

REVISING THE CONCEPT OF BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY
IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT

I evaluate the literary and historical discourses that have circumscribed black female sexualities (from 16th century English accounts with black African women to contemporary popular culture images) and contribute to three active and interesting critical discussions: the entrance and acceptance of sex in black literature, the current role of popular culture in the academy, and the evolution of black feminism. I predicate that ignoring or diminishing black female sexualities in academic discussions on account of societal perceptions forces one to ignore characters that, like *The Color Purple* (1982) and *PUSH* (1996) protagonists, negatively experience sex and are deficient of understanding for lack of critical conversation. Second, my project offers an intergenerational and inter-media approach to utilizing popular fiction and culture in the literary classroom. Finally, it provides what I call *maverick* feminism as an alternative critical lens for evaluating historical and modern texts. Maverick feminism recognizes the inability of an essential feminist theory to appease all scholars and suggests that inherent in modern black feminism is non-conforming, individualistic thinking that advises one to first fulfill self in order to wholly and attentively assist in the obliteration of racist, sexist, and classist oppression amongst others.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the many women and men who helped me along on my journey of becoming self-identified, self-actualized, and self-sexualized, particularly my late grandfathers Roosevelt Givens, Sr. and Sylvester Randle, Sr. I hope that this project will assist and uplift other girls and women on their journeys to finding and defining Self.

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Introduction

“For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment. The development of self-identified Black women, ready to explore and pursue our power and interests within our communities, is a vital component in the war of Black liberation...For it is through the coming together of self-actualized individuals, female and male, that any real advances can be made.”

Audre Lorde, “Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving” (1978)

“We have come of age in an era that has witnessed a past-in-present assault on our identities as women of color, one that harkens back to earlier assaults on our virtue and value during enslavement and imperialism.”

The Crunk Feminist Collective, “Hip Hop Generation Feminism: A Manifesto” (2010)

In 1991, the black female rap group, Salt-N-Pepa, issued a challenge, “Let’s talk about sex...It keeps coming up anyhow/ Don’t decoy, avoid, or make void the topic/ Cuz that aint gonna stop it...Let’s tell it like it is, and how it could be/ How it was, and of course, how it should be...” Salt-N-Pepa’s challenge was crucial because during this time, not many prominent blacks were addressing or acknowledging the role sex andsexuality played in the lives of African Americans.¹ This evasion of a vital discussion was due in part to the fact that for quite some time, the sexual composition and practices of the black race, women in particular, had been the reason for other races of individuals to write home. More specifically, the travelogues of 16th and 17th century European visitors or settlers to America grounded numerous adverse stereotypes that have ultimately regulated the lives of many African Americans and the critical discussions and literary works they have produced, and in effect curtailed the number of those willing to talk about sex, tell it like it is and how it could be, how it was and how it should be.

Richard Ligon is one notable European traveler who depicted a glimpse of the intimate lives of Africans during the mid-17th century. He set sail from London and landed on the Island

¹ “Prominent blacks” is referring to those individuals thought to be at the forefront of the race due to notable occupations and political affiliations, academic scholars and politicians such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Al Sharpton for example.

of Barbados in 1647 with a goal of finding bounteous fruit and fertile land favorable for housing a sugar plantation. However, what readers mostly get in his *True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados* (1657) is a depiction of African women, who like their surroundings, appear to be equally firm, fruitful, and sweet. Ligon recalls a woman he failingly pursues having the “loveliest smile that [he had] ever seen” and two “pretie young Negro Virgins” whose “breasts [were] round, firm, and beautifully shaped” (13, 15-16). Jennifer Morgan (1997) notes, “Ligon’s rhetoric may have surprised his English readers, for seventeenth century images of black women did not usually evoke the ultimate marker of civility” (167).

In opposition to the civility and beauty depicted in Ligon’s account, interpretations by a great many travelling Englishmen presented the black female body as “both desirable and repulsive, available and untouchable, productive and reproductive, beautiful and black” (Morgan 170). An example of such a binary is seen in Amerigo Vespucci’s account of his turn of the sixteenth century voyage: “Theyr bodies are very smothe and clene by reason of theyr often washinge. They are in other things filthy and without shame” (Morgan 171).² The “other things” that Vespucci refers to is the then unfamiliar African marital practice of polygamy, a custom that because of its unfamiliarity, was deemed improper and immoral. For this reason, there were a few travelers, Robert Gainsh in particular, who demonstrated no amount of appreciation for the African women that they encountered. Gainsh, upon his 1554 voyage, insists that Africa as a whole was “a rough and savage region, whose inhabitauntes are wylde and wanderyng people...and women are common: for they contracte no matrimonie, neyther have respecte to chastity” (Vaughan 25). Ultimately, the identities and representations of these women were

²The account of Vespucci’s voyage, reportedly taken place between 1499 and 1500, is documented in Sebastian Münster’s *A Treatyse of the New India* and was translated to English by Richard Eden in 1553.

based solely on the definition of a group of people who did not value and rarely attempted to understand their cultures and practices.

