

THE MOTHER'S MARK: MATRILINEAL INSCRIPTION, CORPOREALITY, AND
IDENTITY FORMATION IN MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS
IN BLACK WOMEN'S LITERATURE

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I. Introduction

“The influence was absolutely fundamental and crucial but it came in a negative way. My mother never directly encouraged me to write. What I absorbed from her was more a reaction to her negativity. It was her saying to me when I was in junior high school after I’d won all the medals, saying to me out of her own defeat and failure, that I was a failure. No, the influence was not positive, it was full of problems, stress, antagonisms. My mother was well aware that it was a power struggle, that I was seeking to replace her. She called me a “force-ripe woman” She wanted me to get a job as a secretary, not go to college. She wanted to get along in a kind of minimal way and she disapproved of all my ambitions”

—Paule Marshall¹

In this quote, taken from a 1981 interview with Mary Helen Washington, the novelist Paule Marshall paints a portrait of a mother who is at once an adversary, a “fundamental” influence, an unsuccessful saboteur, and a proponent of practical ambitions for a black daughter growing up in a time when her career options were severely limited. This contradictory characterization of black maternity is one that Marshall explores in-depth in her debut novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). However, she is not the only writer to grapple with problematic maternal figures in black women’s literature. As Trudier Harris points out in “This Disease Called Strength: Some Observations on the Compensating Construction of Black Female Character” (1995), black writers have continuously returned to the trope of the black female protagonist—most often the black mother—to respond to stereotypes about women of color. According to Harris:

¹ Mary Helen Washington, “I Sign My Mother’s Name: Alice Walker, Dorothy West, Paule Marshall,” *Mothering the Mind: Twelve Writers and Their Silent Partners*, ed. Ruth Perry and Martine Watson Brownley (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984) 156.

Historically, black writers have assumed that strength was the one unassailable characteristic they could apply to black women. If black women could be attacked for being promiscuous, they certainly could not be attacked for being strong. If they could be criticized for acquiescing in their own debasement during slavery, they could certainly not be criticized for taking their burdens to the Lord and leaving them there. Unquestionably, strength was frequently the only virtue available to black women. Without extensive financial resources, or militia, or public opinion, or even mobs to protect them when threatened, they had *only* their minds and bodies (and these could obviously and easily be violated). (109-10)

As Harris points out, early black writers responded to public perceptions about black women by offering an alternative paradigm of invincibility, thus setting a precedent of pathological characterization that persists to this day. Paradoxically, however, the paradigm is most problematic because, while it interrogates some dangerous stereotypes about black women, it only reifies others. According to Belinda Edmondson, one of the many justifications for New World slavery and colonialism was the perceived “inversion of gender characteristics” among blacks (8). Men, who were seen as docile and lazy, were unfit to rule over their families during slavery or over their countries after colonial independence. Women, on the other hand, were posited as aggressive, domineering, and emasculating—a force that black men were too weak to keep under control. As such, the indomitable strength with which black writers often fortify their characters plays into these constructs because, as Harris points out, that strength typically manifests itself in traits like “taciturnity,” “emotional domination,” and a propensity to violence (111). And, even though many fictionalized mothers make dangerous sacrifices for the sake of their children, these traits also alienate their spouses and families because the women are so often portrayed as “more suprahuman than human, more introspective than involved, more silently working out what [they] perceived to be best for [their] children than

actively and warmly communicating those desires to them” (Harris 111). Thus, like Marshall’s mother, although the maternal paradigm is convinced that she alone knows what is best for her children, her determination to control them creates both hostile conflict as well as emotional estrangement.

While Trudier Harris’s definition of the “disease” of strength set a precedent for critical interpretations of black female characters, what I find most interesting about her analysis is the fact that, even though she refers to texts written by male writers like James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright, and discusses both theirs as well as black women writers’ depictions of destructive mother-son relationships, the majority of her readings are centered on female-authored texts wherein black maternal figures forge powerful but antagonistic bonds with their daughters. Harris includes works by Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, and J. California Cooper—all of which offer interpretations of the pathological black mother figure and her contentious bonds with female children. And, while Harris’s motives for doing so are open to debate, one thing is clear: the wide selection of texts and the feminocentric tenor of her work speak to a trans-textual phenomenon that is present in black literature in general, and in black women’s literature in particular: the tendency for writers to explore various representations of black womanhood through the lens of traumatic mother-daughter relationships.

Harris’s identification of a matrilineal, psycho-social affliction whose inter-textual representations are frequently produced by women raises some important questions about black women’s literature. For example: what specific opportunities for representation does the mother figure offer to black women writers that keep them returning time and time again to this admittedly-problematic trope? How do those

opportunities also account for these same writers' tendencies to focus particularly on mother-daughter relationships? How are various portrayals of the mother-daughter dyad linked to other themes often addressed in the larger genre of black literature; themes that include: the portrayal of the black female mind and body in the quest for autonomy and personhood; the formation of a racial identity separate from external violations of the body; and the black subject's connection to national, regional, gender, and other communal histories? In this dissertation, I address some of these questions with close readings of four female-authored texts—Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994), Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006), and Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* (2005)—through which I do the following:²

- 1) I trace the evolution of a specific mother-daughter dyad in black women's literature through which black women writers interrogate predominant notions of black female identity. In a phenomenon I call *matrilineal inscription*, I identify maternal figures who, influenced by a need to protect and prepare their daughters for lives as black women, attempt to control—or reinscribe—the narratives of the

² Over the course of this project, I have been asked several times about my choice of texts. Why would I group an immigrant novel, a migration narrative, a bi-racial bildungsroman, and historical fiction together under the same rubric? The simplest answer is that I wanted narratives of liminality—texts that contained characters who did not fit neatly into racial or national categories—namely because my theory of matrilineal inscription is a description of the ways in which daughters create autonomous identities through interrogations of those same categorizations. I also wanted to illustrate the trans-generic possibilities of my theory by offering close readings of texts including characters who exhibit a range of the physical, psychological, cultural, and ideological nuances inherent in Diaspora, nation, and community. While it is true that there *are* distinct cultural differences, and that those differences should never be glossed over or elided, I still subscribe to a philosophy similar to that of Paule Marshall, the author of one of the texts chosen for this project. According to her: “I have no patience for black American writers who feel that the Caribbean is exotic and curious and different. To me, it's all part of the same thing. There may be differences of expression, but at the base, it's the same cultural expression” (qtd. in Gadsby 166). Though I will not try to speak for Marshall, I will say that, for me, the term “cultural expression” means the ways in which black writers, both male and female, speak back to the corporeal subjectivity (and all that it entails) that, as Spillers so eloquently articulates below, lies at the heart of the New World black experience.

daughters' lives. But, by doing so, they inadvertently create instances of trauma that are mediated through acts of corporeal violence.

- 2) I argue that, in addition to trauma, matrilineal inscription also creates a crisis of counter-inscription: daughters claim their agency by resisting matrilineal influences and, in the process, inscribe their own narratives of identity that are illustrated through acts of contra-respondent corporeality. Nevertheless, as antithetical as it is intended to be, this counter-inscription is shaped by—and sometimes mimics—the mother's intended “mark” on the daughter's body and mind.
- 3) I also argue that, through depictions of matro-filial struggles for corporeal dominance, black women writers illustrate inter-generational interrogations of black female identity. Through matrilineal inscription, mothers challenge the expectations of black female bodies placed on them and their daughters by outside forces (or what I call *extrinsic inscription*). On the other hand, the daughters' resistance to matrilineal inscription is a double interrogation of both inscriptive processes. Through these compound interrogations, these writers create alternative representations of self-articulated black female identity.
- 4) Additionally, I analyze an illustration of the absence of matrilineal inscription, arguing that, in this particular depiction of a daughter who completely rejects the mother-daughter relationship, one black woman writer illuminates the dangers of denying oneself the opportunity of interpersonal interactions with maternal figures by depicting a daughter who, by rejecting one such relationship, is unable to establish her own identity.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that, through depictions of matrilineal inscription, some black women writers illustrate how maternal-filial tropes are far more than just authorial reactions to stereotypes about black women. In fact, they follow a self-theorizing and still-unfolding trajectory of representation that has, heretofore, remained unidentified, and that has recently begun to question the ways in which black motherhood has been assumed and defined in extant critical conversations.

II. Matrilineal Inscription and Trauma

This dissertation enters a rich history of conversations about depictions of black maternal-filial relationships and black female corporeality. However, what I offer here is a theory of matrilineal inscription, one that encapsulates the cycle of trauma, knowledge transmission, and identity formation that critics have identified in black women's literature, but one that I argue is mapped out specifically on the body of the black mother and, subsequently, of the daughter. This mapping corresponds to a history of black female corporeal exploitation in the New World; at the same time, however, it particularizes that influence in various narratives of identity formation. As Hortense Spillers points out in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), the black body has always been a contested space in which external forces fight for dominance of a corporeal terrain (206). As Spillers writes:

...this body, at least from the point of view of the captive community, focuses a private and a particular space, at which point biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological forces converge. This profound intimacy of interlocking detail is disrupted, however, by the externally imposed meanings and uses: (1) the captive body as the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality, (2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—it is reduced to a thing, to *being* for the captor; (3) in this distance *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a

physical and biological expression of “otherness”; (4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning. (206, author’s emphasis).

Within the white male patriarchy of New World slavery, the black body is paradoxically over-eroticized, objectified, “othered,” and finally disempowered. And, in the process, argues Spillers, gender specificity is lost (206). At the same time, however, she contends that the black female body is a particularly important site of commodification; its orphanage in the eyes of laws against rape and its capacity to reproduce human capital have “mark[ed] the flesh as a prime commodity for exchange,” since the early days of slavery (220).³ By making this distinction, Spillers identifies an essentialization of corporeality that makes the black female body uniquely vulnerable, even as it de-genders it by reducing it to a mechanism of production: a thing that is valuable for its ability to produce more things.

This problem, which I call *extrinsic inscription*⁴ plays a decisive role in representations of mother-daughter relationships in black women’s literature. Because of

³The Jamaican author Opal Palmer Adisa makes a similar claim; one that is specifically about slave communities, but which arguably could apply to any black community wherein the rituals of subjugation were played out in acts of violence. In “Undeclared War: African-American Woman Writers Explicating Rape,” Adisa points out that the sexual violation of the black female slave “revealed the impotency of the *entire* slave community”: it was done to show both African American women *and* men that they were completely and utterly defenseless against white colonial power (231,239, emphasis mine).

⁴ Although the term *extrinsic inscription*—and, for that matter, *matrilineal inscription*—are ones that I developed from my reading of Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” it is not an entirely new one in feminist discourse. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), Elizabeth Grosz devotes an entire chapter to corporeal inscription that is entitled “The Body as Inscriptive Surface.” Here she describes the various social, cultural, psychological, neurobiological, and a host of other factors that influence the inscription—or reinscription—of various meanings onto both male and female bodies (138-60). Because I only discovered this text after I had already formulated my theory, and because Spillers’ work both precedes Grosz’s as well as provides a better focus on black female bodies specifically, I chose to leave it out of my discussion, but to include it here as a reference for further reading. Interestingly, in spite of its proximity to Spillers’ theory, I was surprised to find that *Volatile Bodies* makes no reference to any of Spillers’ work; it is not until Victoria Burrows’ *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) that the author makes the connection between the two scholars. Not surprisingly,

the nature of inscription that Spillers describes, I argue that black women writers often illustrate the maternal-filial power struggle through nuanced depictions of trauma that are often mediated through corporeal violence, or what I call *matrilineal inscription*. Historically, black mothers have had the responsibility of protecting their daughters from harmful outside forces while, at the same time, preparing them to successfully navigate what Patricia Hill Collins calls the “interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression” that keep the system of extrinsic inscription in place (*Black Feminist Thought* 124). In order to achieve this, some try desperately to choose the paths by which their daughters will travel this complicated socio-political maze, shielding them from extrinsic inscription by super-imposing their *own* ambitions; a paradoxical act that, in itself (albeit unintentionally) recreates an intimate version of what Spillers calls the “violent...severing of the captive body from its motive *will*, its active *desire*” (206, my emphasis).

And, like extrinsic inscription, this narrative struggle is often mapped out on the bodies of daughters for several reasons. As Hill Collins contends, some black mothers are overbearing because they must physically protect their daughters’ bodies long enough for them to have a chance to achieve long-term goals (*Black Feminist Thought* 125; Hill Collins, “Meaning of Motherhood” 55). The very material consequences of the “marked” black female body, which include hunger, poverty, and the susceptibility to rape and other forms of violence, are all physical threats that come early to black girls, and mothers who understand this are often tasked with striking a difficult balance between

Burrows points out that Grosz’s theory of inscription glosses over “the whole history that underwrites the dichotomising [sic] of racial bodies in the socio-political order of what became known as the New World” (Burrows 5).

ensuring their daughters' physical survival and "encouraging them to transcend the boundaries confronting them" (*Black Feminist Thought* 124, 125).

Interestingly, many of these mothers feel that the successful navigation of social, economic, and gender oppression is achieved through knowledge about how to *behave* one's body in ways that encourage autonomy and prevent exploitation. In two of the most comprehensive studies about black mother-daughter relationships to date, Jualynne Dodson and Gloria Joseph both found that black maternal instruction often includes lessons about corporeality.⁵ In *To Define Black Womanhood* (1970), Dodson found that many of her respondents recall specific instructions from their mothers concerning the importance of a strong work ethic, and being able to physically take care of oneself without male support. One woman recalls her mother saying "you have to know how to work...because he'll leave you and then you won't have anything but those little kids running around" (qtd. in 5). In "Black Mothers and Daughters: Their Roles and Functions in American Society" (1981), Joseph found that many daughters were told by their mothers to be wary of sexual relationships with men because many of them were "abusive, no good, and unreliable" (112, 123, 125). Though such motherwit is arguably trans-ethnic, both sociologists contend that the mothers' concerns for the exploitability of their daughters' bodies as black women by those both within and outside the black community made them even more concerned with their daughters' knowledge about the

⁵ While Suzanne C. Carothers' 1987 dissertation, titled "Generation to Generation: The Transmission of Knowledge, Skills, and Role Models from Black Mothers to their Daughters in a Southern Community" (New York U), is also a study about the kinds of knowledge transmitted from mothers to daughters, it is focused on subject-specific knowledge; namely about black female roles as mothers and workers. The named studies by Dodson and Joseph, on the other hand, are more comprehensive. At any rate, with the exception of Carothers, few other sociological studies concerning this relationship have been conducted since the publications of those by Dodson and Joseph. Even fewer have been published.

dangers of corporeal exploitation.⁶ In the words of Gloria Joseph, the black mother “doesn’t have to read books to know that her daughter will have to struggle to get a decent education, a decent job, and a reliable husband” (85).

But, ironically, this knowledge *does* appear in the books, right alongside depictions of mothers who seem to know and understand black female positionality as well as their non-fictional counterparts. In fact, black women writers often portray mothers who are over-protective, physically violent, and even sexually abusive—all in the name of shielding their daughters from social, economic, and gender discrimination. In such narratives, the mothers either hope to usurp and inscribe the present and future life narratives of the daughters, or to at least squelch their desires for anything beyond the mother’s ideals. But by doing so, they suffer the dangers of mimicking on the bodies of their offspring the very fate from which they had hoped to protect them. In Jamaica Kincaid’s aptly-titled vignette, “Girl,” a fictional mother’s strict set of instructions about clothing, hygiene, mannerisms, and male interaction are all intended to keep the daughter from becoming a “slut,” but they also systemically rob the girl of every instance of independent bodily movement—in the face of the mother’s litany of instruction, the daughter has no corporeal movements that are strictly her own. The mother’s lessons include instructions as specific as how to sew on buttons and do the laundry by hand; how to smile at people and talk to men in public; and even how to cook and choose bread

⁶ As the quotations here make clear, black maternal concern for the daughter’s body is in part due to the fact that, in both studies, black mothers were particularly concerned with their daughters’ physical interactions with their black male counterparts; a valuable discussion, to be sure, but one that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. In Dodson’s study she found that, due to “the nature of the interactions within the family structure” of the women surveyed, literally “the entire research population” defined “Black womanhood” as something that always stands in relation to a woman’s relationships with Black men (8, 11). Joseph, on the other hand, found that, largely, although black mothers saw black men as “abusive, no good, and unreliable”; they expected that their daughters would want to marry them anyway, and thus gave copious amounts of advice about how to best navigate the various physicalities inherent in those relationships (112).

at the bakery (3-5). Interestingly, as the maternal voice alternates between warning and directive, she makes it clear that the proper navigation of black female gender dynamics are all about corporeal control: a *good* woman either knows how to mend the hem on a skirt and walk like a lady in public, or she looks like a whore and is relegated to the status of a nonentity by everyone, even the local baker. Thus, through a very nuanced narrative of matrilineal inscription, the mother reproduces the violence of extrinsic inscription even though her struggle for corporeal control is attempted out of a desire to teach her daughter how to survive in her local community. Even worse, because this violence happens within the supposedly-safe spaces of the mother-daughter relationship, it is even more traumatic for the daughters caught within the struggle for independence.

On the surface, the fact that the daughters suffer trauma in such texts seems pretty straightforward; however, there is still an important question at stake: how exactly is trauma defined in the mother-daughter relationships of texts written by black women writers? Although I argue that matrilineal inscription is most often mediated on a corporeal terrain, there are important physical and psychological nuances inherent in the trauma that can accompany it, ones that black women writers often explore in their works. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth defines personal trauma as a psychological experience that can slide into a physical one, and is thus transferrable between individuals. In fact, according to Caruth, trauma is defined as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91). As such, personal trauma is an experience that

does not happen only in the *moment* of violence, but reproduces itself afterwards in the mind's and the body's reenactments of the event.

These reenactments, however, are more than just solitary ones. As Caruth points out, although trauma is the “illness of a wounded psyche,” it is also a phenomenon that extends beyond the site of psychological injury, just as it persists beyond the timeframe of the event that precipitated it (4). In fact, according to her, it is “the story of a wound that cries out, that *addresses us* in an attempt to *tell us* of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (4, my emphasis). Although she makes it clear that it is not always a physical wound (in fact, she calls trauma the “wound that is not one”), the materiality manifests itself in articulation: the *cry* is a palpable testament of the wound's invisible existence (8). This “cry” can take many forms, and can manifest itself in various forms of reenactment, and when it becomes audible—that is, when someone else becomes privy to the “story of the wound,” either through the victim's account of it or through participation in its “repetitive phenomena”—trauma becomes more than just the mind's solitary experience; it becomes transferrable. As Caruth points out, even though the listener can never “truly know [the trauma] in the way the victim does,” she nevertheless “experiences it in its telling” (8).

Building on Caruth's definitions, I argue that, in black women's literature, trauma can often happen in the midst of matrilineal inscription, not only because it usually includes a mother's attempts to replace her daughter's “active desires” with her own, but because, in the moment of inscription, there is also a transmission of knowledge about an experienced black female subjectivity, which is often the result of personalized trauma suffered in the mothers' life experiences. While Caruth's analysis is neither

gender- nor racially-specific, it echoes the refrain of several critics who have written about black mother-daughter relationships and the histories, tensions, and anxieties that surround them. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, black mothers employ a variety of techniques that, while they may make the mothers seem overbearing or overprotective, are ultimately designed to ensure that their daughters will simultaneously navigate and subvert the “intersecting oppressions” of racism and sexism, and thus “go further than the mothers themselves were allowed to go” (*Black Feminist Thought* 184). In *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20th Century Literature* (1996), Elizabeth Brown-Guillory makes a similar claim, arguing that women’s literature is filled with matro-filial relationships wherein daughters are often the victims of their mothers’ fears that they will repeat the mothers’ mistakes. In terms reminiscent of Lacan’s concept of the Mirror Phase⁷, Brown-Guillory argues that “[w]hen a mother looks at her daughter, she sees herself. She is constantly reminded of her mistakes, yearnings, dreams, successes, and failures” (2). Because of this, the mothers feel that they can never be “whole” until they teach their daughters how to make different choices, and take advantage of the knowledge gained by maternal experience (3).

Similarly, according to Caruth, trauma is a “wound that is not one” precisely because it is the memory of violence that was “experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” (4). As such, trauma is actually borne, not out of the event itself, but out of the feeling of a missed opportunity, out of the realization that one was ill-prepared

⁷ In Jacques Lacan’s concept of the Mirror Phase, an infant first begins to grasp the concept of his/her identity in connection to the objective reality of his body by the sight of him/herself in the mirror. Similarly, according to Brown-Guillory, nonwhite mothers see their own subjectivity (albeit not for the first time) in their daughters—and, I would contend in their daughters’ corporeality. For more information on the Mirror Phase, see Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I [1949]” (*New Left Review* 1.51 Sept.-Oct. 1968) 71-77. See also Jean Roussel’s “Introduction to Jacques Lacan” (*New Left Review* 1.51 Sept.-Oct. 1968) 63-70.

for the trials of life. This is also true for matrilineal inscriptive trauma: each mother's personally-traumatic experiences with (and knowledge about) race and gender oppression ignites a desire to better prepare her daughter for the same experiences, to protect her from as many as she can, and to provide the daughter with the tools to create an identity that is separate from society's expectations for her as a black woman. (Caruth calls this trajectory of response and responsibility an "ethical relation to the real": an "urgent responsibility" to relay the reality of the event to those living outside its memory [102].) However, if and when the mother is insistent on the daughter's complete compliance in the process of preparation, she transmits a trauma to her daughter that, albeit experientially specific, is both intimately connected with and similar to her own. More important, because of the corporeal nature of extrinsic inscription, that trauma is often perpetrated in the very space for which the mother is fighting for protection and control: the filial body. Thus, matrilineal inscriptive trauma ceases to be "the wound that is not one," and turns into the wound that is *recurrently reproduced* on a physical plane. In other words, by relaying the old knowledge about corporeal exploitation, the mother creates a new wound—on the same site.

In this dissertation, the mother-daughter dyads of the first two texts I will discuss—*Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*—contain versions of this kind of inscriptive trauma, wherein the mother's desire to protect her daughter brings with it her own physical and emotional pain. And yet, running beneath the stories of the Boyce and Caco families, there is also a sub-narrative: a history of the black experience that links the matrilineal traumas experienced by Selina and Sophie to larger cultural traumas that can also be transmitted from mother to daughter in the process of matrilineal

inscription. Jeffrey Alexander defines cultural trauma as something that happens “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1).⁸ Similarly, although the matrilineal traumas transmitted in Marshall’s and Danticat’s texts are both nuanced and shaped by each mother’s personal experiences, they are also closely tied to each mother’s black—and female—subjectivities; which are in turn tied to the racism and corporeal exploitation that are the products of the larger cultural traumas that have affected black women around the world.

And yet, although what passes between the mothers and daughters in the texts is mediated through interpersonal corporeal violence, as Ron Eyerman points out, cultural trauma “need not necessarily be *felt* by everyone in a community or experienced *directly* by any or all” in order for it to be painfully tangible to the subsequent generations of people who share a collective past (2, my emphasis). I would argue that this occurs in the third primary text, Natasha Trethewey’s *Native Guard*. Here, trauma and knowledge transmission are idiosyncratic to the speaker’s family, but they are also geographical and trans-temporal. The narrative of matrilineal inscription is couched in a conversation of corporeality, but that corporeality is also profoundly metaphorical: the marking, silencing, blackening, and erasure of the filial body coincides with the daughter’s divestment of social positionality and agency—a state of historical reality that is inherited through the mother, and that the daughter struggles to reinscribe by resurrecting a buried history of another disinherited group of Southern blacks, the Native Guards. I am

⁸ For more information on definitions of cultural, historical, and “structural” trauma (which is defined as an ongoing absence of some important element in a community and/or its consciousness), see Dominick LaCapra’s “Trauma, Absence, Loss” (*Critical Inquiry* 25.4 Summer, 1999) 696-727.

interested in the first three chosen texts because I see each as a part of a matrilineal inscriptive continuum. From *Brown Girl* to *Native Guard*, the scope of matrilineal trauma widens from the individual, to the familial and, finally, to the historio-regional, with each mother's inscription onto the daughter's identity becoming more and more influenced by—and illustrative of—the effects of a history of extrinsic inscription on the intimacies of the black maternal-filial bond.

III. Blackness, Diaspora, Identity Formation, and Racial Difference

In spite of the fact that physical, psychological, personal, and interpersonal trauma all play influential roles within my theory of matrilineal inscription, I also contend that, within the traumatic maternal-filial dyad, mothers nevertheless impart valuable knowledge about life in the Black Diaspora, which includes knowledge about racism, sexism, ethno-cultural identity, and the importance of the daughter's personal link to a historic past. More important, when the daughter rebels—typically through acts of corporeal defiance—she develops a unique black female identity that is shaped by the knowledge gained from her mother, but that is also defined by her own self-developed ideas about black female personhood. Thus, when I use the word “black,” which I employ as an adjective for the writers, their works, the characters of the texts I discuss, and the Diasporic space in which they live, I mean to employ it as a broad, malleable, individually-subjective and ever-evolving term whose definition is not unlike those provided by Carol Boyce Davies and Carine Mardorissian. In their respective texts, each writer highlights the elasticity of racial categorization even as they attempt to articulate concrete definitions of the term. In the second volume of *Moving Beyond Boundaries*

Volume Two: Black Women's Diasporas (1995), Boyce Davies defines black individuals as those who fall into any of the following categories: "(1) of African origin of familial or cultural history or identification; (2) of non-western/Caucasian orientation and articulating "blackness" as a self-defined cultural description, and/or (3) existing in opposition to or outside of dominant racial definitions of whiteness and its politics of oppression" (*Vol. II* 2). While the characters in Marshall and Danticat's novels are typically identified as black—not only because they "articulate" their own blackness, but because they also verbally identify their cultural and familial histories as being of "African origin"—the mixed-race protagonists in *Native Guard* and in my fourth text, Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter*, are arguably more difficult to categorize. However, it is important to note that, in each case, both characters also "articulate" themselves as a part of the Black experience through narratives about the ways in which white racism relegates them to nonwhite status because of their racial mixture. (Specifically, in *Native Guard*, the predominant speaker is actually *re-articulating* her simultaneously-identified black and multiracial identity/ies through historical reconstruction). As such, both fall under Boyce Davies' definition, particularly since these daughters' journeys of self-definition play out in the midst of a society that is bewildered by their biraciality; which is, by definition, "existing in opposition" to the outside world's imagined fixity of whiteness.

Indeed, even as I use the word "black," I do so with the understanding that race is *not* a fixed and finite term, but is one that, as Carine Mardorossian points out, should be read as:

a complex set of crossing categories (gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, etc.) rather than in terms of the simplified binaries of black/white and

self/other (that ultimately derive from post-nineteenth century views of race and nation). This logic...reveals that interpretations of characters as either black or not fail to do justice to the fluctuating meanings of race in narrative. It challenges our deep-seated investments in normative figurations of identity and forces us to develop new reading strategies that emphasize not *whether* but *when* characters are ‘black’ or ‘white.’” (Mardorossian 16)⁹

Here, Mardorossian’s articulations lead to two very important conclusions. First, that meanings of race “fluctuate”—certainly through time and place, but also across matro-filial and familial lines. As such, a daughter’s definition of her own black subjectivity can be both a result of and a divergence from her mother’s, even when both women self-identify as black. In fact, a daughter’s corporeal rebellion against matrilineal inscription often produces this complex and contradictory phenomenon; as she interrogates the layers of inscription that seek control over her body, she is also interrogating what it means for her body to exist and move through what Spillers calls the “various centers of human and social meaning.”¹⁰ Second, in instances where there are phenotypical incongruities between mother and child, the matro-filial relationship itself is an interrogation of racial (and gendered) categorizations of individuals, and calls into question whether or not such categorizations enacted on the black female body produce the same kind of violence that extrinsic and matrilineal inscription do. For, if race is an externally-imposed identification of a set of physical traits, then perhaps it is also an appropriation of the body’s features, one that both denies the realities of phenotypical nonconformity and undermines familial ties in ways that are as detrimental to the

⁹ Like Mardorossian, Michelle Wright also points out that homogeneous racial identities and “clearly-delineated racial categories” are fictions, and that blackness itself is a constantly changing paradigm, continually being defined by the individuals living within the Diasporic space (180).

¹⁰ Spillers 206.

individual psyche as were the arbitrariness of familial separation and color stratification that harken back to the days of slavery.

Similar to the term “black,” “Diaspora” is also one whose definition is elusive, but whose articulation is important to the arguments I posit here. According to Carole Boyce Davies, the African (and, particularly, the black women’s) diaspora is “dispersed, but connected,” and is a phenomenon that is “happening all over the world, in all kinds of communities” (*Vol. I* xvii). Michelle Wright makes a similar claim, arguing that the Diaspora is a space of “multivalent and intersected historical and cultural formations” (4). In this project, each of the daughters is similarly connected to multiple communities, and has inherited “multivalent” cultural and historical literacies from their countries of birth, from the places where they live and travel, and, most important, from their mothers. In fact, in my chosen texts, the daughters are also in constant dialogue with the life experiences *of* their mothers, the lived experiences *with* their mothers, and with their own evolving social and cultural ideologies—all of which help to shape their identities as they grow into women in search of their own self-defined subjectivity as Black subjects in various domains.

This complex phenomenon of identity formation, which occurs at the intersections of gender, non-whiteness, class, sexuality, and other autobiographical idiosyncrasies (and which happens, as Boyce Davies contends, in communities around the globe) is part of my working definition of the Black Diaspora. But, as Mardorossian points out, postcolonialism in general is more than just an identification of a time period, but a practice of seeing, of reading the texts around us and examining the ways in which they interrogate socio-cultural norms and chronologically- and geographically-bound

categories like colonialism and postcolonialism (2). Likewise, I argue that the Black Diaspora is more than just a physical space; it is a practice of *being* and *seeing* the world. It is a realization of the permeability of borders, both national and otherwise, and a knowledge of the ways in which trans-temporality affects how individuals live today: those who have lived in our terrestrial space as “dispersed” people of African descent still live in that space, and continue to influence those who are currently living and moving around in it. Because of this, Selina Boyce can leave the land in which her mother lives, to return to her “motherland,” and, by doing so, come to understand the kind of woman her mother has become. So too can Sophie Caco survive abuse by her mother in the United States, and return to Haiti to confront the family matriarch with whom the abuse first began, and force that woman to reassess her decision to test her daughters’ virginities. And, because of the trans-temporal nature of Diaspora, the speaker in *Native Guard* and the protagonist in Raboteau’s *The Professor’s Daughter* can also reach into the past to resurrect othermothers and ancestors who have come and gone in attempts to better understand the present, and their own particular ethno-social positionalities. In short, although the term “Diaspora” refers to a group of people of African descent living in various parts of the world, it also refers to a way in which one perceives the world around her, as a world of individuals who are “dispersed but connected”—through nation, space, and time.

Black motherhood, in all its revolutionary capacities, is also a far more complicated term than it seems to be on the surface; especially since, as Wright points out, both black and white mothers can produce nonwhite children (180). This fact becomes increasingly important as I move toward my final chosen text, *The Professor’s*

Daughter, and its character, Emma Boudreaux. In this dissertation, “black motherhood” describes the nurturing process of any mother who is a member of an ethnic group of African descent. Along with the definitions provided, most of the mothers I discuss are black women who raise black daughters and who, for all intents and purposes, identify themselves as black mothers (albeit of varying nationalities). However, as is the case with Emma, her white mother also falls under the pale of this discussion because she too is raising a daughter who is, by American socio-cultural standards, black. In fact, Raboteau’s text illustrates how, by completely *rejecting* a relationship with a mother, a black daughter can foreclose on the possibility of dialogic inter-corporeal interaction with a mother figure; a process that Michelle Wright identifies as one of the most important in the development of Diasporic subjectivity. Black subjects are intersubjective, argues Wright. They come into being through other subjects and are in constant dialogue with them (22). As such, the black mother-daughter dyad as employed in black women’s literature is a hallmark illustration of this process: daughters interact with, are influenced by, and define themselves against their mothers (180). In my theory of matrilineal inscription, this is one of the benefits. While the daughter who is subjected to inscription may face the possibility of trauma, she also gets the opportunity to interact with a mother figure in a very dialogical way, thus engaging in the identity-formation process through identifications with and articulations against the mother’s intended influence.

To be sure, even if a nonwhite daughter is born to a white mother, the mother still has the power to “influence” narratives for her daughter’s life, and in ways that are, like her black maternal counterparts, potentially beneficial to the child’s formation of identity. Maureen Reddy, a feminist author and the mother of two biracial children, insists on the

importance of intimate matro-filial contact in interracial families, but also makes distinctions about the white mother's role in a nonwhite daughter's life. Although Reddy understands that her daughter Ailis will face challenges as a woman of color that are different from those she faced as the white child of middle-class Irish immigrants, Reddy writes that:

I believe Ailis will learn some aspects of black womanhood from her black women relatives; none of them, however, *lives* with us on a daily basis. I will be Ailis's bridge to womanhood, for the most part, and both [my husband] Doug and I will have to help her to resist the limiting race and gender stereotypes rife in our culture. (*Crossing* 62, my emphasis)

Reddy's assertion makes several important claims. First, it makes clear that othermothers are vital to knowledge transmission with multiracial daughters, and othermothers can be both female and male (since Reddy's husband will also be in charge of teaching his daughter about race and gender). Nevertheless, even with multiracial daughters, white mothers (when present and active in their lives) serve as the final "bridge[s] to womanhood"; thus, they are ultimately in charge of knowledge transmission for women who may grow up to identify themselves as either multiracial, black, or both. And, by extension, white mothers also participate in the process of knowledge transmission to black daughters. Although I am by no means re-identifying the white mother of a nonwhite child either as a black woman or a black mother by virtue of association, I am identifying her as a woman who, by co-creating a family of color, is one who is intimately related to the process of black *motherhood*, and who takes on many of the same responsibilities as the mothers in the other texts, who must also train daughters for their lives as black women.¹¹ Strictly speaking, for all of the mothers of the texts I

¹¹ It is interesting to note that, according to Hettie Jones, the former wife of poet Amiri Baraka [Leroi Jones] and the mother of two mixed-race daughters, she now identifies herself as "Other" on census forms,

discuss here, black motherhood is not defined by the color of their skin, but by the kind of knowledge they become responsible for transmitting to their children.

IV. Mother-Daughter Relationships in Past and Present Scholarship

The fact that there is a racial difference between mother and child in *The Professor's Daughter* is only one of several aspects of this dissertation that differentiates it from other work on black mother-daughter relationships. In fact, although there has been copious and comprehensive scholarship on black mother-daughter bonds and the knowledge transmitted therein, few critics have offered a specifically-literary theory of a traumatic matrilineal inscription like the one I propose here. But this is for good reason. In the years following the release of the Moynihan Report (1965), academic discourse about mother-child relationships was, on the one hand, counteractive, and on the other hand, heavily sociological. As Jualynne Dodson points out, it was actually the work of both E. Franklin Frazier and Daniel P. Moynihan that set a precedent in research¹² that other sociologists mimicked until well into the twentieth century, much to the detriment

and, in the line slotted for an explanation, she writes that she is a “Semitic-American mother of black children” (Jones 80). Jones identifies the fact that raising black daughters (who she identifies as such because she “wasn’t about to delude [them] into thinking they were different in this country”), makes her “not quite” white, but not black either (150, 151). Reddy expresses a similar sentiment in *Crossing the Color Line: Race, Parenting, and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1995). She points out that:

It was only when I stopped being white, in some sense, that I began to understand what whiteness means in America. Under South African apartheid, the white partner of a black person was reclassified as “colored”: legally; subsequently, there was no such thing as a white/black marriage. Although we do not live under apartheid, a de facto reclassification happens here too. I think: the white partner, in learning what being black in America entails, learns what whiteness means and loses or abandons at least some of that whiteness. (16)

¹² For more information about Frazier’s and Moynihan’s findings, see E. Franklin Frazier’s “The Negro Family in America” in *The Family: Its Function and Destiny*, Ed. R. W. Anshen (New York: Harper and Row, 1949) 142-58, and *The Negro in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1949). See also Daniel P. Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965). This document, which later came to be known as *The Moynihan Report*, was compiled during the Johnson administration, where Moynihan served as the assistant secretary in the Office of Policy Planning and Research of the Department of Labor in 1965.

of the field of black family studies (“Conceptualizations” 55). Frazier and, consequently, Moynihan (who frequently cites the former in his 1965 report titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*) used their findings to conclude that African American families were plagued with illegitimacy, economic dependency, delinquency, and crime. Later, sociologists like Rainwater, Parker, and Kleiner would attribute all these problems to black mothers, contending that the “matrifocal” nature of African American and Caribbean families is detrimental to the personality and heterosexual development of black children (“Conceptualizations” 55).¹³ Their findings were ones that were rarely challenged, so black women scholars—first in sociological fields, and then in the humanities—were compelled to respond to the outrageous nature of such claims.

Six years after the release of Moynihan’s findings, Dodson herself would publish work that refuted his widely-accepted notion that black mothers are harmful to the proper development of their children. In the aforementioned study *To Define Black Womanhood: A Study of Black Female Graduate Students*, Dodson interviewed women attending the University of California at Berkeley, gathering specific information about the knowledge passed on to them by their mothers and other female authority figures. Her study found that, although the relationships were strained and, at times, volatile, the majority of the subjects maintained great respect for their mothers, and believed that the lessons taught to them were done so in adequate preparation for their lives as black women in a racist and gender-oppressive society. In the following decades, studies were also conducted in an effort to dispel notions about the shortcomings of black mothers. For example, in 1981 Gloria I. Joseph and Jill Lewis published *Common Differences: Conflicts in Black and*

¹³ For more information about these findings, see S. Parker and R. Kleiner 507-13; and L. Rainwater, “Crucible of Identity: The Negro Lower-Class Family” in *Daedalus* 95 (1968) 258-64.

White Feminist Perspectives, where they share the results of a nationwide survey of black women about their feelings toward their mothers and the “mother messages” they received from them in childhood. Following up on Dodson’s research, their work concluded that, even though black mothers are often perceived as stoic and unaffectionate, their daughters typically understood that the women did not connect with their children in more tender ways because they felt a need to prepare them to face exploitation and silencing in a world that was much more cruel to them than to their white counterparts (95). (Ironically, this is a conclusion that the fictional character Selina Boyce also reaches near the end of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.) Like those of Dodson a decade before, Joseph’s and Lewis’s findings contradict those of male sociologists, and offer substantial proof that, contrary to the conclusions drawn by Frazier and his progeny, black mothers devoted much of their lives to doing exactly what others claimed they could not: teaching their children how to become functional members of society.

