people. On one hand they attack the enslaving forces of capitalism, while at the same time, they produce messages designed to encourage. Thus, the term “Revolutionary Gangsta” is more than fitting. The title, like the complex imperative of Hip-Hop, brings together a commitment to the theory and praxis of Black liberation and remains infused with the knowledge that the people have the power and energy to access and seize the tools of the oppressor.

Consider that, among other works, Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* was required reading for all Panthers. Fanon’s *Wretched* finds its way into Hip-Hop via the film *Bamboozled*. In the film, the revolutionary Hip-Hop group, the “Mau Maus,” lead by “Big Blak Afrika,” who is portrayed by Hip-Hop artist Mos Def, audition for a television variety program. During their audition they perform their song “Blak Iz Blak,” in which they rap about social injustice and responses to Black exploitation. Fanon’s theory of revolution is evoked in “Blak Iz Blak” during the first chorus when the Mau Maus exclaim, “The way Frantz Fanon put it / They lucky I ain’t read *Wretched* yet!” (Lawrence “Blak Iz Blak”). By channeling *Wretched*, the BPP were able to import Fanon’s strategies to dismantle European imperialism in Africa into “principles and methods acceptable to the brothers on the block” (Newton 111). BPP praxis was borne out of contemplations about the Diaspora. The organization initiated a program of self-defense where BPP members “trailed cop cars in the Black neighborhoods armed with

guns, tape recorders, cameras, and law books” (Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom* 67).

While the BPP “Police-Alert Patrols” were designed to eliminate police brutality in the Black community, the initiative was instrumental on other critical levels. The BPP also served notice to police agencies that it could no longer monopolize violence as a means to systematically brutalize Blacks with impunity. Also, the Black community was well aware of institutionalized racism that sanctioned police attacks, but BPP patrols mobilized the community so it could control confrontations with the police, instead of being victimized by these encounters. And within this context, the patrols were instrumental in demystifying police authority. What developed was the strategy George Jackson would term “counter-terrorism” – “a facet of urban people’s guerilla warfare” that is to be implemented within a nation where violence is reserved only for the “omnipresent administrator” (Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* 34). Counter-terrorism, therefore, destabilizes the oppressor’s sense of security and privilege. In *Negroes with Guns* Robert Williams offers an example of the impact of counter-terrorism. He recalls how a crowd of whites in Monroe, South Carolina was immobilized by gun-wielding Southern Blacks who were defending themselves against a white mob. Williams writes of how one elderly white man, who began “crying like a baby,” had to be led away when he realized the police were not going to arrest Williams and his comrades in arms (R. Williams 10).

When asked to explain their name, “Dead Prez,” M-1, who takes his name from an assault rifle, explains: “For me, Dead Prez means Dead Bush, Dead George Bush – straight up hole in the head. You know what I mean?” (DJ Cloak, forthcoming). As straightforward as M-1’s response may be, Dead Prez is not exclusively interested in

taking out Bush, as if his death and his death alone would instantaneously usher in the liberation of Blacks. Rather, M-1's response works in unison with Fanon's assertion: "For the native, life can only spring up again out of the rotting corpse of the settler" (Fanon, *Wretched* 93). The goal is to destroy imperialist authority and privilege symbolized by the office of the president. Perhaps Safiya Bukhari clarifies this point when she recalls how her BPP comrade Cetewayo told her "[t]o deal with the principle and not the personality" (Bukhari, "Coming of Age" 10). According to stic.man, "Dead Prez" signifies on U.S. administration and policy. He explains: "We recognize Bush and Clinton and the dudes ain't bringin no life in our community. They dead to us – they policy, they system is dead" (*Dead Prez: It's Bigger than Hip-Hop*). M-1/Mutulu Olubalu and stic.man/Khnum Olubala met in Tallahassee, Florida, and their messages showcase a flow reminiscent of the Panther's southern roots. The BPP may have officially started in a northern state, but "the young folks who established and staffed the organization came from predominately Southern backgrounds and therefore had to have suffered a kind of dual alienation" (Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom* 6).⁷ It was the children, whose families attempted to escape the racial terror of the South and encountered the same in the ghetto's "up North," who started the BPP and moved into the BLA. BPP Los Angeles chapter's Deputy Minister of Defense, Geronimo ji-Jaga, grew up in lower Louisiana. As a child he learned the value of armed self-defense and solidarity. His uncle was a member of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the deacons of his church armed themselves in order to protect the congregation from the Ku Klux Klan. ji-Jaga also cites how the church deacons inspired the formation of the Deacons of Defense. After graduating from high school, ji-Jaga