Scholars Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughn suggest in their work, “Before Othello: Elizabethan Representation of Sub-Saharan Africans” (1997) that “In the final decades of the [sixteenth] century, English readers enjoyed an expanding flow of travel narratives, mostly by their own countrymen, that increased substantially the quantity and accuracy of information about sub-Saharan Africans and shaped significantly the popular image that underlay that era’s theatrical representation” (24). The accuracy of the information is questionable, but representations were theatrical indeed. And, they shaped more than that era’s popular image, as the images conveyed by the male travelers of the 16th and 17th centuries not only affected general perceptions of that time, but also have a direct correlation to the images and depictions of early 21st century African American women.

Specifically, because of these images in the sixteenth century, would be American settlers were presented a skewed view of Africans, particularly African women, before they actually encountered them. Morgan insists:

[T]he encounter had already taken place in parlors and reading rooms on English soil, assuring that colonists would arrive with battery and assumptions and predispositions about race, femininity, sexuality, and civilization. Confronted with an Africa they needed to exploit, European writers turned to black women as evidence of a cultural inferiority that ultimately became encoded in racial difference. Monstrous bodies became enmeshed with savage behavior as the icon of women’s breasts became evidence of tangible barbarism...By the mid-seventeenth century that which had initially marked

African women as unfamiliar—their sexually and reproductively bound savagery—had become familiar. (191-2)

This familiarity, the depiction of the black female body as both desirous and shameful, trickled down into the institution of slavery and yet presents itself in present-day American society.³ As a result, scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000) insists that black women are an oppressed group, oppressed due to “the exploitation of Black women’s labor,” the denial of “African American women the rights and privileges routinely extended to White male citizens,” and “finally, controlling images applied to Black women that originated during the slavery era” (4-5). The voyeurism of English travelers incited the initial oppression and brought light to the “shameful” sexual practices of African women, but this shamefulness has caused a repression of black female sexuality that is oftentimes self-inflicted.⁴

Despite traditional disregard and lack of appreciation for overt black female sexuality, Scholars Bette J. Dickerson and Nicole Rousseau (2009) indicate that sexuality studies is a “burgeoning field,” but they also recognize that there is an “astounding gap in the literature” on this particular topic (307). This gap is due in part to many elite scholars’ propensity to, as Salt-N-Pepa suggests, “decoy, avoid, or make void the topic.” In conversation with the work of forward-

³ R&B singer Beyoncé Knowles-Carter is an example of this desirous and shameful relationship American citizens have with the black female body, as her explicit and mass sex appeal aided in catapulting her music career, but Beyoncé’s latest album and recent pronouncement as a feminist, along with her performance at the 2014 Grammy Awards have acquired descriptions and monikers such as “risqué,” “raunchy,” and even “whore.”

⁴ During one of the most crucial times in black history—the Civil Rights era—overtly sexual and “inappropriate” black women were in some cases turned away from participation in the movement. More “respectful” black women were recruited instead. In March 1955, Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus because she felt that she was treated unjustly. Colvin was arrested and taken to jail, and her case eventually went to trial. Colvin’s case was supposed to be used by the NAACP as the test case for civil rights, but it was discovered that Colvin was pregnant out of wedlock, and Rosa Parks’s case was used instead. Instead of becoming a famous civil rights hero, Colvin was charged with disorderly conduct. See the November 25, 2009, *New York Times* article entitled “From Footnote to Fame in Civil Rights History” by Brooks Barnes.

Too, while African American women traditionally support First Lady Michelle Obama, many other critics suggest that her dress is not modest or respectful enough for a first lady, as if wearing a sleeveless dress to a formal event or shorts on a vacation trip make her less capable of fulfilling her duties.

thinking scholars in the field of black sexualities, this project serves as an overall attempt to throw off the shackles of colonialism and imperialism, and “talk about sex,” black female sexuality specifically.⁵

Notwithstanding the gap in literature concerning sexualities, I argue that representations of black female sexualities are evolving in contemporary African American literature, but literary scholars and black feminists miss this evolution if they continue to dismiss black women’s popular fiction. Because lowbrow and popular fiction is often considered sooty and sex and sexuality is likewise associated with the soiled and unclean, some works that engage sexuality are deemed lowbrow and thus marginalized by the academy. Hence, the major objectives of this project are to: 1) outline the historical and literary discourses that have circumscribed black female sexualities, 2) examine how critics and scholars address stereotypes of black womanhood and sexuality, and 3) bring critically marginalized works into conversation with each other, and with critically acclaimed works, using a black feminist lens to analyze the marginalized works in a manner that supports and develops feminist claims regarding the treatment of black female sexualities. This pairing of texts from decidedly different eras and genres is considered an intergenerational dynamic and serves as a means by which to enhance the depth of conversations on (African) American literature as well as black feminist and sexualities studies.