The counteractive work like that performed by Dodson, Joseph, and Lewis was groundbreaking, but it also set a precedent for the literary criticism about black motherhood that came after it. In fact, much of the early work was written in *response* to sociologists’ calls for more qualitative work on negative black maternal images, and this kept the work heavily scientific. For example, in the conclusion to *To Define Black Womanhood*, Dodson argues that qualitative work among black populations is crucial to understanding the complexities of black life because, oftentimes, the most important information about research populations cannot be quantified (5).¹⁴ Furthermore, the

¹⁴ Interestingly, Joseph’s and Lewis’s study actually begins with the close readings of poems by Winnie Oyoko Loving and Carolyn Rodgers, both of which include black maternal personas. In fact, Rodgers’ featured poem, titled “It is Deep” appears again in Michelle Wright’s *How I Got Ovah: Masking to*

rebuttal to the work about black women that had been published at the time needed responses that hard science could not always provide. Because of this, many black feminists in other fields begin to publish such work, and the conversation about black mother-daughter relationships expanded beyond the purview of the social sciences to literary studies. Nevertheless, it was still married to its “mother” field: the work often appeared side by side in multidisciplinary anthologies. For example, in 1980, La Frances Rodgers-Rose published *The Black Woman*, a volume that, according to her “br[ought] together for the first time the original works of sixteen Black women trained in the fields of sociology, social psychology, political science, demography, and history” (12). *The Black Woman* features essays like Bonnie Thornton Dill’s “‘The Means to Put My Children Through’: Child-Rearing Goals and Strategies Among Black Female Domestic Servants,” in which Dill discusses the results of a survey she conducted among retired domestic workers. *The Black Woman* also features Gloria Wade Gayles’ “She Who is Black and Mother: in Sociology and Fiction,” an article in which Wade-Gayles compares fictional mothers found in black women’s literature to real-life women who participated in sociological studies between 1940 and 1970. While the writers of both pieces concede that there are limitations to simple quantification, both heavily rely on historical and scientific data. While Dill uses the more qualitative “life history” data-collection method when studying black women’s lives, her work primarily consists of nonfictional narratives, and does not address literary representations of black mothers. On the other hand, while Wade-Gayles conducts close readings of several texts, she contends that analyzing black maternal representations in fiction should be used to “complete and

Motherhood and the Diasporic Black Female Subject,” the chapter in *Becoming Black* that includes Wright’s theory on black maternity.

compliment” sociological data (Dill 107; Wade-Gayles 100, 103). In her 1984 *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women’s Fiction* (where this essay appears again along with other analyses of fiction by writers like Ann Petry, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker), Wade-Gayles follows this directive in her readings of dominant literary images of black women; and although her work is highly informative and remarkably insightful, it too is much less theoretical than it is responsive to extra-literary conversations about dominant images of black women.

And yet, in spite of the heavily-sociological nature of work by Wade-Gayles and others, it is important to remember that, throughout the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, scholars in a variety of academic fields did turn to literature and critical analysis in order to better explain the ways in which race, sex, and class made it difficult for black women to raise their children, and their work is the foundation upon which this project is built. In “She Who is Black and Mother,” Gloria Wade-Gayles poignantly states, “the fact that the mother in fiction is forced to be the kind of mother she does not wish to be makes the imaginative statement on cause as important as the dramatic illustration on effect” (97). And, a decade later, Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Patricia Bell-Scott would produce some of the necessary critical work devoted to that “imaginary statement” of black motherhood in *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters* (1991). They present a text that, unlike many of the earlier works, is much more literarily analytical, and focuses solely on exploring relationships between black mothers and their daughters. The anthology includes articles by some of the most preeminent writers in the field of black feminist literary studies, including Lucie P. Fultz, Rosalie Riegle Troester, and others, who each analyze fictional mothers and the ways in which their characterizations speak

to some of the real-life issues and concerns of black women. For example, in “Images of Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” Fultz points out the importance of understanding the fictional slave Sethe’s murder of her infant daughter as an act that takes place in the “web of a cultural and economic system that sought to denature human feelings and sever family ties” (36). Fultz reads the murder as a mother’s last resort in a desperate power struggle between her natural rights as a parent, and the slaveholder’s legal and economic rights as the owner of her body and its offspring. In “Turbulence and Tenderness: Mothers, Daughters, and ‘Othermothers’ in Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*,” Riegle Troester uses the relationship between Silla and Selina Boyce to explore an alternative to Sethe’s filicide: a mother’s creation of a daughter whose self-identity is strong enough to resist being overpowered by external forces. As the works of Fultz, Riegle Troester, and many other writers included in *Double Stitch* make clear, issues of race, gender, and class make it extremely difficult for black women to raise their children, and literary representations of the relationships between black mothers and daughters—contradictions and all—are important to understanding the ways in which their nonfictional counterparts are successful in spite of the overwhelming odds.

Double Stich is a rich and informative text that, even today, stands as one of the most definitive works about mother-daughter relationships in both sociology and literary criticism.¹⁵ It answered the call for the qualitative work made by sociologists in earlier years and, as such, produced important cultural work that recast black mothers in a light unfiltered by the stigma of widely-accepted sociological data. However, because of its commitment to that work (in addition to the fact that it was a multi-authored, multi-edited

¹⁵ In my desperation over being unable to find more up-to-date fieldwork conducted on black mother-daughter relationships, I once asked an advanced sociology PhD student about recent studies, and she directed me right back to *Double Stich*.

anthology), *Double Stitch* contains no overarching theoretical approach to conversations about black mothers and daughters as represented on the written page. Such is also the case with more recent work like Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20th Century Literature* (1996), another anthology that includes a pantheon of essays about literary representations of mothers and daughters from a variety of ethnic groups. But, much like its predecessor, *Women of Color* is valuable in its own right: it offers one of the most comprehensive articulations to date about how nonwhite women writers depict filial resentment. In addition to her articulation of the "looking glass effect," which anchors my theory of the origins of matrilineal trauma, one of Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's most powerful claims is that a mother's anxiety about raising her daughter can estrange the two when the daughter feels that her mother's sociopolitical sensibilities are obsolete, and that her life lessons are "invalid in changing social times" (2). But, in spite of this initial rejection, argues Brown-Guillory, a woman of color often comes to *see herself* in her mother (2). Building on this claim, I discuss the ways in which, during the process of matrilineal inscription, daughters grow to understand the importance and value of their relationships with their mothers, even when such relationships are profoundly traumatic. Like Brown-Guillory, I contend that some fictionalized black mothers and daughters share a unique love-hate "dyad" wherein the mothers are resented by their daughters because of the disastrous effects of the mother's trying to inscribe a better life for her daughter than the one the mother herself has lived. But ultimately, that same daughter comes to recognize the points of convergence between her and her mother's lives. In other words, she comes to understand the benefits (and perhaps the inescapability) of matrilineal inscription.

As the wide generic scope of Brown-Guillory's text illustrates, recent postcolonial criticism has also turned to the subject of mother-daughter relationships, and this transpatial, trans-racial work sets equally-important critical precedents for my own. For example, Michelle Wright's *Becoming Black* (2004) features an important chapter on mother-daughter relationships, titled "How I Got Ovah: Masking to Motherhood and the Diasporic Black Female Subject." In it, Wright's discussion of dialogic subjectivity focuses mainly on ideological interactions and the ways in which portrayals of mother-daughter relationships often highlight the importance of dialogue, influence, and exchange in the process of identity formation. And, though she does not take up the issue of trauma, her identification of an "endless line of ancestry that precedes and overlaps with each subject" is imperative to understanding the corporeal and temporal cyclicalities that often occur in literary representations of matrilineal inscription (179-180). In some texts, the daughter rebels against the mother's influence, and deliberately acts in ways that are contrary to the mother's example; however, she is ultimately marked by both analysis and introspection as well as by maternal instruction. Additionally, although matrilineal inscription can sometimes be portrayed as traumatic, it can also be beneficial: as the daughter moves through the Diasporic space, she operates with tools that have been sharpened in her mother's house, using her history of maternal engagement and interaction in order to successfully and independently navigate various social, cultural, and geographic spheres. This paradox of ideological, philosophical, biographical, and corporeal movement—in which the daughter leaves one point of origin as she identifies and moves toward it—describes one of the most basic forms of matrilineal inscription. In a daughter's reactive crisis, wherein she feels a need to claim her agency by "writing

over” her mother’s mark, even that inscription is undeniably matrilineal, shaped by the very thing it intended to obliterate.

Like Michelle Wright’s “How I Got Ovah,” Simone Alexander’s *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (2001) is a ground-breaking text devoted to comparisons of mother-daughter relationships in works by black women writers. In *Mother Imagery*, Alexander identifies a complex triangle of influence between the mother, the motherland (which includes Africa as well as the Caribbean), and the mother country (i.e., the European colonial power), all of which come to bear on the Afro-Caribbean daughter protagonist (3). While she contends that each force contains potentially-stifling influences, and that the daughter ultimately moves away from the home space of the Caribbean because of them, Alexander concludes that the “generational narratives” (or matrilineally-transmitted knowledge) passed on by the mother ensures that the daughter will be able to negotiate her identity based on maternal example (18).

By identifying the ways in which black daughters interact both positively and negatively with maternal figures, Alexander’s work sets a crucial precedent to my own. Building on her theory of triangular influence, I extend my readings from the geographical space to the black female body; a movement that allows for an exploration of the idiosyncrasies of matro-filial interaction, but that also highlights the ways in which black women writers use such idiosyncrasies to interrogate black female identity and corporeality. As Alexander’s theory makes clear, a “mother’s mark” is influenced by her subjectivity as a fellow “disempowered subject”—in short, her own traumatic experiences (Alexander 7). At the same time, however, it is also the result of a

personally-evaluated and identified responsibility to her daughter's identity formation. And, while this responsibility changes with the mother's knowledge of and experiences with extrinsic inscription, it is never completely usurped by it: the mother almost always retains a certain degree of agency in her interactions with her child. Thus, like Alexander, my identification of the external factors that influence matrilineal inscription allows for a theory that is trans-textual. However, by positing my theory within the matro-filial power struggle itself, and by identifying the ways in which a daughter's identity construction occurs both against *and* alongside her mother's desired corporeal protection and control, I am able to explore authorial interrogations of black female identity and corporeality through a bilateral discussion of the mother's ideologies as well as her child's. Additionally, by shifting my focus from the colonial space to the mapping of matrilineal inscription on the black female body, my analytical lens widens to include black women novelists (and a poet) from the Caribbean as well as the United States, thus allowing for a bilateral comparison and a trans-generic theory of maternal influence.

More important, my theory of corporeal trauma allows for an in-depth discussion about the black female body, which, in addition to its vulnerability to "externally imposed meanings and uses," has also been a site of discursive silencing in black feminist criticism. As Elizabeth Grosz points out in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), feminists at large have been uncomfortable with theorizing the female body because of such theories'

perilous closeness...to those facets of patriarchal thought that have in the past served to oppress women, most notably the patriarchal rationalization of male domination in terms of the fragility, unreliability, or biological closeness to nature attributed to the female body and the subordinate character attributed to women on account of the close connections between female psychology and biology. (xiv)

While such has certainly been the case for women in general, the black female body is particularly vulnerable to such “rationalizations” for all the reasons that Harris, Spillers, Hill Collins, and others describe above. And, arguably, such is even more prevalent in conversations about black mother-daughter relationships, because few black women—literary critics, feminist scholars, or others—are willing to highlight the corporeal victimization of black women by black women, especially in discussions about a relationship already fraught with misconceptions and accusations that divest the black mother of any responsibility to positively contribute to the lives of her children. Though recent texts like Victoria Burrows’ *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison* (2004), and Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber’s *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2010) discuss the transference of trauma from mother to child (or in Burrows’ case, mother to daughter), like Alexander, their arguments are bound up in the notion that external forces—the external traumas of slavery, racism, and the sociocultural ideals of “whiteness”—are the true culprits; claims that also work to discredit the power of black matrilineality, particularly in their interrogations of such powers through acts of corporeal inscription. Furthermore, in spite of the fact that each text focuses to some degree on matro-filial trauma in black women’s literature, both are heavily influenced by scientific fields (a common phenomenon in black matrilineal theory that I discuss in depth in the earlier portion of this section). Schreiber’s *Race, Trauma, and Home* is heavily mediated by the fields of sociology and neuroscience. And, although Burrows’ *Whiteness and Trauma* does approach the texts of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, and Toni Morrison from a narratological standpoint, it is nevertheless heavily influenced by the field of

psychoanalysis and by Burrows' very vocal political agenda of transforming the ghettoization of black women's issues among her fellow white feminists. As such, they both set crucial interdisciplinary precedents to my own work but do not discuss the agency of black women, or the ways in which contemporary notions of race and beauty also enact a particular kind of intra-racial, intra-gender violence on black women's bodies. This is a phenomenon that desperately needs to be addressed, particularly for its importance in my concluding call for a radical redefinition of black motherhood that removes the markers of "blackness" away from the corporeal body, an identification that has, up to this point, reenacted the very trauma of extrinsic inscription.

The work of all the women discussed here is crucial to my own because it creates a strong critical context for my claims about the trauma that can happen when a mother is obligated to both protect and prepare her daughter for a world in which her body and mind will be constantly subjected to violation and exploitation. Though such work has waned in the decades since the heyday of feminist discourse from the 1970s, '80s, and '90's (and even then, many of the texts, including LaFrances Rodgers-Rose's *The Black Woman* [1980], Gloria Wade-Gayles' *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Literature* [1984], and Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* [1990] only included chapters about black motherhood and/or black mother-daughter bonds), both Burrows and Schreiber's texts, along with Alexander's *Mother Imagery*, and Michelle Wright's *Becoming Black* offer hope that the conversation is recovering its momentum and gaining an audience. Additionally, recent dissertations like Vanessa Kimberly Valdez's "Mothers and Daughters: Searches for Wholeness in the Literature of the Americas" (2007) and Kinitra Brooks' "The Black Maternal: Heterogeneity and

Resistance in Literary Representations of Black Mothers in 20th Century African American and Afro-Caribbean Women's Fiction" (2008) suggest that younger scholars within the field of Inter-American literature are also becoming interested in this conversation. With that being said, the main goal of this project is not to point out lacunae in the genre, but to bring together the many discourses about black mothers and daughters into a comprehensive (though by no means all-inclusive) literary theory that encapsulates what critics have already identified as a complex, though not yet exhaustively defined relationship that still holds rich ground for critical discussion.

V. Chapter Breakdown

In this dissertation, I analyze traumatic matrilineal inscription in black women's literature, providing close readings of texts wherein black women writers illustrate how external influences—including biographical, familial, regional, and historio-cultural ones—operate in mutually-inclusive and variably-intensive degrees in relationships between mothers and daughters. In the subsequent chapters, I trace the traumatic inscriptive dynamic from the personal, to the familial, to the communal, and, finally, to the lack of matrilineal inscription altogether, and to the devastating effects thereof.

I have decided to use the two texts featured in Chapters II and III—*Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*—because they illustrate some of the most basic forms of matrilineal inscription as it occurs on the “contested space” of the black female body: isolation and intrusion. Both Silla Boyce and Martine Caco understand the kinds of challenges their daughters will face as black women, and feel that their plans for their daughters' lives are the best means by which to overcome them. But when each daughter

tries to reject the mother's intentions, the older women redouble their efforts to control them, and it is at this point that the traumas between mother and daughter transpire. While Selina experiences it through physical isolation and restricted movement, Sophie experiences it through penetrative sexual violence.

In Chapter II I begin with my discussion of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), discussing the ways in which Silla Boyce's ambitions for her youngest daughter Selina drives her to try to inscribe the young girl's personal and group identities. In Selina, Silla sees a wild territory that she must tame, but one that is, in many ways, a mirror image of her former self. But when Silla tries to force Selina's conformity to her own values of financial stability and upward mobility by destroying all of Selina's meaningful relationships and restricting her physical movement, Selina thwarts her mother's attempts through acts of corporeal rebellion, which include: interacting with othermothers, taking on a lover, learning to dance, and finally emigration, which removes her from the mother's sphere of influence altogether. But, in spite of all this, Selina also emerges as another version of her mother's former self, possessing many of the same traits that have driven Silla's immigration from Barbados and her climb to economic stability. This example of matrilineal inscription makes *Brown Girl, Brownstones* an anchor text in this project; not only does it chronicle the inscriptive processes of influence, interrogation, rejection, and resemblance, but it does so through simultaneously antipodal, yet intertwining representations of maternal and filial corporealities, narrating the transmission of trauma and violence that dominates the movements of each woman.

In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, even though the trauma passed between generations is isolated and mostly biographical—Selina is most affected by her parents' volatile

relationship and her mother's ambition—it is a trauma that is also influenced by the ideologies and experiences of the Barbadian immigrant community of which the family is a part. Similarly, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the trauma is biographical, but also heavily influenced by a socio-cultural and a familial past; a past that included the rape of the protagonist's mother as well as the nuances of Haitian history and society. In Chapter III I turn to Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) to explore the sexually violent and culturally-influenced relationship between Martine and Sophie Caco. In an attempt to preserve Sophie for a better life than the one she has lived, Martine begins testing her daughter's virginity, a form of sexual abuse that is a reenactment of Martine's rape, but is also a part of the Caco's familial and cultural histories. Interestingly, Sophie's responding self-mutilation with a pestle and her adulthood bulimia are a slight variation of Selina's response to Silla's matrilineal inscription: while Selina defies her mother through attempts at corporeal difference, Sophie thwarts Martine's assaults through mimicry, and her actions momentarily become a part of a matrilineal legacy of traumatic reenactment. However, Sophie's determination to protect her own daughter from this cycle of abuse forces her to seek out rituals of difference, including a return to Haiti and a confrontation with her grandmother, participation in group therapy, and a final act of externalized violence, where she symbolically recognizes and rejects the hypocrisy of the exploitation of the Haitian female body by both external and maternal forces. In each of these instances, Sophie interrogates the legacy of trauma in matrilineal inscription, and ultimately seeks out ways to pass on matrilineal knowledge and a cultural/familial heritage to her daughter that are neither abusive nor traumatic.

In Chapter IV, I move to the genre of poetry, and to a larger conversation about forms of matrilineal trauma that are transferred from mother to child through their shared positionalities as women of color. In this chapter I posit a theory of matrilineal cultural trauma, arguing that, in *Native Guard* (2006), the speaker describes how she inherits a familial and regional history that inscribes itself on her body while she is still in her mother's womb, but that is ultimately sustained and reinforced by the racist Southern society in which she comes of age. In this particular text, the mother's anxiety about her daughter's being born in the racially hostile environment of the Civil Rights era South creates a symbolic "maternal impression" on her baby's body in utero. And, after her birth, the daughter's physicality is continually inscribed by both the example and mimicry of her mother's various forms of silencing, but ultimately by extrinsically imposed moments of blackening, renaming, silencing, and erasure that persist until the speaker breaks her matrilineally inherited silence by telling the history of the Native Guards, an all-black Civil War regiment who, like her and the other women in her family, held a dubious relationship to their "native" land: although they were Southerners, they also had to fight their fellow countrymen for freedom and equal rights. *Native Guard* illustrates how, although the predominant speaker's matrilineally inherited relationship to the South is strained, she creates the possibility of healing by reconstructing the narrative of the Guards and, by doing so, is able to come to terms with her legacy of trauma as a Southern biracial woman. By the end of the text, Trethewey has told her mother's history, the Guards' history, and is able to resituate herself in a matrilineally inherited, pre-inscribed Southern history by re-appropriating the meanings of her multiple identities.

Though the first three chapters in this dissertation discuss various representations of traumatic matrilineal inscription, this theory is meant to be neither all-inclusive nor exhaustive—after all, not all illustrations of mother-daughter relationships include trauma. Nevertheless, a look at alternative characterizations suggests that, in spite of the inscriptive trauma that can occur in the mother-daughter dyad, even writers who offer alternative representations often end up highlighting the concomitant importance of matrilineal inscription and matro-filial exchange in the shaping of a daughter's black female identity. In the fifth and final chapter, I turn to Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* (2005), a text that begins, not with a mother's desire to inscribe an identity for her daughter, but with a daughter's desire to inscribe one for herself. In *The Professor's Daughter*, the main character Emma's feelings of displacement (not to mention the influence of her older brother) lead her to assume that her white mother can offer her little knowledge about how to live as a woman of color. Because of this, she rejects any relationship with her mother, instead offering up her body to inscription by others (including her brother and her first love) and to self-destructive acts like creating rashes on her own skin. But, after the divorce of her parents and the death of her brother Bernie, Emma soon learns that, by refusing to make a connection with her own mother, she has prevented herself from learning valuable lessons from a woman who, in the wake of their common losses, is learning how to heal. Through the case of Emma's maternal rejection, Raboteau illustrates the importance of matro-filial bonds, but also interrogates traditional literary representations of black-white female interactions, which are often portrayed as hostile because the women perceive each other as threats instead of allies. The novel's thwarted possibilities of trans-racial female solidarity calls the black-white female binary

into question by depicting one case wherein an alliance between two women could have proved beneficial for one young girl struggling to cope with issues of race, identity, and grief. I conclude with a coda that illuminates some of the problematics of traditional notions of “black motherhood” by tracing a critical trajectory that has foreclosed on the possibilities of discussing white mothers of black daughters, and limited the definitions of black maternity to skin color—a dangerous and potentially divisive assumption.

As the final novel in this project makes clear, the collection of texts I have chosen is not an ideal representation of any genre; each one is complicated by variables that, in a scientific experiment, would make them unfit for group analysis. Falling under the rubrics of poetry, prose, autobiography, and historical fiction; and nuanced by the factors of economics, racial difference, poverty, and absent and/or emasculated fathers, they all contain depictions of mother-daughter relationships, but arguably have little else in common. And yet, I have grouped them together here, in part, because of this. As divergent as they are, they all contain various aspects of matrilineal inscription, and I highlight its presence in these seemingly-unrelated texts in an effort to illustrate the need for—and the usefulness of— a theory of trans-textual black matrilineality that is both inclusive as well as idiosyncratic.

CHAPTER II

THE DUAL DANCE: TRAUMATIC INSCRIPTION, CORPOREAL MOVEMENT, AND MATERNAL MIRRORING IN PAULE MARSHALL'S *BROWN GIRL*, *BROWNSTONES* (1959)

I. Introduction

"[M]others point to the endless line of ancestry that precedes and overlaps with each subject: all human beings emerge from the mother, are conflated with and distinct from her—and are therefore an undeniable product of the past, shaped by it without being wholly controlled."

--Michelle Wright¹⁶

On July 9, 1930, *The New York Times* reported on the detainment of Ralmente Dorce, a three year-old Haitian girl from Port-au-Prince who was found as a stowaway on a Dutch ship that docked in Brooklyn just one day earlier. According to *The Times*, Dorce was, to date, the youngest person ever detained at Ellis Island, although her journey to the U.S. was allegedly unintentional. Dorce's aunt, Hilda Schutt of West New York, New Jersey, who was returning from a visit to Haiti, testified that the young girl, who was very fond of her aunt, hid in the aunt's cabin when relatives brought her aboard at Port-au-Prince, and Schutt did not find her until after the ship had departed. Yet, coincidentally, when the Commonwyne reached Brooklyn, the aunt and niece were greeted by none other than Julia Dorce, Ralmente's mother, who reportedly had not seen her sister in nearly twenty years.¹⁷

It is not immediately clear how we should read this story. While the aunt's testimony sounds plausible, her sister's presence at the dock in Brooklyn seems much

¹⁶ Michelle Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004) 179-80.

¹⁷ See "GIRL, 3, HELD AS STOWAWAY: Here From Haiti on the Commonwyne After Hiding in Aunt's Cabin." *New York Times* (1923-Current file) 9 Jul 1930, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The New York Times* (1851-2007), ProQuest. Web. 1 Jul. 2011.

more than coincidence. Could Julia Dorce have simply been coming to greet a long-lost sister? Or was her arrival in Brooklyn the end result of a carefully-coordinated plan to smuggle her young daughter into the country? Additionally, although Hilda Schutt is identified as a resident of West New York, New Jersey, there is no mention of where Julia Dorce lives. Is Julia a United States citizen? Has she been in the United States for the entire eighteen years during which she had no contact with her sister? And, if so, then why isn't Ralmente already there with her? And why is the little girl not already a U.S. citizen? In the small snippet of text that *The Times* devotes to the story, none of these details are available; however, what *is* known is that a three year-old girl, somehow separated from her mother in the short time since her birth, crossed an ocean, and found that mother waiting for her on a distant shore.

In addition to the logistics of citizenship and travel, the story of the Dorces potentially offers insight into representations of mobility in mother-daughter relationships in black women's literature. Reading narratives about mothers, daughters, and matrifilial movement has recently become of interest in the field of postcolonial women's studies because, as Simone Alexander argues in *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women* (2001), it is most often the mother figure who serves as the catalyst for female movement through the Diasporic space. Because she must teach her daughter the "habits and mannerisms" needed to successfully move within colonial/post-colonial spheres, mothers in Afro-Caribbean women's literature in particular frequently play the ambiguous and interchangeable roles of disempowered subject and all-powerful colonizer in the lives of their daughters (S. Alexander 7). And, when the mothers are overbearing, the daughters often leave the maternal space on what Alexander calls "quests for

selfhood, initiated and exacerbated by a lack of self and spiritual consciousness and connectedness” (22).

While I agree that the ambiguity of a mother’s role in the shaping of her daughter’s identity often creates instances of trauma within the mother-daughter dyad—particularly when a mother is aggressive or overbearing in her insistence on inscribing her own ideologies onto the slate of her daughter’s identity—I would also contend that the identity-formation process does not begin only *after* the daughter’s departure from home; it has actually already begun in the mother’s house. As Alexander describes it, once the daughter reaches adulthood, she *moves away* from both the mother’s sphere of influence as well as from her prescribed way of life, and such movement is imperative to a daughter’s “search” for a self that is separate from her mother’s antagonistic insistence on her adherence to the restrictions of a patriarchal society. But I would also argue that, even as the daughter resists her mother’s inscription in the home space, she is already creating a form of “selfhood” that exists, if for no other reason, for the sake of the daughter’s defiance. At the same time, however, the antithetical nature of identity formation that occurs during matrilineal inscription sometimes creates a woman who is a complex reflection of the mother’s intended and unintended influences. Indeed, even as the daughter leaves the maternal sphere, she often continues to follow a life pattern that is both idiosyncratic and mimetic; one that is, as Michelle Wright contends, a “conflation” and continuation of the mother’s past even as it is shaped by the daughter’s choices, desires, and experiences.

To be sure, the dichotomies of idiosyncratic mimesis and dissimilar resemblance which are encapsulated in the trope of mobility are arguably possible in any mother-

daughter relationship in any literary genre. However, within representations of the Black Diasporic matro-filial bond, it is amplified; particularly because the Diaspora is a space in which racism, sexism, and socio-economic disenfranchisement create instances of both voluntary and involuntary physical (and, more often than not, ideological) movement, even as individuals carry with them the lived and inherited memories and traumas of both their and their ancestors' pasts. In turn, black women writers often depict this phenomenon in narratives of identity formations, and it is for this reason that it serves as a core concept of my theory of matrilineal inscription: as the daughter leaves one point of origin, she also simultaneously moves toward it in a series of interconnected corporeal, ideological, and temporal movements that are simultaneously similar to, divergent from, and an extension of her mother's. In other words, on a purported "quest for selfhood," a daughter might (like Ralmente Dorce) leave one homeland only to find her mother waiting for her at the end of her journey.

These foundational dynamics of movement, corporeality, temporality, and resemblance in matrilineal inscription are ones I will use to examine the cornerstone text for this project: Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). In this coming-of-age novel (which operates simultaneously as both a bildungsroman and a kunstlerroman) of a first generation Barbadian American teenager, Marshall narrates the development of black female identity and the ways in which a mother succeeds through failure in inscribing a particular identity on her daughter. In *Brown Girl*, Silla's disappointments in her unambitious, philandering husband Deighton and her economic struggles in the United States have restricted both her corporeal and ideological mobilities, and have also made her anxious to protect her daughters from her own traumas of heartbreak and

hardship. And, when she realizes that the youngest, Selina, is unconcerned with wealth, status, and socially-strategic matrimony, Silla attempts to inscribe a new life narrative for her, and she does so by physically restricting the young girl's movement and isolating her from every perceived negative influence, including the tenants of the Boyce Family's brownstone, non-Barbadian blacks, and even Selina's own father, Deighton, whose death at sea is the direct result of Silla's determination to have sole control over her household.

Building on Simone Alexander's theory of counter-maternal movement and Michelle Wright's identification of the paradoxical ancestral influence on the Diasporic subject, I argue that, although Silla Boyce initially traumatizes her daughter, who watches her mother's ruthless ambition curtail her movement, subsume her personal identity, destroy the Boyce family, and finally attempt to usurp Selina's own dreams, Silla's attempts to control her daughter ultimately stand the young girl in good stead as she grows into womanhood. Selina benefits from rewriting her mother's inscriptive trauma through a (literal) dance of both improvisation and mimicry. By rejecting Silla's capitalist ideals of wealth, financial stability, and community allegiance, Selina reverses the possibility of suffering her mother's fate of early widowhood, estranged children, and suburban loneliness. But, in her journey toward self-identification, during which she begins a love affair, interacts with "othermothers," chooses a career as a dancer, and ultimately emigrates from home, Selina enacts corporeal movements that, in spite of their rebellious intentions, are influenced by a matrilineal inheritance of defiance, independence, and a sense of adventure. In short, Selina's resistance of matrilineal inscription allows her to reinscribe her own corporeal, ideological, and biographical narratives; but, in the end, each still bears the mark of her mother, who, like Selina,

defied her own mother's wishes and left her mother('s)land many years before. As such, Silla and Selina serve as complex reflections of one another. Like the appearance of reversal in a mirror image, Selina defines herself by antithesis— she actively defies her mother's attempts to pre-inscribe her life's narrative for her by enacting the very corporeal movements that her mother has warned her against. And yet, even as she does this, Selina ultimately adopts some of Silla's earlier life choices in various forms of autonomy and movement that reverse and revise, but ultimately reenact her mother's stilled past (DeLamotte 40).¹⁸

II. The Mother's Movement (Or Lack Thereof)

Before entering into a conversation about matrilineal inscription in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, it is important to discuss how Silla's desire to control her daughter's body mirrors a progressive restriction that has already claimed her own, and one that Selina witnesses during her most formative years. Years before, when she emigrated from Barbados to the United States at the age of eighteen, Silla was both autonomous and ambulatory. Although the specific details of her transoceanic journey are unclear, the magnitude of the event is still tangible throughout the text and, juxtaposed against Silla's current (im)mobility, its memory attests to the drastic change in her value system. When Silla confronts a young Selina about Deighton's plans to return to Barbados and live on the land he has inherited from a dead sister, Silla recalls how, from the early days of her childhood, she was a being in constant motion: spending her days picking grass in the

¹⁸In *Places of Silence, Journeys of Freedom: The Fiction of Paule Marshall* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998), Eugenia DeLamotte says that Selina is returning to her mother's "silenced past" (40). Here, I have altered her metaphor to fit my argument about mobility.

sugar cane fields and, when times were especially difficult, selling fruit to make ends meet. According to Silla: “I would put a basket of mangoes ‘pon muh head and go selling early-early ‘pon a morning. Frighten bad enough for duppy and thing cause I was still only a child.... No, I wun let my mother know peace till she borrow the money and send me here” (46). According to her own memory, the younger Silla was mobile—willing to work for the things she wanted and needed—and moved independently of others. Consequently, she was not subject to their desires; even her mother could not stop her from coming to the United States as a teenager. In fact, Silla was moving for the self-defined purpose of emigration, and her range of movement grew increasingly wider until she was able to achieve that ultimate goal. If put in Simone Alexander’s terms, Silla moves and moves until she leaves her mother’s maternal space forever.

But once Silla arrives in the U.S., her range of movement decreases, which corresponds to the adoption of a new identity. On the morning she and Deighton are scheduled to cash the check from his land, which Silla has secretly sold in order to put a down payment on their brownstone, Deighton offers both of his daughters a glimpse into the history of this digression by recalling the moment at which Silla became unable to perform even the simplest acts of independent travel. According to Deighton, one day, while the couple was still dating, Silla “took a sudden fright” while emerging from the subway station after a movie date (117). “I ask her what was wrong” recounts Deighton, “[a]nd yuh know what—she din know where she was! The head had turn completely from the subway. I had to lead she the way you would lead a child” (117). “The head turn now” he adds playfully in a thinly-veiled allusion to their previous night of lovemaking (117).

Deighton's subway anecdote identifies an important correlation between Silla's ideologies and her corporeality; a correlation that will reemerge when Silla later tries to control Selina's bodily movements. For a girl who once spent weeks on the high seas, Silla's being disoriented by a ride on the subway seems out of character. However, it is actually a corporeal representation of her shifting emigrant to immigrant ideologies; one of which is a new dream of companionship and joint financial success. As Silla points out later in the text, new immigrants like the girl she once was often wish for partners with whom they can co-achieve their dreams. According to her: "if you got a piece of man you want to see him make out like the rest. You want to see yourself improve. Isn't that why people does come to this place?" (174). In the early days of their courtship, Deighton showed such promise, and Silla's submission to him as he led her off the subway was given in expectation of his future achievements; it was a physical manifestation of her decision to submit to his direction for their future.

Unfortunately, however, Silla's and Deighton's most recent conflict over the best use of his inherited land attests to the disappointing reality that they are now two individuals who are literally moving in different directions. While Silla wants to simultaneously 'put down roots' in the United States, Deighton wants to return to Barbados and live like a king; and, as his wife and financial partner, Silla is obligated to dance to the same tune. In fact, Silla's acquiescence to Deighton's sexual advances on the previous night, and his exploitation of her need for intimacy illustrate the amount of socio-economic mobility that Silla has now ceded to her husband—a man who, in her eyes, is not really going anywhere at all. Like her physical reaction on the subway, Silla's sexual desire has most recently caused her body to behave in ways that are equally

uncharacteristic, but also profoundly debilitating. Though Selina has often overheard Silla telling her friends that she ““can’t bear the sight”” of Deighton, and that she feels like responding with violence whenever he ““come muching [her] up ‘pon a night,”” Selina also notes how her mother’s body still “submit[s] to his caress” with “a kind of stunned peace” whenever he turns away from other women long enough to offer it (32, 116). On this particular night, however, submission proves to be catastrophic because Deighton uses it to avenge himself (Christian 91). Empowered by the reaffirmation of his sexual prowess, he effectively convinces Silla to stay behind while he cashes the land check and squanders the money on clothes and other trinkets for the family. While he saunters from shop to shop, reveling in the treatment of store clerks who are eager to make a sale, Silla, now subdued in her role as his wife, can do nothing but sit at home and wait anxiously for his return. Deighton uses his power over Silla to immobilize her, and by doing so, gives himself free reign to ruin her dreams of owning a home.

In fact, Deighton’s telling of the subway story on the morning after he seduces Silla works as an explanation of both the past and the present. First, it serves as the connective thread between Silla’s formerly-mobile and currently-static selves. The subway scene encapsulates Silla’s digression from mobile to static by identifying her desire for companionship in the achievement of her immigrant dreams as the culprit for her restricted mobility. Next, by making the connection between her “turned head” during their courtship and her “turned head” after their night together, Deighton creates a narrative trajectory that highlights the ways in which Silla’s initial decision to cede her mobility created long-term effects. Not only does her choice of a companion hinder the future achievement of her goals, but the concomitant corporeal immobility creates a

precedent for other disempowering moments of stasis, including the one that manifests itself on the morning Deighton cashes the check. In short, Silla's initial decision sets off a chain reaction that continually impedes several forms of personal movement.

And yet, although Deighton's failure to become successful initially halts Silla's socioeconomic and corporeal mobility, Silla soon learns the value of restricted but strategic maneuvering when she begins to imbibe the ideologies of the Barbadian community. Like her fellow immigrants, Silla comes to define success in terms of property acquisition, a desire that the Barbadians brought with them from the small island on which wealth and land ownership for blacks was virtually impossible (Francis, "Accents" 22). As Silla recounts in her memories of Barbados: "That's Bimshire. One crop. People having to work for next skin to nothing.... It's a terrible thing to know that yuh gon be poor all yuh life, no matter how hard you work...." (70). In the United States, however, things are slightly different. "I ain saying that we don't catch *H* in this country what with the discrimination and thing and how hard we does have to scrub the Jew floor to make a penny," says Silla, "but my Christ, at least you can make a headway" (70).

According to the ideals of the Barbadian Association, "headway" becomes achievable by property acquisition, which brings with it financial independence and power over one's life. During the first Association meeting, an impromptu speaker named Cecil Osborne articulates this sentiment when he says that:

'All those houses we sweat so to buy and now, at last, making little money from gon soon be gone! That's why we got to have a voice at City Hall to see that they go slow. And if we have enough pull and enough money behind us, they gon have to listen...! [...] We ain white yet. We's small-timers!... But we got our eye on the big time....' (221)

Indeed, for many individuals in Silla's community, both personal and political success means literally putting down roots and staking a claim to the land on which they (and their future tenants) now live. For this reason, Silla works numerous jobs (including housekeeping, factory work, and selling baked goods), and cleverly strategizes to either bully or buy out the other tenants and claim her house for herself—she is determined to remain literally the last woman standing in her beloved brownstone. Thus, although marriage initially stifles her movements, Silla learns that some forms of physical stasis can serve as the means for upward mobility. On the other hand, incessant movement and instability, which are best illustrated by Deighton's constant career changes, his adulterous meanderings on Fulton Street, and his refusal to own (or at least *aspire to* own) property can only lead to poverty and failure.¹⁹

Eventually, Silla's adoption of the community's ideologies ultimately usurps from Deighton any power over her corporeality. However, instead of reclaiming her autonomy, she remarries it to the group in a lavish ceremony that is narrated through descriptions of communal ritual and corporeality and, more important, is carefully witnessed by a teenaged Selina. At 'Gatha Steed's daughter's wedding, Silla's initial refusal to dance, which is followed by her finally accepting the hand of an elderly Barbadian just moments before Deighton's arrival serves as yet another climactic corporeal representation of a moment in which her shift in ideologies is inscribed on her body and its movements. During the wedding reception, an elderly native of Silla's village asks her to join him on

¹⁹ One summer night, while on his way to meet his mistress, Deighton walks into the kitchen to announce to Silla (who is making dinner and preparing for a weekend of cooking) that he is going out for "air" (23). Silla, who is frustrated by both his philandering and his lack of ambition, verbally attacks his laziness and financial impotence in a tirade that, albeit abusive, summarizes Deighton's attitude about home ownership: "But be-Jesus-Christ... what kind of man he is, nuh? Here every Bajan is saving if it's only a dollar a week and buying house and he wun save a penny. He ain got nothing and ain looking to get nothing" (23, 24).

the dance floor, and quickly refutes her excuse that she does not dance: ““You must think I forget how you used to be wucking up yourself every Sat’d day night...how I see you dance once till you fall out for dead right there on the grass”” (144). Selina, who overhears this exchange, is astonished; in spite of all the stories told to her about her mother, she can hardly imagine the woman as a young girl who once gave herself over to such revelry. The Silla Boyce Selina has grown up with is confined to domestic spaces—both her own as well as those of her employers; the latter of which is financing her purchase of the former. In the old country, Silla was independent, but here she has traded in the dances of frivolity and celebration for ones of hard labor and strategic maneuvering in order to move her family up the social ladder.