enlisted in the army and fought in Vietnam. He states very clearly that he did not enlist out of a sense of patriotism; rather, his “Elders,” the church deacons, who had fought in World War II and Korea counseled ji-Jaga and his classmates to do so because they were now the “young soldiers.” The Elders then instructed ji-Jaga to return to the war at home:

Martin Luther was like the god of the older people, and Malcolm X was like our god. We were the young crazy people. But we respected the Elders, and we loved Martin Luther King through the wisdom of the Elders. But when Martin Luther King was killed April 4, 1968, the Elders of Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, sent out a call. We can talk about this now. We were told to come home. And we came home (ji-Jaga 75)

Dead Prez’s “Food, Clothes + Shelter pt. 2” encapsulates the Deputy Minister of Defense’s ideas concerning the “Elders” and war. The song’s title, taken from the BPP’s “Ten Point Program,” opens with the sounds of rapid gunfire, and a bomb explosion that are all elements used to suggest war. But war, as ji-Jaga’s Elders understood it, was not only taking place overseas, it was being waged in their communities. And as DPZ raps, the Black community is held under siege and occupied by the police force. Also, the lyrics pay tribute to the Southern elders who pass their wisdom on to the young to recognize the necessities of life: The rapid-fire rap begins:

Undercover pigs jumpin outta cabs / niggaz get nabbed / I seen it wit my own eyes in Tallahassee Florida / where I was raised by my elders / who taught me the fundamentals of food, clothes, and shelter. (Dead Prez 2002b).

M-I and stic.man migrated to New York and work with the National People's Democratic Uhuru Movement, an organization defending the rights of "Africans." And, as the two will tell you, although born and raised in the United States, they are African since "aint no point in time have we became Americans" (Ablo 110). The term "African American," M-I continues, "came from the middle-class movement to assimilate" (Ablo 110). M-I and stic.man consider centuries of brutal racial oppression throughout the U.S. a clear indication that Blacks living in the confines of this country never were and never will be citizens under this national regime. This assertion is the driving force behind their CD, *Turn Off the Radio: The Mixtape Volume 1* that includes the tracks "That's War" and "We Need a Revolution."

We can turn to Technique – a solo artist who in the beginning of his career opened for Dead Prez. Although Technique does not directly refer to his style of music as "Revolutionary Gangsta," the artist does see himself in opposition to the 'candy rappers' who dominate radio and video airplay. Born in a military hospital in Peru, Technique now lives in Harlem. The inside jacket of Technique's CD, *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, features full-page artwork by Alton Fletcher, who depicts a full-scale assassination at the White House. Fletcher's art is reminiscent of the artistic vision of the *Black Panther* newspaper under the direction of Emory Douglass, the organization's Minister of Culture. From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, Douglass was responsible for creating artwork framed by a "protest aesthetic aimed at convincing audiences of black power" (Doss 175). Douglass created drawings designed to demystify state authority by "mak[ing] the people aware of the character of those who oppress us" and directing them to understand that they had "the right to destroy the enemy" (Doss 183).

For example, the November 21, 1970 issue of the *Black Panther* featured a montage drawing depicting various members of the Black community shooting the police. Placed at the center of the artwork is a photograph of a BPP rally, and framing the rally are drawings of Panthers and non-Panther members, women, men, and children alike, ending the lives of police officers. Blazoned across the piece is the message, "WE HAVE TO BEGIN TO DRAW PICTURES THAT WILL MAKE PEOPLE GO OUT AND KILL PIGS" (Doss 176). In other artistic renditions Douglass would routinely recast the police as hanged pigs, and he would include the actual badge numbers of the cops who harassed Blacks in the neighborhood.