However, at some point, Silla does join the other guests on the dance floor, but in a way that is far more austere and controlled than the dancing she once did back home. As Selina describes it, all of the adults on the dance floor—including her mother and the old man—move with a “graceful restraint—their backs stiff with only a suggestion of movement in their hips and legs” (145). And, unlike the young girl Mr. Braithwaite describes, Silla is, in this instance, being led by a community elder. She does not dance alone to the point of fainting, but follows the customs of the rest of the group. Additionally, her dancing in concert with the others works as a powerful dismissal of Deighton when he suddenly appears at the door of the dancehall and is summarily ignored by everyone, including Silla, who turns her back to him in a provocative reclamation of her body and a simultaneous corporeal amalgamation with the other guests. According to Selina, everyone, from the men sitting at the bar to the dancers on the floor “*turned in one body* and danced with their backs to him” (150, my emphasis). In

this moment, Silla's community acceptance is secured, while Deighton's is severed forever.

In addition to its value as a ceremonial celebration of Silla's "marriage" to the Barbadian community, the wedding scene actually serves as the final installment in Silla's corporeal narrative; one that begins with her childhood memories of Barbados, and ends with Selina's watching her dance with the wedding guests. While she was once staunchly independent, literally dancing to her own tune and oblivious to those around her, Silla is first corporeally joined to her husband, but is now a part of a much larger collective. And, like the hand that she initially raises to greet Deighton but quickly drops, and like the body that once danced uninhibitedly, but that now moves in concert with so many others, Silla's ideologies, ambitions, and beliefs are all circumscribed by the Barbadian community. Silla has written a narrative for her life that has been inscribed onto her body, and she, in turn, tries to do the same for her children. Fortunately, however, Selina, her youngest and most defiant daughter, witnesses her mother's transformation, and ultimately rejects a similar fate. In fact, in the moment of the group dance, when the narrative of Silla's digressive mobility reaches its climactic peak, Selina—who has finally heard *and* witnessed it in its entirety—rejects her mother's example by trying to dislodge herself from the throng of dancing bodies. "Lemme go," she commands her best friend Beryl when her father appears. Unfortunately, however, Selina is unsuccessful, and the group "closes protectively" around her, her mother, and her sister in a move that is as stultifying for Selina's body as Silla's shifting ideologies have been for her own. And yet, though Selina is unsuccessful in this instance, it is only

the first act in a series of rebellions that respond to the trauma of Silla's attempted corporeal control with a defiance that manifests itself in antithesis: corporeal movement.

III. The Anatomy of a Daughter's Defiance

Even in the early days of Selina's childhood, Silla's fears of her independent mobility are couched in concerns for her physical well-being, but ultimately correspond to a larger fear of external influence. Her first opponent is Selina's father, Deighton. Years before their daughters were born, Silla gave birth to a son who died as a toddler from a weak heart. Silla, however, attributes the death to her husband's taking him for fast rides in a rickety old car (176). This instance of fatal movement is one that Silla seems paranoid about Selina's repeating, and she often accuses Deighton of encouraging their daughter's potentially-reckless behavior in the same way he exacerbated their son's heart disease. When Deighton says that Selina should be allowed to go out with friends un-chaperoned when her sister Ina is sick, Silla immediately links his current irresponsible parenting to the loss of their son: "You does think she's a boy" she tells Deighton, "always filling her head with foolishness and her guts with Hooton. You like you does forget the boy dead and she ain he" (24). This accusation is expressed as a part of a general concern for Selina's safety; however, it also alludes to Silla's growing realization of Deighton's ideological influence over their daughter. Not only does Deighton approve of Selina's independent comings and goings, but he is also "filling her head with foolishness" that runs counter to Silla's vicarious ambitions. When Deighton tells Selina about his inheritance, he immediately convinces her that returning to Barbados will create a better life for them than the one they now live as immigrants.

Thus, not only does he sanction her independent movement within the space of their neighborhood, but he encourages her to think differently from her mother—thoughts that threaten to destroy Silla’s dream of immigrant success by encouraging Selina’s desire for corporeal movement across a wider terrain via expatriation.

In fact, throughout Selina’s childhood, Silla’s matrilineal inscription repeatedly manifests itself in attempts to control her daughter’s corporeality. Selina’s bodily movements—like travelling to Harlem to visit her father once he leaves the family home—often represent shifting allegiances to people living outside her mother’s household (if not outside her house altogether). Thus, the trauma that transpires between them lies in an intense struggle over the control of Selina’s body. Whenever the young girl exhibits diverging ideologies through various forms of movement, Silla tries to restrict the movement by destroying the relationship that causes it. Subsequently, over the course of a few years, she evicts one brownstone tenant, Suggie Skeete, amid allegations of prostitution and virtually commands another tenant, Mrs. Mary, to die when she discovers that Selina often visits both women. Silla’s most traumatic feat, however, is her orchestration of the death of Selina’s father.

After Deighton’s public embarrassment at the Steed wedding, which is followed by a debilitating work-related injury and a conversion to the religious doctrine of Father Peace, his and Silla’s marriage disintegrates. In less than a year, Deighton moves to the Father’s Harlem “Kingdom,” where Selina frequently visits, and where the two share the same quiet moments they once did when she was a child. Selina, however, refuses to divulge to Silla any information about the time she spends with Deighton; and, out of a fear of his negative influence, Silla ends her visits by reporting his status as an illegal

alien, for which he is deported. According to her, she does this because he has abandoned the family, but when they learn that he has died at sea, it becomes clear that Silla has other motives. On the night the family receives word of the drowning, Selina attacks her mother in a blind rage. Strangely, instead of protecting herself (or returning the blows), Silla holds her daughter until she falls asleep in her arms where, for hours afterward, she caresses Selina's face with a "frightening possessiveness [that] declared that she was touching something which was finally hers alone" (185). Silla's reason for not responding to Selina's attack is simple: she has no need to fight, for she has already won this battle. Though Selina's assault is a moment of violent corporeal rebellion, Silla has already succeeded in destroying her relationship with her father, thus momentarily restricting Selina's movement. And, even though Selina rages against her mother, she does so in the confines of the one place where Silla reigns supreme, and in the one place where she believes she finally has Selina all to herself: the brownstone.

After Deighton's death, however, Selina continues and intensifies her rebellion, and, true to form, it is mediated through various depictions of corporeal movement. When Silla suggests that Selina attend the Barbadian Association's meetings, Selina obeys her, but it is there that she meets and begins a love affair with Clive Springer, a shell-shocked World War II veteran and unsuccessful painter. When Silla insists that her daughter go to college, again she obeys, but begins taking dance classes in addition to her science and pre-med courses. Additionally, even though she takes her mother's advice to apply for the Barbadian Association's annual scholarship, Selina's secret intentions are to run away with the money and escape her mother's control altogether. In each instance, Selina

appears to acquiesce to Silla's inscription of a life narrative for her, but ultimately uses her mother's demands to defy her, and she uses her body to do so.

Ironically, some of Selina's most salacious physical actions often mirror Deighton's various betrayals of Silla—which serves as quite a feat of poetic justice, given the fact that Silla has literally erased Deighton's body from the face of the earth (since it is never recovered from the sea).²⁰ For example, when Selina makes love to Clive for the first time, the experience is described as a quasi-marital betrayal that literally echoes her father's past infidelities. As she walks through Fulton Park with her soon-to-be lover, Selina thinks of Suggie's admonition to “do the living” for her father, and to enjoy the life he has so tragically lost (209). As she and Clive enter an empty park building, Selina resolves to do just that, thinking: “Well then, let it be summer and Saturday night and she some bold woman with a warm laugh and the man her father!” (234). Instead of heeding her mother's frequent warnings against becoming a “concubine,” Selina does for Clive what Deighton's mistress once did for him: she provides refuge from his wife and his failures. Thus, when Selina and Clive share their first sexual encounter, it is a reenactment of her father's life, but it is also, like Deighton's indiscretions, an act of corporeal disloyalty against Silla and her expectations for Selina. In fact, Selina suddenly wishes that her mother and every other member of the Barbadian community could be there to witness “how utterly she renounced their way” (239). In this moment, Selina does with her body the thing she wants to do; and, by doing so, wins one of the first

²⁰ Although critics like Simone Alexander contend that Selina's plan to win the scholarship mirrors Silla's successful plot to secretly sell Deighton's land (159), I would argue that her gaining her mother's approval by attending the meetings, where her participation places her in the running to win, is also akin to Deighton's wooing Silla the night before they are scheduled to cash the check from the sold land. In both cases, Silla's appeasement loosens her control over them, and allows them to do as they wish.

triumphs over her mother's attempts at matrilineal inscription—through corporeal movement.

But, in addition to Selina's relationship with Clive, which is, for all its defiance, a form of movement in a relatively small space, she also moves across wider ideological distances; movement that is also represented by instances of subversive corporeality. By forming extra-maternal bonds with othermothers (most of whom Silla disapproves) Selina is introduced to alternative representations of black womanhood, which are often expressed through the women's distinct physical qualities. In these women, Selina finds examples of divergent corporeality that she adopts, both in the interrogation of her mother's ideas about black female identity and in the subsequent formation of her own. Suggie Skeete, the upstairs tenant who Silla evicts amid allegations of prostitution, models a sensuality and an enjoyment of sexual intercourse that Selina never sees in Silla, and that Silla often discourages in her daughter. In fact, Silla and Suggie are both moral and physical character foils to one another: while Silla is described in traditionally-masculine terms, Suggie embodies all things feminine. According to Deighton, Silla's "resolute mouth," "broad nose," and "bold yet well-molded contours of the bones under her deeply-browned skin" give her an "angularity" that belies the "narrow void between her legs" he once enjoyed (22). Suggie, on the other hand, is "voluptuous," with a "languorous gaze" and soft arms and thighs that are irresistible to men, and that are equally beautiful to Selina (18). For this reason, it is an image of Suggie lying "languorous and laughing amid her tumbled sheets," that comes to Selina during her first night of intercourse (239). And, as is the case in all her subsequent encounters with Clive, Selina's body mimics both Suggie's example and her advice; on the two women's last

visit before Suggie moves away, Suggie tells Selina to “find [her]self some boy or the other out there and get little loving up and thing” (209). And, on that first night with Clive (and for many nights after), Selina does this, offering herself to her lover with the same “full passion” for life that she once saw—and admired—in Suggie (239).

In addition to her example of sensuality, Suggie’s ostracism from the Barbadian community due to her perceived sexual promiscuity offers Selina what Joyce Pettis calls a “variation in negotiation of community” (44), one that Selina extends to create her own intra-gender bonds that include non-Bajan women—something that neither Suggie nor her mother ever do. Like Suggie, Selina becomes increasingly disinterested in the prudish life that the typical upstanding Barbadian woman is expected to lead, which includes marriage and “the sanctioned embrace[s] two nights a week, the burgeoning stomach, the neat dark children...the slow blurring of the self, the steady attrition of the soul over all those long complacent years” (300). Equally important, however, is the fact that Selina also disavows both her mother’s and the community’s refusal to form alliances with other black minority groups like African Americans. Throughout her childhood, she maintains a close friendship with Miss Thompson, a black Southern woman who works in a nearby beauty shop. And, like Suggie, the older woman becomes instrumental to Selina’s understanding of her black female subjectivity, which is also manifested in physical terms. Through Mrs. Thompson, Selina learns that her skin color creates for her a bilateral positionality in the United States, and this knowledge works in two ways: it gives Selina a new perspective on her own corporeality, and it metaphorically inscribes itself on her body in profound ways.

Miss Thompson is the first woman in the text who offers Selina a glimpse at the ugliness of racism when she tells the story of her “life-sore”: a putrefying wound on her foot that refuses to heal. As a young woman, Miss Thompson is almost raped by a group of white Southern men, and although she escapes sexual assault, one of them manages to permanently mark her foot by slicing it with a shovel. After hearing this story, Selina feels hatred toward whites for the first time; she imagines taking Miss Thompson’s cane and “rush[ing] into some store on Fulton Street” where she would exact revenge by “bringing [the cane] smashing across the white face behind the counter” (216). Later, Selina will feel the same rage when a classmate’s mother admires her West Indian heritage, telling her that it makes her more civilized than other blacks, and then spouts off all the typically-condescending praises of black people’s “natural talent for dancing and music” that Selina has so skillfully “developed” (287, 288). After this particular encounter, Selina realizes that Margaret’s mother “saw one thing above all else...her black skin” (289). Immediately she remembers Miss Thompson’s attack, and imagines that the shovel “cutting like a scythe in the sunlight...was no different from the woman’s voice falling brutally in the glare of the lamp” (292). Here, Selina finally realizes that, in the eyes of Margaret’s mother, she is exoticized for her ‘West Indianness,’ but in the end the woman considers her to be no better than the blacks who her mother and other Barbadians mistreat and ostracize. In a moment of bilateral ideological and corporeal defiance of her mother, Selina comes to understand that—at least for some whites—her black skin overrides her nationality, and, like Mrs. Thompson and other African Americans, it marks her as a *thing*: an object that is subject to the whimsy, condescension, and exploitation of whites.

In the weeks and months following this incident, Selina's recurring nightmare of being chased by a dark beast that injures her leg is another instance of marking that creates difference between her and Silla—albeit one that is metaphorical. In a moment of other-matrilineal inscription, the mark of the beast is in fact a mental reenactment of Mrs. Thompson's injury; one that, in Caruthian terms, serves as a vivid reminder of the "wound of the mind" that Selina suffers during her encounter with Margaret's mother. Paradoxically, it is also a realization that she can *save* her body from the kind of degradation that has happened to both Miss Thompson and her mother. When Miss Thompson first tells Selina about her life sore, Selina understands that the sore, and the racism that it represents is, in her words, "the thing that had *really* yellowed Miss Thompson's eyes, grayed her skin and given it its tragic mien" (216, my emphasis). But, at the dance party, she discovers that she too is vulnerable to a similar living death, and she decides that she "must somehow prevent [racism] from destroying her inside" in the way that it has done to the older woman (Marshall 291; McDonald 32). Thus, when Miss Thompson first tells the story, she transmits to Selina knowledge that marks the young girl's mind by foreshadowing and clarifying the white mother's later marking of her body (via color classification). But after that incident, this same knowledge offers Selina the wisdom she needs to leave the United States and perhaps escape the kind of corporeal and psychological marking suffered by the older woman as well as by Selina's own mother; whose rigid, masculine body and "lips, set in a permanent protest against life" are, like the life-sore, a physical manifestation of the soul-hardening Silla has undergone in order to deal with the ignominy of day labor, low wages, an unfaithful husband, and the other miseries of life as a black immigrant woman (18, 292).

In addition to the kinds of corporeal knowledge gained from her relationships with black women, Selina learns a powerful form of physical self-expression from her Jewish classmate and fellow dancer Rachel Fine. Under Rachel's instruction, dance becomes another corporeal enactment of difference; it becomes a means of self-support that helps Selina avoid the avarice Silla practices in her mimicry of the "Jew landlord" who profits through the exploitation of others—namely, other black people. Additionally, it serves as a provocative way to escape the kinds of racism that her mother has experienced.²¹ True to the many matro-filial paradoxes that define Silla's and Selina's relationship, Rachel's Jewish heritage is actually a point of common economic interest between the two—even as it highlights their vast ideological differences. Unlike African Americans, who some Barbadians looked down on, Jewish Americans were a group that many of them criticized, but ultimately admired and, in some cases, imitated (Hathaway 113). At the inaugural Association meeting, when Silla and her friends get into an argument about black solidarity, Silla points out that the Barbadians who lease rooms to black boarders are no better than the Jewish families for whom they once worked as maids and day laborers. According to Silla:

"It's true the roomers is our own color. But if they was white or yellow and cun do better we'd still be overcharging them. Take when we had to scrub the Jew floor. He wasn't misusing us so much because our skin was black but because we cun do better. And I din hate him. All the time I was down on his floor I was saying to myself: 'Lord, lemme do better than this. Lemme rise!'" (224)

In Silla's eyes, "getting on like a black-guard" with her roomers is no different from the Jewish homeowners' former exploitation of her own labor. But more important, it connects her to the Jewish population in the same way that Selina's friendship with

²¹ Selina also dances with Suggie during the scene when she admonishes her to start living again (2905-6); in that instance, it too serves as an act of self-definition, of a burgeoning sensuality.

Rachel does: through the lesson of economic autonomy (224). While working in their houses, Silla cultivates a desire to “do better,” and to one day own a house where she can have similar luxuries. Selina, on the other hand, is “not interested in houses”; however, she does want to be her own woman, and after receiving her mother’s blessing to leave home, Selina calls Rachel and makes arrangements for a dance audition with Rachel’s aunt (an entertainment booking agent on a cruise ship) so that, like Silla, she too can support herself financially, albeit without her mother’s ruthless ambition (306, 307).

IV. A Changing Same: Silla, Selina, and the Mirroring of the Mother

In addition to Rachel’s Jewish heritage, dance is also a common point of interest between Selina and her mother. Ironically, it is Rachel, the othermother who is most racially different from Selina, who serves as the fulcrum upon which Selina cycles back to the influence of—and corporeal resemblance to—her mother. In *Activist Sentiments: Reading Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (2009), P. Gabrielle Foreman describes the depiction of Frado’s relationship with (and to) Mag in Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) as a “temporal and textual palimpsest” wherein daughter and mother share similar life experiences, including seductions by duplicitous men, descents into the ‘fallen womanhood’ that characterized many of the nineteenth century’s “tragic mulatta” texts, and childbirths that complicate already-difficult financial situations (58). Similarly, in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* Selina and Silla share both autobiographical and corporeal resemblances that speak to each other across a temporal divide. In fact, throughout the novel, Marshall describes Selina’s body as first a corporeal and later a temporal reflection of Silla’s: even as Selina rebels against her mother’s inscription through acts of physical

disobedience, she also shares many of the older woman's physical characteristics, former physical movements (which includes a shared love of dance), and a desire to travel beyond the maternal sphere of (attempted) influence—something her mother did many years earlier. At the same time, however, Selina's life choices ultimately help her to escape Silla's present loneliness. As such, by the end of the novel, Selina's departure from her lover, and her sojourn to the Caribbean is a complex reverse, revised, and reenacted migration of Silla's former trans-oceanic journey, marriage, and widowhood. Instead of being a mere palimpsest—wherein one image is transposed onto another that has been partially-erased—Selina serves as an inverted mirror image of her mother: Silla's story is neither erased nor identically repeated in Selina; rather, Selina's movements are a reflection of Silla's across the span of a generation, but only after Selina has revised them (through counteractions taken against Silla's matrilineal inscription) to fit into her own self-composed life narrative.

According to Heather Hathaway, the mimetic dance that Rachel and Selina perform near the end of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is symbolic of Selina's reaching out to make connections with groups outside her Barbadian community (113). However, it is also a corporeal reconnection between Selina and her mother; one that begins long before Selina and Rachel perform together, and one that continues long after she dances her life-changing solo alone. Even though Selina is introduced to the art by Rachel, Silla also once shared a love for dance when she was Selina's age. And, when Selina dances, her body and its movements take on the qualities of her mother's. Even their performances follow a similar sequence. When Seon Brathwaite confronts Silla at the Steed wedding, he says that she once danced until she “fall out for dead right there on the grass” (144).

Similarly, Selina's signature performance, the birth-to-death cycle, begins with vibrant movement and ends in stillness. Thus, although the dance with Rachel is technically mimetic, the sequence of movements of Selina's body actually mimics her mother's former habit of dancing until she appeared to die. Additionally, the life cycle itself alludes to Selina's role within what Michelle Wright calls the "line of ancestry" that has come to her through her mother (179). As such, the sequence is both an ancestral mimicry as well as a representation of her body's acknowledgement of a matrilineal birth-life-death continuum that the human body reenacts every time it "emerges from the mother"—every time a daughter is born.

The connection between corporeal resemblance and ancestry becomes even more pronounced as Selina moves toward her solo performance. Although, on the night before the recital, she and Rachel dance "as if guided by a single will, as if, indeed, they were simply reflections of each other," on the next night, as Selina prepares to perform her solo, the description of her face and eyes echoes earlier descriptions of her mother (281). For example, on the day of the Steed wedding, Silla is described as possessing a beauty that has been passed down to her from her female ancestors. According to the narrator:

[S]he was handsome, as the women from the hills of Barbados sometimes are, a dark disquieting beauty, which broods in their eyes and flashes in their gestures.... Silla had learned its expressions early from her mother and the other women as they paused in the cane fields and lifted their sun-blackened, enigmatic faces to the sea, as they walked down the white marl roads with the heavy baskets poised lightly on their heads and their bodies flowing forward in grace and restraint. They seemed to use this beauty not to attract but to stave off all who might lessen their strength. (135)

Moments before her performance, Selina is described in similar terms. As the piano plays the opening strains of music, the young girl

rose—sure, lithe, controlled; her head with its coarse hair lifting gracefully; the huge eyes in her dark face absorbed yet passionate, old as they had been even when she was a child, suggesting always that she had lived before and had retained, deep within her, the memory and scar of that other life. (281)

In both instances, the women's facial features link them to a past that their bodies remember, even if their minds do not. Thus, only moments before Selina performs the solo dance that serves as a corporeal acknowledgement of her specific matrilineal inheritance, this description of her features is already working to link her to a shared past.

This shared beauty becomes even more significant after Selina's dance when, in a fitting correlation between body and mind, it sparks the confrontation that helps Selina experience—and finally understand—the forces that have stilled her mother's past (DeLamotte 40). During Selina's interview with the mother of Margaret, a fellow dancer, the older woman “spots” a difference in the young girl that she ultimately attributes to Selina's West Indian heritage (287). And, racist and condescending as she is, Margaret's mother actually recognizes and responds to the inherited “dark disquieting beauty” with which Selina has previously captured the audience's attention. Although the mother does not see the performance, it is described to her by her own daughter, and its power continues to radiate in Selina's features. In fact, as Selina wanders the streets after their conversation, she muses that the woman must have seen her “brash” defiant face and “sensed an arid place in herself”—one she needed to fill by dehumanizing and objectifying the young girl (289).

Interestingly, Selina's face, in all its maternal resemblance, creates a profound moment of realization, one that helps her understand the ways in which extrinsic inscription has shaped her mother's personality. Paradoxically, however, in this same,

Selina rejects the ways in which Silla has chosen to respond to it. While walking home from Margaret's house in the aftermath of the white mother's "racist narrative about black mothers," which includes stories about the honesty and work ethic of the maids her family once employed, Selina is able to "glimpse her own mother clearly for the first time" (DeLamotte 10). She realizes that the humiliation Silla faced as a day laborer must have been nearly unbearable. "She might have come home some day, the bitterness rankling deep, and seeing them there—Selina with her insolence and uncombed hair and Ina feigning some illness—she might have smashed out and killed them," thinks Selina as she wanders through the city (293). She, who has just come quite close to assaulting both Margaret's mother and the group of girls at the party, now understands that her mother's "uncalled-for outbursts" were actually bursts of anger released in a safe space; it is only in Silla's own brownstone that she has any power over her actions and her surroundings (and perhaps this is what has fuelled Silla's need to own it) (293).

For the first time in the text, Selina realizes that she is no different from Silla: in fact, she now knows that she is "one with them: the mother *and* the Bajan women, who had lived each day *what she had come to know*" (292-3, my emphasis). At the same time, however, she understands that, though it is inherited from her mother, her black female subjectivity also intimately connects her with the African American community that Silla and her friends have repeatedly rejected. In the same moment Selina recognizes her similarities to her mother, she also identifies herself as "one with Miss Thompson...the whores, the flashy men, and the blues rising sacredly above the plain of neon lights and ruined houses" on Fulton Street (a hub of activity in the African American community of Brooklyn) (292). Interestingly, this alliance with this group coupled with Selina's violent

reaction to Margaret's mother is part of what makes this moment an instance of resemblance, but also of an interrogation of both extrinsic and matrilineal inscription. By reenacting her mother's anger at the site of her own dehumanization, Selina physically acknowledges an understanding of her mother, even before realizing the resemblance herself. More important, however, she revises Silla's "outbursts" by redirecting her anger at the rightful culprit: the racist woman. Later, when she embraces a bilateral kinship with both Barbadian- and African Americans, Selina also revises Silla's ideas about Barbadian American identity. Instead of following her mother's example of defying white racism by hardening into a formidable force of endurance and promoting exclusive community alliances, Selina defies by movement: first she pushes Margaret's mother's hand away, destroys her lamp, and leaves the room; and later she defies by emigration, which is the ultimate act of counter-inscription: Selina's emigration is a rejection both the racist society in which the black female body is subjected to dehumanization, and of Silla's dreams of immigrant success (for both herself as well as for her children) in the United States.

V. More Close Calls: Clive and Selina, Movement and Stasis

Selina's moment of consciousness after her confrontation with the white mother is but one instance in which she interrogates various forms of inscription and simultaneously enacts matrilineal resemblance and difference. In spite of the defiant nature of Selina's sexual relationship with Clive, their love affair is also, in many ways, a corporeal reenactment, reversal, and revision of her mother's marriage to her father. As couples, Clive and Deighton and Silla and Selina share many of the same personality

traits, but there is one major difference: Selina is determined not to emasculate and destroy Clive in the same way Silla has destroyed Deighton. And, like the confrontation with Margaret's mother, Selina's decisions ultimately result in a reversal/revision of her mother's actions. By severing her ties with Clive and leaving New York on her own, Selina unequivocally rejects the digressive mobility that Silla has experienced over the course of her life and that she has tried to impose in Selina. But nevertheless, because of the meanings of movement and stasis have evolved in the generation between mother and daughter, even this reversal of movement has at its core the common desire for autonomy that both Silla and Selina share, but that manifests itself in divergent theories of corporeality.

In regards to the men in the two relationships, Deighton and Clive have both been emasculated by white male power and rejection. Deighton often remembers the indignities suffered during his days of job-seeking in Barbados, where "white English faces mottled red by the sun in the big stores in Bridgetown" flushed with "incredulity...d disdain and indignation" as they refused him accounting jobs time and time again (39). Similarly, Clive, an unsuccessful visual artist, also remembers his many rejections in the face of white male superiority. When Selina reveals the details of her encounter with Margaret's mother, he replies: "every time I tried to sell a painting or get a showing somebody slapped me down with a smile... It happens, and whether it's a rope or a kick in the butt, a word that slipped out or a phony smile, it's the same damn thing" (295). Clive's near-death experience during one such rant about racism is also eerily reminiscent of Deighton's death/suicide at sea. In the years after her father's death, Selina imagines that, while standing on the deck of the ship that would return him to Barbados,

her father's body simply "buckle[d]" under the weight of his own failure (190). Similarly, during an afternoon on the beach with Clive (who is in the middle of a desperate rant about the tragedy of being born black), Selina describes her lover's body as being "pitched forward as if shoved from behind by some powerful, invisible assailant"; one that nearly topples him headfirst into the ocean (265). Like Deighton, Clive's overwhelming sense of failure is almost his downfall to a death by water; it is only his fear of dying that prompts him to regain his balance, saving himself from suffering the older man's fate.

Deighton and Clive also share strong ties to their mother('s)lands; allegiances that serve as opportunities for redemption in the face of the racism they both face as black men, and ones that also make them incompatible with their female counterparts. Before Silla's betrayal, Deighton's land ownership in Barbados promised an opportunity to redeem himself—both to the white Barbadians at home who had once refused him work, as well as to the black Barbadians in New York who mock his over-ambition and laziness. For this reason, Deighton is desperate to hold on to it: its potential profitability serve as a possibility to triumph over those he would return to, but also over the incredulous Bajan community he is eager to leave behind. Clive, on the other hand, also has close ties to home that promise him a kind of agency that his lives in the military and the art world have not. Although Clive claims to feel trapped by his mother's hold, and has resigned himself to his fate, his self-determined responsibility to care for her actually gives him a sense of personhood that he has never received from the rest of the world.²²

²² Although the intricacies of mother-son relationships in black literature are beyond the scope of this project, it is important to note that Clive and Clytie Springer share a strange and mutually-destructive bond with each other. It is also important to point out that there is a rich body of scholarship on the subject of mothers and sons, particularly from the feminist canon of writings about motherhood. For more

According to Clive, after a violent confrontation with a white friend who tells him that being black must be akin to the feeling of an “irrevocable loss” (254), Clive decides that it is no use trying to convince the whites of the world to think differently, so he retreats into the dark room where Selina now visits, and where he now paints pieces that never see the light of day. The only thing that now draws him out of it is his mother’s calls, which often happen while he and Selina are making love. Clive’s willingness to leave his lover to tend to his mother illustrates the older woman’s power over him, but it also indicates how her need for him returns to him a sense of purpose that he has never felt from the outside world, from his art, or from Selina. More important, it stands in direct opposition to his lover’s disdain for their community and her defiance of her own mother. (Selina’s very presence in his apartment is a rejection of her mother’s intentions for her.) And, by witnessing his repeated acts of maternal devotion, Selina finally realizes that Clive could run away with her. Thus, their differences, like those of Selina’s parents, ultimately drive them apart.

But, in the two love relationships, Clive and Deighton are not the only ones who resemble each other. Even though there are drastically different outcomes for the two relationships, Silla’s and Selina’s decisions are marked by similar ambitions, and these

information on the subject, see Daryl C. Dance’s “Black Eve or Madonna?: A Study of the Antithetical Views of the Mother in Black American Literature” in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature* (ed. Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall [Garden City, NY: Anchor P/Doubleday, 1979]) 123-32. See also the chapter titled “The Halo and the Hardships: Black Women as Mothers and Sometimes Wives” in Gloria Wade Gayles, *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women’s Fiction* (New York: The Pilgrim’s P, 1984) 57-113; and another chapter, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images” in Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990) 67-90. For informative discussions about black mother-son relationships in relation to particular texts, see Marjorie Pryse’s “‘Patterns Against the Sky’: Deism and Motherhood in Ann Petry’s *The Street*” in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers [Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1985]) 116-31; and, finally, Chapter 7 (“The Stubbornness of Tradition”), Part I (Do What Big Mama Sez: Ernest J. Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying*) in Trudier Harris’s *Saints, Sinners, Survivors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 123-38.

divergent yet overlapping meanings of action and intention are a part of what create the simultaneously identical and inverted images of mother and daughter that reach a climactic point near the end of the text. As Martin Japtok points out, Selina's vow of determination to raise money via the Association scholarship is as duplicitous and as fierce as is her mother's vow to sell Deighton's land; in fact, like Clive and Deighton, their sentiments often echo each other's (Japtok 310). As soon as Silla confirms the rumor of Deighton's inheritance, she promises to find a way to wrest it from him. "I gon do it... Some kind of way I gon do it" she tells her friends during one of their visits (75). Similarly, when Selina first decides to win the Association's annual scholarship so that she and Clive can run away together, her declaration is just as self-assuring: "I know I can do it! I swear I'll do it!" she tells him (267).

However, unlike Silla, when Selina realizes Clive's inability to leave, she does not take the money and force him to comply with her decisions; instead, she leaves New York alone; an act that is a direct reversal of Silla's treatment of Deighton. When Deighton refuses to comply with Silla's ideologies of rootedness and economic stability through home ownership, she tries to force his rootedness by severing ties to his homeland. And, when he later moves to the kingdom of Father Peace, thus opting for a rootedness that lay outside her sphere of influence and away from their immigrant community, Silla forced his movement by alerting the authorities of his illegal status and orchestrating his deportation. Selina, however, is different. She does not try to force Clive's movement as her mother has done with her father, but instead moves without him and allows him to continue to live by his own terms. Thus, when the love affair ends, Selina and Clive reverse the stasis/movement dyad that once existed between Silla and

Deighton. The sense of power gained through Clive's relationship with his mother resembles the sense of vindication Deighton derives from ownership of his land. At the same time, Selina's desire to leave mirrors her mother's desire to "make a headway" in a new place; however, in the end, the movements are reversed between the two men and women. At the end of *Brown Girl*, it is Selina who is mobile, returning to the Caribbean (as her father once did), while Clive stays behind (as her mother now does).

And yet, even though the inversion of movement between man and woman in each relationship illustrates the various differences between both the couples and the individuals involved in them, in the end, those differences ultimately represent matro-filial sameness because the *motives* for movement and stasis have so drastically changed in the time between the Boyce marriage and Selina's and Clive's love affair. While Deighton wants to return to his fondly-remembered "land home" because his ideologies do not fit in with the new immigrant community of which he is a part, Silla is rooted in the United States because it promises economic stability and political agency. On the other hand, while Clive stays in New York because he has given up hope that autonomy is possible Selina is mobile precisely because she is in search of an autonomy unfettered by the demands from within her community and the racism from outside;. Thus, although Deighton wants repatriation (and finally gets it, but not under the circumstances he desired) and Clive wants to stay close to his mother, they are both in search of a kind of familiarity and agency that makes the world that repeatedly rejects them less frightening. Most important, although Silla stays and Selina leaves, they both do so because they are looking for a certain kind of personal freedom.

The similarities in motives for movement and stasis and the obverse outcomes that occur between the two couples illustrate the intricacies of matrilineal inscription as it occurs between mother and daughter in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. The differences in movement foreclose on any pretense of strict linearity or identity in Silla's and Selina's relation to one another. At the same time, however, their similar ambitions illustrate the ways in which Silla's inscription has had an impact on Selina in spite of the young girl's repeated and active resistance to it. Though Selina has continually enacted interrogation, revision, reversion, and rejection of her mother's instruction and example, the end result is that she still bears the mark of Silla's influence—so much so that, in the climactic final scene in the text, in which Silla confronts Selina about her rejection of the scholarship's money, both women's bodies collapse into a moment of overlapping corporeality and co-temporality that solidifies both their physical and ideological kinships before they finally part ways.

VI. Cloakrooms and Crossings: Final Scenes and Images

Interestingly, the cloakroom is, both literally and figuratively, an ambiguous space. People enter it when they arrive at a place, but they also enter when they leave, retrieving the items that will keep them warm in the outside world. Likewise, in the cloakroom, Silla and Selina represent opposite poles on a spectrum of mobility. Silla has finally "arrived" in the United States: it is here she announces that she has finally put down a payment on the long-coveted house in Crown Heights. Selina, on the other hand, is departing, and in this space she finally receives her mother's blessing to leave. "G'long!" Silla tells her in a fit of exasperation, "You was always too much woman for

me anyway, soul. And my own mother did say two head-bulls can't reign in a flock. G'long!'” (307). By repeating the same words her own mother once told her, Silla continues the necessary “mother-daughter tradition of separation” that she once made with her mother many years before (Alexander 160, 161). At the same time, however, she is also reenacting a scene in which she was once the daughter, but where she is now the mother. Like the birth-to-death cycle that Selina performed months before, Silla uses her own greatest performance tool—her words—to acknowledge the cyclicity that has shaped both her and her daughter's lives in highly nuanced ways. But, even more provocative, as she faces her daughter in the cloakroom, they both simultaneously revert/convert to the girl Silla once was in an instance of shared corporeality and temporality that illustrates their resemblances to each other, even as it highlights their differences. According to the narrator:

Silla's pained eyes searched her adamant face, and after a long time a wistfulness softened her mouth. It was as if she somehow glimpsed in Selina the girl she had once been. For that moment, as the softness pervaded her and her hands lay open like a girl's on her lap, she became the girl who had stood, alone and innocent, at the ship's rail, watching the city rise glittering with promise from the sea. (307)

Here, present, past, and future collapse into an instant in which both Silla and Selina simultaneously embody the “girl” Silla once was. Even the unclear pronoun usage in phrases like “her adamant face,” “her mouth,” “her hands,” and “she became” illustrate the ambivalence of the moment, and how, for that brief period of time, both women become one person: while the mother gazes at her daughter and sees “the girl she had once been,” her bodily movements also soften, and she too becomes the same girl, “alone and innocent,” watching her future rise before her. And, while Selina stands poised for a future of “promise” in the same way her mother once did many years before, Silla, who

will remain behind, also gets a glimpse into that future, but she does so by retreating into her own past.

Indeed, like her mother Silla, Selina is leaving what has literally become her mother's land, the place where Silla has struggled to become a "head bull": she has finally staked a solid claim on American soil by purchasing the home in Crown Heights, where many Barbadian immigrant families now live (306). And yet, in spite of the fact that she is leaving her mother, Selina's first stop on a largely unplanned journey will be the birthplace of that same immigrant mother to whom she is finally acknowledging a resemblance (McGill 38). But this is not unintentional. When Selina watches Silla dancing at the Steed wedding, she realizes that she wants to understand this woman, because she knows instinctively that "she will never really understand anything"—including herself—until she does (145). Thus, Selina is leaving her mother's *land* even as she returns to the land from which her mother came—a place where she will undoubtedly continue to gather knowledge about the young girl who, on the "green node" of a distant island, still dances in the memories of an old man, and who also lives on in the movements of her own body (145). Like Ralmente Dorce, stowed away in the bowels of the Commonwyne, Selina, operating within a matrilineal cycle of corporeal and temporal inscription, reinscription, influence, and resemblance; and in a complex web of national, filial, and personal allegiances, is leaving her *mother's land* and returning to her motherland, to meet her mother.

VII. Conclusion: On to Other Mothers

And yet, in spite of the fact that, in the provocative cloakroom scene, Selina and Silla's identities briefly collapse into one "girl," it is important to remember that the two are neither identical nor are they linear extensions of one another. The complicated travel from one mother('s)land to another is proof that Selina's identity, like her departure, is far more complex than a straight line. It is true that, in her daughter, Silla has always seen not only herself, but the *strongest* parts of that self. Even as a child, Selina stuns Silla with her boldness; the girl never flinches when her mother raises a hand to her; and as Selina tears through the brownstone, Silla notes her "brave" neck and small back, which was, even at such a young age, "as unassailable as her own" (47). However, Selina's journey of self-discovery, which began with deliberate corporeal rebellion, was—and continues to be—an interrogation of Silla's notions of black female identity. As Selina moves both within and beyond the space of the brownstone, she meets and is influenced by othermothers: women who teach her survival skills and offer alternative examples of sexual, ethnic, and national identities—something her mother was unable to do (Japtok 313). Thus, Selina's extra-maternal affiliations develop an identity that was transnational long before she left the American shore; and, in this way, her corporeality interrogates a present Silla even as her movements mimic her mother's past.