To return to Technique's CD jacket, at the center of Fletcher's art is a drawing of George W. Bush, who sits at his desk in the Oval Office. A plate piled with cocaine is placed before him, and Bush has taken a fatal gunshot through his eye. The office is riddled with the dead bodies of Bush, Sr., Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and Osama Bin Laden. Tom Ridge and Colin Powell are also present, but unlike the others, Ridge, although shot, remains alive, and Powell, who has not been shot, lies in a corner alive and blindfolded. Among the piles of money that litter the floor is a scattering of memorandums with the following titles: "CIA," "9/11 Report," "Iran Contra," "ANTHRAX," and "MUMIA." The staging is critical. The viewer is intended to recognize on one level the markers of collusion that transpire within the Oval Office. The presence of Bush, Sr. within this scene exemplifies the legacy of corruption emanating from the White House. No doubt a diabolical meeting was in progress when the revolutionaries arrived – given the fact that America's leaders, past and present, were enjoying illegal drugs, counting their blood money, and reviewing memos documenting

insidious manipulations, lies and cover-ups. The site of America's seat of power and prestige has been revealed as the nation's base headquarters of corruption. The perspective not only disrupts the readily assumed sanctity and authority of the Oval Office, but also exposes its inhabitants as treacherous and thus marked for obliteration. Like Technique, M-1 and stic.man set their sights on the nation's capitol when they classify Bush, the CIA and the FBI "as the real terrorists" in "Know Your Enemy" (Dead Prez 2002b). Two more important points need to be made in reference to Fletcher's artwork, which is really a form of graffiti writing par excellence. Ridge is depicted as sitting immobilized in the corner with a look of dismay and astonishment as he stretches his hand out toward the person who has blazed his way into the room. While the image features Ridge's alarm at the audacity of this assault, we need to recognize that Ridge, together with his co-conspirators, has been caught off guard. Everyone is supposed to be caught off guard here – not only those in the office, but also those of us who witness the depiction. This point directs me to the image of the blindfolded Powell. Both Elaine Brown and Amiri Baraka, through their critique of the careers of Powell and Condoleezza Rice, discuss how New Age Racism promotes Powell and Rice's positions within the Clinton and Bush administrations as indicators of racial progress. Baraka, in "Somebody Blew Up America," asks in the rhythmic/fearless flow and dialogue of Hip-Hop, "Who know what kind of skeeza is a Condoleezza?" (Baraka line 94), while Technique proclaims in "The 4th Branch": "The new age is before us, yet the past refuses to rest in its shallow grave" as he proclaims Rice is "just a new-age Sally Hemings" (Immortal Technique 2003). Brown defines both Powell and Rice as "New Age House Negroes" who have served and sustained structures of white power within presidential

administrations. The two espouse and validate U.S. policy. The very presence of these “New Age House Negroes” is used to validate U.S. policy as racially inclusive. As Brown writes:

More than merely advocating and sanctioning government policies that contributed to and maintained the wretched state of ghettoized and millions of other poor blacks, there had now come to be a new crop of Negroes who, positioned to actually influence the outcome of government activity, were actively undermining the cause of improving the lot of blacks in America. (Brown *Condemnation* 220)

Rice, who has aggressively served both Bush administrations, steadfastly ignores the extent to which poverty is racialized. Thus, Rice, as Brown reports, opposes affirmative action programs, since she believes that this country already operates on a system of equal opportunity. Brown refers to Powell as “Clarence Thomas with a gun.” Powell, she writes, was moved from the “field” of battle into the White “house” once he demonstrated for George Bush, Sr. his “readiness to kill for American oil companies” (Brown *Condemnation* 226).

M-1, stic.man, and Technique signify on America’s exploitation of Black culture. Technique, for instance, samples from a Disney rendition of the children’s fable, “Pinocchio.” Technique laughs on the cut, when he proclaims this song is for the kids – a re-telling of the children’s story of power and of who controls the strings. Technique raps about his objective to maintain control of his talent and vision. He explains that his track “Freedom of Speech” has dual meaning: “I refuse to let the labels control me, just like I won’t let the government do so to my opinion” (Immortal Technique 2004a). DPZ

makes a similar assertion. In "It's Bigger than Hip-Hop," DPZ targets how corporate America attempts to enslave Hip-Hop artists by controlling public perceptions of Hip-Hop. This observation is initially established within the song "Turn Off the Radio" that opens the CD. It is here where Dead Prez raps that radio airplay is dominated by those songs that are used to spread the misconception that Hip-Hop is exclusively about "party and dance." As a tradition, Hip-Hop takes immense pleasure in "party and dance" because it is an essential element of Hip-Hop. Black youth understand the brutal opposition they must face in order to survive in North America – a terrain where they are cordoned off within the nation's central cities and are expected not only to live without joy, but to repress any hope of escaping. Hip-Hop at the same time expresses Black youth's culture awareness of their condition, and provides the site where they can "talk back" and can experience the ecstasy of rebelling against these sociopolitical machinations.

Conclusion

Throughout my dissertation I traced the significance of the Black Radical Movement and its impact on contemporary literature and culture. By using Black radical theory as an interpretive lens, I was able to look back and to see old texts with fresh eyes, from a new critical direction. African American literature, beginning with chattel slave narratives, has devoted attention to the pathway to freedom, to paraphrase Frederick Douglass. These early texts, centered on ideals of freedom and liberation, sought to establish a Black identity opposed to racist white American presuppositions regarding Blacks. But the authors of chattel slave narratives, which were politically conscious in their focus, sought the attention and support of conscientious white America in order to realize this emancipation. By detailing the horror of slavery, Black authors appealed to a white reading audience, and in doing so, aligned themselves with mainstream cultural values. Within her appeal to white Northern women, for example, Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) re-inscribes conservative bourgeois models of subjectivity. Throughout her text, Jacobs attempts to expose the sexual oppression of Black women, but her strategy relies on an adherence to middle-class ideas of not only of virtue, but also of class distinctions, and a doctrine of pacifism. Jacobs virtually apologizes to her readers for becoming pregnant while enslaved, and at the outset she attempts to establish a kinship between herself and her readers by evoking her white heritage, which then allows her to establish her quest for freedom as a right and privilege. A textual analysis of Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* proved that conventional interpretations of these canonical works readily conceptualize liberation as a male-centered prerogative. My critique of these

classics, however, reveals that Black male liberation, within the context of both chattel and neo-slavery, is made possible through the subjugation of Black women. Within *My Bondage* and *Native Son*, we witness a bourgeois mentality that invariably defines liberation as an act of acquiring absolute dominion over the “other.” In their attempt to gain full membership within American society, the Black bourgeoisie can only envision liberation in terms of ownership, which, in these canonized texts by Black males, results in a reiteration of enslavement. A ritual of ownership must be performed to claim full personhood, a ritual that is enacted as sexual violence against Black women. Moreover, bourgeois norms of subjectivity, when adopted by the Black middle class, require the disavowal of the actual socioeconomic condition of Blacks. The Black bourgeoisie can only envision its inclusion in American society, can only establish its full membership within the elite “master” class, on the condition of objectifying the majority of poor Blacks as “other.” I asserted that this formulation, exemplified by Douglass and Wright, of “master” and “other,” resides at the center of male-authored texts. Within this context, the pre-existing social hierarchy is re-configured in terms of gender wherein Black males authors adopt an unconscious identification with white male “masters” through the subjugation of Black women.