As such, Marshall creates a fascinating map of transgressions, progressions, and regressions that illustrate how the process of matrilineal inscription interrogates representations of black womanhood. In fact, even Silla's gradually-restricted movement is an attempt at claiming a sociopolitical autonomy that is continually threatened by racism, sexism, and the general disappointments of a failed marriage and lost love. Thus,

for both women, corporeality becomes a means of divergent identity formations, even as the two share so many of the same traits. And, quite fittingly, the reader can only guess the next stage in Selina's or Silla's journeys; it is left up to the individual to imagine the remainder of their lives in ways that are undoubtedly indicative of our own ideas about how black women can and/or should live out their days in a global Diasporic space.

In fact, I chose to follow Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* with a discussion of Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* because, like Silla and Selina, the two texts and their heroines are speaking to each other across textual and temporal divides. *Brown Girl* ends with Selina's feet dangling from the American shore with the young girl on her way back to a second home. And, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the story of Sophie, a Haitian girl who emigrates to the United States at a young age but returns to her native land as an adult, is a narrative of what could have happened had Marshall written past her own ending:²³ Here, Sophie gets the opportunity to return to her mother('s)land and reconstruct her relationship with her foremothers and their culture in ways that are restorative to the traumatic matrilineal inscription she experiences. Additionally, there is another major difference: while Selina rebels against maternal ideologies, but ultimately mimics her mother's corporeality, Sophie initially mimics her mother's rape and sexual abuse, but ultimately rebels against that selfsame mimicry. And yet, even as she does so, Sophie eventually acknowledges her resemblance to her mother, and ultimately

²³ In *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1995), Joyce Pettis identifies Avey Johnson as the pseudo-continuation of many of Marshall's earlier protagonists, including Selina Boyce, because, while Selina stands poised for travel to the Caribbean at the end of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Avey actually achieves it in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). According to Pettis, it is not until Avey travels to Carriacou that "[s]piritual wholeness is finally attained" for any of Marshall's characters (4).

incorporates the narrative of their relationship into an identity that is consciously inclusive of both her mother's positionality as well as her own.

CHAPTER III

BREAKING CANE, BREAKING CHAINS: INSCRIPTION, REENACTMENT, AND RITUALS OF DIFFERENCE IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY* (1994)

I. Introduction

“The act of rape...is a matter of the needle giving because the camel
can't.”

—Maya Angelou²⁴

In an essay titled “Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells,” Alice Walker tells the story of her friendship with Luna, a young white activist with whom Walker registered black voters in Georgia during the summer of 1965. Several months after meeting and working together in the South, Luna reveals a secret that shatters Walker’s assumptions about black men indefinitely: during that summer, she was raped by a fellow activist. Until that day, Walker says that, whenever she heard stories about interracial rape, her first instinct was the same as that of scores of black women in the generations before her: to “protect the lives of her brothers, her father, her sons, her lover” from allegations which, when levied against black men in the South, almost always meant death (2447). In this case, however, Walker believes Luna is telling the truth; thus, the instinct to protect meant denying a reality and covering up a crime against a fellow woman who, although she is not black, is bound to Walker by the shared positionality of gender. On the other hand, however, Walker’s accepting the truth of the story represented a symbolic betrayal of her race by admitting that a black man was actually capable of doing what so many others had been falsely accused of for centuries. And as if these conflicting interests were

²⁴ Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Bantam, 1969) 65.

not already difficult, the story is even further complicated by the fact that, during their last month living together, Walker comes out of her bedroom one morning to find none other than the alleged rapist, Freddie Pye, emerging from Luna's. Though Walker admits that she is never sure what to make of any of these details, near the end of the text she cryptically compares the experience to a piece of pottery once given to her by Luna, which Walker's daughter later broke, but which Walker "glued back together in such a way that the flaw improves the beauty and fragility of the design" (2450).

I begin this chapter about traumatic matrilineal inscription in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) with the epigraph above and the vignette about "Advancing Luna" because, like Luna's assault, Sophie Caco's ordeal of being tested (the practice of probing a girl's vagina in order to ensure that her hymen is intact) is also a rape. However, in regards to "Advancing Luna," Sophie has much less in common with the rape survivor as she does with the narrator, Alice Walker, whose conflicting obligations to "advance" the cause of rape victims while protecting the reputations of black men cause her to interrogate her long-held beliefs about black male innocence. Though each woman is responding to culturally-idiosyncratic belief systems from different time periods and different national legacies, both women experience losses of innocence wherein they must come to terms with realities that contradict the matrilineally-inherited knowledge they have been given about their own histories, their own 'people.' In "Advancing Luna," Walker addresses the woman who is arguably the 'mother' of anti-lynching advocacy, Ida B. Wells. In the early-twentieth century, Wells used the power of journalism to denounce rape allegations that often led to the violent deaths of scores of

innocent black men in the early-twentieth century.²⁵ However, in light of Luna's recent allegations, Walker must face the possibility that this legacy of black male protection is a flawed one. In a provocative prayer to Wells, she says: "...I grew up believing black men literally did not rape white women. At all. Ever. Now it would appear that some of them, the very twisted, the terribly ill, do. What would you have me write about them?" (2447). Similarly, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Sophie's testing forces her to interrogate her allegiance to her family as well as to her Haitian culture, whose history of poverty and economic exploitation allowed for the testing of women as a means for upward social mobility (since a girl whose virginity remains intact stands a better chance of "marrying up" than a girl who has been sexually active). Though Sophie's grandmother once tells her that "your mother is your first friend" (24), Sophie soon learns that this passed-on knowledge is also problematic: her mother Martine's ideas about maternal responsibility (which have also been passed on from Sophie's grandmother) compel her to sexually abuse her own child. For both Alice Walker and Sophie Caco, knowledge and reality clash in ways that force them to question their own instincts, which run contradictory to some of their most basic beliefs.

In spite of these similarities, however, there are important differences between the two narrators and their texts. While Walker's narrative about the violence of shattered beliefs is inscribed on the written page (an act that the author admits was still extremely difficult to do), Sophie Caco's narrative is literally inscribed onto her body. From the moment of her mother's first test to Sophie's self-inflicted genital mutilation, bulimia, and the final rejection of that corporeal violence, Sophie's body is marked with cultural

²⁵ For more information about Ida B. Wells and her work, see Linda O. McMurry's *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), and Ida B. Wells' *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans* ([1892] New York: Arno P, 1969).

and matrilineal narratives of sexual violence. And, like the needle in the Angelou quote above, Sophie initially “gives” to an overwhelming history of trans-generational traumatic inscription that has reproduced itself across several generations. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the trauma of a father’s death introduces the practice of testing into the family as a means for Sophie’s grandmother to ensure that her daughters are not ““raised trash with no man in the house”” (156). In turn, Martine’s teenage rape and her desire to protect Sophie’s virginity and ensure her a good spouse predisposes Martine to reenacting both her sexual assault and Grandmé Ifé’s testing on her daughter; thus perpetrating a transference of corporeal matrilineal trauma in which Martine literally rewrites her daughter’s narrative through digital penetration. And, determined to end the sexual violence of the testing, Sophie pierces her own hymen with a mortar and pestle; an act that is both a reenactment of and an attempt to escape her mother’s abuse. Even after eloping with her next-door neighbor Joseph and becoming a young mother, both the memory of Sophie’s abuse and the lingering physical and emotional pain of her mutilation persist, and she continues to reenact her mother’s assaults through self-destructive behavior like bulimia. In other words, *because* Sophie’s body “gives” its power to the history of abuse through rituals of reenactment, the history itself cannot.

Fortunately, however, like Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Sophie’s story is both an extension of her mother’s as well a departure from it, albeit by circuitous means: instead of reaching reflective corporeality through attempts at difference, Sophie first mimics, but then diverges from maternal example. Thus, although the destructive behaviors that follow her into adulthood are violent reenactments of matrilineal inscription, the reproduction of that violence ultimately necessitates a search for healing;

and, in the process, Sophie begins to enact rituals of difference that, like Selina's, save her and her daughter from suffering her mother's fate. In fact, in this chapter I will argue that the inscription Sophie suffers at the hands of her mother is, like Selina's, profoundly traumatic; however, the sheer corporeal violence of the abuse (and the reflexive repetition that it creates) allows a daughter to interrogate the inescapability of inscription by interrogating the cycle of abuse. Because Sophie's trauma originates in her familial history and is committed by women who have themselves been both perpetrators and victims, Sophie is forced to carefully reevaluate her place within her family's socio-cultural belief system. As a result, she seeks healing from her mother's abuse in ways that allow her to regain agency and start the healing process, but that also particularize her identity as a Haitian woman and as a Caco mother. Although Sophie learns to place her experience within a larger socio-familial context, which allows her to gain an alternative perspective on the motivations behind the choices her foremothers have made for her body, she does not compromise on her attitude toward sexual abuse. Rather, she comes to better understand and make peace with her mother and grandmother, but makes important decisions that ensure that the abusive cycle will end with her.

Within the theoretical framework of traumatic matrilineal inscription, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is the text wherein one sees not only defiance against inscription, but also healing from it. While Selina's body becomes a site of resistance, Sophie's becomes a space for both interrogation *and* healing. Even as she reenacts the instances of matrilineally-transferred trauma against her own body, Sophie begins to seek agency in a variety of ways: by returning to Haiti (which, although it is the birthplace of her sexual abuse, also becomes a site for both confrontation and a reevaluation of maternal

ideologies); by attending group therapy with other women who have experienced similar sexual abuse; and by becoming a mother, which gives her the power to end the cycle of trauma in her family. And, at Martine's funeral, Sophie commits her most profound corporeal act: the pulling up of cane stalks from the field where her mother was raped and where she herself was conceived. In this instance, the field acts as a material space where she can finally redirect violence away from her body, even if it is only transmitted to an inanimate object. In the end I conclude that, by actively regaining control over her own corporeality, Sophie is able to begin putting the pieces of her life back together in a way that is self-healing, but that also ensures that the traumatic inscription she has suffered at the hands of her mothers will never again be committed by another woman in her family.

II. The Reading of Reinscription and a Mother's Reenactment

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the narrative of the bond between Martine and Sophie makes it clear that Sophie's self-inflicted corporeal trauma is the inevitable progression of a complex and violent form of matrilineal inscription—one that occurs in several stages. First, Martine's revelation of Sophie's conception early in the text inscribes for the young girl a new autobiographical narrative that links her to a legacy of violence. Next, Martine transfers trauma through corporeal reenactments of her own experiences: first on herself through her night terrors, and then through the digital penetration of her daughter. By doing so, she serves as both an abuser and an exemplar for Sophie: not only does she sexually abuse her own child, but she models the self-abuse that Sophie will one day mimic. And finally, Martine's misinterpretation of the nature of maternal and filial roles creates a dangerous semi-incestuous relationship that, when coupled with the sexual

abuse, further complicates the bond between her and her daughter. In the end, each of these intricately-bound factors—a reinscribed matrilineal history, exemplary and surrogate reenactment, and the corruption of maternal and filial roles—all contribute to both the trauma that is passed from Martine’s body to her child’s, and to Sophie’s subsequent mimetic response.

Although it is nearly six years after Sophie moves to New York that her mother begins to test her, the inscription that Martine inflicts on her begins early with the reconstruction of Sophie’s creation story and the revelation of the history of testing in the Caco family. For the first twelve years of her life, Sophie is raised in Haiti by Martine’s sister, Tante Atie, an othermother who takes great pains to shield Sophie from potentially-painful knowledge. For example, although Sophie is actually the product of a violent rape, Atie tells her that she was born from “the petals of roses, water from the stream, and a chunk of the sky” (47).²⁶ Shortly after reuniting with her mother in New York, however, Sophie learns the truth. Martine tells her that: ““A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field, and put you in my body. I was still a young girl then, just barely older than you”” (61). In the same conversation, Sophie also hears for the first time about the long history of testing in her family. According to Martine, her mother (and Sophie’s grandmother) Ifé ““would put her finger in our very

²⁶ Another example of this is Atie’s secret of her relationship with their neighbor, Monsieur Donald Augustín. One day, when Atie serves Sophie tea, the young girl notices a note stuck to the bottom of the kettle that reads “I love you very much,” but when she reaches for it, Atie snatches the note away in a vain effort to prevent her from seeing it (27). Although Atie is illiterate and cannot read the note herself, she probably knows—or has been told by Augustín—what it says, and does not want Sophie to know any more than she already does about the extent of their relationship. Though Sophie has watched as Atie longingly watches Augustín and his wife through their open bedroom window at night and she knows he is a confidante who Atie trusts enough to tell the secret of Martine’s sending for her, Sophie is unaware that they were once more than old friends. However, when she reaches New York, Martine reveals the truth about Donald and Atie: though they were once lovers who had one day planned to marry, Augustín ultimately chose a life with someone else. Martine tells Sophie: ““When [his wife] Lotus came along, he did not want my sister anymore”” (43).

private parts and see if it would go inside. The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until the daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure” (60-1). In just a few sentences, Martine changes Sophie’s personal identity by revising her genealogical narrative, identifying her as a child born out of a legacy of female trauma that began with Ifé’s tests and was compounded by Martine’s rape. In this way, Martine locks her daughter into a larger traumatic legacy of matrilineal inscription and sexual violence.

In fact, Martine’s revelation of her teenage rape and her recitation of maternal practices works on a number of levels. Not only do they reveal the history of violence in Sophie’s matrilineal line, but they stand as psychological and temporal parallels to Martine’s rape, which, according to her own account, happened when she was “just barely older” than Sophie is at the time the conversation occurs. Although Tante Atie was similarly abused, she neither tested Sophie nor ever told her about her or Martine’s experiences; thus, up to this point, Sophie has been protected from any knowledge about the violent family ritual. In the wake of this conversation, however, she has lost that innocence. Additionally, Martine’s revelation about the maternal convictions that prompt testing is equally important: it alludes to the fact that Martine will one day feel compelled by the same skewed sense of “responsibility” to test Sophie. In other words, this conversation sets both a parallel and a precedent for the corporeal violence that will visit Sophie in the coming years. Like Martine, Sophie is introduced to a body of adult knowledge too soon, and loses some of her innocence because of it, but the initiation is in itself little more than a foreshadowing of more intense physical violence to come. As such, the conversation illustrates how, from the early days of their reunion, Martine’s and

Sophie's relationship is marked by revelations of first figurative and then literal bodies of knowledge—traumas that make Sophie vulnerable to self-inflicted violence as an adult.

As a matter of fact, as their relationship develops, the trauma Martine inflicts on her daughter gradually slides from narrative and psychological spaces to physical ones; not only do Martine's night terrors create a corporeal exemplar of reenactment for Sophie, but the fright that the young girl experiences while witnessing them literally changes her body. In her recurring nightmares, Martine's relives the experience of her rape, and even though she tries to physically stave off her attacker, she only succeeds in harming herself. According to Sophie, she would often have to awaken Martine before the older woman "bit her finger off, ripped her nightgown, or threw herself out of a window" (193).²⁷ According to Cathy Caruth, a survivor may often reenact a trauma because they feel that, in its original occurrence, it was "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (Caruth 4, 6). However, because the event is now anticipated, a survivor may subconsciously believe that it can now be relived in a moment when one's body is better prepared to experience it, and perhaps even produce a different outcome (6). Similarly, Martine's repeated dreams offer her the opportunity to capture the fullness of the experience, but also to respond to it in the (albeit reconstructed) moment of its occurrence: the scene of the cane field. Unfortunately, however, this reenactment models for Sophie a destructive example of self-preservation. In the reenactment of her attack, Martine's tactic for survival is self-harm, which Sophie

²⁷ Interestingly, Martine's violent corporeal response is reminiscent of her actions during her pregnancy. In the months following Martine's rape, she was so afraid that her attacker would "creep out of the night and kill her in her sleep" that she often "tore her sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh" (139). As such, her nightmares during her pregnancy are arguably an immediately-delayed response to her rape (they may have also been realistic reactions to the very possible threat of her rapist's return), while the nightmares she suffers in New York are a *twice*-delayed reenactment of her trauma.

will later repeat when she protects herself from her mother's testing by piercing her own hymen with a pestle.

Sophie's physical reaction, however, is still years in the making when she witnesses her mother's nightmares for the first time; nevertheless, they create an immediate physical change in the young girl. During her first night in their apartment, Sophie awakens to the sounds of sirens, loud music, and her mother's screams, which sound as if "someone was trying to kill her" (Danticat 48). Sophie is so frightened that, when she awakens her mother, Martine immediately recognizes the fear in her face. Later that morning when Sophie sees herself in the bathroom mirror, she too notices a change, remarking that, not only have her surroundings and perceptions been altered, but so too have her features; it is almost as if she is slowly becoming a different person. "New eyes seemed to be looking back at me," recalls Sophie, "[a] new face altogether. Someone who had aged in one day, as though she had been through a time machine, rather than an airplane" (49). This altered physical appearance speaks to a drastic psychological change in the young girl, who has now travelled with her mother back into the past and, in Caruthian terms, shared Martine's trauma by witnessing her nightmares and sharing the fear associated with them (Caruth 8). Sophie even emerges from the experience with her face altered in the same way that Martine's body was altered by pregnancy and madness after her rape. Thus, her features are an early moment of maternal resemblance that foreshadows even more violent physical changes to come—changes that will further "twin" her with her mother in ways that are far more physical, and far more catastrophic.

III. Another Readyng: (Re)Defining Maternal and Filial Roles

Paradoxically, while the trauma that passes from Martine and Sophie during this first night terror is (like the narrative reconfiguration of Sophie's origins) part of the process of traumatic kinship (Sophie comes out of the experience physically changed in the same way Martin emerges from her rape), it also foreshadows how their relationship ultimately transforms into one in which maternal and filial roles are swapped and corrupted. When Sophie is awakened by her mother's screams, Martine tries to comfort her, but only minutes later, she is fast asleep, and it is Sophie who keeps a night vigil, listening for the sound of Martine's heartbeat in the early morning silence (48). Instantly, Sophie becomes the caretaker, who now watches over her mother in the same way Tante Atie used to watch over her after her own bad dreams back in Croix-des-Rosets. In this respect, Sophie is now a mother figure, while Martine, helpless in her unconscious state, is virtually a child who (at least during the time she is sleeping) has no power to care for herself.

This nocturnal swapping of responsibilities is part of a larger redefinition of identity that occurs when Sophie's custody transfers from Atie to Martine. Sophie recalls that, on the morning after Martine's first nightmare, when she sees her "new face" for the first time in the bathroom mirror, it seemed to say "Welcome to New York. Accept your new life" (49). And, according to Sophie, she greets the challenge "[a]s my mother's *daughter* and Tante Atie's *child*" (49, my emphasis). Indeed, in Atie's maternal ideology, Sophie *is* a child, and children are nurtured and cared for. For Martine, however, Sophie is a *daughter*, and daughters are possessed, protected, and often bear restrictive responsibilities that are as gender specific as the term itself. This is most evident in the

way Martine conflates education and sexual purity: they are both means to better one's social position and are subsequently tightly wrapped around her definition of "success." But even more important, they are Sophie's unavoidable responsibility as a Caco woman. On the way home from the airport shortly after Sophie's arrival, after Martine recounts the ill-fated love story of Tante Atie and Monsieur Augustín, who left Atie when he met his fairer-skinned and more educated wife, Martine says to Sophie:

'You are going to work hard here, and no one is going to break your heart because you cannot read or write. You have the chance to become the kind of woman Atie and I always wanted to be. If you make something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can *raise our heads*.' (44, Danticat's emphasis)

Here, Martine identifies general success as becoming a certain kind of woman: an educated one, but also one who can control how she is treated by men. Interestingly, Martine performs another important conflation here: she figuratively joins Sophie's body with that of the other women of the family; Sophie's head becomes "our heads." Thus, not only does the young girl bear a new responsibility as her mother's daughter, but the responsibility itself creates a divestment of corporeality that serves as additional foreshadowing for Martine's sexual abuse.

Similarly, in the conversation in which Martine reveals the truth about Sophie's conception, Martine again conflates educational success with sexual purity, but this time she offers a glimpse into her ideas about maternal responsibility. In this instance, she demands that Sophie devote her time to her education, but then immediately follows up with questions about her sexual experiences: "You need to concentrate when school starts, you have to give that all your attention. You're a good girl, aren't you?" Martine asks, using another euphemism that means that Sophie has never had any form of

intimate contact with a boy (60). When Sophie confirms that she is indeed “good,” Martine is relieved, but makes it clear that this is not the last time she will demand information about Sophie’s sexual experiences. ““You understand my right to ask as your mother, don’t you?”” she asks (60). In both the conversation about Tante Atie and the interrogation about Sophie’s sexual experiences, Martine’s ultimate expectations for her daughter are clear: she wants her to get a good education and marry well. However, just beneath the surface of each lies definitions of the responsibilities of first daughters and then mothers. In the first conversation, Martine informs Sophie that it is a daughter’s responsibility to preserve (if not enhance) the family’s honor; but in the second conversation, she makes it clear that it is a mother’s responsibility to ensure that this happens by regulating the daughter’s burgeoning sexuality. In fact, it is during this particular conversation that Martine talks about her mother’s testing as part of a matrilineal obligation to “keep” a daughter “pure” (61). As such, Martine’s definitions of matro-filiality are heavily influenced by the notion of concomitant responsibilities; and it is around these responsibilities that most of the matrilineal trauma that transpires between mother and daughter occurs since, for Martine, maternal obligations involve the right of both figurative and literal corporeal intrusion. Thus, from the moment she is returned to her mother, neither Sophie’s personal life nor her body are her own, but are now parts of Martine’s larger dream of restoring the Caco family honor and improving their socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, however, within this plan for Sophie’s success, Martine identifies both interrogation and testing as reasonable means by which she can ensure that Sophie achieves it.

And yet, as corrupted as Martine's expectations are by her own past experiences, it is important to note that Martine's matro-filial ideologies (and the subsequent trauma that she inscribes onto Sophie's body) are also heavily influenced by the transplanted sociocultural values that have followed her from Haiti to the United States—in short, by extrinsic inscription. In Martine's Haiti²⁸, external forces have commodified Haitian female bodies, sometimes making them the only objects that can be traded between families for profit. For women like the Cacos, who inhabit the lowest part of the social strata in an already economically-oppressed third-world country, a virginal marriage is one of the few ways to 'marry up'—free oneself from lives of “poverty and endless toil” (Chancy 123).²⁹ Consequently, Caco mothers equate virginity with a good marriage, which leads to honor, respectability, and a chance to live better lives (Francis, “Silences” 82). Since Martine's father dies before his daughters are married off, this is a particular concern for Grandmé Ifé. She fears that her widowhood will detract honor from the family if she fails to raise Martine and Atie as virgins; it is for this reason that she tests them, thus beginning the cycle of abuse that is passed on to Sophie. When Sophie returns to Haiti as a young mother, Ifé explains her logic behind the practice, and its function in their community:

²⁸ I use this term here because I want to make it clear that I am not reading Danticat's text as a mirror of Haitian culture; however, in her text, Martine's ideologies are directly related to her communal, ethnic, and national heritages.

²⁹ As Chancy points out in *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1997), even though marriage is seen by the Caco women as a way out of poverty, it also robs women of the very agency they seek (Chancy 123). Interestingly, part of the folklore Sophie recounts in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* grimly attests to this fact. For example, in one story, a peasant woman's wealthy husband cuts her on their wedding night in order to produce bloody bed sheets as proof of her virginity, and the woman ultimately dies as a result of his need to defend his “honor and reputation” by exhibiting ownership over her virginal body (Chancy 123; Danticat 155). In another instance, cane cutters on the side of the road in Haiti sing about a woman who left her skin at night to fly around, but is killed when her husband peppers it in an attempt to “teach her a lesson”—presumably about the dangers of movement and autonomy as a married woman (Danticat 150). In each case, the husband's ability to exert some sense of control over his wife results in her death; thus, marriage, despite its economically-liberating possibilities, is—for women—a dangerous institution.

‘If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced. And people, they think daughters will be raised trash with no man in the house.... From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak ill of me, even bring her back to me.’ (156)

As a woman who has carved out only a meager existence working in the cane fields in rural Haiti, Ifé’s desires for her children are like many mothers: she wants them to live better lives than she has; she wants them to “go further”³⁰ than she has been allowed to go. Unfortunately, for her own daughters, marriage is the only thing that offers such an opportunity. However, when Martine is raped and Atie lacks the education that would have made her a feasible match for a man like Augustín, all of those hopes are passed on to Sophie, and these twice-deferred dreams define her obligations as a daughter, but also make her duty to ‘raise the heads’ of the entire family even more imperative.

Arguably, the fact that Martine has relocated to a new country by the time she begins testing Sophie should invalidate the power of extrinsic inscription and the logic of testing; however, Martine has carried some of the most negative socio-cultural aspects of her homeland with her—most notably the stigmas associated with race, color, and class. Because of this, she continues to be bound by an externally-imposed sense of inferiority long after leaving home, and this too aids in the corruption and redefinition of maternal and filial roles within the Caco household. This is most evident whenever Martine talks about her boyfriend Marc, or about potential mates for Sophie. Martine once says that “[i]n Haiti, it would not be possible for someone like Marc to love someone like me. He is from a very upstanding family. His grandfather was a French man” (59). Later, when

³⁰ Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 124.

Sophie reveals that she is interested in a fictitious medical student named Henry Napoleon, Martine does some digging and discovers that the “Leogane Napoleons” have a reputation as a “poor but hardworking clan” back in Haiti (80). In both instances, Martine analyzes possible love matches for herself and her daughter within a Haitian sociological context that places her as an inferior outsider even in a new country where upward mobility is (somewhat) possible. Martine has left the land, but cannot leave its restrictions behind; and in so doing, she recreates a home space for Sophie where the most dehumanizing constructs of her homeland are simulated and intensified. Consequently, in spite of their relocation to New York, internalized ideologies create an atmosphere of oppression for mother and daughter wherein testing is a means to an end.

Danticat’s text, however, is in no way a sweeping indictment of Haiti or its culture; rather, it is an exploration of the ways in which harmful cultural practices can corrupt the family dynamic when they are passed unchecked from one generation to the next. As Carine Mardorossian points out, although the history of testing in the Caco clan begins in Haiti, and Sophie identifies the practice as part of a Haitian “virginity cult,” Sophie’s experience occurs in New York, a place to which her mother has fled in hopes of living a life unhaunted by the ghosts of her past (Mardorossian 132; Danticat 154). However, the exigencies of racism and economic oppression in the United States make a clean escape impossible. Multiple jobs with insufficient pay, the inferior treatment of immigrants, and the overwhelming symptoms of undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder³¹ all render Martine unable to “construct an alternative narrative” for her life, or

³¹ In “‘Silences Too Horrific to Disturb’: Writing Sexual History in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*” (*Research in African Literatures* 35.2, Summer 2004), Donette Francis argues that Martine exhibits some of the classic symptoms of PTSD as outlined by Judith Herman, including “amnesia about the traumatic event, the attempts to dissociate that generally induces a sense of fragmentation, and, the

“devise a new model” of motherhood for her daughter (Francis, “Silences” 80; N’Zengou-Tayo 130). Thus, in spite of the fact that Martine wants to interrogate the social stratification of poor Haitian women, and to revise the narrative of her own body as a rape victim by preserving Sophie’s, she does so within the very social constructs she is trying to defy, but in a place where her hopes for leaving the oppressive colonial space and arriving in a liberating metropole have long been dashed.

Furthermore, because Martine carries the memory of her rape along with the stifling social constructs of her old country into her new one, the testing to which she subjects Sophie is not only a part of a communal heritage, but it is also the reenactment of a very personal experience. In fact, it is Martine’s nightmares which stand at the beginning of the traumatic trajectory that begins with narrative reinscription and reenactment, and ends in testing. And Sophie, the living reminder of Martine’s rape, often serves as both the savior from and the catalyst for them. Not only does Sophie’s arrival in New York trigger memories of her conception, but her face is a continual reminder of her father, who was never completely seen, but who has either been imagined in Martine’s reenactments, or defined by Sophie’s dissimilar features. ““He had [his face] covered when he did this to me”” Martine once explains to her daughter, ““[b]ut now when I look at your face I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father”” (61). Martine so fervently believes this that when Sophie awakens her from her dreams, she is momentarily even more frightened by the sight of the child’s face. Thus, even though Sophie is often the only thing that keeps Martine from killing herself in her sleep, she is also a constant trigger for Martine’s relived trauma.

“unspeakableness” of the trauma itself” (80). If such is the case (and I agree that it is), then it would have most likely been a financial impossibility for Martine, who was struggling to support a family in two countries, to seek and receive proper medical care.

Sophie's ambivalent identity as savior, sharer, and provocateur of Martine's nocturnal self-assaults is yet another example of the perverse matro-filial bond the two women share. Martine's digital penetration of Sophie comes out of a cauldron of emotions: an obligation to save her from the sexual exploitations of men (an exploitation she knows all too well); a need to keep Sophie at home as her continual companion and protector; a determination to see her succeed in life in ways that Martine and her sister Atie could not; and perhaps even a need for revenge—a desire to reenact her own rape on someone who she imagines looks a lot like her assailant. Indeed, it is important to note that Sophie's (albeit imagined) resemblance to Martine's rapist could mean that Sophie's testing is, like Martine's dreams, a reassertion of agency on the proxy of her attacker. Her fear of Sophie's face, coupled with the fact that she ultimately commits suicide because she fears her unborn child will come out looking (as Sophie did) like her rapist, all suggest that, whenever Martine has the opportunity to enact revenge on anything closely resembling her assailant, she takes it.³²

And yet, Martine also has a selfishly-strong bond with Sophie; one that becomes apparent early in their reunion, and one that Myriam Chancy calls incestuous (121). On the night when Sophie first witnesses her mother's nightmares, Martine pulls her into bed and falls asleep, but the morning, as she drifts in and out of consciousness, Martine tells her "I will never let you go again" (49). While it may seem like little more than an innocent declaration of a mother's love, like many of the other things Martine says to Sophie during their first months together, it is also a declaration of possession. Shortly after Sophie's arrival in New York, when Marc takes the two out to dinner for the first

³² In Martine's progressively paranoid state, she also imagines that the child is speaking to her in the voice of her rapist, calling her names like "filthy whore" while still in her womb (Danticat 217).

time, Martine does nothing to “defend her man” during his heated discussion with another woman about politics; however, she is quick to intervene when Marc directs his attention to Sophie, inquiring if she has a boyfriend (56). ““She will have a boyfriend when she is eighteen”” snaps Martine (56). In an instance when Haitian culture dictated that she defend her lover (55), Martine’s attentions are not focused on him at all, but on her daughter.

Later, when Martine decides to test Sophie for the first time, the event seems more than anything like an attempt to consummate the bond between the two of them before anyone else can usurp the opportunity. When a teenaged Sophie first starts to have feelings for Joseph, and tells Martine that she “trusts” him, Martine says: ““You are already lost.... You tell me you trust him and I know you are already lost”” (78). Though it seems as if she is talking specifically about Sophie’s naïveté, one cannot help but wonder if what Martine really means is that Sophie is already lost to *her*. When she tests Sophie after her first date, Martine talks incessantly about her and Joseph’s secret affair as if it is a romantic betrayal. First she tells her the story of the Marassas, ““two inseparable lovers”” who were so much alike that even their tears were identical (84). ““What vain lovers they were”” says Martine about these mythical twins; and yet, despite this criticism, she likens their perfect compatibility to her and Sophie’s relationship (85). ““You would leave me for an old man who you didn’t know the year before”” Martine laments (85). ““You and I we could be like Marassas. You are giving up a *lifetime* with me. Do you understand?”” she asks (85, my emphasis).

The contradictory nature of Martine’s story/statement about the Marassas is interesting because, although they are indeed “vain lovers” whose only attraction to one

another lies in each entity's ability to mirror the other, their love is still enviable, and far more preferable to Martine than love from a male counterpart. As Marie-José N'Zengou-Tayo points out, Marassa love offers Martine an exclusivity that she does not associate with traditional erotic love (130). I would also argue that, through its concept of mirroring, Marassa love engenders a sense of autonomy for Martine that love between a man and a woman cannot. While the Marassas are “the same person, duplicated in two,” they are also separate and *complete* mirror images of each other; unlike the typical male lover who, according to her, enters a woman's body (which is only possible through his anatomical difference) and becomes her “soul” (Danticat 84-5). Such an alternative to erotic love and the sexual intercourse that accompanies it is ideal for Martine: by sharing a mirror image with an identical entity, she can achieve a wholeness that she has not experienced since her rape, when her body was impregnated by an intruder and her mind was veritably spilt in two with madness. Furthermore, Marassa love would make contact with men unnecessary; with it, Martine can forego the frightening prospect of male-female intimacy, and she can protect her daughter from that same exploitation, which her own past has taught her to believe is inevitable. The only problem is that, although this love is fulfilling for Martine, it is nothing short of terror for Sophie, and the testing becomes her own rape which, in addition to witnessing her mother's nightmares, ironically “twins” the two women—right down to their identical dreams. As an adult, not only does Sophie have similar problems with sexual intimacy, but she also remarks that she wakes up some mornings wondering if she and her mother “hadn't both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless

young girl” (193). Indeed, Martine’s inscription is successful: she does create a mirror image of herself, though not with the positive results she intended.

In the relationship between Martine and Sophie, the trauma of matrilineal inscription is compounded by a number of factors: not only by a mother’s desire to protect and prepare her daughter for life as a black woman, but by her unresolved history of trauma, and a legacy of inscription via sexual abuse that is as restrictive as the rape that ultimately freed her from it. For this reason, Sophie’s initial interrogations of matrilineal inscription are tinged with the dysfunctionality of her mother’s trauma; although Martine believes she is passing on the knowledge of black female subjectivity, she herself has never completely learned it. Unlike Elizabeth Brown-Guillory’s concept of the mirror image, when Martine looks at Sophie, she does not see only their shared corporeality, but she also sees her rapist; and she wants to usurp Sophie’s body as a way to reclaim it from that resemblance as well as to heal herself by creating someone who can, in Brown-Guillory’s words, make her “whole” (3). Unfortunately, because Martine’s actions mirror that of her past assailants, she only succeeds in reproducing her trauma on another individual; thus creating a monstrous mirror image in a daughter whose body has been inscribed with a nearly-identical assault, and who has learned to protect herself by reenacting the very cycle of abuse she is trying to end. In short, instead of creating a better version of herself, Martine only achieves an enlargement of the site of her own trauma, whose borders literally bleed from her body to her daughter’s.

IV. The Breaking: Corporeal Repercussions

Martine's penetration of her daughter's body is traumatic inscription in its most extreme form; and, even though it is an act that ultimately gives Sophie a kind of female agency that Martine is never able to achieve, Sophie's initial reactions—self-mutilation and bulimia—are catastrophic. Up to this point, Martine has been reenacting her rape on herself through nightmares, and Sophie has been experiencing the trauma associated with them as a bystander. However, on the night she decides to test Sophie for the first time, Martine's knowledge transmission moves from what Gloria Joseph calls "latent learning" to active teaching (109). Martine brings her daughter into the realm of experience through raping her body with her hands, and Sophie's initial reaction is mimetic of both the nightmares and the testing. Having learned from her mother's example of self-harm, Sophie chooses to reenact the violation of her body on herself, and the results are frightening. Sophie recalls that, on the night she decides to end her mother's testing, her flesh "ripped apart as [she] pressed the pestle into it" (88). And, when her mother comes to test her for the last time, she is in so much pain that she can hardly move. Even after healing from the mutilation, Sophie describes sex with her husband as feeling like "tearing all over again" (130). Indeed, the pain she experiences both during and after her injury is intense and immobilizing.

But even in the beginning, as she inflicts the crippling wound, Sophie is not merely reenacting the testing; she is also trying to regain agency by a violent reinscription of a new narrative onto her own body. In fact, on the night of the assault, Martine's physical protection of Sophie's body—and particularly her hymen—ends. Once her daughter's hymen is broken, there is no longer a need for Martine to prepare her for a

virginal marriage; at this point Sophie actually protects herself from any “future violence” at the hands of her mother (Loichot 105). Additionally, Sophie’s use of the pestle is her first interrogation of Martine’s definitions of maternal, filial, and gender roles. Martine’s ideal daughter is one who is physically intact; her ideal self is a mother who preserves that reality, and the ideal wife is one who has been unsullied at the time of her wedding. Indeed, most of her relationship with Sophie has been defined by these beliefs and ambitions. However, with her mutilation, Sophie corporeally articulates a strong disavowal of her mother’s ideals. Actually, her weapon of choice, the pestle, serves as both an intimate and a general symbol of Sophie’s severed allegiance to Martine. Not only is it symbolic of Sophie’s former devotion to her mother, for whom she once cooked authentic Haitian meals during Martine’s long hours at work, but in a larger sense, it is representative of Caribbean—and in Sophie’s case, Haitian—female compliance and domesticity. The mortar and pestle have long been indispensable tools in Caribbean cooking (Chinsole 388)³³ In fact, “Boiling,” “Baking,” and “Frying” are three of the ten attributes Atie names when she lists the duties of a Haitian woman’s fingers (Interestingly, Atie herself once wished that she had twelve fingers instead of ten so she could claim at least two of them for herself) (151). Thus, even in the midst of this physically-destructive act, Sophie does regain some control over her own body while simultaneously interrogating Martine’s ideologies about female corporeality by willingly destroying the body part that her mother deemed most valuable with an object that has

³³ In a personal conversation, Caribbean literary scholar Ifeoma C.K. Nwankwo pointed out that Danticat’s use of the mortar and pestle in her work links it to other Caribbean texts, like Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing P, 1982). After rereading Lorde’s chapter, I was struck by the ways in which both her and Danticat’s narrators’ experiences with the culinary object coincided with a break from their mother’s prescribed roles for them as women of color. For Lorde, coming to terms with her sexuality meant breaking away from her mother’s ideals about how to behave as a proper woman—right down to the method for pounding spices. And, for Sophie, the pestle aids in a decision to rebel against maternal instruction/inscription by eliminating her most valued feminine organ—her hymen.

been designed to curtail female autonomy. Of course, it is not until Sophie moves away from her mother's influence that she is able to gain agency in more successful ways. Until then, she is trapped in a cycle of seeking it through self-destruction, and continues the process of her mother's intrusion and her mutilating expulsion with another dangerous and food-related ritual: bulimia.

Valérie Loichot argues that, in Danticat's fiction, food is "an unavoidable and complex form of language necessary to remember the past and heal the self" (92). Furthermore, it "links bodies to the earth, and to other individuals who share the same meal"—and, arguably, the same culture (97). This is true for Sophie early in the text; when she discovers at the pot luck in Croix-des-Rosets that she will soon be leaving for New York to reunite with her mother, she completely loses her appetite, saying "I could not eat the bowl of food that Tante Atie laid in front of me. I only kept wishing that everyone could disappear so I could go back home" (Danticat 14). At this point in her life, Sophie associates food—and particularly Haitian food—with Tante Atie's physical and emotional nourishment, which are often symbolized by food and its smells. When Sophie returns home from school, she is often greeted with the smells of Atie's cooking—sweet potato or cinnamon rice pudding—before seeing the woman herself (9, 18). Thus, until she leaves for New York several weeks later, eating remains difficult because it is a reminder of the nurturing othermother she is leaving behind. However, once she moves away, the same food becomes a way to remember her, and Sophie gorges herself with Haitian cuisine at every opportunity. When Marc takes her and her mother to Miracin's, Sophie eats as if she "had been on a hunger strike," finishing off her meal with

watermelon juice, a drink recommended by Tante Atie for its ability to “put red in [the] blood and give...strength for hard times” (56).

But as Sophie gets older, and spends more time with Martine, food becomes associated with her mother; particularly Haitian food, which Sophie cooks for Martine in an effort to quell her fears about Sophie’s new interest in boys. This connection becomes so powerful that, when she leaves her mother’s house, Sophie drastically alters both the kind and the amount of food she takes in. She completely renounces Haitian cuisine, recalling that, during those years, she ate “random concoctions: frozen dinners, samples from global cookbooks, food that was easy to put together and brought [her] no pain. No memories of a past that at times was cherished and at others despised” (151). And, when Sophie finally starts speaking to her mother again, she also reveals that she now has an eating disorder. On the plane ride back to New York, Sophie tells Martine “[a]fter I got married I found out that I had something called bulimia” (Danticat 179). Interestingly, Martine admits that, before battling breast cancer, she too once had a similar obsession with food because it became much more available when she first moved to New York. In those early days, recalls Martine, she too began to binge. According to Martine: “I ate for tomorrow and the next day and the day after that, in case I had nothing to eat for the next couple of days. I ate reserves. I would wake up and find the food still there and I would still eat ahead anyway” (179-80).

At this point, Sophie remarks that perhaps her own disorder “is not so abnormal;” before cancer plagued Martine’s body, she too stuffed herself with food; and now, so does Sophie. But, as Martine points out, her daughter’s condition is somewhat “different”: each woman’s treatment of food mirrors the nature of her assault and the

consequences of it (180). However, it is because of this mirroring that Martine and Sophie are also the same. For both women, food becomes another way to reenact past trauma. Martine, who is raped and impregnated, binges, but the food remains in her body and changes her physically in the same way her pregnancy with Sophie does. Her daughter, on the other hand, does not simply allow food to remain in her body and make her overweight; she forcefully expels it just as she once physically expelled her mother's digital penetration through an invasive self-mutilation. With the mortar and pestle, Sophie invades herself and (in addition to hemorrhaging a large amount of blood—the physical link between her and the other women in her family), she expels her mother's assaults. Similarly, with food, she invades her body with foreign cuisine, and then purges it. Thus, while Martine reenacts her rape and impregnation with nightmares and overeating, Sophie uses bulimia as yet another dangerous ritual for reenacting the history of her testing—a ritual that, by the sheer nature of self-harm, undermines the very agency she is attempting to regain through its practice.

Fortunately, however, not all of the repercussions of testing are bad; in fact, Sophie's visit to Haiti marks a turning point in the aftermath of her experience—a true beginning of the healing process that reunites her with all the “mothers” in her family; women who are both culprits and victims of abuse. When Sophie, now a mother herself, is able to interrogate (and reject) Grandmé Ifé's and Martine's decisions to pass on the ritual of testing to their daughters, she finally achieves an authentic agency, one that she has only mimicked before with mutilation and bulimia. (Quite fittingly, it is not until her return to Haiti that Sophie is able to cook or eat the foods her mother loved [151]. As Loichot argues, Sophie's offering to cook her mother's favorite dish—black beans and

herring sauce—for Grandmé Ifé and Tante Atie is a “ceremony of tradition and memory” in which she reconnects herself with the family of women that she has tried unsuccessfully to forget [106]). By returning to her “motherland,” Sophie reestablishes her relationship to it and to the socio-cultural beliefs that have shaped the lives of women in her family. At last she begins to re-assemble the “broken” pieces of her life.

V. The Mothers in Haiti: Confrontation and (The Beginnings Of) Healing

Because she escapes Martine’s traumatic matrilineal inscription by moving away from her mother’s house and using every tactic—including food—to forget her past, Sophie’s returning to Haiti because, as she tells the taxi driver who takes her to Dame Marie, she ““need[s] to remember,”” seems somewhat antithetical (95). After all, it is Martine’s memories of rape and the family’s history of sexual abuse that have been so detrimental to her in the recent past. However, Sophie’s return allows her to achieve a number of personal victories against her personal trauma, both the matrilineal and the self-inflicted. First, returning to Haiti allows her to confront her mother and grandmother about the practice of testing and to learn the reasons behind her family’s history of matrilineal trauma; both of which help her revise the Caco legacy of matrilineal inscription so that she does not pass on the same traumas to her daughter. Second, Sophie’s return provides her the opportunity to learn enactments of resistance to both matrilineal and extrinsic inscription that do not inscribe themselves on her body in the painful ways her earlier disfigurements have.

When Sophie and her infant daughter Brigitte Ifé first reach Dame Marie (the town where her grandmother and Atie now live) her motives are unclear. However, once

her grandmother starts prodding, the secret of Sophie's life finally spills out: she has temporarily left her husband because physical intimacy is difficult. Almost immediately, Ifé seems to know the root cause of her troubles. "Your mother? Did she ever test you?" she asks (123). At this point, Sophie finally gives a voice to the trauma she has unsuccessfully tried to purge from her body. "You can call it that" she tells her grandmother, "I call it humiliation.... I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself. That is why I am here" (123). This initial confession seems to open the floodgates for Sophie. Over the next few days, Ifé serves as a listening ear for her granddaughter, but she also allows Sophie to interrogate the Cacos' history of inscription by interrogating the person from whom those ideologies originate in the text. By doing so, Sophie forces Ifé to reevaluate them herself. Initially, when Sophie asks why a mother would test her daughter, even when she knows from firsthand experience the pain it causes, Ifé responds: "You must know that everything a mother does, she does for her child's own good" (157). However, after hearing about Sophie's marital difficulties and her negative body image, Ifé offers one of her most prized possessions—a statue of the Haitian goddess Erzulie—and says: "My heart, it weeps like a river [...] for the pain we have caused you" (Danticat 157). Ironically, like Sophie's witnessing her mother's nightmares, Ifé experiences Sophie's trauma through their conversations, and is herself altered by the experience. By listening to Sophie, whose wounds are, in Caruthian terms, 'crying out' a painful truth, she begins to understand the lasting effects of her own corporeal legacy, and seeks forgiveness from her granddaughter for both herself as well as for Martine (Caruth 4). Her use of the pronoun "we" is proof that the older woman

now recognizes her own culpability in Sophie's trauma; thus, her apology speaks for both generations of Sophie's mothers.

More important, once Ifé comes to understand the disastrous impact of her maternal ideologies, she literally becomes a different kind of mother; even the content of her transmitted knowledge changes—or rather, it expands to include the new lessons about mothering that she herself has recently learned. Though Ifé's first lesson to Sophie in the text is the admonition that a daughter's mother is her "first friend" (24), she now tells her granddaughter that, because she has become a mother, Sophie's pain has a power that is potentially as dangerous as Martine's once was to her: "You cannot always carry the pain" says Ifé. "You must liberate yourself" (157). Though she does not say it outright, carrying the pain will no doubt have a direct impact on how Sophie raises her own daughter; and even she, a woman who tested her own children, now understands that holding on to it has been unhealthy for Sophie, and will most certainly be harmful to Brigitte. Ifé's offering the alternative of liberation to Sophie sets a precedent for transformative motherhood in the text; it is the first time that a mother imparts identity-changing knowledge in a non-traumatic way. As such, Ifé does more than simply *instruct* Sophie in how to mother Brigitte, but she *models* an alternative kind of motherhood that the young mother can follow without the same trauma she has suffered from mimicking Martine. In fact, Ifé offers Sophie the power to determine the kind of mother a Caco woman should be: her gift of a statue of Erzulie, the mother goddess, is symbolic of a transfer of power from one matriarch to another. Now that Sophie is a mother, she literally holds in her own hands the power to determine which ideal she should worship, emulate, and pass on to subsequent Caco daughters.

The conversation with Ifé is also a gift for Sophie because it empowers her to later confront her own mother, who soon arrives in Haiti at the request of Sophie's husband, Joseph. On the morning after Martine's arrival, Sophie finally demands to know why she tested her; and, according to her mother, the answer is simple: she did so because her mother had done it to her. "I have no greater excuse" says Martine (170). Though the simplicity of the answer is disappointing, this is yet another transformative moment in Sophie's quest for agency. It is the first time that Martine is the one who must meet her daughter's expectations. Now that she wants the two of them to be friends, and now that she has no control over Sophie's life, Martine can make no impossible demands on her child; she must literally meet her halfway in order to gain her trust. For example, when Martine arrives in Haiti, and Ifé tells Sophie to obey the custom of greeting her mother first, Sophie refuses, and after a few tense moments it is Martine who finally acquiesces, walking over to greet her daughter in spite of Ifé's commands (159). On the following day, when Martine agrees to tell Sophie why she tested her, but only under the condition that she can never ask again, Sophie refuses, because, in her own words, she wants to "reserve [the] right to ask as many times as [she] needed to" (170). Again, it is her mother who yields, answering her question without the promise of future silence (170). By seeking answers, and by refusing to submit to Martine's demands, Sophie has gained a far more powerful, far more constructive sense of agency than she has ever had before. Not only does she refuse to be silenced about her own trauma, but she forces Martine to admit to it as well. And, cryptic as her answer may sound, Martine's response, like Ifé's, offers Sophie the kind of knowledge that can help her become a better mother because it identifies the cycle of abuse as the culprit of traumatic matrilineal inscription

in the family. Martine has become an abuser because she was abused; and up until now, Sophie has, like Martine, reenacted her previous abuse on her own body for the same reason. However, now that she understands that the root of her own trauma lies in its repetition, Sophie now knows that she must stop doing this to herself; otherwise, she may do the same thing to her child.

And yet, although Martine seems remorseful, her pat answer to Sophie's question about testing identifies a fatal flaw—one that ultimately causes Martine her life: she is unable to interrogate her own past actions, or to even revisit her past in a way that allows her to face it without trying to revise it through self-destructive reenactment. In other words, she is unable to heal; for this reason, Martine's death is inevitable. Indeed, even though Ifé prepares for death throughout most of the novel, it is ultimately Martine who commits suicide, and on the cusp of second motherhood. This happens because she realizes she has already failed once as a mother, and her refusal/inability to let go of the trauma of her past makes her unfit to mother again. When Martine tells Sophie that she fears her unborn baby is the reincarnation of her rapist, and Sophie suggests therapy, Martine says that she is afraid that a psychiatrist might force her to "face" her trauma—perhaps even hypnotize her and take her back in time to the day of her assault (190). This, argues Martine, would surely kill her. However, for several years Martine has been doing just that: reenacting her past in her night terrors, but without any kind of knowledge to combat her memories in more healing ways. And, ironically, this *is* what ultimately kills her: her inescapable memories finally drive her to suicide. In fact, Martine's suicide is almost anti-climactic: it is the natural progression of years of unmediated self-abuse from which Sophie has tried to save her, but to no avail. Its true

significance lies in the fact that it signals the “death” of traumatic matrilineal inscription in the Caco family: Sophie and Ifé, who have learned new, non-traumatic ways to mother. Martine, on the other hand, who is already inscribing a traumatic identity onto her second unborn baby, does not.

Martine’s premature and tragic death forecloses on any opportunity for her to heal from her violent history, or to relearn mothering skills for her next child; however, it does allow Sophie an important final gift on her own journey: the opportunity to physically redirect her self-inscribed trauma away from her body. At Martine’s funeral, Sophie suddenly begins attacking stalks of cane in the field where her mother was raped; a place that is highly significant because it serves as the physical seat of engenderment for herself as well as for her personal, familial, and communal traumas. In the cane field, Sophie finally reaches a moment of interrogation of both matrilineal and extrinsic inscription wherein she uses her body to interrogate both inscriptive processes; but instead of using the typical tactic of harming herself, Sophie turns the violence outward to the land where both processes were engendered and corrupted.

While it is true that the cane field is the site where Martine experiences the very personal trauma of rape and where Sophie is conceived, the field also has much larger social implications for both her family as well as for the country in which they live. First, the field is important in Sophie’s family history because it is where her grandfather suddenly died while cutting cane. The grandfather’s death is, according to Ifé’s earlier admission, the catalyst for her decision to begin testing her daughters, who she feared would be “raised trash” in the absence of a husband. More important, the grandfather’s working himself to death is indicative of the Caco family’s limited circumstances; not

only does he overwork himself in the field for little pay, but Tante Atie tells Sophie that they were so poor that, when he died, Ifé could only afford to “dig a hole and just drop him in it” (20). This extreme poverty further justifies Ifé’s attempts to preserve Atie’s and Martine’s bodies for socially-strategic marriages, and this makes the cane field significant for its metonymic relationship to the economic circumstances that make virginal marriage a socially-strategic option for the Caco daughters.

As some critics have noted, the bodies of women in Haitian literature are often political entities that are, like the cane field, metonymic for the country itself (Francis, “Silences” 76). If such is the case, then Martine’s rape in the field can be read as a moment of usurped corporeality wherein Martine’s “loss of authority” over her own body is “tied to the overall motif of invasion” in Haiti’s long history of political instability (Higgins 137). According to Sophie, her mother’s assault was most likely committed by a Tonton Macoute, a member of the U.S. Marine-trained police force of the Duvalier regime who committed atrocities against the Haitian people in general and women in particular (139). As agents of a violent thirty-year dynasty, the Tonton Macoutes suppressed revolutionary feminist activism on the orders of the government and as part of the capricious depravity that accompanied their unregulated power (Chancy 26). As a result, Haitian women’s “bodies and homes” were repeatedly “invaded” if and when they were seen as political threats (Francis, “Silences” 78). Thus, Martine’s rape takes on added significance when coupled with the image of the Macoute. It ties her body to a troubled political history that has limited the rights of the poor and especially of poor women. Subsequently, the field in which it occurs becomes a microcosmic stage on which the drama of extrinsic inscription plays out: here, a black girl’s body is usurped by

outside forces, creating a moment of trauma that she later passes down to her daughter by various acts of matrilineal inscription.

Thus, even though the trauma that Sophie suffers at the hands of her mother is idiosyncratic, and potentially avoidable, it is also heavily circumscribed by the extrinsic inscription that created the poverty which, in turn, sanctioned the dehumanizing practice of testing in the Caco family. Martine's fervent desire to protect Sophie from the exploitation of male rape by inscribing for her a life narrative of chastity creates the impetus for the trauma that passes between them, but the trauma becomes inevitable because Martine's *methods* of protection and preservation are tragically myopic. Her attempt to revise Sophie's narrative through an overprotective and ultimately invasive corporeal preservation of her body tragically mimics that of her past assailants—both her own mother as well as her rapist—and follows the logic of corporeal commodification by valuing Sophie's body as a bargaining tool for a better life. As such, Martine's matrilineal inscription only perpetuates the cycle of corporeal abuse, and so too has Sophie's self-mutilation and bulimia. However, Sophie's attack on the site where all of these external forces once converged to create her trauma is a moment of profound recognition. She finally understands that matrilineal inscription is not simply the wrongdoings of women in her family, but the product of a much larger system of socio-politically empowered extrinsic inscription on the black female body. As such, it is the land and its customs—not the bodies of the women—that deserve the abuse they have so tragically inflicted on themselves for several generations. And, through a long process that is still ongoing when the novel ends, Sophie is slowly coming to realize this. Thus, when Ifé and Tante Atie ask her at Martine's funeral: “ ‘*Ou libéré?* Are you free?’ ”—a Creole phrase used when a

market woman accidentally drops a heavy load on the road— Ifé stops her reply, telling her that, *one* day, she will ““know how to answer”” (234). Indeed, Sophie, who has not yet completely cast off the burden of inscription, cannot yet answer the question posed by Atie; however, the journey on which she has begun (one in which she has finally reclaimed some agency by a redirection of physical violence) is ongoing, and has gained considerable momentum in this moment of defiant corporeality.

VI. Conclusion: Rituals of Difference and Redefining Matrilineal Inscription

Sophie, the product of rape, is a child born without agency: she is the result of a violent act, whose mother is driven to insanity because of it. What is worse is that she is born in a country—in a world, really—where the birth of a girl is an event that few people rejoice over. As Grandmé Ifé points out to Sophie one night as they watch a midwife’s lamp moving back and forth in the hills, when the birth of a girl is over, the light is put out and everyone goes to bed. Only the mother is left in the dark with her child. The mother is given the sole responsibility of raising a daughter; thus whatever the mother’s flaws are, whatever traumatic knowledge she has gathered over the course of her life, these are passed on to her child ““like heirlooms”” (234).

But, according to Donette Francis, ““motherhood becomes a catalytic turning point for Sophie as she goes through considerable efforts to reclaim her body”” (“Silences” 85). Even though she must deliver through a Caesarian section, giving birth to Brigitte is an act of agency. Unlike her mother, who sought wholeness through controlling the body and the life of her daughter, Sophie enters a path to achieve wholeness through simultaneously recognizing her autonomy as well as her

responsibilities as a mother. Unlike Martine's ideologies about matro-filial obligation, which placed the burden of 'raising' the family's heads solely on the daughter, Sophie learns that she is not defined by what her child becomes, but by what she becomes for her child. In fact, when she returns to New York after her trip to Haiti, Sophie begins enacting rituals of healing and self-improvement (like personal and group therapy) in hopes that they may one day replace her former rituals of self-mutilation, and curtail her instinct to potentially enact similar traumas on her daughter. These rituals help shape her identity as both a mother and as a woman in the Black Diaspora; identities that overlap and respond to each other in important ways. More important, they make her a transformative character who stands at the precipice of a new kind of motherhood in her family; one wherein trauma is not a necessary part of raising a daughter.

In an effort to heal from her history of abuse, Sophie meets with a sexual phobia group; women who, as Donette Francis explains, have also experienced "sexual violations at the hands of their local cultures" ("Silences" 86). Sophie's interaction with other "postcolonial women"³⁴ who share a history of sexual trauma is important to the dual process of self-healing and maternal transformation. First, by sharing her pain with fellow sufferers from other families and from various parts of the world, Sophie identifies herself as part of a larger group of women with similar Diasporic identities; thus forming coalitions that solidify her place within a larger socio-cultural context than the one Martine carried with her from Haiti to New York. Sophie's interactions with women who share similar experiences helps her to understand that she does not have to hold on to the harmful social constructs of social and gendered inferiority like her mother once did; nor does she have to completely discard her heritage altogether as she once tried to do with

³⁴ Francis, "Silences" 85.

her dissociation from her family and food. Rather, she can celebrate the rich legacy of her foremothers, yet still reject and refuse to replicate the harmful traumatic inscription that is such an inescapable part of that heritage. This is most evident in the fact that, when Sophie returns from her trip, she begins to talk about Haiti as “home,” a reference that surprises her husband Joseph, who points out that, up to this point, “home” for Sophie was her mother’s house, a place that she ““could never go back to”” (195). This change in language illustrates how Sophie has begun to separate her cultural identity from the painful history with her mother. Martine no longer defines “home” and heritage for Sophie—Sophie comes to define it for herself.

Additionally, interacting with younger women like Buki, an Ethiopian college student whose grandmother removed her clitoris when she was only a child, allows Sophie the Marassa-like power of identification with a similar individual, but without the guilt of having created this mirror image of herself in the way her mother once did. This is important because, in Buki, Sophie sees another version of herself, but also a potential version of her daughter; because of this, she finally becomes certain that she can never do to Brigitte what has been done to herself, to Buki, and to the other women in her phobia group. After a special ceremony, where each woman burns the name of her abuser, Sophie finally realizes this dual power and responsibility. According to her: “It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had *her* name burnt in the flames” (203, Danticat’s emphasis). In this moment, Sophie redefines maternal and filial roles in her family, and finally achieves the transformative motherhood that Ifé modeled for her back in Croix-des-Rosets through a shared and co-experienced subjectivity. By

witnessing Sophie's pain, Ifé comes to understand it, and offers a form of mothering based on empathy instead of expectations; one based on the encouragement of individuality instead of a demand for resemblance. Similarly, by forming a sisterhood with the women in her phobia group, Sophie is able to practice this new form of transformative motherhood, wherein both parties recognize a common black female subjectivity, but the mother does not try to force an inscribed narrative or a shared corporeality onto her daughter.

Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* text takes up the issues of both personal and collective trauma, and illustrates how the two can often heavily influence each other by tracing a daughter's coming to understand herself as the complex product of a history of women. At the same time, however, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* also offers an example of a woman who comes to understand the power of matrilineal inscription and the importance of consciously choosing which narratives should be passed on to her daughter. Like Alice Walker in "Advancing Luna—and Ida B. Wells," Sophie must learn how to juggle the reality of her own trauma with a larger legacy as both a Caco and a Haitian woman—women who have "caused her pain," but who have also given her a roadmap for liberation. Sophie's decision to give her daughter her grandmother's name indicates that she is finally coming to terms with such a dichotomous legacy. By naming her daughter Brigitte Ifé, she identifies her baby girl as an individual, but also as a future matriarch who will, like her namesake, one day make the same definitive decisions about how she will raise subsequent generations of Caco women. By doing so, Sophie reinscribes the meaning of her grandmother's name, moving it from the ranks of the perpetrators, to those of the survivors and protectors.

Similarly, in Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*, the narrator is most traumatized by a cultural inheritance that, albeit passed on to her from her mother, is ultimately reinforced by the extrinsic inscription of racism in her native Mississippi; a place where, as the biracial product of an illegal marriage, she is subject to the dual traumas of being considered both legally invisible and a target for racialized abuse. While *Breath, Eyes, Memory* ends with a mother's regaining the power to protect her child from trauma—a child whose name represents the first step in a narrative of deliberately non-traumatic matrilineal inscription—in the chapter that follows, I will discuss an instance where it is the daughter who finds a way to accept her multiple subjectivities, and ultimately reinscribes—or rather *renames*—a healing identity for herself.

CHAPTER IV

“MEMORIES THAT ARE(N’T) MINE”: MATRILINEAL CULTURAL TRAUMA, SILENCE, AND DEFIANT REINSCRIPTION IN NATASHA TRETHERWEY’S NATIVE GUARD (2006)

I. Introduction

“I’m remembering in some of those poems memories that aren’t mine immediately but ones that are given to me, and I think those become part of who you are, too. I really can’t distance myself from my mother’s life growing up in the 1950s and 1960s or my grandmother’s life growing up in the 1920s and 1930s. They feel like part of my life. It’s all in there now with me growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, and it all makes that a part of who I am.”

—Natasha Trethewey³⁵

In this epigraph, taken from a 1996 interview with Jill Petty, the poet Natasha Trethewey unwittingly describes the narrative heritage that is played out in the storytelling among the women in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. More important, however, she simultaneously summarizes a private, familial version of what Ron Eyerman calls collective memory: the memories of specific events that are retained by a group of people who, for some reason (be it religious, ethnic, regional, generational, or other affiliations) agree that they share a common past; a past that, albeit not experienced by each and every member of the group, is passed between generations through “public reflection and discourse”—so much so that the memories become a part of a group member’s concepts of both personal and collective identities (2,6). The poems Trethewey refers to in this interview would later become part of her inaugural volume,

³⁵ Jill Petty and Natasha Trethewey, “An Interview With Natasha Trethewey,” *Callaloo* 19.2 Spring 1996: 366.

Domestic Work (2000), a collection that commemorates the lives of working-class Southern Blacks during the first half of the twentieth century; a time when both de facto and de jure Jim Crow rule left its unique mark of traumas on the collective memory of blacks in the region, including Trethewey's own ancestors. In fact, *Domestic Work* is a series of particularly powerful testimonies of hard labor and socio-political disenfranchisement that are taken from the lives of the women in Trethewey's family (her mother, grandmother, and aunts) and placed alongside those of fictional characters who were created from photographs and paintings produced during the era.

Nearly a decade after the release of *Domestic Work*, however, Trethewey would publish the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Native Guard* (2006), a semi-autobiographical collection of poems that further illustrates her skillful use of the narrative voice to complicate the boundaries between history and myth, biography and autobiography, and the individual and collective experiences of living as a black person in the United States. While most reviewers divide their discussion of the text into its three sections— poems about the loss of the poet's mother, the first-person narrative poem about the Native Guards, and other more personally-autobiographical pieces—the poet herself makes it clear that these categories are neither static nor mutually-exclusive. Not only are the poems not organized in any strict chronological order (the title poem, "Native Guard" actually appears squarely in the middle of the text), but the collective and personal memories within them are often inextricably intertwined in pieces that are set in drastically different time periods. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the idea for the text evolved over a long period of time, and came out of both historical research as well as several of the poet's life experiences. According to Trethewey, she initially became

interested in the Native Guards when, as an adult, she discovered that this all-black Civil War regiment had been ordered to protect a Confederate prison on Ship Island, a fort just off the coast of her native Mississippi, but there were no monuments commemorating their presence there (M. Wilson, Brown, Anderson). Because of this act that she calls “historical erasure,” Trethewey decided to devote her next major project to the subject, and while conducting research on these forgotten soldiers, she also began writing poems about her mother, who was murdered at the hands of her stepfather nearly twenty years before (Anderson). In a 2007 interview, she explains:

‘...I thought that what I was interested in was that aspect of buried history, a collective American history. But what I came to realize, as I began researching and writing, is that I hadn't erected a monument to the life of my own mother and that I should be the native guardian of her memory, as well.’ (Brown)

Here, Trethewey explains how, in the process of gathering information about the Guards, she began to realize that, like them, her mother had no public memorial; neither she nor her brother had placed a tombstone at her mother’s grave (Brown). However, after learning about the fate of the Guards, she began to realize the importance of preserving and commemorating her mother’s history, which, according to her, “had not been properly memorialized, remembered, tended by someone native to her” (Anderson). As a result, Trethewey brought out pieces about her mother’s life that she had originally written and put away, and they too became a part of the volume.

And, in yet another layer of narrative complexity, research on the Guards also inspired the poet to write about her personal memories as a biracial Southerner who had also suffered from a particular kind of “erasure” in her early years. When her African American mother and white Canadian father married in 1965 and settled in her mother’s

native Mississippi, interracial unions were not legally recognized in the state, and it would be several years before anti-miscegenation laws were ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court (Trethewey, “Black *and* White”). These same laws which illegalized interracial marriage subsequently denied the legitimacy and legal existence of biracial children like Trethewey (in spite of the fact that both voluntary and coerced mixed-race couplings—as well as the children spawned from them—had existed long before the end of slavery). At the same time, however, she and her family were also the targets of personalized acts of terror spurred on by the same bigotry that kept those laws in place: the poet recalls suffering everything from name-calling on the neighborhood playground to cross-burnings in the family’s front yard. Thus, Trethewey’s childhood existence was marked by a paradoxical mixture of legal nonexistence and hyper-visibility: while state laws denied her legitimacy, racist whites simultaneously terrorized her multi-racial family for the audacity of their existence.

These individually-experienced incidents are actually part of a larger regional history of African American cultural trauma³⁶ that, according to Eyerman, stems from the larger collective traumas of slavery and the Civil War; events after which Southern whites struggled to incorporate the memories of both into a revised narrative of their own identity (4). Eyerman argues that, in the process of this identity formation, whites began to “re-remember” the past as idyllic and, as a result, Blacks paradoxically became both invisible *and* punishable in the “selective construction” of Southern identity as a whole (4-5, 3). For example, historical representations of blacks were either nonexistent (as in the case of the Native Guards) or gross caricatures portrayed as unintelligent beings who were better off in slavery (a representation that Trethewey takes up in a poem discussed

³⁶ For an in-depth- explanation of cultural trauma, see Chapter 1, pp.10-12.

below). Thus, in both legislative and sociopolitical arenas, the South's general "dis-memory"³⁷ of its complicated past created a precarious position for black individuals and families in the region: be it through outright punishment or transparent dismissal, they were blamed for the loss of an imagined utopia where whites were wealthy and blacks were happy slaves (Eyerman 4-5).

This paradox of harassment, misrepresentation, and erasure is one that describes the most powerful connective theme of the biographical, autobiographical, and historically-fictional poems featured in *Native Guard*. Learning about the disinheritance of the Guards sparked in Trethewey memories of personal traumas suffered by the loss of her mother, but it also forced the poet to think about the racism she experienced as a child. While describing the creative process for the text, she remarks: "I started thinking about my place as a southerner, and as biracial, and as a black southerner and what gets left out of history and who's responsible for remembering, recording, those things that are left out" (Anderson).³⁸ The poet herself describes the sense of "exile" she often experiences while living in the South, where, on one occasion, she read a letter to a newspaper editor in which the author declared that all "true Southerners" love the Confederate flag; a declaration that, for Trethewey, seemed to say that only whites can be true Southerners (Anderson). As a result, Trethewey was determined to "write" herself

³⁷ I chose this term because I feel that it encapsulates Eyerman's explanation of the dualistic corruption of the white Southern imaginary: not only are the memories of certain events completely suppressed, but the details of others are distorted by a desire to create a history that justified the violence and general discrimination of blacks in the post-war era. It is both a *distortion* of the memory, but also, to borrow a term used by Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a *disrememberance*—an inability (or refusal) to recall events of the past.

³⁸ Though some may argue against my alternating use of terms like "black," "biracial," "multi-racial," and "mixed-race" in my discussion of Trethewey's work, this quote illustrates that the poet herself claims all of these racial categories, and refers to other biracial individuals in similar terms. In an article where she discusses the inauguration of President Barack Obama, she also refers to him as "the first black person *and* first biracial person to hold this office" ("Black *and* White," my emphasis).

back into history, and that desire became the linchpin for the text. “It was important for me to say: this is *my* South,” says Trethewey. “I love it and I hate it, too, but it’s mine” (Anderson). Consequently, the group of poems that became *Native Guard* evolved into connected stories about the necessary work of excavating and, in the process, honoring the painful memories of one’s personal past, while also reclaiming a place for oneself in the tales told as history.

And yet, although I would agree that *Native Guard* is an indictment of the often-abused power of those who publicly commemorate history—a power that continues to silence and disregard the presence of African Americans even to the present day—I would also contend that it is something else. In addition to its explorations in public and private memory, this text is an illustration of both extrinsic and intergenerational traumatic inscription. While *Native Guard* chronicles the racism that inscribed a distorted Southern history for African Americans, it also tells the story of a daughter who must come to terms with the pain inflicted by her mother’s early death even as she grapples with the ways in which meanings of her mixed-race identity are inscribed onto her literal and figurative bodies in the post-Civil Rights era South. Indeed, although Trethewey’s mother does not intentionally hurt her daughter, the trauma that is passed between them is located in the violence of her death as well as in the matrilineal inheritance of a distorted cultural history; one that comes to the poet through her mother’s socio-racial positionality, and persists because that distortion initially goes unchallenged in the poet’s early years.

In fact, in this chapter, I argue that, in Natasha Trethewey’s *Native Guard*, the poet identifies matrilineal and cultural traumas that are both the products of Southern

whites' fallacious interpretations of black inferiority in the creation of collective Southern memory. These traumas initially "mark" her body while she is still in her mother's womb, but continue to inscribe themselves on her life in a sequence of silencing, naming, distortion, and erasure that is not broken until the speaker-as-amanuensis tells the stories of those traumas alongside the similarly-sequenced history of the Native Guards. Indeed, the narrator suffers from both the extrinsically inscribed trauma of racism as well as from a matrilineally inscribed trauma of silencing. In several poems, the speaker and her family suffer from traumatic acts of racism, but the mother's silence in the face of that racism is also traumatic, and manifests itself in both moments of non-verbalization as well as in an instance where she inscribes "silence" on her daughter's black body by distorting and whitewashing the young girl's appearance. While the young narrator at first reenacts this verbal and corporeal mutism in the face of extrinsic inscription, she ultimately breaks it by telling the historical secrets of the past and by calling for a change in the public distortion of Southern history that has disinherited both her as well as the Native Guards. And, by acknowledging that she has suffered from a cultural trauma whose power over her life is protected by various forms of silence, she is able to come to terms with a matrilineal legacy of trauma as a biracial Southern woman, resituate herself in a reinscribed³⁹ Southern history, and finally reclaim her agency by articulating a personally inscribed identity that encapsulates her multiple subjectivities.

³⁹ Interestingly, after already completing several drafts of this chapter, I met Daniel Cross Turner, an up-and-coming scholar of Southern literature who pointed me to an interview he conducted with Trethewey in April 2010 titled "Southern Crossings: an Interview with Natasha Trethewey" (*Waccamaw: A Journal of Contemporary Literature* 9 Spring 2012, Web). Here, Trethewey, perhaps in her most explicit articulation of such to date, identified the poem "Native Guard" as a specific example of "reinscribing cultural memory." Although I had already formulated this theory as a part of my larger theory of matrilineal inscription, I was delighted (and perhaps felt a bit justified) by her statement.

II. The Condition of the Mother('s)land: Extrinsic Inscription

In the very early pages of *Native Guard*, Natasha Trethewey introduces her own theory of cultural trauma, one that she establishes in the first poem, and then links to the mother-daughter relationship in subsequent pieces. In the aptly-titled “Theories of Time and Space,” the poet names the factors that play a role in such trauma—land, memory, and temporality—and then describes them in provocative detail. Here, the Mississippi landscape takes on an ominous presence: as the reader travels alongside the speaker down the state highway, each of the mile markers are “ticking off / another minute of your life” (6-7). And, as the road “dead end[s]” at the coast, Ship Island looms in the distance, its “buried / terrain of the past” beckoning the traveler to an unknown fate (13-14). Memory is another entity whose significance is foreshadowed here: the narrator describes it as a “tome” of “random, blank pages”; an image that highlights its ability to be forgotten, erased, and rewritten at will (15-16). Finally, the linearity of time is deconstructed, as the narrator states how, as one “boards the boat for Ship Island, / someone will take your picture,” which will capture not only the image of oneself, but “who you were”; an entity that “will be waiting when you return” to dry land (18, 19, 20).

“Theories of Time and Space” illustrates how time, space, *and* place can constitute an extrinsically inscribed cultural trauma that is tied to social positionality as well as to a literal location in the world. Each entity works together in the poem to create a theory of extrinsic inscription; one wherein past, present, and future are relative, and where people (particularly African Americans) are constantly faced with misrepresentations of a past self, much like the photograph that awaits the traveler’s return. And, in the poem immediately following it, a piece titled “Southern Crescent,” the

mother-daughter dyad is evoked as the speaker describes how she and her mother board trains that trace and retrace the same Mississippi landscape at various stages of their lives (even the image of the “crescent” lends itself to the boomerang-like aspect of their journeys). The coupling of the two poems at the beginning of the text illustrates how, in this particular relationship between mother and child, there are moments of temporal and spatial palimpsests: the cultural trauma that influences the nature of the matro-filial bond is highly-inflected by a regionally-specific history that is constantly being erased, rewritten, and retold by those who wish to divest African Americans of their historical past as well as of their present agency.

As discussed earlier, cultural trauma is at times an inevitable phenomenon that can occur within specific communities and, subsequently, between black mothers and daughters. By the very definition of their existence—being both black and female—the daughters inherit a history of physical exploitation, sexual abuse, and economic disenfranchisement that stems from the days of slavery, and that the mothers are well aware of. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is a hallmark illustration of the longstanding saga of inherited black female subjectivity. In it, Harriet Jacobs discusses the unique difficulties of slave motherhood, and of giving birth to a daughter who will most likely suffer the same abuse Jacobs herself has endured at the hands of her lascivious master. She writes:

When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own. (85, author’s emphasis)⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Toni Morrison also explores the ramifications of a slave mother’s foreknowledge of her baby daughter’s black female subjectivity in the 1987 novel *Beloved* (New York: Random House).

At this point in Jacobs' autobiographical text, the slave mother had already experienced years of sexual abuse, and had witnessed enough of it to know that her daughter, who would grow into womanhood at the mercy of the same abuser, faced a hard road ahead. Similarly, the mother in Trethewey's poems is also concerned about her child's unique racial inheritance as a biracial Southerner in a society not unlike the one into which Jacobs herself gives birth. In fact, in the pages of *Native Guard*, Trethewey devotes several poems to the theme of gendered racial inheritance by crafting scenes that serve as vignettes: brief but vivid forays into the interior lives of Southerners throughout history, wherein the effects of such a legacy are illustrated in intimate detail. In a piece titled "My Mother Dreams Another Country," the poet uses one such scene—her expectant mother awaiting the arrival of her child in seclusion—to illustrate how the many complexities of Southern life can taint even the most intimate of spaces. In fact, this piece is particularly important because it serves as the fulcrum upon which the major themes of the other poems in the text rest. Themes like inscription via naming, blackening, and erasure all appear in other pieces; however, in this very modern nativity scene, the narrator describes these traumas as ones that begin with the mother, in the *body* of the mother, and then resonate through various historical, territorial, and articulatory spaces.

In "My Mother Dreams Another Country," the mother harbors no illusions about the world into which her baby will be born: a place where even one's name is predetermined. According to her:

Already the words are changing. She is changing
from *colored* to *negro*, *black* still years ahead.
This is 1966—she is married to a white man—
and there are more names for what grows inside her.

It is enough to worry about words like *mongrel*
and the infertility of mules and *mulattoes*
while flipping through a book of baby names.

(1-7, author's emphasis)

Here, the mother—who carries her own host of titles—already understands that, even though she has the power to choose her daughter's name, these racial identifiers are the epithets that will be the most important. Although the daughter's mixed race heritage means that her titles will be slightly different from the mother's "colored," "negro," and "black" epithets, the mother knows that terms like "mulatto" will be just as powerful in their ability to name and subsequently mark her child, identifying in only a few words not only the child's race, but also her gender via an allusion to her (imagined) reproductive incapacities. As Suzanne Bost points out in *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Race Identities in the Americas (1850-2000)* (2003), in both literature and other forms of popular culture, women have been identified as "the source and the face of mixture" because the enslaved maternal body was considered the seat of miscegenation, and because, before miscegenation laws were put in place, it was the only legally-protected site of mixture in the eyes of New World slave law (2). Additionally, the mulatta figure is often both the public proof and the recipient of the lurid eroticization of nonwhite female bodies—even as they are incorrectly identified as infertile (18). Whether or not the mother in the poem knows her unborn child's gender is unclear; however, what is quite apparent is that images of interbred animals and reproductive incapacities come hand in hand with the epithets of biracialism. Thus, in the mother's mind, the child's body is already "marked" by this title, which alludes to both racial and gendered physical properties.