But by the late twentieth-century, Black literature began to talk back on multiple fronts. This generation of authors located their voices through the language of the Black Power Movement, which was infused with the teachings of Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*), Robert Williams (*Negroes with Guns*), and Malcolm X (*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*). This Movement, borne out of a response to state oppression, included the militancy and strategy of armed-self defense advocated by the women and men of the

Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. These organizations demystified state authority by showing the Black community that it and could and should defend itself by any means necessary. The BPP and the BLA organized “survival programs” throughout the country that included police alert patrols, breakfast programs for children, food and clothing drives, sickle-cell clinics, ambulance services, political education programs, and a clandestine network that engineered the escape of political prisoners from the nation’s penitentiaries. All these activities bolstered a broader campaign of self-determination, set against a society that defined Black life as meaningless and captive. Panthers and BLA soldiers armed themselves in order to protect their community from the onslaught of police assaults and a biased judicial system, and they were equally adamant about excising the “bourgeois cancer” of the Black middle-class.

On these subjects Elaine Brown was indispensable. Her narrative, *A Taste of Power*, is introduced through the proclamation that continually manages to outrage and create trepidation: “I got all the guns and all the money.” *A Black woman* in control of the largest revolutionary organization in the entire history of North America, which managed to bring fear to white America and the Black bourgeoisie alike. The former BPP chairman’s extensive research of the economic and ideological structure of slavery in North America was essential to this project. Brown would announce throughout *The Condemnation of Little B*: “The goal of *freedom* must return to the top of our agenda. For it is the only business of the slave” (357). By calling our attention to the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which re-defines rather than abolishes slavery, Brown provides insight that reinforces George Jackson’s (*Soledad Brother*) theory of neo-slavery. Both revolutionaries assert that the subjugation of Blacks within the

confines of contemporary America is determined through a system of brutal socioeconomics. The large majority of Blacks in the United States are cordoned off in central cities where state-inflicted poverty serves the needs of the state. Brown draws attention to the incarceration rates of Blacks in U.S. prisons, where the incarcerated serve as slaves within the mammoth prison industrial complex. And yet, Assata Shakur (*Assata*) and Huey Newton (*Revolutionary Suicide*) both remind us that in terms of Black existence in North America, prison is merely a microcosm of the outside world.

E. Franklin Frazier (*The Black Bourgeoisie*), Fanon, and Malcolm X worked well in theoretical union in their indictment of Black bourgeois consciousness. While Fanon spoke about the “native intellectuals,” the “faithful followers” who do their best to get on *within* the framework of the colonial system” [emphasis mine] (*Wretched* 112), Frazier and Malcolm identified contemporary Black elites as the descendants of chattel house slaves who aligned their interests with white masters. Brown continues the discussion about Black collusion by specifically reporting on the careers of several “successful” Blacks whose rise to fame and fortune, which was bought at the expense of inflicting further damage throughout the Black community. On this point, Brown, together with Frazier, Fanon, and Malcolm are clear. Black elites, through their doctrine of “racial progress,” directly impede the process of empowerment for Black people. The activities of the Black bourgeoisie maintain the status quo. They are subsumed within an ideology that misinterprets America as a safe haven founded on an egalitarian model.

The literature that followed the Black Power Movement was receptive to the era. Literature was employed as a meeting place where Blacks began speaking to each other about their shared experiences within the Diaspora. Writers no longer attempted to

appease a white reading public because the focus was on issues impacting Black life, and this introspective literature included an array of works that dealt specifically with political struggle and a quest for liberation. Authors began talking about past events with a new reverence. Nat Turner's rebellion and the Haitian Revolution were re-visited in *Dessa Rose* (Sherley Anne Williams). The bourgeois ideal of "racial progress" and "integration" were exposed as sheer hypocrisy in *The Spook who Sat by the Door* (Sam Greenlee) and *Linden Hills* (Gloria Naylor). Acts of self-defense were considered an undeniable necessity rather than psychosis, as in case of *Flyin West* (Pearl Cleage) and the "Seven Days" of *Song of Solomon* (Toni Morrison). And white America was put on notice instead of being appealed to. Toni Bambara's *Those Bones are Not My Child* and Tayari Jones's *Leaving Atlanta* are communiqués that alert the nation that the horrifically systematic murder of Black children mobilizes the community to action rather than making it submissive and catatonic with fear.