Ironically, as the fetal body is described as being inscribed by this extrinsic naming that, for the mother, silences her own name for the child, it is also described as being marked by the mother's desire to raise her child in a safer socio-geographical space. When friends and family warn her against worrying, telling her that doing so will "gray a lock of the child's hair" or leave the imprint of "a thing she craves too much," the mother already imagines that this baby will bear what she calls a "maternal impression": the mark of a mythical "unknown [and dare we say "mother"...?] country" she often dreams about; one wherein her baby's race would have no bearing on the way she is treated by the outside world (16, 18, 15-16). Thus, in addition to the word "mulatto," the mother's dreams—instead of creating some (albeit imagined) safe space—also inscribe on her daughter's skin a taunting reminder of the impossible, and serve as precursors to the actual marking that the child's extrinsically- (and, just as often, imprecisely-) identified phenotypical characteristics will someday create.

And yet, even though the mother's thwarted hopes mark the child in the poem, in the final lines of the piece, the narrator describes how the land and its customs infiltrate the mother's prenatal space, serving as culprits of inscription by blackening her (and subsequently her daughter) from the outside in. For example, the same women who warn her against worrying also tell her to "stanch her cravings by eating dirt"; and, even as the woman sleeps, she inhales the "red dust" of Mississippi—a literal representation of how truly impossible it is to keep the social contaminants of her native land away from her child (24). The very air the mother breathes literally "soils" her daughter, and although the mother constantly thinks of "someplace she's never been"—a place where her child

might escape the “psychological exile”⁴¹ of being born in a country where she is both native and illegal—the poem ends with the mother still trapped in the land of her birth (26). As she drifts off to sleep, Mississippi is described as a “dark backdrop bearing down / on the windows of her room” (27-8). And, inside its walls, the mother’s white childhood dolls hold a mocking vigil, “winking down from every shelf—all of them / white.” This whiteness serves as contrasts to the darkness of the dirt, the room, and to the skin of the mother and her baby (10-11). At the same time, the television station signs off playing “The Star-Spangled Banner” (30). The hypocrisy couched in what the poet calls “*our* national anthem,” a song whose lyrics tell the history of (and which are only true for) half of its citizens, and which is placed in the last line of the poem, illustrate how inescapable her daughter’s racial heritage really is (30, my emphasis). Thus, although the mother tries to quell her own fears by imagining a country that doesn’t exist, it is no use; the reality of racism in America infiltrates and controls her safest spaces. And, while the child’s predetermined names and the local landscape literally blackens the air that is circulating to her through the mother, the lullaby of a national hypocrisy and a host of hollow white figures deny the reality of her presence in her native land, taunting her in her restless sleep.

In subsequent pieces, the trauma of naming and distortion continue to shape the speaker’s childhood experiences; but, as is often the case in cultural trauma, it takes on a paradoxical new dimension via acts of erasure. When the black body is named for its phenotypical characteristics as the “mulatto” baby is named in “Another Country,” that identification creates a moment of dehumanization where the body is essentialized to a color—or as Spillers puts it, “reduced to a thing...for the captor” (“Mama’s Baby” 206).

⁴¹ Term used by the poet, Trethewey, “Black *and* White.”

But at the very same moment of objectification, corporeal obliteration becomes much easier to negotiate: once the black body moves from the category of human being to *thing*, its eradication becomes easier to justify. In a true feat of poetic craftsmanship, Trethewey depicts this phenomenon over the course of several pieces. While extrinsic naming is played out in “Another Country,” in a piece titled “Miscegenation,” the narrator’s parents choose a name for the baby, Natasha, which according to the speaker means “*Christmas child*, even in Mississippi” (14, author’s emphasis). However, in a later poem titled “Incident,” the speaker re-tells the story of a cross-burning in her grandmother’s front yard shortly after her birth (Anderson). Here, Trethewey creates a symbolic moment wherein, by burning the cross, the Ku Klux Klan symbolically erases the biracial baby’s body by burning the object that has been associated with her given name.

Although burning a cross in front of a black family’s home had long been a calling card of the Klan, in “Incident” it serves as a specific representation of racist whites’ attitudes about the speaker’s complex racial heritage and her very existence in a land where races did not (or at least were not supposed to) mix. In an earlier piece titled “Miscegenation,” Trethewey points out that the name “Natasha” is reminiscent of Christ’s nativity; however, in Mississippi, it is also akin to Joe Christmas, a Faulknerian anti-hero whose race is also “unknown”—and who is, by extension, unaccepted—in his native state (8). Her name carries that special meaning over several pages to “Incident.” Because the given definition in the previous poem connects Trethewey’s name to Christmas—a holiday defined by its relationships to tangible objects like gifts and Christmas trees—it becomes a semiotically/symbolically destructible object in

“Incident.” Just as Christ and Joe Christmas are the products of seemingly-incompatible entities, Trethewey is also perceived as the living “gift” of a contradictory, unnatural act. Thus, in an attack that was most likely a response to her birth, the Klansmen’s burning of the cross—which was, in the words of the poet “trussed like a *Christmas tree*”—is an act that represents their desire to obliterate everything that her existence represents: a fluid racial identity that, for any racial absolutist, exposes what Michelle Wright calls the “inherent fiction of clearly delineated racial categories” (“Incident” 6, 9, my emphasis; Wright 180). As such, the cross burning serves as a scare tactic used to remind the family of their place in Southern society. Moreover, (in a move that reiterates Hortense Spillers’ contention that the denigration of the black body in the New World is fraught with contravening exploitations⁴²) it illustrates the destructive possibilities of extrinsically-inscribed naming. By opting to use the name given to the baby by her parents rather than the epithet bestowed upon her in “Another Country,” the narrator depicts the power of extrinsic inscription in its ability to completely destroy the humanity of the black body: not only does its naming dehumanize her, but it usurps and corrupts the meaning of the name that the parents give to their own child.⁴³

⁴² “Mama’s Baby” 206.

⁴³ Though a complete discussion of Trethewey’s use of poetic forms is a one that exceeds the scope of this dissertation (and, at any rate, deserves exclusive attention due to the level of Trethewey’s craft), it is important to note that “Incident” is a poem whose repetitive lines are, for Trethewey, also crucial to understanding the impact of the incident on her family’s collective memory. According to the poet:

I tried writing “Incident” for a long time with a straight narrative lyric, but it kept getting bogged down by the incident, reduced to a little incident about the cross burning. It wasn’t until I turned to that other envelope of form and repetition that I even understood what the poem was about—[not centered on the incident but] how we *remember* the incident. (Anderson, my emphasis)

In light of Trethewey’s explanation, it is almost as if the lines in “Incident” represent a pattern that was inscribed on the psyche of the poet by the memory of an incident she was too young to remember herself, but which, according to the poet, was told to her by older members of her family (Anderson).⁴³ As such, the repetition speaks to the power of collective memory, but also to the perpetuity of the cycle of marking, naming, and erasure that cultural trauma can create. Additionally, like the playing of the national anthem in

III. The Condition of the Mother and the Child that Follows: Matrilineal Inscription

In fact, in “My Mother Dreams Another Country” and “Incident,” the mother seems to have little agency in the inscription of her child’s name, and her powerlessness raises the question: how does this mother fit into a conversation about matrilineal inscription? While the poem discussed above tells the story of the inevitable transmission of cultural trauma from the body of the mother to the body of her child, several other poems illustrate how some of the mother’s actions co-inscribe on her daughter’s mind and body legacies of silence and corporeal distortion that keep the mechanisms of traumatic inscription in place. In both poems, the mother’s ability to name her child is silenced by her knowledge of the many names that will be bestowed upon her by others. However, in the poem “Southern Gothic,” when the mother has the opportunity to counteract that naming, she does not. In the opening lines of the poem, which recounts her parents’ reaction to the epithets she is called on the playground, Trethewey writes:

...I have come home
from the schoolyard with the words that shadow us
in this small Southern town—*peckerwood* and *nigger*
lover, *half-breed* and *zebra*—words that take shape
outside us. (11-14)

Just as the mother has predicted in “Another Country,” the child she once carried has now brought home with her names that have been (figuratively) inscribed onto her by others; ones that define the entire family from without, and constantly remind the young mother that the home she has built with her husband is one that stands in a “muck of ancestry” as dark as the Mississippi night air she once breathed in in her sleep (18). In fact, in the lines quoted above, each family member is inscribed with a new identity: the

the last lines of “Another Country,” the repetition of lines gives “Incident” the quality of a frightening lullaby that induces a trauma on the child before she even understands the magnitude of the act. And, as is the case in “Another Country,” it is a tune from which the mother has no power to completely shield her.

mixed race child is a “half-breed” and a “zebra,” while the enjambment of the word “nigger / lover” simultaneously identifies both parents. On the one line, the word “nigger” stands alone as a referent to the narrator’s mother, but with the simple addition of the word “lover,” the father is evoked in the completion of the phrase, whose extension over two lines of poetry is in itself a distortion that speaks to the dehumanizing effect of the term itself.

However, unlike in “Another Country” the parents are given an opportunity to counter-articulate these epithets; in fact, the child actually interrogates them with repeated questions of “*why* and *why* and *why*,” that neither of them answer (7). And, although the father’s face is described as “an expression of grief” (11), it is the mother’s inarticulation that is pronounced in the poem: the speaker describes herself as “the child with too many questions. . . *my mother* cannot answer” (6, 8, my emphasis). Even though the speaker’s calls the mother’s “cold lips stitched shut” a “gesture / toward her future” of an early death, the highlighting of the mother’s silence also suggests the unique responsibility of maternal counter-articulation; particularly if one agrees that, as Hortense Spillers points out in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” “the child’s humanity is mirrored *initially* in the eyes of its mother” (220). If such is indeed the case, then it is the mother’s failure to counteract the child’s de-humanization—which is provocatively illustrated by words like “half-breed” and “zebra”—that is most important because the child loses that “initial” opportunity of humanization. Even worse, the mother’s silence in the face of this inscriptive naming also sets an example for the child—one that, when mimicked, thwarts the child’s ability to humanize herself. In fact, there is actually a ‘gesturing’ toward the child’s silent ‘future’ that occurs near the end of the poem. Though the poem opens with

the child interrogating the extrinsic inscription of naming with the ““*why* and *why* and *why*,” it ends with all three members of the family sitting in silence. According to the poet, the entire family are “quiet / in the *language of blood*” (15-16, my emphasis). However, given the fact that the mother’s silence is so pronounced here, this phrase seems particularly matrilineal. And, as such, the silence becomes more than simply the mother’s failure to counter-articulate. Instead, it becomes a matrilineal inscription: the daughter mimics the mother’s mutism in a figurative “stitching” shut of her own lips that is learned through her mother’s example.

In addition to this inheritance of silence, the last lines of “Southern Gothic” also describe how the family members’ shadows on the walls have become “bigger and stranger” than their corporeal realities; a provocative illustration of how the external forces of extrinsic inscription infiltrate safe spaces and create moments of inscriptive trauma that are simultaneously mapped out in the naming and silencing of the family members, as well as in more literal, corporeal spaces. Indeed, as reflections of both their literal bodies as well as of the public’s perception of those bodies, these distorted shadows represent the ways in which each member of the family takes on a newer, more monstrous identity in the process of extrinsic inscription. More important, however, is the fact that, in “Southern Gothic,” this subjectivity is buttressed by matrilineally inscribed silence that, while it is arguably passed from *both* parents to the child in this poem, in other pieces the poet describes it along with other forms of inscription that are specifically inherited from her mother. In addition to the “maternal impression” that is made in utero in “Another Country,” in a piece titled “Blond,” the speaker is subject to a moment of corporeal inscription that, albeit fleeting, is captured in time by way of a

photograph. “Blond” tells the story of the speaker’s happily receiving what turns out to be a very racialized Christmas gift. Here she writes:

When on Christmas day I woke to find
a blond wig, a pink sequined tutu,
and a blond ballerina doll, nearly tall as me,
I didn’t know to ask, nor that it mattered
If there’d been a brown version. This was years before
my grandmother nestled the dark baby
into our crèche, years before I understood it
as a primer for a Mississippi childhood (9-16)

In these lines, the poet describes a moment where her corporeality is distorted by a costume in which she morphs into both a caricature of and a dark contrast *to* an accompanying life-sized doll. Throughout the poem, the poet describes the possibility of being born blond as something that she could have inherited from both of her parents, but only through “chance” and “long odds” (24). And, in hindsight, this possibility is made even more improbable by the future birth of her brother, who is presumably the “dark baby” referenced in Line 14 (24). Under these circumstances, the costume becomes an unrealistic representation of the poet’s reality of dark hair and dark skin, which makes her the living “brown version” of the ideal that the white doll represents.

What is truly fascinating about this piece, however, is one distinct connection to “Another Country”: the life-sized doll, which is eerily reminiscent of the dolls that “wink down” from the mother’s shelves as she awaits the speaker’s birth (10). In fact, the presence of white dolls in both poems suggests that, in spite of her wish for “another country” for her child, the mother embraces subjectivity as distortion through the collection of the dolls; and, by offering a similar gift to her daughter, passes down that ritual of embracement to her child. This notion is compounded by the fact that the lasting image of the speaker in the costume is one that is captured in the form of a photograph

taken by her mother. As is the case in “Southern Gothic,” the father is immobile; even though his face is included in the picture, it is “almost / out of the frame” (20-1). The mother, on the other hand, is the active entity. It is she who sets the precedent of the ownership of the white dolls, and it is she who captures this moment of corporeal distortion in which the camera serves as Spillers’ “maternal gaze”—one that locks the speaker into a moment of distorted corporeality that is far more concrete than the maternal impression the mother imagines in “Another Country.”

Furthermore, although Trethewey’s placing of poems in the text is actually marked by a chronological non-conformity, the thematic ordering of several pieces lends itself to an argument of a theory of matrilineal inscription that runs parallel to an extrinsic one. Through “Another Country’s” textual placement before “Blond,” and through “Blond’s” placement as the poem immediately preceding “Southern Gothic,” the poet identifies a trajectory of matrilineal inscription that begins with depictions of corporeality and is solidified through both the example and the mimicry of verbal mutism. In fact, just as the mother anticipates in “Another Country,” the daughter’s phenotypical characteristics interrogate the idealization of whiteness and beauty personified in the figure of the white doll in “Blond” (in spite of the fact that she never verbally asks about a “brown version” of the doll). However, the photograph’s capturing of the child wearing the blond wig solidifies a moment of complicity with silence by both mother and child. On the one hand, the child’s wearing of the costume silences her body’s corporeal interrogation of typical standards of beauty as well as the “inherent fiction of clearly delineated racial categories” (Wright 180). On the other hand, the mother’s willingness to capture such a moment illustrates a tacit complicity with that silencing that becomes

more deliberate through maternal example in “Southern Gothic.” Thus, the possibility of the speaker’s interrogatory corporeality is raised in “Another Country,” squelched in “Blond,” and finally, even the body’s verbal questioning is silenced in “Southern Gothic.” And, although cultural trauma plays a decisive role in this inscribed silence (best illustrated by the ritual annihilation in “Incident”), the mother’s complicity with that silence is also heavily influential.

Indeed, the corporeal mutism that is finalized in “Southern Gothic” ultimately carries over into a larger silence about historical fictions, which becomes an even greater threat to black Southern personhood in the text, but ironically also offers an opportunity for the poet to raise some important questions about cultural trauma and the ways in which both whites *and* blacks protect racial fictions: one group with their revised memories of the antebellum South, and the other through their unspoken complicity. Indeed, although the mother’s silence is something that the child immediately mimics in “Southern Gothic,” Trethewey depicts a second—and perhaps more conscious—instance in the poem “Southern History,” whose proximity in name suggests its intimate connection to the former piece. In “Southern History” the speaker recalls her embarrassment and silence during a high school history lesson in which her teacher tells the class that Southern blacks were actually happier during slavery. The poem opens with an almost comical demonstration of how the history of African Americans has been truncated to fit the confines of traditional Southern history and a white Southern imaginary. The teacher’s contention that “[*t*]he slaves were clothed, fed, / and better off under a master’s care” would be, to most individuals with any knowledge of American slavery, laughable; however, in this case, it is tragic because it is being passed off as

legitimate knowledge (3-4, author's emphasis). Later, the teacher shows the movie *Gone With the Wind*, touting it as another "true account of how things were back then" (11). As the class looks on, Trethewey recalls seeing a slave "big as life" with a "big mouth [and] bucked eyes" grinning back at her from the screen—a blackened representation of herself that she does not refute (12-13).

Like so many other poems in the text, "Southern History" explores the constant tension within the cycle of naming, distortion, silencing, and erasure that constitutes Trethewey's depiction of extrinsic inscription. The image of the slave, along with the teacher's complete misrepresentation of slave life, is a form of negation similar to the attempts of the Klansmen in "Incident": the dark-skinned caricature excludes any alternative representations of real-life African Americans, many of whom (like Trethewey) share none of the woman's exaggerated features. Thus, in the same way the recurrent memory of the burning cross repeatedly chars the grass in front of her childhood home, the image of the slave blackens the narrator and other members of her race even as it erases their faces from white collective memory—the film character's bestialized features are super-inscribed over any images of black faces whose phenotypical attributes might be different. And the history teacher, in his position of educational power (with the help of fellow Southerner Margaret Mitchell, upon whose novel the film is based), super-inscribes his version of past and present over both the speaker's face as well as over her very presence in the classroom. Under his rubric, she, along with every other living African American, would be best suited as a docile, obedient worker, uneducated and "under the care" of someone else.

And yet, as villainous as he may seem, Trethewey makes it clear that the high school instructor is not the only guilty party in the room. In the last lines of “Southern History” she writes that the image of the happy slave was “a lie / [her] teacher guarded” with textbooks, movies, and his own lectures; however, the speaker’s failure to confront his fictions is ultimately the thing that authenticates them (13-14). While it is true that the instructor staunchly protects this whitewashed version of history, the speaker concludes with a very simple statement: “Silent, so did I” (14). Here she makes clear that her failure to speak is just as harmful as the teacher’s racist representation of her group. More important, her silence also protects the lie, and “guards” it in a way that ensures its longevity.

In fact, Trethewey’s use of the word “guard” in the poem “Southern History” works as both a description of the fervor with which the instructor promotes his one-sided version of history, but it is also a call for a “changing of the guard” that is necessary in order for Southern history to include a more comprehensive version of the African American experience. In fact, the responsibility of guardianship is imperative to understanding the entire text of *Native Guard*, which is all about breaking silences and reversing the erasure that has befallen groups of black from the past to the present. In a recent interview with Daniel Cross Turner, Trethewey highlights both the magnitude and the rewards of such a responsibility when she states:

Perhaps even now my role is to establish what has always been Southern, though at other points in history it has been excluded from “Southernness.” We just hadn’t found the right metaphor yet. Which is to me one of the reasons why *Native Guard* has been successful. People finally saw the American story. I think Mississippians see our story in that American story. I boldly think of myself as that native guardian. Not to mention that my name, Natasha, actually shares the prefix of words like

“native” and “national” and “nativity.” It’s there in my very naming.
 (“Interview”)

Interestingly, in the process of articulating the importance of redefining “Southernness,” and interweaving it into a larger “American story” while simultaneously re-integrating a silenced narrative of Southern black history, Natasha Trethewey alludes to the power of re-signification and reinscription that accompany that responsibility. While the autobiographical poems in the text tell the story of a child who loses the power to determine the meaning of her own name while still in her mother’s womb, here the poet identifies a unique positionality that can emerge from that traumatic inscription. By challenging the rituals of oppression that make even a history lesson an assault on one’s personhood, Trethewey uses the story of the Native Guards to “reinscribe cultural memory”(Turner, “Interview”); but, in the process, she also regains the power to reinscribe—and retrieve the meaning of—her own name.

IV. Native Work

Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the title poem “Native Guard” is that it is written in first person, and by ceding the narrative voice to the soldier, Trethewey (albeit as amanuensis) transfers the power of the recordkeeper back to the previously-silenced historical subject. Even more important, she enacts a powerful interrogation of the matrilineal inscription of silence. In fact, this poem is her defiance of both extrinsic and matrilineal inscription: in the same way Selina Boyce defies by movement, and Sophie Caco defies by rituals of difference, the speaker’s breaking the silence about the history of the Guards serves as a defiance of both historical dis-memory as well as of the matrilineal inheritance of silence that she mimics in “Southern History.” Of course, the

great irony is that she does this by speaking through another entity, the soldier who narrates the piece. This, however, does not detract from the power of interrogation; the voice of the soldier *is* the interrogation. In the first stanza, he describes himself as a male slave who has “reached / thirty-three with history of one younger/inscribed upon my back” (10-11). However, he can also read and write, and has decided to “use ink / to keep record” instead of relying on memory alone, which is “flawed [and] changeful” (11-12, 13). Here, the soldier describes the exact phenomenon that Ron Eyerman identifies in his theory about cultural trauma: the “flawed and changeful” memory of the post-Civil War South that was ultimately reflected in acts of postwar commemoration and that ultimately silenced the history of slaves and other blacks. According to Eyerman, in monuments erected in both the North and South, “issues such as slavery were at best subsidiary...lumped in with stories of Christian bravery and other deeds of heroism” (17-18). In “Native Guard,” however, the *slave* actually speaks, and tells of his own “deeds of heroism” as a soldier. Because he has been taught by his master to read and write (which is quite a different depiction from the caricatured slave in “Southern History”), he is able to directly translate the “history...inscribed upon [his] back” from the flesh to the page *in medias res*. By doing so, he defies the inscriptive trauma of silence, but also rewrites the historical record to include the story of his former life as a slave, to tell the story of his current life as a soldier, and to give his reason for fighting in the war in the first place: to gain personal freedom.

The other great irony in this piece is that silence is broken and historical memory revised by narrating the very trajectory of silencing and historical erasure in the moment of defiant articulation—in the poem itself. The narrator tells how the Guards gain a sense

of agency as the jailers of captured Confederates, but are gradually disempowered by their superiors and ultimately erased from history before the war ends. In the fifth stanza, he recounts how he and other black troops are assigned to write letters for imprisoned Confederate soldiers, many of whom are illiterate. As Trethewey herself points out, there is a certain kind of power implicit in this task. According to her, the narrator of “Native Guard” is “the one with the documentary power. He’s the one who has the pen and is doing the writing and, because of this, he’s the one who has the power to shape the narrative, what gets recorded” (Turner, “Interview”). Indeed, because the white prisoners cannot read, they do not have the power to control what is said, and must rely on the black writers in order to communicate with their families. Interestingly, the narrator says that he writes down things what the prisoners “labor to say between silences / too big for words” (72-3). Thus, as amanuenses, the Guards are given the responsibility of recordkeeping, but with it they have the full power to record whatever they choose to say about the events they have witnessed. This actually temporarily puts them fully in charge of recording history, but they do so with an astonishing degree of empathy (Turner, “Interview”). It is the Guards who choose to describe what is happening to both captors and prisoners: the way the air carries to the prison “the stench of limbs, rotten in the bone pit”; the fact that all grow weaker by the day for lack of food; and how, when their fellow soldiers die, the prisoners “eat their share of hardtack,” trying hard not to think of the gaunt faces of their dead fellow soldiers (82, 84, 87). Thus, there is a powerful (albeit temporary) role reversal between recordkeeper and historical subject.

But, in spite of this narrative power, the Guards maintain their subordinate subjectivity throughout the poem. Long before the troops are charged with the task of

letter-writing, the narrator describes the difficult circumstances under which he and other Native Guardsmen must work. In the second stanza, the soldier tells of the “nigger work” that is also assigned to black troops: the hauling and trench-digging that are made even more difficult by the fact that they are given only half the rations issued to their white counterparts (20-23). Thus, by the seventh and eighth stanzas, when task of letter-writing ends, and the power of inscription changes hands, it is not completely unexpected. Here the narrator recalls the fates of black Union troops in the massacre at Pascagoula, where the Guards sustained friendly fire from white regiments; and the dishonor at Port Hudson, where fallen black soldiers’ bodies were left to rot in open fields because their general denied sustaining casualties there (87-91, 101-4). According to the speaker, the Colonel at Ship Island called Pascagoula an “unfortunate incident,” but said that the dead troops’ names would ““deck the pages of history”” (97-8). But of course, the very fact that General Banks has denied the existence of his dead troops proves that statement to be false. Because the bodies are neither collected, counted, nor buried, no one can be sure of who fought and died there, and the narrator is well aware of this. In the opening lines of the stanza just after the Colonel’s quote—and in an allusion to the plaque that the Daughters of the Confederacy will one day erect at Ship Island—the narrator counters: “*Some* names shall deck the pages of history / as it is written in stone. *Some* will not” (99-100, my emphasis).

In fact, even though he tries desperately to eulogize the dead and their contributions to the war, the narrator’s efforts are rendered fruitless when his superiors tell him that “it’s best to spare most detail” in the official letters that must be sent to soldiers’ families. And, in this particular instance, it is not even clear which soldiers he is

referring due to the mistreatment by their superiors, the Guards' identities have been so conflated with those of the Confederate soldiers that, by this time, the "details" could refer to either the dead Confederate prisoners, or to the slaughtered black Union troops. And, in the following and final stanza, identities get even more indistinguishable when the speaker tells us that the Native Guards have actually been renamed "Corps d'Afrique," a title that, according to him, "takes the *native* / from [their] claim," and makes them "exiles / in their own homeland" (130-2). Ultimately, through the Guards' slaughter on the battlefield and their subsequent renaming, the Union army slowly alienates the black soldiers; first by misdirected violence, and then by replacing their title with a moniker that identifies them with an entirely differently continent. Furthermore, the renaming of the troops so near the end of the war (the stanza is titled "1865") foreshadows the legal, economic, historical, and other forms of disenfranchisement that will soon happen to Southern blacks after Reconstruction. In fact, in the last lines of the poem, the narrator fortuitously describes the inevitable fate of himself and his fellow soldiers. He calls their lives "untold stories of those that time will render / *mute*" (137-8, my emphasis). And, over the course of ten stanzas that span fewer than three years, the narrator traces this silencing from his personal inter-inscription in the journal, to the public inscription of prisoners' letters, and finally, to the violent slaughter, dismissive renaming, and impending historical erasure of the entire regiment.

Indeed, before the end of the war, the narrator knows his fate will be historical erasure; however, even as he describes it, Trethewey (as meta-amanuensis) achieves a powerful and multifaceted *coup de grace*. First, she places the Native Guards back into public history by granting inscriptive authority to one of their own. By doing so, she

offers a revision of cultural memory; but more important, she models a reconceptualization of historical memory by introducing into the historical record a story in which the lives of both blacks *and* whites are honored for their sacrifices. In spite of the fact that the Native Guards recognized their Confederate prisoners as “would-be masters,” and were often killed and dishonored by their own troops, the soldier as narrator still labors to tell each group’s story as descriptively and as honestly as he could—even as he sees his own history slowly being silenced (57). The speaker’s description of the medium in which the soldier is literally inter-inscribing his narrative—between the lines of an old journal confiscated from a Confederate home—attests to this. Both he and Trethewey describe his written lines as “crosshatched”: written *between* and not over or on top of the original text (Anderson; line 27). In stark contrast to the nominal, psychological, and historical super-inscription described in earlier pieces in the volume, the soldier’s decision to leave the story of the first diary’s owner intact illustrates the fact that history can—and should—be inclusive. As such, “Native Guard” demonstrates how one can heal from cultural trauma—not by an attrition of counter-erasure, but by simply reclaiming the power of inscription.⁴⁴

Additionally, by choosing to retell the story of a group of men whose voices have been “rendered mute,” Trethewey not only interrogates the dis-memory of Southern history, but she also calls to task the extrinsic inscription of racism and the matrilineally-inherited inscription of silence—both of which she suffers during her own life. Like the Guards, the speaker of the poems surrounding the title piece was also born among foes.

⁴⁴ In the interview with Turner, Trethewey supports such a reading of *Native Guard* when she says: “And the great thing about the idea of the crosshatching is that, depending on how you turn it, you can read one or the other narratives. It doesn’t actually obliterate one in order to replace it with another; they both exist, and we only need shift our vision to see both stories.” (“Interview”)

As the daughter of a native Mississippian, she is considered a crime in her homeland because her very existence confounds notions of racial purity. Subsequently she is, like the “Corps d’Afrique,” renamed as something unnatural and strange while still in her mother’s womb. Also like the Guards, the speaker is erased from historical narratives like the one presented by her high school teacher. She has no place in its annals, which are filled with dark caricatures of slaves who were allegedly “happier” in bondage. And finally, in the same way that the Guards are silenced—first through murder and other forms of ignominy during the Civil War, and later through the dishonor of historical amnesia—the speaker is also inscribed with a matrilineal trauma of silence that spans both psychological and corporeal terrains. Through her mother’s examples of inarticulation in response to racist epithets, and the mother’s symbolic silencing of her daughter’s body through the gift of the doll costume (which negates the filial body’s ability to *visibly* interrogate notions of racial absolutism), the speaker learns and reenacts an incapacitating mustism that renders her unable to counteract all of the social and historical disinheritances she suffers throughout her life. Thus, in both the individual and the collective histories gathered in this text, the subjects undergo varied sequences of trauma via symbolic misnaming, blackening, and ultimately silence and erasure, all of which stem from a larger society’s need to simplify its own history by creating false binaries of blacks and whites, friends and foes, and good and evil. Yet, in the very telling of these traumas, the poet reinscribes the identities of both the historical subject as well as of herself, and breaks the silences that keep the various forms of traumatic inscription in place.

V. Conclusion: Finding Her True-True Name⁴⁵

In the pages of *Native Guard*, the predominant speaker interrogates and rejects the repression of regional history and her positionality as a nonwhite Southerner, as well as the matrilineal inheritance of silence about these traumas. More important, she declares allegiance to and ownership of her homeland, in spite of both her personalized trauma and the larger region's more turbulent past. And, in true Tretheweyan fashion, she achieves this final articulation over the course of several pages, and in two drastically-different poems. In "Pastoral," the first poem to appear in the final section of the text, Trethewey describes a dream in which she is posing for a photograph with the Fugitive Poets, a group of writers and literary critics who came to virtually define Southern literature in the twentieth century.⁴⁶ She, dressed in blackface, is asked "'You don't hate the South?'"⁴⁷ (14). While she does not answer the question in the poem itself, she does respond in the last piece in the volume, a poem aptly titled "South." Here she states:

...I returned
to a field of cotton, hallowed ground—

as slave legend goes—each boll
holding the ghosts of generations...

I returned to a country battlefield
where colored troops fought and died...

Where the roads, buildings, and monuments
are named to honor the Confederacy,

⁴⁵ This subtitle is borrowed from Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson's edited collection titled *Her True-True Name: An Anthology of Women's Writing from the Caribbean* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1989).

⁴⁶ For more information about The Fugitive Poets and their impact on Southern literature, see Charlotte Beck's *The Fugitive Legacy: A Critical History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2001) and Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: The UP of Mississippi, 1998).

⁴⁷ In Trethewey's notes, the author states that this line is "borrowed, in slightly different form, from William Faulkner's character Quentin Compson at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!*: 'I don't hate the south. I don't hate it'" (49n.).

where the old flag still hangs, I return
to Mississippi, state that made a crime

of me—mulatto, half breed—native
in my native land, this place they'll bury me.

(15-18, 23-4, 29-34)

In this final poem, Natasha Trethewey brings together the histories of those who came before her, but she also legitimizes herself by tracing an ancestry of slaves and soldiers whose rights to the land of her birth stem from their unpaid labor on it and their patriotic dedication to it. In essence, the once disinherited Corps D’Afrique are finally “brought home”; resituated in the history of their native land in lines that are crosshatched with traditional Southern history. In “\South,” the Guards are finally eulogized right alongside the “old flag,” whose lingering presence is, according to Trethewey, a constant reminder of the “exile” black Southerners feel in a land where Confederate heroes are honored while black soldiers are forgotten (Anderson). And finally, by combining the former epithets—“mulatto” and “half-breed”—with the word “native”; Trethewey re-appropriates the nominative inscriptions that have haunted her from the days spent in her mother’s womb, thereby declaring a complex and “crosshatched” ethno-social identity. Thus, although the poem begins with an epigraph from E. O. Wilson, which states that “Homo sapiens is the only species to suffer psychological exile,”⁴⁸ it ends with the poet’s figuratively “coming home” by declaring that she is still a “native in [her] native land”: one who was born there, and one who will die there as well, her bones returning to the dust just as those of the slaves and Guards—the disinherited ancestors who came before her.

⁴⁸ Trethewey, *Native Guard* 45.

And yet, even though *Native Guard* ends in the glory of the poet's "coming home," I would like to conclude my own reading of the text in the same space I began: the mother's womb. It is imperative to remember where the speaker's journey of inscription, trauma, and reinscription started: in a small room in Mississippi in 1966, where a soon-to-be mother awaited the arrival of her first child. In fact, the narrative trajectory of *Native Guard* places the mother squarely in the middle of the identity formation process. From the "maternal impression" she creates on her child, to the corporeal silencing that she teaches her, and in even her traumatic death, Trethewey highlights the maternal presence as an indispensable part of this process. But such a technique is not new; it actually harkens back to a strong matrilineal tradition in biracial literature. As P. Gabrielle Foreman points out, since the nineteenth-century, many African-American women's narratives feature heroines of "mixed parentage" whose texts are characterized by the "repression of the white father" and the "recuperat[ion]" of the black mother ("Whose Your Mama" 510). Similarly in *Native Guard*, in spite of the fact that so much of the text deals with the themes of ancestry and inheritance, the white father's presence is fleeting, and in the interview with Jill Petty that provides the epigraph for this chapter, Natasha Trethewey candidly acknowledges this. While she proudly describes herself as coming from a "very matrilineal family," and insists that her poetry is heavily influenced by memories of her maternal ancestors, she is far more cavalier about her father's absence. In regards to him and her other paternal relatives, she states:

I think that perhaps the more that I begin to story parts of my own life and delve into other parts of my consciousness, the circle will get wider—the camera's angle will be a wide-angle lens, and I'll be able to include more [about them]. But right now in terms of binary oppositions of some sort there's what's there and what's not there" (369).

I would argue that what Trethewey is saying about families and identity formation—and what *Native Guard* has been saying all along—is that, as Hortense Spillers points out above, “the child’s humanity is mirrored *initially* in the eyes of its mother” (220, my emphasis). But unfortunately, as the poem “Blond” illustrates, in addition to that humanity, cultural trauma and traumatic inscription are also often passed through the maternal gaze. However, the balance of *Native Guard* illustrates how, ultimately, although such trauma is passed through the mother, re-identification and regeneration are achieved by retracing and revising that narrative of transference. Where Trethewey’s mother’s memory went un-commemorated, the poet uses her text to do so right along with the memory of the Guards. And where the mother loses the ability to name—or rename—her child in “Another Country” and “Southern Gothic,” Trethewey traces a history of extrinsic inscription from the Guards to her mother and, finally, to herself; proudly crosshatching externally-imposed names—“mulatto” and “half breed”—with a self-chosen one: “native.”

In fact, the sheer power of matrilineality in *Native Guard* raises some important questions about the maternal presence in identity narratives, particularly: what happens when the mother or maternal figure is, for some reason, inaccessible to the Diasporic subject? In the following chapter, I will address that question through a reading of Emily Raboteau’s *The Professor’s Daughter* (2005), a text wherein various modes of maternal estrangement present fertile ground for discussions about the importance of matrilineal inscription in the process of identity formation, even in instances of matro-filial racial difference.

CHAPTER V

WHEN MAMA'S WHITE: TRANS-RACIAL MATERNALITY AND FAILED MATRILINEAL INSCRIPTION IN EMILY RABOTEAU'S *THE PROFESSOR'S DAUGHTER: A NOVEL* (2005)⁴⁹

I. Introduction

"Mulatta fiction employs and challenges the markers used to signify white racism as well as those that signal African American identity politics."
—Suzanne Bost⁵⁰

In an essay titled "Black With 'White Blood'? To Advertise, or Not Advertise, The Race of Obama's Mother," Daniel McNeil analyzes the self-marketing strategies of the 2008 presidential candidate Barack Obama, who, according to McNeil, deliberately used his mixed-race heritage in the construction of a voter-friendly, multi-racial, all-American identity. McNeil points out that, in an earlier autobiography titled *Dreams from My Father* (1995), Obama talks about his discomfort with his white parentage, writing that he decided at an early age not to disclose the race of his mother to others because he feared that "by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites" (qtd. in McNeil 99). However, by the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama's tune had changed. Not only does he cite his mother's Midwestern values as crucial to his success in college, law school, and beyond, but he also told one interviewer that her warning against "the more aggressive or militant approaches to African American politics" was his impetus for distancing himself from Reverend Jeremiah Wright, whose anti-white pulpit antics created a stir among liberal whites who—albeit supportive of an eloquent, fair-skinned,

⁴⁹ The first part of this title is borrowed, with some variation, from Lisa and Hettie Jones's article "Mama's White" (*Essence* 25.1 [May 1994]).

⁵⁰ This quote is taken from Suzanne Bost's *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2003) 71.

Sidney Poitier-like presidential candidate—were not quite ready to put an angry black man (or even the friend of one) in the Oval Office (qtd in McNeil 108). McNeil’s incisive reading of Obama’s history of self-fashioning illustrates the fact that, in spite of all the talk about America’s new “post-racial” society, little has actually changed in the era of the “new” multiracial public figure. The fact that Obama needed to employ the aforementioned strategies in order to establish himself first as an authentic “race man” to black voters in Chicago, and then as a safe presidential candidate for white voters across the country is proof that, as McNeil writes, black and white America’s separate but equally-preposterous “attachment[s] to racial myths” about what it means to be a viable black leader live on (112).