Indisputably, Hip-Hop continues this tradition of rebellion and defiance. All the ingredients are there – the language, the strategy, the spirit of resistance, the demand for self-definition. Hip-Hop, the culture created by the children whose parents and grandparents activated the Movement, has embraced their foreparents' revolutionary ideals. Musical artists such as Dead Prez and visual artists such as Alton Fletcher create specific and deliberate links to the Black Panthers and other revolutionary groups in order to articulate their messages within a tradition in opposition to bourgeois notions of subjectivity as ownership. By embracing the unlawful pleasures contained in acts of resistance, such artists construct identities and libidinal connections that are both in opposition to and outside of dominant norms of personhood, citizenship, and subjectivity.

Endnotes

¹ In a telephone interview with CNN, U.S. Representative John Conyers from Detroit, recalls that Parks worked as member of his staff when he was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1964: "I think that [Parks], as the mother of the new civil rights movement, has left an impact not just on the nation, but on the world. She was a real apostle of the nonviolence [sic] movement." John Conyers interview with CNN, October 25, 2005.

² Within his formulation of Bigger Thomas, for *Native Son*, author Richard Wright pulled from his childhood memories in Mississippi and Tennessee the experiences of young Black men living in the Jim Crow South. He recalls two young men whom he titles "Bigger No. 3" and "Bigger No. 4":

There was Bigger No. 3, whom the white folks called a "bad nigger." He carried his life in his hands in a literal fashion. I once worked as ticket-taker in a Negro movie house (all movie houses in Dixie are Jim Crow; there are movies for whites and movies for blacks), and many times Bigger No. 3 came to the door and gave my arm a hard pinch and walked into the theater. Resentfully and silently, I'd nurse my bruised arm. Presently, the proprietor would come over and ask how things were going. I'd point into the darkened theater and say "Bigger's in there." "Did he pay?" the proprietor would ask. "No, sir," I'd answer. The proprietor would pull down the corners of his lips and speak through his teeth: "We'll kill that goddamn nigger one of these days." And the episode would end right there.

And there was Bigger No. 4, whose only law was death. The Jim Crow laws of the South were not for him. But as he laughed and cursed and broke them, he knew that some day he'd have to pay for his freedom. (508).

³ Mumia Abu-Jamal (*We Want Freedom* 2004) discusses how the question of freedom and liberation have always remained the central question within radical activism (17).

⁴ From Lil' Kim's "The Jump Off." (2003).

⁵ Elaine Brown's *The Condemnation of Little B* (2002) chronicles at length Atlanta's quest to reassert its economic might following the Civil War and how this objective recapitulates racial oppression in the twentieth century and beyond.

⁶ The United States government refuses to recognize the name "Assata Shakur." In her narrative, Shakur writes: "The name JoAnne began to irk my nerves. I had changed a lot and moved to a different beat, felt like a different person ... I felt like an African woman ... and rejoiced in it" (185). Shakur designates "JoAnne Chesimard" as her "slave name." By referring to Shakur as "*Joanne* Chesimard" and not as "JoAnne," the U.S. government not only misspells her first name, but re-establishes the slave which she chooses to reject. In doing so the U.S. government, in issuing the bounty, appears determined to enslave her when we also consider how the bounty operates as a re-instatement of nineteenth-century Fugitive Slave Laws.

⁷ In the section, "Southern Roots" Abu-Jamal (2004, 6) outlines key BPP personnel and their Southern origins: BPP co-founder and Minister of Defense Huey P. Newton and Los Angeles chapter's Deputy Minister of Defense Geronimo ji-Jaga, (Louisiana); BPP co-founder and Chairman Bobby Seale and Central Committee member Kathleen Cleaver, (Texas); Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, (Arkansas); Chief

of Staff David Hilliard, (Alabama); New York chapter Section Leaders Assata Shakur and Afeni Shakur, (North Carolina); and *The Black Panther* Editor Elbert Howard (Tennessee).

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