More important than this racial scaffolding, however, is the fact that Barack Obama’s drastically-different autobiographies are two literary examples of a mixed-race protagonist who is willing to lose a parent for the sake of establishing what s/he believes to be a more “authentic” racial identity. In Obama’s case, it was first his mother for the sake of black voters; and later his father for the sake of whites. But as P. Gabrielle Foreman points out, it is most often the white parent who disappears from the written page in mixed-race literature (“Whose Your Mama” 510). Natasha Trethewey’s fleeting portrayals of her father in the text of *Native Guard* and the remarks about her patrilineal heritage that are quoted at the end of the previous chapter certainly seem to suggest as much. And yet, while it is true that white fathers often disappear from texts written by and about mixed-race characters, this phenomenon seems to be much more prevalent when the mother is white. If one pauses to count the number of white mothers present in black literature, it becomes immediately apparent that there are not many. With the

exceptions of James McBride's *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1996), and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), white mothers in black literature are predominantly absent.

In fact, in several canonical texts written by women, including Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, the mothers of both female protagonists are not only absent, but the dim portraits painted by their narrators are far from flattering. In *Our Nig*, Frado's mother Mag Smith abandons her daughter to the household of Mrs. Bellmont, an overbearing matriarch whose verbal and physical abuse of Frado makes her an even more despicable white maternal figure than Frado's Mag, who knowingly relinquishes her child to a woman she herself called a "right she-devil" (Gates xlvi; H. Wilson 17). In *Quicksand*, Helga Crane's memories of a beautiful, loving mother are less painful; however, Larsen's portrayal of the mother's family in Denmark, whose commodification of Helga's exotic dark features borders on panderage, suggests that, in her sexual relationship with Helga's father, this mother may have been guilty of black fetishism, and completely oblivious to the struggles her daughter would face as an adult.

Indeed, the "tragic mulatta" figure—a mixed-race protagonist who is orphaned early, shunned by both black and white communities, and constantly pursued by poverty, misfortune, and lascivious white men—has been a recurring trope in both black and white literature since the early nineteenth century, when mulatta slaves were often held up as the "tragic" results of miscegenation.⁵¹ However, I would contend that the absence of the

⁵¹ For more information about the literary history of the tragic mulatta, see Bost's *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities into the Americas, 1850-2000* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2003), but see also: Shirley Samuels, *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in 19th-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992); Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1995); Eve Allegra Raimon, *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2004); David S. Goldstein (ed.), *Complicating Constructions: Race, Ethnicity, and Hybridity In*

white mother in works written by and about women of mixed race is more than simply a literary convention. In texts that depict such women coming of age in black communities in particular, the presence of a white mother may be a bit too much to tackle in conversations about already-complex and gendered racial identities. How can a white mother fit into a narrative in which a dark girl must learn to navigate the double-negatives of gender and race that make her social position one that is parallel to and yet has always been depicted as diametrically oppositional to that of the white woman?⁵² Can a black woman truly learn about womanhood from a white one? And, if she does learn something, what of it? Does that make her less “black”? Does it trivialize the racially-specific aspects of black female subjectivity? Does it mean that being a black woman may be easier, a little less mystifying than we thought?

Perhaps it is because these questions are so difficult to answer that they have not yet been fully tackled in either critical or creative texts. They are, however, ones that Emily Raboteau explores in her semi-autobiographical⁵³ *The Professor's Daughter* (2005), a text in which Emma Boudreaux grapples with the disintegration of her parents' marriage, the death of her brother (who is electrocuted while urinating on a subway car), and later, her first heartbreak. Further complicating these losses is the fact that Emma is coming of age in the predominantly-white college town of Princeton, New Jersey; an environment wherein racial lines are insidiously drawn, and where she feels immense

American Texts (American Ethnic and Cultural Studies Series, Seattle: U of Washington P, 2007); and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, *Portraits of the New Negro Woman: Visual and Literary Culture in the Harlem Renaissance* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2007).

⁵² For a discussion about the centuries-long divide between black and white women, and the ways in which it is depicted in literature, see Minrose Gwin's "Green-Eyed Monsters of the Slavocracy: Jealous Mistresses in Two Slave Narratives," in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 39-52.

⁵³ In a brief article titled "What is 'Real?'," Raboteau writes: "My book is not a memoir, but it does draw heavily from my life experience. I began writing when I was very young, too young to know how to write about anything else" (73).

pressure to forge a concrete racial identity. In fact, in spite of the fact that her mother is white, Emma, like the predominant speaker in *Native Guard*, inherits a complicated and gendered racial (dis)identity.⁵⁴ And, like the speaker in Trethewey's volume, her trauma is reinforced from without, compounded by others' discomfort with her perceived racial indeterminacy.

However, in this text, it is the notion that her mother can offer her no knowledge about any kind of identity formation—gendered, racial, or otherwise—that is the seat of Emma's matrilineal trauma, and the young girl's assumption about her mother's inability to transmit knowledge makes her a powerful example of the exception that proves the rule of matrilineal inscription. Emma's losses of her father (to divorce), then of her brother (to death on the subway), and finally, of her first love (to an arranged marriage in his native India) are ones that run parallel to her mother's sudden singlehood and the loss of her only son. However, Emma consistently rejects a relationship with her mother and instead tries desperately to create an identity by latching on to others. She is particularly drawn to men who could serve as exemplars because they inhabit more concrete racial identities, but who all ultimately abandon her. As a result, Emma's losses are doubly traumatic: not only does she feel that by losing them she has lost an un-regenerative part of herself, but she also suffers these heartbreaks in complete isolation from her mother and other potential female mentors; ultimately resorting to inventing maternal figures in order to combat her overwhelming sense of loneliness.

In this chapter, I argue that, in *The Professor's Daughter*, Emily Raboteau creates a biracial daughter whose self-imposed exile prevents successful interpersonal interaction and knowledge transmission from her mother—in short, Emma suffers from a complete

⁵⁴ For an in-depth explanation of the gendered nature of biracialism, see Chapter 4 pp. 127-8.

lack of matrilineal inscription, traumatic or otherwise. Her inability to establish an autonomous identity speaks to a dire need for a matrilineal connection that Emma's mother offers, but that Emma consistently rejects. Moreover, in spite of all the nonwhite othermothers Emma invokes in her quest to define her racial identity (othermothers that include her brother, the South African writer Bessie Head, the Ethiopian wife of one of her father's colleagues, and even her father⁵⁵), it is her mother's example that could have best taught her how to heal and how to define herself; two things that Lynn learns to do in the wake of her personal tragedies, but Emma never does. Thus, the thwarted possibilities of matrilineal inscription, best illustrated by Lynn Boudreaux's successful healing process juxtaposed with her daughter's disastrous struggle to deal with the same losses, create a cautionary tale of sorts. While it is true that Emma's loneliness is reminiscent of the tragic mulatta characters of the past, in this case at least part of her sense of isolation is self-created and avoidable. By allowing herself to develop a relationship with her mother, Emma could have benefitted from her example, and gained an ally who was suffering the parallel losses of heartbreak and family tragedy. This reconceptualization of the tragic mulatta figure as one with potential agency and access to a loving—and present—white parent makes *The Professor's Daughter* a powerful argument for the fact

⁵⁵ *The Professor's Daughter* is indeed a difficult text; not only does it tackle intra-familial issues of race and gender, but it also raises some important questions about the nature of mother-daughter relationships, othermother bonds, and even male othermothers within those same contexts. With the presence of Bernie in the text, Emma's search for "mother" figures becomes a transgender one, and although one might argue that a male mother is also a father, I would contend that Emma's desire for nurture, and the belief that she could get it from men, suggests something else—that men are capable of serving as nurturing maternal figures to black and white daughters, even though the men in this particular text are, for their own idiosyncratic reasons, unable to do so. Indeed, we live in a world of fluidity, where issues of race and gender are all the more prevalent, and yet we also live in a world where we know that the lines that separate races and genders are social constructs, and entirely permeable. Although a far more in-depth discussion on this topic is needed, it is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this project, I will say, however, that the presence of male othermothers in *The Professor's Daughter* suggests that "motherhood" is not exclusively woman's work, nor should it be expected to be. And, in the end, the truth of the matter is that black daughters need *parents*—wherever and whoever they are.

that racial similarities or differences between mothers and children do not—or should not—make or break a family. More important, a black woman could have learned some very powerful, healing lessons from a white one.

Furthermore, by presenting the possibility of a trans-racial female bond, Emily Raboteau also interrogates traditional literary depictions of such relationships, which are often portrayed by black women writers as ones that are at best contentious and at worst dangerous. In this way, Raboteau shifts the focus of the “tragedy” of the mulatta narrative from the protagonist to the missed opportunity of a valuable coalition between women, an opportunity which suggests that persistent portrayals of antagonistic interactions between the two groups is perhaps in itself the real tragedy; such divisiveness hinders literary representations of revolutionary, intra-gender, trans-racial coalitions. Thus, I conclude that *The Professor’s Daughter* not only complicates the trajectory of matrilineal traumatic inscription, but, as the epigraph states, it “challenges the markers used to...signal African American identity politics” by calling into question the validity of antithetical paradigms of black and white womanhood and motherhood that are often represented in black women’s literature.

II. M(Br)other, Where Art Thou?: Usurped Matrilineality in *The Professor’s Daughter*

In one review of *The Professor’s Daughter*, Lizzie Skurnick writes:

Raboteau circles the same characters, but there's no continuity—even the title misrepresents the whole. Was it a marketing decision to make this a novel and not a set of linked stories? If so, it's a shame, because Emma's identity crisis is not as great as the one on the page. (“Heroine and book”)

Indeed, Skurnick’s tone throughout the review suggests that the disjointed nature of the text is the result of an overzealous publisher, and perhaps the naiveté of a young writer.

However, I would argue that the narrative fragmentation in *The Professor's Daughter* is no oversight; the overwhelming sense of racial otherness that Emma suffers throughout the course of the novel is founded on her constant racial-misidentification, and her responding attempts to “place” herself within some kind of concrete genealogy by latching onto or completely inventing the lives of others. In other words, Emma’s identity crisis is not, as Skurnick contends, *lesser* than the one on the page, it *is* the one on the page. Emma’s cobbling together of biographies and the invented histories of other people’s lives is not the result of bad writing, but a provocative illustration of two profound realities. The first is the extrinsic inscription she is subjected to by those who are unable to perceive and accept her as biracial, but instead use her features to place her in a host of other ethnic groups. The second factor is a displacement of matrilineal inscription. In *The Professor's Daughter*, Emma’s brother Bernie divests their mother of any power of matrilineality, and then imposes a warped surrogacy on Emma that disappears once he begins to distance himself from the family, leaving her completely rudderless in his absence. As a result of these two very different phenomena—one of imposition, and the other of absence—Emma turns to nonwhite “othermothers” who she feels can either offer (or model) some sense of personal wholeness. Unfortunately, however, each of these individuals is either physically and/or emotionally distant, and is thus unable to engage in the kind of interpersonal interaction that is such a foundational part of the identity formation process.

In previous chapters, mother-daughter relationships have not been discussed in the context of siblinghood, namely because there have been no siblings to discuss; with the exception of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*’ Ina Boyce, whose docile nature makes her

ineffectual in exacting any kind of influence over her outgoing and defiant younger sister, Selina. But, in *The Professor's Daughter*, one of the most important influences in the shaping of Emma's identity is her older brother Bernard III. His identification of Emma as a part of himself and his perception of their mother as an outsider in the family have a profound impact on the way Emma sees her mother, and, ultimately, on how she sees herself.

Bernard Boudreaux III—better known as Bernie—is a host of contradictions: he is charming and eloquent, yet profoundly dyslexic; notoriously defiant, and yet a favorite of both his parents; and he is loving and protective of Emma even as he identifies her as little more than an extension of himself. While Emma's adoration of her brother is predicated on many of these things, what Emma loves most about Bernie is his ability to be perceived as “whole”—an ability to both embrace and embody the race of their enigmatic, emotionally-distant father. As a child, Bernie's ethnicity was, like his sister's, indistinguishable, but as an adult, with his darker skin, shaved head, and deep voice, which he perfected to sound “Street Black. Prophet Black. Angry Black,” he is able to, in the words of his sister, “pass for the *whole* of one half of what he was” (1, 3, my emphasis). Although his appearance (and no doubt his gender) makes Bernie the subject of racial profiling in their suburban enclave, his ability to disguise his ethnic multiplicity in order to simplify his public persona is something Emma envies, particularly because people's constant interrogation of her ethnicity subjects her to a kind of othering that strips her of any concrete sense of identity, racial or otherwise. According to Emma, she “remain[s] a question mark” to people: even when she tells them she is biracial, they do not believe her (2). Bernie, however, “made sense” to them (2).

As a result of Bernie's perceived wholeness, Emma constantly tries to identify herself both with and through him. By the time she reaches adulthood, whenever she is asked questions about her race, Emma usually says that her father is black and her mother is white, but her first impulse is to tell them about her brother, whose external features and internal ideas about race seem far more concrete than her own (2). For example, as a freshman on Yale's campus, Emma is rejected by an assigned mentor from the African American Center who, upon meeting her for the first time, says "'There must be some kind of mistake or something,'" because her features suggest that she is not black (22). At the same time, however, both Emma and the mentor, Karim, are taking an African American history course wherein they are reading a book written by her father's colleague, Lester Wright. Quite fittingly, one of the most provocative passages in Wright's text is an-almost direct quote from Bernie's musings about race. According to Bernie (through his amanuensis/plagiarist, Dr. Wright):

[T]here can be no life on the hyphen. The "mulatta" cannot be both black and white just as he cannot be neither black nor white. The terms are mutually exclusive and mutually imperative. In the hyphenated psyche, an internal choice must be made to privilege one of the two warring selves. Black-White. Pick one! Or this choice will be made hard and fast by the external world (p. 272). (22)

Although Emma's phenotypically-induced existence as a "question" prevents her from being able to make such a statement, she longs to show this passage to Karim as proof that, by extension, she too is African American, and has tried to choose a life beyond the ambiguity of the "hyphen"—even if her attempts have been to no avail. Indeed, after so many years of being mis-raced, her own sense of individuality has disappeared. In public, Emma tries unsuccessfully to identify herself by reciting the races of her parents; but, more important, she privately identifies herself through her brother.

Ironically, although Emma tries vainly to use Bernie as a means to authenticate herself, his actions unwittingly intensify her sense of self-fragmentation. On the surface, Emma's bond with Bernie appears life-saving, particularly since she has few other childhood companions, and both her father and mother are too preoccupied to realize how isolated she really is (while her father grapples with his own painful childhood memories, her mother is trying desperately to save a loveless marriage). Thus, in many ways, her close connection to Bernie seems beneficial; as the consistently-available family member, he is the one who provides her with human interaction and companionship. However, by recreating her origins in ways that disinherit her from their mother, Bernie creates a surrogate matrilineality with Emma that is so all-consuming that, in his absence, he leaves her without an identity because his has been the sole anchor for it all along.

In fact, in spite of his gender, Bernie is Emma's most influential othermother. In a move that is eerily reminiscent of Martine Caco's reinscription of Sophie's creation narrative in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Bernie reinscribes the narrative of Emma's origins that replaces himself as her maternal ancestor, and inscribes a fragmented identity for her that has both corporeal and psychological implications. As a child, Bernie proudly identifies Emma as an extension of himself, telling her that she exists because he was born too quickly, leaving parts of himself in his mother's womb. These parts, according to Bernie, later became Emma; in his words, she was born in order to "'finish [him] up'" (2).⁵⁶ In this way, Bernie creates a mythology that divests their mother of agency in the creation of her own children, and replaces himself as his sister's matrilineal ancestor. In

⁵⁶ I think that Bernie's mythmaking is fertile ground for discussion about the socialization of male and female children, and about the ways in which male children are trained early to subsume the identities of female partners, relatives, etc. beneath their own. Unfortunately, however, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Bernie's story, Lynn is a failure at motherhood: she can neither keep Bernie in her womb long enough to "finish" him, nor can she contribute anything to her daughter's composition. In short, Emma is created solely out of the refuse of her brother in a profoundly corporeal (albeit figuratively) reinscription which puts it squarely in the realm of matrilineal inscription. In fact, in this new narrative, Bernie forecloses on any possibility of Lynn Boudreaux's matrilineal inscription by revising the narrative of Emma's body that marks it as accidental, fragmented, and motherless.

In addition to a reinscribed corporeal reality, Bernie alters Emma's matrilineal heritage by using his mother's racial difference to challenge her maternal authority as well as her ability to understand her children's complex racial identities. Emma notes that, whenever her mother hears the teenaged Bernie talking "Black," and urges him to "talk like [him]self," Bernie replies in "Pure Professor Lester" fashion: "'Mother Lynn, I am nobody but myself. Do I make you uneasy? Let's examine your fear'" (1). In another instance, when his mother asks him why he is playing a cacophonous tune for Emma on his saxophone, he tells her it is because he and Emma are angry. "'About what?'" she asks (107). "'You wouldn't get it'" he replies (107). "'You have to look like us.... You have to look like Dad'" (107). In both cases, Bernie "others" his mother within her own family: first he accuses her of being afraid of his "blackness"; an accusation that sets her squarely in the same category as many other whites, from outright racists to pseudo-liberals (like their neighbors) who are only accepting of blacks who conform to their ideals of social decorum. In the second scene, he dismisses her by making it clear that, in spite of the fact that she is his mother, Lynn will never completely understand him because she is not black like their father. Unfortunately, because Bernie couches this

assertion in one that also highlights his and Emma's solidarity, Emma eagerly accepts it as simply the way things should be. Although she pities her mother, she also longs for the camaraderie that Bernie offers through this exchange. Recalling the saxophone incident, Emma says: "I felt bad for her. But that's how it was between Bernie and me. We were a club" (107). Thus, Emma's need to maintain a familial connection—which is, by this time, based on Bernie's (re)creation narrative—overrides her compassion.

In fact, Emma feels such a corporeal and ideological connection to Bernie that, when he begins to distance himself from the family as a teenager, she responds with both traumatic corporeal self-inscription as well as dangerous neuroses. Even before his death, Emma starts to lose her connection with Bernie who, as a teenager, finds companionship with Professor Wright, a man who Bernie looks up to because Wright possesses more stereotypically African American traits than Bernie's father. With his gold tooth, Afro, and Cadillac, Professor Wright provides the role model (dare we say "otherfather"?) Bernie does not have in Bernard II; Emma describes him as "younger" and "cooler" than her father (16). He introduces Bernie to the music of John Coltrane, and takes him to concerts, museums, and protest marches. Even Bernard II finally accuses him of trying to "teach [his] son how to be a black man" (17). Indeed, Wright serves as the same kind of exemplar for Bernie as Bernie has served for Emma in the past; he models a hyper-stereotypical blackness that Bernie mimics. Bernie, on the other hand, provides firsthand knowledge about multi-raciality that Wright uses to enhance his own work; Emma notes that Wright often came over simply to "pick Bernie's brain," and, sometimes, it seems as if Wright is not the mentor at all—that, somehow, things between he and Bernie are "the other way around" (17).

This symbiotic relationship, where part of each man's identity is sustained through his interaction with the other, mirrors the bond that Bernie once had with Emma, but is one that fulfills Bernie in ways that his relationship with his family cannot. For this reason, Bernie begins to isolate himself from everyone in the household, including his sister. But, because Bernie has usurped Emma's familial connections, he leaves her devoid of any sense of matrilineality, which intensifies Emma's loneliness and escalates her self-destructive behaviors. As a child, Emma begins to develop painful, widespread rashes that are impervious to treatment or dietary changes. And, on the day of the saxophone incident, Bernie learns the reason why her rashes are incurable: Emma has learned how to give them to herself, either by scratching a healthy patch of skin until it blisters, or by staring at herself in the mirror until her face breaks out in hives. Interestingly, although Emma insists that she does so for different reasons, her creation of the rash is arguably an attempt to regain Bernie's attention. According to Emma, she usually felt both abnormal and invisible, and the rash offered her a mix of notoriety and attention that often escaped her. According to Emma:

As a matter of fact, I grew to enjoy the attention the rash attracted. There was something magic in it. I normally felt invisible, but the rash made people stare. It lured my mother's attention away from Bernie, who outshone me at everything except for school. It won sympathy from my teachers. It dominated my biracial features, which my classmates found perplexing. Most important, when it was bad enough, the rash demanded my father's compassion. (102)

While Emma names a host of unrelated benefits of the rash, including its ability to "lure" her mother's attention away from Bernie, I would argue that the attention that Emma most fervently seeks is not his, but her mother's. At the time Emma's breakouts intensify, Bernie has developed a close relationship with Lester Wright, but he has also

taken up the saxophone, both of which lure his attention away from her. And, when Bernie and Lester Wright attend the Million Man March, and Bernie recounts the sense of solidarity he felt in the presence of so many other black men, Emma feels abandoned. She writes: “Bernie was my we. I didn’t like to hear him talk about other people like he belonged to them.... I didn’t know where that left me” (19). The language she employs here illustrates the extent to which Bernie has become a part of her sense of identity, a sentiment that she never expresses about her mother. In fact, it is during the incident with their mother in the attic that Bernie discovers that Emma can create the rash outbreaks on her own; but, when the mother appears only a few minutes later, Emma does not reach out for her mother’s attention, but instead allies herself with Bernie in an increasingly-rare opportunity to connect with him in a moment when she is corporeally altered. And Bernie, true to form, encourages her persistence at this form of self-mutilation through his silence. At the moment when he has the opportunity to turn his mother’s attention away from himself and onto her daughter, he balks, and instead of revealing Emma’s drastic attempts to be noticed, he instead closes his mother out of their circle of intimacy, making her interest in her children’s lives seem undesirable and ineffective.

Moreover, as Emma develops the power to mark herself with skin rashes, she also develops a habit of shoplifting, both of which Bernie is able to discover by seemingly-clairvoyant powers. In fact, Emma insists that he has developed a mind-reading intuition about her. On the day he discovers her in the attic, Bernie knows immediately what she is doing: ““You’re giving yourself the rash, aren’t you?”” he asks (106). And, on the night after returning from the Million Man March he suddenly turns to her, saying ““You gotta cut that shit out,”” referring to her new habit of shoplifting: ““You think I don’t know

what's going on?.... You better cut that five-finger shit out before you get caught. You're too smart for that mess. Harvard don't take folks with criminal records'" (19). Emma has begun shoplifting as a way to exploit her imagined invisibility. According to her, it is easy because "[n]obody could see me" (19). And, up to this point, Emma assumes that she has been careful about her new vice, stealing only items that are small enough to put in a jewelry box she keeps hidden under her bed (19). Bernie, however, somehow knows about it, though it is unclear whether he has found concrete evidence that led him to his own conclusions, or if he really simply read the secrets on her face. But, whatever the case may be, Emma's insistence about his intuitions, both the shoplifting and her rashes (which he also seems to guess by simply catching Emma staring into a mirror) illustrate the degree to which she misses her former intimate connection with him. Additionally, her need to bequeath him the same intuitive powers that a mother might have for her child speaks to her need to reconnect with him as her surrogate maternal figure. More important, this is also the first example of Emma's practice of mythmaking; a technique that she first learns from Bernie's creation narrative, but then applies to Bernie himself when he starts to distance himself from her, and finally employs to imagine the lives of several othermothers in his absence.

III. Othermothers and Mythmaking

When Bernie starts to distance himself from his family; Emma feels so completely alone that she tries to replace him with othermothers who she hopes will show her how to deal with racial difference, loneliness, and (when Bernie dies) with her grief. Influenced by Bernie's past insistence that a white person could never "understand" a

nonwhite one, Emma typically seeks othermothers in only nonwhites, like Lester Wright's Ethiopian wife, Meteke; the novelist Bessie Head; and, ironically, her father. Emma mistakenly assumes that each of these individuals' non-whiteness will somehow serve as an intra-racial exemplar that is unavailable from her mother. However, in spite of their similarities to her—particularly because all three are also racially different from the people around them—the loneliness and isolation that each person experiences because of their differences (Bessie because of her racial ambiguity in her native South Africa; Meteke because of her abrupt transplantation from Ethiopia to the U.S.; and Bernard II because of lingering memories of his own past traumas) renders each of them incapable of offering her a viable example of someone who is able to function within his/her society in both public and private spheres. Moreover, because Emma has little to no physical contact with any of them, she is never able to interact with them in meaningful ways. In fact, Emma must invent the details of each person's narrative in a kind of tragic self-defeating cycle: because she does not interact with any of the othermothers, she cannot receive any new knowledge about nonwhite subjectivity. Subsequently, she cannot imagine happier outcomes for any of the individuals, but can only reproduce her own story in them; thus she creates narrative palimpsests wherein loneliness and isolation are the repeated outcomes, which in turn make her hopeless of any happier alternatives.

Perhaps the most tragic "othermother" that Emma desperately clings to in her brother's absence is her father; ironically because she has already been conditioned to do so by her experience with Bernie. Not only does Bernie's inter-gender maternal surrogacy set a precedent for Emma's looking to Bernard II—a male—for the kind of nurturing typically given by a maternal figure, but in the process of Bernie's

mythmaking, he actually places both himself and Emma in a matrilineal legacy that has been bequeathed to them *by* their father. Unfortunately, however, Bernard's painful past prevents him from performing any kind of parenting of his children, maternal or paternal. And, even worse, he tries so desperately to protect Bernie and Emma from his past that his own silence perpetrates a specific kind of traumatic inscription on them.

According to Nancy Chodorow, author of *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), as gender-biased as it may be, the mother is often the expected physical caretaker of her children, even in two-parent households (7). She is often the parent with whom children of both sexes share the deepest "interpersonal, affected relationships" (7). In *The Professor's Daughter*, Emma rejects this kind of relationship with her mother, but she desperately seeks it with her distant father, and longs to be physically nurtured by him in a way that her mother tries to do, but to no avail. Emma's fondest memories of Bernard II are the two instances she can remember him touching her: the night when he puts rolls of wrapping paper on her arms to stop her from scratching her rash in her sleep, and the day he tells her about eating dirt from his father's grave. In both instances, when Bernard touches his daughter, she is mesmerized. Emma says that, on the night he brings her the wrapping paper: "I experienced two simultaneous but contradictory sensations. The first is that my father had made me a present of my own body, the other was that he was forcing me not to open it" (104). Even though she is in extreme pain, Emma is so excited over the fact that Bernard has made her heretofore strange and unwanted body "a gift"; one that she doesn't scratch herself all night.

In another instance, during her college years, Emma develops a strange rash that covers only one half of her face. When her father picks her up from the train station, he recognizes it as the result of touching graveyard dust; the same thing happened to him after visiting his father's grave. Just before she exits the car, Bernard—without looking at her—briefly places his hand on Emma's head, and she writes: "It rested there for a full eight seconds, during which I felt my heartbeat roaring in my ears" (126). In each scene, Emma is happy because her father touches her in a way that a mother might caress a child (and in a way that her mother touches her all the time), and she is able to feel an intimate connection to him that is otherwise nonexistent. Additionally, this touching is also indicative of Emma's dire need for the interpersonal maternal interaction that she lacks. As such, each event takes on an exaggerated significance. On the night her father gives her the rolls of wrapping paper, it is only because her mother has complained so much about his inattention to the children that he feels compelled to do something about it. Nevertheless, Emma feels that it is a momentous occasion—that her father is so invested in her well-being that he has wrapped up her body like a fragile and precious thing. In the instance of her facial rash, Bernard's touch lasts for mere seconds, but it literally alters Emma's corporeality by momentarily changing her heart rate. In both instances, she is so desperate for some kind of corporeal interaction—*inscription*—that she invests her father's touches with non-existent significance.

In spite of these fleeting moments of tenderness, however, Bernard's story is (like Meteke's and Bessie Head's) one that Emma must construct from the bits of information she has gathered over the years because her father refuses to talk about his painful past. In fact, several of the details are ones that Emma has collected from Bernie, who has also

never been told the story, but claims he “remembers” it because he is the reincarnation of Bernard I (26). As such, Emma’s interpersonal interaction with her father is mediated by Bernie, an individual who has already inscribed a painful corporeal narrative for her. In one scene, shortly after Bernard II has abandoned the family, Emma and Bernie lie in the grass overlooking the golf course on their father’s campus, and Bernie tells Emma:

‘I got put here to finish something. They got Bernard Number One before he could do it. Bernard Number Two has failed in every respect to get it ‘cause he’s blind. I’m Number Three. Number One came back in me. In us.... You think it’s a coincidence we chose to descend through the same womb into the world? I wasn’t finished yet when I came. I came too fast and left some of me behind. That was you. So you came afterwards to finish me. I’m the he of you and you’re the she of me. Understand?’ (16)

Although they are now teenagers, Bernie repeats the creation story he told to Emma as child; a story in which he reinscribes Emma’s matrilineal genealogy, positing himself as her maternal ancestor. However, here, he goes one step further, and links his own matrilineal ancestry, not to his mother, but to his father and paternal grandfather. Again, Lynn Boudreaux’s womb is relegated to a mere incubator; but more important, by reinscribing his and Emma’s matrilineal heritage, Bernie actually resituates them in a history of matrilineal traumatic inscription that is passed to them by their *father*. In this way, both Bernie and Bernard become Emma’s othermothers, but they pass on to her an inscriptive trauma that cannot be counteracted by her biological mother because she has been stripped of any inscriptive power in the exchange.

Indeed, even though Bernard is male, the personal trauma that he passes on to his two children is described in Tretheweyan terms: as a matrilineally inscribed mark that is made in his mother’s womb and is sustained by his positionality as an African American. Bernard II is born to a woman who has lost her sanity, and he spends most of his adult

life feeling like a stranger in a strange land; particularly because he is a black man who has excelled in academia, but is still subjected to the same kinds of racism that less successful black men experience. Not only is Bernard racially profiled by a police officer while rushing his wife to the hospital in the middle of the night after she has gone into labor (198), but even in the college town where he now lives, waiters at local restaurants ask to see proof of his ability to pay for a meal before they are willing to serve him (87). As a result, Bernard often feels like an intruder in his own life. On his walks home from work, he flinches at the sounds of passing cars, and is in constant fear that, once he arrives, he will find that his home is “in the sudden possession of another man,” and that his wife and children won’t recognize him (181).

Most of Bernard’s pain and fears, however, stem from the fact that he was born into tragedy. His father, Bernard Sr., was lynched in their native Mississippi, while his mother, Sarah, who is pregnant with him at the time, goes insane with grief. While she is chopping down the tree from which her husband was hanged, her water breaks early, and she gives birth to Bernard II, whose club foot is, according to Bernard II’s prenatal memory (a memory that is imaginatively constructed by Emma), created in his mother’s womb at the moment she destroys the tree (219). Indeed, Bernard’s mother—like the mother in *Native Guard*—passes on her trauma to the child in her womb; and, even though he tries desperately to keep that transmission of knowledge from his children, he passes it on anyway through a trauma of silence. In an attempt to erase the pain of his past, Bernard never discloses the facts of his life to his family, so his children are in constant search of somehow connecting to him as well as to the first Bernard Boudreaux—so much so that Bernie once tries to use the walkie-talkies his Aunt Patty

gives him as a present to contact his grandfather from beyond the grave. Though he is unsuccessful, Bernie ultimately reconstructs the details of Bernard Sr.'s death through what can only be called an imagined memory; and his burning at the subway station is the final piece of the puzzle: Bernie learns the complete story of his grandfather's being burned alive by experiencing it firsthand in a moment of violent corporeal and temporal mirroring that reenacts his grandfather's lynching. Not only is Bernie's skin permanently burned by his electrocution, but doctors ultimately have to amputate several limbs, including his penis (23). This was a typical act committed during lynchings; not only were black men castrated, but body parts were often removed as souvenirs.⁵⁷

And, in addition to the actual incident, Bernie also has comatose dreams in which he is Bernard Sr. on the night of his death. He watches the "twisted shapes of spitting faces flickering through fire" as he sprouts "wings of roped gasoline" on the baseball diamond on which his grandfather is killed (29). Finally, Bernie knows completely the story of his origins, and the loss that Emma feels as a result of her brother's death mirrors her father's sense of loss as an orphaned child. Her grief serves as a traumatically-inscriptive moment all its own, in which trauma is passed from Emma's replaced matrilineal ancestor to her. Ironically, the torture both of his children experience is the very thing from which Bernard II wanted to protect them. But, in spite of all his silences, Bernard, like his own mother, ultimately passes on to both of them through a inter-gendered moment of matrilineality the one thing he hoped they would never have to experience: his own pain.

⁵⁷ For more information on lynching, see Ralph Ginzburg's *100 Years of Lynchings* (1962, Baltimore: Black Classic P, 1988), which is a compilation of newspaper articles and other primary sources on lynching in the United States.

In addition to his emotional distance, the dichotomous relationship between Bernard and his wife is also traumatic for his children because it justifies their disavowal of her. During the Boudreaux family's cross-country move from Oakland to Princeton when Emma is six, they stop to sightsee in several places, including Salt Lake City, where Bernie steals a bag of peanuts to share with his sister. When the older Bernard discovers the theft, he slaps Bernie and insists that he return the peanuts, even though they are already half-eaten. Lynn chimes in that her son should give them back anyway because stealing is wrong. Bernard, however, thinks different: “*NO. The reason you don't steal is because that is exactly what they expect you to do*” (4, author's emphasis). In this exchange, Bernard's correction of his wife's lesson is similar to Bernie's assertion of the rest of the family's racial difference from her. In both cases, the racial lines are drawn with the mother outside them, and both men make it clear that her lack of understanding makes any knowledge she could hope to impart to her children inadequate.

By distancing himself from his family, and failing to create any kind of parental solidarity with his wife, Bernard actually sets the stage for more traumas in the lives of his children. Like him, they experience a (figurative) dual orphanage: they feel alienated from him because of his distance, and alienated from their mother because of their disbelief in her agency as a parent. This is particularly true for Emma, whose male *and* female othermothers are no better off than she. Because she has no familial foundation upon which to build a concrete sense of self, her identity become enmeshed in Bernie's; and when he gradually distances himself from her and later dies, she experiences more than the loss of a sibling and a surrogate parent; she suffers what feels to her like a physical part of herself. In a letter written to Bernie, Emma says: “Imagine a one-legged

man with no crutch. That's how I am with you gone. Not like the man, like the missing leg. You made me symmetrical" (123). Like Bernie's revised creation narrative, and like the visceral memories of her father's history, Emma's loss is expressed in the language of corporeality, which illustrates how greatly her sense of wholeness has been influenced by Bernie's (and by extension, Bernard's) traumatic inscription. By re-identifying Emma as created by him, Bernie is the only means through which she sees herself as a whole person; but now, without him, she can no longer keep that self together. And, while Bernie identifies their father as their matrilineal ancestor, Bernard's emotional distance from Emma constitutes yet another disconnection from something—*someone*—she longs to be connected with.

In the figures of Meteke and Bessie Head, however, Emma finds, for the first time, intra-gender role models. However, like her father, their lives are anything but ideal. Meteke, who is hysterically lonely after her marriage to Professor Wright, can only find companionship in the deer that wreak havoc on their neighborhood, rummaging through trash cans and destroying suburban property. When the town decides to pay for professional hunters to thin out the herd, she almost loses that companionship, and must resort to murdering one of the hunters (via telekinesis) in order to save the deer population. This feat, however, does nothing to change her relationship with her husband, who continues to see her as little more than a beautiful import from her native continent. When Meteke returns from her confrontation with the hunters in the woods, and Lester lifts her up to carry her to bed, he fails to notice "the twigs in her hair and the dirt under her fingernails" that are testament to her recent experience and her power (92). And, even though the threat to the deer is gone, life in suburbia continues as it always has. As Emma

writes: “Christmas will come and go. There will be more presents than anybody needs. These presents will go unused” (92). In short, Meteke will continue to live among the excess she despises. Nothing about her life has changed.

On the other side of the world, young Bessie Head is a similar outcast. Like Emma, she is born to a white mother, but spends the first few years of her life bouncing from home to home until she lands in the shantytown alehouse/bordello of a Xhosa woman named Sunshine, who cares for the foundling like her own child until she is arrested for having a relationship with a married white man. Bessie is removed to an orphanage/mission school where she is treated harshly, and begins to hate herself for being nonwhite; despising her hair, eyes, and lips because, in the eyes of others, they are “ugly, homeless, strange” (177).

In both cases, the women are disappointed in their most intimate relationships; Bessie is first rejected by her mother, then later by a family who discovers she is black, and is finally forcefully separated from the one person who accepts her. Meteke, on the other hand, is little more than an African artifact to her husband, something she does not realize until she has already become his wife. But what is most important in each case is that it is Emma who serves as the interlocutor of their narratives even though she has had little contact with either woman. Although Meteke is the wife of Professor Wright, Emma never speaks to her in the novel; she seems to construct the details of her story out of thin air—even the local newspaper refutes her. Before launching into Meteke’s tale, Emma notes that:

The Princeton Packet attributed the cessation [of the deer hunt] to a driveling of funds. That was a lie. Maybe the taxes would have been better spent on road repair, as they argued in the paper, but that wasn’t the actual

reason the hunt was stopped. This is the *true* account of the events leading up to that night. (70, my emphasis)

Here, Emma introduces a counter narrative and refutes it, but the nature of the source, the local newspaper, offers an authenticity that Emma's story lacks. Like her description of Bernie's mindreading powers (as well as her own ability to create skin rashes), Meteke's power to murder hunters by simply staring at them is implausible, while the tax dollar crisis, on the other hand, is not. Furthermore, her emphatic insistence of the "truth" of the following narrative makes it immediately dubious; it is a claim that is identical to that of the high school history teacher in Trethewey's poem "Southern History," who uses the movie *Gone With the Wind* as a "*true account of how things were back then*" (11).

With Bessie Head, Emma's tactics are slightly different; nevertheless, they destabilize the story in much the same way. The chapter devoted to Head is prefaced with a note that states that the following is a "*story based on the early life*" of the author (167). And that story, quite fittingly, is an assignment for a course on postcolonial African novels—an assignment that she admits is not what the instructor asked for (167). In the middle of the narrative, Emma pauses, saying: "Professor Kagunda, are you reading this? I suspect you've stopped reading by now. I tried to do the assignment, but I couldn't. My brother dies eight days ago" (173).

Thus, the depictions of both women are flawed by Emma's physical and temporal distance from them; and, because of this, the women's stories are merely variations on *her* story. In fact, Emma's fascination with Meteke stems from the fact that she sensed in the woman "a profound sadness" that she feels she understands (69). And, in the case of Bessie Head, the narrative begins with a quote by Frantz Fanon, which reads "When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the

world is to begin with the fact of *belonging* to or *not belonging* to a given race, a given species” (qtd. in 167, my emphasis). Powerful as it is, the quote echoes Emma’s already-articulated feelings of placelessness. In each case, the narratives are circumscribed by her worldview, which is itself contaminated by a sense of “not belonging.” Thus, their examples unavoidably confirm her misguided belief that, like them, she is destined to be completely alone in the world, unnoticed and misunderstood by everyone, especially her own mother.

IV. Sins of the Daughter

Before embarking on a discussion of the relationship between Emma and her mother Lynn, it is important to understand that, for all her revolutionary potential, Lynn Boudreaux is not a perfect version of a white mother; she is as flawed as all the other characters in the text. While we can only know as much about her as Emma is willing to convey, we do know that she has not been a model parent—at least not to Emma. During her earliest years, Emma notes that her mother was preoccupied with Bernie and his learning disabilities, as well as with her husband and their failing marriage. Another of Lynn’s shortcomings is her disillusionment with black men, which prompts her to tell Emma not to marry one, because ““they’re too complex”” (113). And yet, although this is a dangerous generalization about black men, it is her desire to protect and prepare her daughter for life as a woman of color that drives Lynn to make this statement—the selfsame desire that the black mothers had for the daughters who were surveyed by Dodson, Joseph, and Lewis in the 1970s and ‘80s (a study mentioned in Chapter 1). Thus, as misguided as she may be, Lynn is still a caring mother; furthermore, the fact that Lynn

is not perfect adds depth and texture to her character. Like Grandmé Ifé in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Lynn is a woman who is learning how to be a better mother *in medias res*, and even she recognizes this later in the text as she tries to connect with a college-aged Emma through conversations about sex and self-created happiness. This admixture of traits, I would argue, makes Raboteau's depiction of a white mother all the more powerful and subversive. Lynn is not the ambivalent victim of black men like Frado's mother Mag Smith, nor is she venomous and condescending like Margaret's mother in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Instead, she is a complicated, compassionate woman who is, in spite of her faults, a revision of her literary foremothers.

Like her mother, Emma is somewhat different from her literary predecessors; particularly because her non-orphan status is a variation on the typical tragic mulatta figure. But in spite of the presence of her mother, like many of the daughters discussed in earlier chapters, Emma enters adulthood purposely trying to define herself against Lynn and her example; an attempt that begins early, but is exacerbated by Bernie's death and the beginning of Emma's first sexual relationship. At sixteen, Emma is referred to a gynecologist because she has not yet started her period. When the doctor recommends daily milkshakes and birth control pills to speed up the onset of puberty, Emma refuses, remarking, "I didn't believe in mind or hormone control. My mother had started on Prozac after my dad left us that year for one of his graduate students. I thought it was an act of weakness and I did not want to be like her" (222). In college, Emma is equally disdainful of her mother, and describes her in a tone that illustrates how her mother has become, for lack of a better term, whiter, and more estranged from Emma than she was during her youth. According to Emma, Lynn has no life after her father leaves: she works

at the public library and sings “atonally in the atonal [read white] choir at St. Paul’s Church” (224). Lynn also lives in a home that has been depleted of its color and culture. Although she gets to keep the family house, her husband has “taken all the things that had made it interesting, the Jacob Lawrence prints and the kente cloth wall hangings and the African masks and the stone fertility statue that used to sit roundly by the fireplace” (224). In short, all the things that had visibly made her home an African American one are gone. The absence of Emma’s father and his artifacts completely shuts Lynn out of the world of nonwhites, a world that includes her daughter, Emma, who is harshly critical of what has taken the place of her father and brother in Lynn’s life: “the Catholic Church, the book club [of white suburban mothers], her therapist, Prozac, the memory of Bernie and this new fixation on [the book club’s chairwoman] Deb Levine” (224). Emma finds her mother’s now-whitewashed suburban existence “pathetic”; much different from Emma’s own life with her lover, an East Indian graduate student named Poresh. With Poresh, Emma attends art exhibits and winetasting events, eats exotic foods in order to expand her palette, and “trie[s] new things such as anal sex and Camembert” (230). To her, such were the marks of a truly multicultural experience—one that does not include her mother.

But, just as it was with her brother Bernie, Emma makes the mistake of defining herself through Poresh, a definition that is equally detrimental to her relationship with Lynn because she begins to look at her through Poresh’s critical eyes. In fact, Emma is afraid to introduce them because she fears that “he’d be disappointed by her intellect in the same way he was disappointed by my friends” (231). In fact, during this time, Poresh takes a quasi-parenting role in her life, and he is all too willing to make her into the

“beautiful woman” he feels she “could be”; first by taking her virginity, and then by exposing her to “culture,” all the while chastising her whenever possible (231). When he escorts her to her father’s wedding, Poresh constantly reprimands Emma for slouching and sulking; and even when he breaks off the relationship by telling her that he has agreed to an arranged marriage to a girl from his native Bombay, he admonishes her for crying, saying: “You’re making a scene.... Calm down and show some dignity” (236). Of course, this is impossible, since, once again, Emma has lost another person with whom she feels most connected. And, even in the midst of her crumbling life, she refuses to turn to her mother, or to even do anything that may resemble her. After the breakup with Poresh, which was followed by a week of incapacitating nausea and diarrhea, Emma’s roommate finally takes her to the student infirmary, where a doctor tries to prescribe Emma Xanax to help her cope with her anxiety. “I don’t believe in it” says Emma; “My mom’s on antidepressants. It seems wrong to me” (237). Though she finally agrees to take them until the end of the semester, she discontinues them immediately after, and retreats into herself, spending the summer self-medicating with alcohol and sleeping in her brother’s room, still surrounded by his old things. Ironically, just as Poresh once claimed, Emma is now truly suspended between childhood and adulthood; her latest heartbreak has brought her new grief, but it has also pushed her back into grieving Bernie’s loss.

Lynn, on the other hand, is beginning to reassemble her life, and is also striving to be a better mother to Emma, even though the younger woman rejects both her advice and her example. On the heels of a conversation about mothers and daughters in her book club group, Lynn tells Emma that she wants her to be happy, and to enjoy her sexual

relationships with men, which is something Lynn herself never really learned to do. According to Lynn, Emma should learn to masturbate in order to discover how best to pleasure herself before having intercourse. Emma is furious. “My sex life is none of your business” she tells her (228). “You can’t keep defining yourself as just being somebody’s mother or somebody’s ex-wife” (228-9). Although her need for privacy is understandable, Emma’s rejection of her mother’s advice proves to be unwise because, later, when she does have intercourse for the first time, it is extremely painful; so much so that she disengages herself from the act, imagining that she is a spider on the wall watching everything unfold from above (231). Ironically, Emma’s first sexual experience is yet another exercise in reflexive-disembodiment. While Lynn offers the kind of knowledge that would have allowed her some sense of autonomy, Emma refuses on the grounds that her mother is trying to control her, but the end result is that she loses an opportunity to define herself in a way that is separate from others’ estimations and expectations of her.

In addition to offering advice, Lynn is also learning to honor Bernie’s memory in ways that are much healthier than her daughter’s. While Emma refuses to let go of his material belongings, throwing fits whenever her mother suggests that they donate some of his items to Goodwill, Lynn chooses to honor his memory in other ways; namely by taking aviation lessons, which is similar to Bernie’s childhood dream of learning to fly like Superman. While Emma cloisters herself in his room, Lynn celebrates her son’s memory with freedom and movement. And, by the time her daughter discovers this, the two women seem to have switched roles: Lynn is no longer the pathetic, childlike automaton dependent on anti-depressants to stay sane. In fact, Emma is the most pitiful

sight, while her mother has gained new strength. During the summer after her freshman year, Emma breaks her wrist in a drunken stupor, and then becomes dependent on painkillers, but runs out of them one day while her mother is away. By the time Lynn returns home, Emma is writhing on the floor in pain, having been unable to contact her father or numb her pain with alcohol, which is no longer in the house. ““Where *the hell* were you all day?”” she asks (241, author’s emphasis). ““Aviation school,”” replies Lynn before calmly squaring her shoulders and leaving the house again to refill Emma’s prescription (241). In this scene, Emma is the one who is drug-dependent and incapable of controlling her emotions, while Lynn remains composed, even in the midst of her daughter’s tantrum. Years before, Emma’s hysterics might have brought Lynn to tears, or, as she did during the scene in the attic, she might have simply hurried away, visibly hurt but unable to respond. However, in this scene, it is she who takes control of the situation, and does not coddle Emma, but goes in search of what her daughter needs.

In a later scene, Lynn also takes back her maternal agency when Emma laughs at the news of her best friend Deb Levine’s suicide. Only a few days after learning that her husband is leaving her, Deb hangs herself, and when Lynn hears the news, she is in shock with grief. Emma, however, is not: ““I guess that just goes to prove she wasn’t so tough after all”” she smirks (242). Immediately, Lynn strikes her, yelling: ““*You selfish little brat*. You think the world revolves around you? Wake up, because it doesn’t. Show some sensitivity. Show some goddamned respect. *She was my friend*”” (242, author’s emphasis). Albeit a somewhat violent exchange, Lynn overturns the myth that she has nothing to teach Emma, who has, for the past month, been behaving as if nothing in

Lynn's life should be more important than she—in spite of the fact that Emma is continually cruel and disrespectful to her.

Actually, Lynn's slapping Emma is a pivotal moment in the text for many reasons. In a twist of irony, it is a reenactment of a parenting scene from years before, when her husband Bernard once slapped Bernie in Salt Lake City for stealing a bag of peanuts. Finally, Lynn regains some agency in Emma's eyes by mimicking her husband, who Emma and Bernie always identified as the most legitimate parent. By striking Emma, she assumes the role that Bernard, Bernie, and Emma have all tried to deny her for years and demands her daughter's respect and obedience. Her lesson, however, is unlike Bernard's; it is not solely based on the need for her daughter to appear a certain way in public, or to confound stereotypes about African Americans. It is about showing dignity and respect for the dead, and about being compassionate toward *her mother's* feelings—something that the rest of the family has never done. After Lynn storms off the porch, Emma has a change of heart about her. Sitting alone, she muses: "I should have told her she was worth ten Deb Levines, for the simple act of enduring. I should have asked her how she did it. I should have put my head in her lap and *grieved*" (243, my emphasis). After the confrontation, when Lynn reclaims—or perhaps claims for the first time—her place as Emma's parent in an act of momentary corporeal trauma, Emma finally receives the one thing she has been simultaneously avoiding with her mother, and seeking everywhere else: corporeal interaction with a maternal figure. And, in spite of the fact that it is a somewhat violent exchange, its effectiveness reverberates in the new way Emma perceives Lynn; she finally begins to see her as an exemplar: someone she can look up to, and someone whose example she can follow.

Two days later, at Deb Levine's funeral, Lynn's transformation becomes complete right before Emma's eyes when Emma, who has finally found a place to grieve openly and is crying hysterically, turns to check on her mother, believing that Lynn, who must suffer the funeral as well as the sight of Bernard and his new wife in attendance, must be in a worse state than she. However, much to Emma's surprise, her mother is quiet and composed. According to Emma:

I looked at her and was awestruck. She had transformed. I cannot describe the sudden beatitude of her face and I won't even try except to say that it was exposed, the way an icon's face is.... I looked for a trace of my own face in her profile. Slowly, she turned her head to mine and I saw myself for what I truly was, reflected in her eyes—tiny, and insignificant, and loved. (246)

In the exact moment when Emma realizes her own vulnerability, and her own place in the world as a lone human being (and not as a part of someone else's identity), she also realizes that her mother is everything she once thought she was not: strong, beautiful, and someone who truly loves her. While Emma has just learned how to grieve, her mother has been, in her words, "learning to fly" (246).

During this poignant scene of knowledge transmission, Emma learns several things. Not only is she "loved," but she is also only a small part of the world in which she feels she is forever upon display, always in the center of people's most problematic assumptions and beliefs about race. One of the most important lessons Lynn offers her daughter is that she is but one member of a larger system of "mixed race" beings, and that her skin, which she has obsessed over to the point of self-mutilation, is but one part of the whole—both of herself as well as of the multiracial world in which she lives. As Emma looks around the funeral, she sees various permutations of herself: the Hispanic toddler who has been adopted by the Levine family; the non-Jewish girlfriend of Simon Levine,

who will soon become the member of a family in which she may also feel like an outsider, and whose child may be treated as such; and perhaps even Simon himself, whose physical transformation has placed him in a body that is at once healed from its scoliosis and other childhood ailments, but which also makes him look markedly different from his parents, and (at least according to the woman sitting next to Emma) phenotypically non-Jewish. Each of these individuals faces a challenge of difference, and at the moment when Emma's and her mother's eyes meet, she immediately understands that her own difference is but one of many.

And, in addition to knowledge transmission, this is also a moment of profound recognition. As Emma looks at the face of her mother, she finally comes to understand that the older woman has something to teach her about dignity and endurance. Emma's uncontrollable sobbing at the funeral happens because, up to this point, she has not allowed herself to grieve for her brother. Her mother, on the other hand, has grieved, and is now at peace with her life as well as with the many losses she has endured over the years, including the disintegration of her marriage. In this moment, Emma finally recognizes what she has missed: the opportunity of matrilineal inscription, of allowing her mother to influence her life. Since the days of childhood, Emma has tried to be everything her mother was not, and even her self-inflicted rashes were a futile attempt to obliterate her mother's biological mark from her skin, since the rashes "dominated [her] biracial features, which [her] classmates found perplexing" (102). But at the funeral, not only does Emma acknowledge her admiration of her mother, but she also finally acknowledges Lynn's maternity by looking for some "trace" of her own features, some shared physical resemblance in her mother's face. This gesture is symbolic of Emma's

climactic recognition that, at some point, she needed her mother's inscriptive influence, but rejected it, and the gesture has hurt no one but herself.

V. Recreating Coalitions: Lessons to Learn

While the funeral scene in *The Professor's Daughter* is a transformative moment for Emma in particular, it also has much larger implications for black-white female relationships in black women's literature. From the days of the genre's proto-textual slave narrative, black women's writing has featured contentious relationships between black and white women; and while it was an early technique of self-fashioning for black women writers, it cast a pall over the genre that persists to this day. As Minrose Gwin points out, female slaves were, by virtue of enslavement, unable to live up to the "Victorian ideal of chastity" that was expected of, and in turn protected and promoted by white women (42). Female slaves, however, were often sexually exploited by the husbands and loved ones of these same women, who then took their feelings of betrayal out on the victims by blaming them for encouraging sexual relationships that were, for all intents and purposes, out of either woman's control. For this reason, when some slave women got opportunities to "remak[e] their own lives in language," their narratives exerted upon the characterizations of their white mistresses the same control the white mistresses had once exerted over them (40). Unfortunately, however, that textual freedom was often achieved at the expense of representations of black-white female bonds. To be sure, real-life slave-mistress interactions were complicated;⁵⁸ however, as a part of the

⁵⁸ For more information about the domestic relationships between white women and black women both during and after slavery, see Thavolia Glymph's *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008).

necessary cultural work of explaining how and why they could not live by the Cult of True Womanhood, slave women writers often pitted their virtues of Christian kindness and forgiveness against the jealousy and violence of demonized mistresses.

As such, these narrators set a precedent for depictions of white womanhood that locked white female characters into stereotypical roles in black women's literature. Indeed, if they are present at all, such characters are far more likely to resemble Big Missy in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966); Sarah Marie Holley in Alice Walker's "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff" (1973); or Margaret's mother in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, instead of Miss Rufel in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986) or Amy Denver in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). However, in *The Professor's Daughter*, at the moment during the funeral when Emma realizes that she is "loved," Raboteau not only transforms the image of the tragic mulatta, but she also recasts the white woman—the white *mother*—as a compassionate, loving entity for her black female child, thus creating both a matro-filial bond and a moment of trans-racial female solidarity between mother and daughter that Emma finally begins to understand. And, by depicting a white mother as such, and by illustrating a black daughter's realization of her white mother's loving nature, Raboteau makes a subtle call for black women writers to reassess typical characterizations of white women, and to perhaps reimagine them, not as enemies, but as fellow members of a larger female coalition.

In fact, analyzing the text of *The Professor's Daughter* performs the cultural work of opening up possibilities for further critical conversations about representations of white women in black women's literature, but one of the ways in which it achieves this is by interrogating the genre's representations of white mothers and their interactions with

black children. Like depictions of black-white female solidarity, I would argue that the image of the white mother is one of the casualties of self-representation whose demise lies in the pages of the female slave narrative. As P. Gabrielle Foreman points out, slave mothers were often perceived as indifferent to their bonds with their children, and many narrators had to work against that assumption in the construction of their own lives on the written page (*Sentiments* 58). On the other hand, it was not a stretch to depict mistresses who were cruel to both the mother-narrators and their offspring. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs tells the story of one girl who dies while giving birth to one of her master's children. But, even as she draws her last breaths, her angry mistress stands close by, mocking both the dying girl and her attending mother until the end. When the girl's mother announces that the baby has also died, and that she hopes the daughter will soon reunite with her child in heaven, the mistress scoffs:

“Heaven!...There is no such place for the like of her and her bastard” (11). Even though the mistress's anger seems justified (since it is revealed that her husband is the father of the dead baby), her placement side-by-side with the grieving slave mother paints a portrait that is anything but forgiving. In narrating the last moments of the dying girl's life, Jacobs writes:

Her sufferings, afterwards, became so intense, that her mistress felt unable to stay; but when she left the room, the scornful smile was still on her lips. Seven children called her mother. The poor black woman had but the one child, whose eyes she saw closing in death, while she thanked God for taking her away from the greater bitterness of life. (11-12)

Here, the mistress actually scorns two generations of children in a scene narrated in Jacobs' typically sentimental style. Even more provocative, however, is the fact that Jacobs moves beyond descriptions of mere jealousy between a sexually-exploited slave

girl and her spiteful mistress, but pauses to make comparisons about black and white maternity in a *coup de grace* that divests the white woman of any possibilities of garnering sympathy from her audience. In her rage, the mistress curses a grieving mother, her dying daughter, and a dead baby with a smile, then returns to the bounty of her full house while the slave mother is left to bury both her daughter and grandchild—her only offspring.

Even in more recent texts, white female characters act as antithetical othermothers to their black counterparts, particularly in the context of identity formation. In fact, one example appears in an earlier chapter of this dissertation, in the figure of Margaret's mother in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Although I have argued that the scene between her and Selina is a moment that precipitates Selina's recognition of herself as a part of a larger black female collective, that recognition, like most of Selina's identity-formative experiences, is achieved *in spite of* the white mother's maternal gaze. As mentioned earlier, if it is true that, as Spillers contends, a child's humanity is "mirrored initially in the eyes of its mother, or the maternal function," and that "the social subject grasps the whole dynamic of resemblance and kinship by way of the same source" (220), then Margaret's mother's "gaze" literally works to dehumanize Selina. As soon as Selina enters the room, she notes the woman's "lackluster blue eyes" which were "almost colorless," and yet, "fretful" and "disturbed" (285). Initially, Selina does not notice this, but later, after the woman's inquisitions about her origins, and a spouting of all the typically-condescending praises of black people's "natural talent for dancing and music," and of West Indians' honesty and excellent (manual labor-based) work ethic, Selina realizes the danger she has walked into. According to the narrator:

[W]hen she looked up and saw her *reflection* in those pale eyes, she knew that the woman saw one thing above all else. Those eyes were a well-lighted mirror in which, for the first time, Selina truly saw—with a sharp and shattering clarity—the full meaning of her black skin.... In that instant of death, false and fleeting though it was, she was beyond hurt. And then, as swiftly, terror flared behind *her eyes*, terror that somehow, in some way, this woman, the frightened girl at the door, those others dancing down the hall, even Rachel, all, everywhere, sought to *rob her of her substance and her self*. (289, my emphasis)

Here, the woman and her eyes perform the exact opposite function of Selina's black mother and othermothers, from whom she inherits a rich, multinational identity. Momentarily, the woman's gaze actually "kills" her; the girl sees herself reduced to a color—a dark and ugly thing. Fortunately, however, when Selina realizes this, she leaves, and is able to save herself; both within that instant, as well as in her later dreams, in which the white mother morphs into a pursuing monster who possesses the same deceptively-passive eyes, which are, in this case, "as innocent as a child's" (298)

In *The Professor's Daughter*, however, Lynn's maternal gaze is a complex interrogation of the white maternal function as represented in texts like *Brown Girl*. Although the adjectives "tiny, and insignificant" may seem troubling (even if they refer to the unimportance of Emma's racial indeterminacy, and to the fact that it does not—or should not—matter if her race is not explicitly apparent on her skin), it is important to remember that, in the end, Emma sees herself as "loved." Furthermore, the details of the experience are subject to Emma's own mediation through the filial gaze—one that is nascent, and still evolving within that moment. In fact, it is not until the funeral scene that Emma "sees" herself "reflected" in her mother's eyes for the first time, and even *begins* to desire the "resemblance and kinship" that Spillers attributes to the maternal gaze. Additionally, the fact that Emma is "loved" is still a far cry from the hateful white

mothers of bygone texts. Thus, in the end, Emily Raboteau depicts a complicated but nevertheless regenerative relationship in black women's literature: a nonwhite daughter with a living and actively-involved white mother who cares deeply for her child across the fictional binary of race.

VI. Conclusion: More Lessons to Learn

Most of the mother-daughter relationships in this project are driven by the same kinds of tensions that exist between Emma and her mother: a mother's desire to adequately prepare her daughter for the kinds of challenges she will face in the world as an adult; a daughter's mistrust of the kind of knowledge a mother has to offer; and a daughter's frantic attempts to live a life markedly different from her mother's even as she often repeats the same mistakes and learns the same lessons the mother has tried so desperately to teach. In Emma's case, however, the added layer of racial difference casts her coming-of-age story in a somewhat different light. In every way, Emma strives to be the tragic mulatta—the woman who is neither understood nor really accepted by anyone, including her own family. However, it is her own estrangement from her mother, and her acceptance of the outside world's misunderstanding of her that has made her tragic, and not her own body, her own skin. In his description of a letter he receives from Emma near the end of the novel, who has relocated to Brazil, Bernard II says:

At the end of page nine, she asked him to please tell her mother she was fine, that she was better than fine because she was learning how to dance, that everybody there looked like some permutation of her, and furthermore that Lynn was wrong about the nature of depression. As far as she could see, it wasn't just anger turned inward, or grief, or something genetic she'd gotten from Bernard's side, or a chemical imbalance in need of correction by a head doctor and pharmaceuticals. Though it might have been all those things, more important, it was a thing you could escape. She

was beginning to suspect that there wasn't anything wrong with her head, but rather something wrong with her country. (271).

Remarkably, Emma has finally learned that her feelings of placelessness and racelessness are not her own truth, but a problem with the world around her. Like Sophie, she has finally redirected her anger and frustration away from her body and its racial indeterminacy, and re-directed the problem outward, to those around her who are unwilling to leave her uncategorized, to leave her ethnicity a "question" that does not need an answer. More important, however, is the fact that Emma is exhibiting an engagement with her mother's knowledge in a highly-sophisticated way. In her ideas about depression, Emma simultaneously refutes and confirms her mother's wisdom. Although she does not believe that her mother has all the answers about the disease, she does feel that Lynn is right about some things. And, by arguing that depression is something from which one can escape through movement, through changing her place on earth, Emma reveals that she has discovered something that Lynn has already been learning in aviation school. In this way she is finally accepting her mother's wisdom, but on her own terms.

What Emma has also come to understand is that, not only does she have valuable lessons to teach, but that Emma also has the agency to decide what parts of her own narrative should be inscribed by her mother's knowledge and example. Like Sophie Caco, who comes to understand that she can celebrate parts of her matrilineal heritage while still rejecting the trauma that was a part of it, Emma ultimately realizes that she too can choose how matrilineal inscription by her white mother should shape her own life. Unlike Bernie's all-consuming reinscription of her life's narrative, Lynn's inscription is one that Emma can incorporate into her own; however, she can also interrogate it and,

when necessary, reject it. In short, Emma has a mother who can offer her guidance as she enters womanhood, but the journey to find a place wherein she feels most loved, and most at “home” is one that she must, like the other daughters in this project, take on her own—not because she is alone in the world, but because such a journey is, as Susheila Nasta contends, necessary for anyone living in Diaspora. And yet, even as Emma embarks on it, she can take with her the love of *both* of her parents and the example of her mother’s survival as a blueprint for her own healing.

CODA

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

*“do the daughters’ daughters quilt?
do the alchemists practice their tables?
do the worlds continue spinning
away from each other forever?”*
—Lucille Clifton⁵⁹

“I told this story because it wasn’t there for me when I needed to read it.”
—Emily Raboteau⁶⁰

On a website titled “Chocolate Hair, Vanilla Care: Natural Hair Care, Transracial Adoption, and Everything in Between” (<http://www.chocolatehairvanillacare.com/>), Rory, the adoptive mother of an African American daughter, posts blogs and tutorials about all things black—well, all things black *hair-related*. As the name suggests, this site is, according to its founder, designed to aid non-black adoptive and/or foster parents in learning the ins and outs of caring for black children’s hair. In both design and description, “Chocolate Hair, Vanilla Care” explicitly states its purpose: not only does the main page feature a cartoon image of a small black girl and a larger white woman standing on the opposite sides of the site’s subtitle, but Rory states on the “About Us” page that it is a place where she hopes to foster conversation about “what it means to be a vanilla mama of a chocolate girl, and how we explore identity, respect, and empowerment, using hair as our common language.”⁶¹

⁵⁹ Lucille Clifton, “quilting,” *Quilting: Poems, 1987-1990* (Brockport, NY, BOA Editions, Ltd., 1991).

⁶⁰ Emily Raboteau, “What is ‘Real’?,” *Black Issues Book Review* 7.4 (July/Aug 2005) 74.

⁶¹ “Chocolate Hair, Vanilla Care: Natural Hair Care, Transracial Adoption, and Everything in Between” (<http://www.chocolatehairvanillacare.com/>). 2011. Web. 25 Feb 2012.

The irony of this site lies in the fact that, although blogposts featured here offer deceptively simple titles like “Tips and Tricks for Parting Hair” and “Transitioning Christmas Hair to [Brand New Bicycle] Helmet Hair,” the corresponding photos (as well as those featured in the “Style Gallery”) showcase hairstyles far more innovative and elaborate than anything my mother ever did for my sister and me. But, what is most important for the purposes of this discussion is the fact that the presence of this site (and the fact that nearly 8,000 people have “liked” it on Facebook) is testament to the reality that there is among us, not only a growing generation of people of mixed race (estimates from the Census Bureau in 2011 state that this population has grown by roughly 35 percent over the past ten years),⁶² but there is also, interestingly, a growing generation of little black girls who will enter womanhood raised entirely by white mothers. One can only hope that, out of this generation rises a new crop of black women writers whose stories, novels, and poetry are as rich as those who came before them. And, if they do come, one can only imagine the creative, critical, and theoretical complexities that will result from these black daughters’ unique narratives of lives lived within white households. Although I do not wish to conflate the experiences of adopted black daughters with those of mixed-race writers chronicling their experiences with biological mothers, I would argue that, by picking up the (semi- or fully) autobiographical pen, this new generation of women will follow in the footsteps of daughters like Emily Raboteau, who understood that her story did not fall in line with that of the ‘tragic[, orphaned, and misunderstood] mulatta.’ And, if such is the case, and these girls (if the website is any reflection of the larger reality) have mothers who are invested in the well-being of their children literally from their heads to their toes, they too will have a different take on

⁶² qtd. in Saulny “Black? White? Asian?”

representations of white mothers in black women's literature. What they write may finish what Raboteau has started, and turn the paradigm completely on its head. The only question that remains is: will there be a place for them, either in the creative genre of black women's writing, or the critical one?

While the immediate response to this question should undoubtedly be "yes," the task of inclusion may be easier said than done. Like the sociological influences that shaped critical conversations about mothers and daughters from the middle of the twentieth century on, a racial divide about the very definitions of motherhood also began in the early days of the feminist movement, and that divide, bolstered by the precedents of representations of white mothers in black women's literature, has persisted to this day. In conversations about evolving ideas of motherhood in the 1960s and '70s, white writers and critics began talking about the importance of mothers in the formation of contemporary feminist ideologies. Their appraisal of motherhood, however, was anything but laudatory. In Adrienne Rich's book-length study titled *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Rich argues that, although it is a badge of honor and distinction in some cultures, for the most part, the "mainstream" institution of motherhood has "ghettoized and degraded female potentialities"; a phenomenon that is passed from mother to daughter, thus creating more women who never realize their lives' true potentials (13).⁶³ Other writers like Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of*

⁶³It is important to note here that, although Rich's evidence originally centered on the experiences of white mothers (including her mother and herself), in an amended introduction that appeared in the 1986 anniversary edition titled "Ten Years Later: a New Introduction," Rich admits that the first version of her book overlooked the maternal issues of women of color, and was overwhelmingly influenced by her middle-class sensibilities (ix). Nevertheless, she does not edit the text itself, but only apologizes for her myopic fixation on white motherhood, and encourages readers to seek out writers like Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, and Alice Childress, who had, at that time, all written either critical or creative texts about motherhood and their own experiences as daughters (xxv).

Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (1976), and Nancy Friday in *My Mother/My Self* (1977), would bolster Rich's claims. While Chodorow argues that mothering is defined by "structurally induced psychological processes" that restrict women's agency to caretaking, sacrifice, and confinement to the domestic sphere" (7), Friday contends that many daughters grow up to become so resentful of their mothers perfect or imperfect love that they spend much of their lives trying hard to be something completely different—either by rejecting what they perceive to be the necessary self-sacrifices of mothering, or by trying to live up to the myth of maternal perfection (13). In short, many white feminists concluded that, not only are mothers oppressed, but they are taught how to pass on the mentality of oppression to their daughters.

The widely-read work of Rich, Friday, and Chodorow set an important precedent in mainstream feminist discourse. However, these sentiments were fundamentally different from the ways in which contemporary black feminists perceived the sociopolitical possibilities that came along with becoming mothers, and black women writers made no bones about articulating this. In Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers Gardens" (1974) the author uses the life of her very traditional mother to argue that, through the legacy of storytelling, of a knowledge of a specifically black female history, black mothers give their daughters agency by teaching them how to tell their stories through the written word and other art forms (Walker, "Gardens" 2435; Washington 144).⁶⁴ Many black feminist critics who came after Walker also saw black mothers in the same light. As Patricia Hill Collins points out in *Black Feminist Thought:*

⁶⁴ In this essay, titled "I Sign My Mother's Name," Washington interviews Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, and Dorothy West, and her conclusions are drawn from what those writers say about the maternal influences that persist in their writing. In the interview with Washington, Walker repeats what she has admitted in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," and traces several of her short stories' origins to autobiographical narratives told to her by her mother.

Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (1990), the act of black motherhood can actually be empowering. Both biological and othermothers have, for generations, found a “base for self-actualization, status in the Black community, and a catalyst for social activism” in their roles as mothers (118, 120). By acknowledging both the historical and the creative legacies of their many mothers, black feminists were, like white feminists, writing as “daughters” responding to the lives and legacies of their forebears, but they were also (unlike many of their white counterparts), writing as women who celebrated the rich legacies those women left behind.

These drastic differences in ideology created separate camps on the feminist front, but they also polarized the conversations about black and white motherhood based on the assumption that black and white mothers had different challenges, different tactics, and obviously different outcomes. However, sites like “Chocolate Hair, Vanilla Care” make it clear that, even if such is true (and I strongly suspect that it is not), then at least the white mothers of black daughters have unique responsibilities that are particular to the race of their children that deserve attention in creative representations as well as in black feminist criticism. And yet, though recent texts like those by Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, Andrea O’Reilly and others,⁶⁵ as well as the recently discontinued *Journal for the Association for Research on Mothering*,⁶⁶ all offer trans-national discussions about motherhood, nobody seems willing to leave conversations about black mothers and white mothers—and God forbid, white mothers of nonwhite children—alone in the proverbial

⁶⁵ See Andrea O’Reilly and Sharon Abbey’s edited collection *Mothers and Daughters: Connection, Empowerment, and Transformation* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), and Andrea O’Reilly’s anthology *21st Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010).

⁶⁶ The *Journal for the Association for Research on Mothering* was a predominantly-academic journal published from 1999 to 2009, after which it became the *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*, a much more community-oriented publication. For more information, see <http://www.motherhoodinitiative.org/journalmotherhoodinitiative.html>.

ring. But, in the chapters of this dissertation, I have tried to do just that: offer a critical theory of traumatic inscription in representations of mother-daughter relationships in black women's literature that is responsive to the various influences that shape those relationships, but one that can also encapsulate conversations about racial difference, and the ways in which new writers like Emily Raboteau are using that difference to interrogate traditional representations of white women who serve as mothers across racial lines.

In the final pages of this project, I have also made a decided shift from conversations about representations of *relationships* to conversations about representations of *individuals*—namely white mothers—because a discussion of the trope offers a possibility for the enrichment of critical conversations about the issues that are relative—not only to representations of black motherhood specifically—but to black womanhood in general and to black corporeality in particular. For example, in addition to the fact that Emily Raboteau is challenging the demonization, silencing, and/or disappearance of white maternal figures in black women's literature, she is also challenging how kinship is mapped on the body by what Carine Mardorossian calls “identificatory structures”: physical characteristics to which the meanings of race and nation have been systematically attached (16, 15). Much of the trauma that Emma Boudreaux suffers stems from the fact that her racial identity is not explicitly inscribed on her skin and that people cannot immediately recognize where she belongs in their conceptualizations of race, nation, and ethnicity. By representing her as such, I wonder if Raboteau is interrogating the assumption that either black motherhood *or* black womanhood is supposed to be obvious, and written on the black female body. Do not

these assumptions create the very kind of violence that extrinsic inscription has done? Do they not also undermine the intimacy of kinship and identity formation in its most basic forms, and dismiss the reality that black identity is an ever-changing, ever evolving entity that does not always follow the strict rules of physicality? I'm not sure, but as a person who does not immediately resemble the other members of her family, there is a certain kind of corporeal violence that is implicit in the public's perception and (mis)identification of me; an othering that troubles me even as I understand that it is unintentional.

Conversations about identificatory corporeality also bring me back to an issue raised in *Native Guard*: the power garnered in the ability to re-appropriate the meanings of names—names that have, up until very recently, had the power to extrinsically inscribe on the black female body racial and gendered meanings that are themselves attached to phenotypical characteristics. In fact, recently, the power to name oneself has come of interest in what some have hailed as a “post-racial” America (a term that is hard to put credence in in the midst of national crises like the Trayvon Martin shooting in Southern Florida).⁶⁷ College-aged students like the ones interviewed for Susan Saulny's *New York Times* Article “Black? White? Asian? More Young Americans Choose All of the Above” have recently expressed pride in the ability to self-identify and celebrate multi-racial heritages—in much the same way Trethewey does in the poem “South.” For them, terms like “mulatto,” which once held negative racial and gendered connotations, are currently bandied around on college campuses; student groups even participate in activities in which they guess each other's various nationalities by scrutinizing each other's facial

⁶⁷ For more information on the Trayvon Martin case, see the “Trayvon Martin Case” page, *The New York Times Online* (http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/m/trayvon_martin/index.html). Last accessed on 1 June 2012.

features. Such trends suggest that, even if race and racism have not become things of the past, at least the power to inscribe an identity has become a more autonomous one. But has it? Recently, I have begun to question whether or not naming, or an identification of heritage/ethnicity based on the assessment of phenotypes is not in itself a kind of violence on the black body, one in which fairer phenotypes are separated from darker Others. In a world where standards of African American beauty are still measured by its proximity to whiteness, should we be more careful about how we name and rename ourselves? As much as I would like to think that it shouldn't matter, our words have histories, and sometimes it is not the words but the histories of the words that, in Trethewey's words, "shadow us"; that, in Selina Boyce's words, hide our true faces, and that, for Emma Boudreaux, make us monstrous, even in an era where race and racism are assumed to be things of the past.

And yet, words are only a part of an even bigger picture of corporeal violence. Oftentimes, we talk about literature in an abstract sense; it is the obtuse art that only some people really "get." But, here, I would like to argue that, in particular, Natasha Trethewey's representation of prenatal matrilineal trauma has concrete, real life implications. In 2008, PBS broadcasted a documentary series titled *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?* In Episode Two of this series, which is titled "When the Bough Breaks," anthropologists, sociologists, and epidemiologists examine how race affects birth outcomes in the United States. They found that, across the board, Black women have one of the highest infant mortality rates in the country—almost twice that of white women ("When the Bow Breaks."). In fact, even well-educated Black women have higher rates than white women who only have high school diplomas, which suggests that

there is something inherent in the black female experience (the scientists actually call it the cumulative “impact of racism”) that puts stress(ors) on the fetal body and determines its destiny even before its birth (“When the Bow Breaks.”). It’s a frightening reality to know that if you can somehow protect your child from dying on the streets, the victim of mistaken identity, that the very history into which he *or* she is born could do them serious harm even before they take their first breaths.

It is also frightening to think about how those selfsame stressors that endanger unborn black children affect the bodies that are supposed to carry and protect them. As Dr. Michael Lu, one of the obstetricians on the episode asks, “What kind of nation do we want?” It is a question that makes me ask: “What kinds of lives can we as black women *live*, when our bodies are susceptible to such unavoidable, and unrecognized violence?” Even Martine and Sophie Caco’s bulimia, an eating disorder rarely discussed within the black community, is a frightening reality for many black women that few people seem genuinely interested in.⁶⁸ The issues I have raised in this project have made me think long and hard about the living bodies of black women and mothers that are so often reproduced on the written page. Even though this dissertation rose out of a need to create a specifically-literary theory of matro-filiality, I remain convinced that the nuances of literary theory are only as important as they are useful—not only to critical conversations in the genre, but to the communities out of which black literature comes. As I type the last words of this project, I look to the future of my research with the question: if my focus is to remain on black female corporeality and trauma, how then can I use it to foster

⁶⁸ A cursory search on the internet, along with a more specific inquiry on amazon.com produced only one text devoted to a comprehensive conversation about black women and eating disorders: it was Stephanie Covington-Armstrong’s *Not All Black Girls Know How To Eat: A Story of Bulimia* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2009).

conversations about real life experiences? At present, I pose this question unsure if it can ever be answered; however, I do insist that we who study black women's literature must be ready and willing to discard *all* of our divisive binaries, including black and white motherhood; the identificatory structures of colorism; and the figurations of literary bodies and lived corporealities. My hope is that this dissertation is a contribution to this kind of discourse because, in a universe of black and white, light and dark, and literature and life, these worlds are—to paraphrase Lucille Clifton—not spinning away from each other at all. If they do not threaten to collide, it is only because, in so many ways, they already have.⁶⁹ We as critics need only to catch up with this reality.

⁶⁹ Fortunately, some of these conversations have begun in other disciplines. For example, Yaba Blay's *(I)ne Drop: Conversations on Skin Color, Race, and Identity*, an interview and photography-based project which features individuals who represent "a multiplicity of skin tones and phenotypic characteristics," is one such conversation whose relevance is gaining recognition (Blay). For more information, see <<http://1nedrop.com>>. Last accessed on 30 March 2012.

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