The texts central to this study are Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help* (2009), which serves as an example of neo-colonization of the black female body, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), Sapphire’s *PUSH* (1996), and Terry McMillan’s *Getting to Happy* (2010),

⁵ The field is making strides due to select forward thinking scholars. These strides include critical works by scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Stacey Patton, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and graduate courses and conferences devoted solely to the topic of black sexualities.

each of which was initially marginalized or considered popular fiction (and therefore mostly disregarded in critical academic discussions) but ultimately reveal critical accounts concerning the significance of being a self-identified and self-sexualized black woman in America.⁶

I. Literary and Critical Responses to Black Female Exploitation and Stereotypes

The trajectory of literary responses by African American women writers to societal stereotypes of black women is one that can be mapped out primarily according to the socio-political climate during the time of each author's publication. Varying little, the responses range from the tale of the tragic mulatto newly freed from slavery in the late 19th century—as black women novelists attempted to refute the stereotype of the loose black woman by demonstrating their mulatto characters' fervent efforts to fight off sexual abuse and advances in order to maintain their chastity and virtue in a newly reconstructed society—to the late 20th century where black women novelists reaping the benefits of a tumultuous Civil Rights Movement boldly dismissed stereotypes altogether and were devoted instead to creating their own individual definition of a black woman.

In her groundbreaking work entitled *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980), black feminist literary critic and scholar Barbara Christian maps out the literary tradition of black women novelists by examining its origins, tracing the development of stereotypes of black women, and evaluating the affect those stereotypes had on literature written by black women. Christian acknowledges Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) as the first novel published by an African American woman, stating:

⁶ Being self-sexualized consists of not allowing others' perceptions of or mandates for "suitable" sexual behavior to limit or determine one's personal sexual desires or experiences, but rather being a knowledgeable and unapologetically active agent in one's intimate and sexual affairs while being fully aware of the pleasures and consequences these affairs may present.

Iola Leroy is an important novel, not because it is a “first” or because it is a good novel, but because it so clearly delineates the relationship between the images of black women held at large in society and the novelist’s struggle to refute these images—all of this even as the novelist attempts to create a world of characters and situations that can be viewed as suitable to the form of the novel, yet realistic enough somehow to resemble life. (5)

A few years after the publication of Christian’s work, scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., rediscovered Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In a Two-Story White House, North* (1859) and determined that not only was it the first novel published by an African American woman, but it was the first novel published by an African American in general. Overall, through the mulatto characters of Iola and Frado respectively, both *Iola Leroy* and *Our Nig* served as a refutation of negative black female images and a critique of wavering abolitionists and interracial marriage, but Wilson’s work, as it was published anonymously, was a bit more explicit in its critique.

Because Wilson depicted issues of the times more matter-of-factly, *Our Nig* seemed to in fact be realistic, while *Iola Leroy* only “somehow...resemble[d] life.” Wilson’s resounding depiction of racism and black female sexuality (and sexuality in general) was not widely accepted and was soon forgotten. As a result, Wilson’s response to black female exploitation and stereotypes was consigned to oblivion, and thus Harper’s more subtle narrative and critique served as the primary example of African American women novelists. And, while the field of African American literature, for quite some time after the publication of Harper’s novel in 1892, was mostly populated by male writers, the example set forth in *Iola Leroy*, of repressing a

deviant sexuality in return for a more respectable lifestyle, was followed by a great many black women novelists.⁷

One noted black woman novelist in particular that followed this paradigm is Pauline Hopkins. Noting Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900) specifically, black feminist scholar and cultural critic Ann duCille (1993) states, "Reflecting their author's concerns and social reform, many novels of this era are characterized by sexual reticence, the literary purification of black womanhood, and the celebration of marriage as a seemingly sexless meeting of like minds and sociopolitical ambitions" (10). As a result of these characterizations, novelist Gloria Naylor (1989) insists, "Black female sexuality was therefore whitened and deadened to the point of invisibility" (22). In agreement, Hazel Carby (1987) suggests, "Sexual attraction is displaced by a joint desire, not for each other, but to uplift the race" (xxv). Still, duCille maintains that "sexual desire is not *displaced* by social purpose but *encoded* in it—regulated, submerged and insinuated into the much safer realm of political zeal and the valorized venue of holy wedlock" (45, emphasis original). Most importantly, duCille states:

They [turn of the century novelists such as Harper and Hopkins] also critique the dominative powers of patriarchy and begin to reclaim for black women their own female bodies. It will be a full quarter century, however, before black women writers begin to explore those bodies sexually—before social conditions and literary conventions create a space where African American women writers can dare to delve into the realm of black female desire and to explore the intimate sexual self. (47)

⁷ When Iola Leroy accepts the proposal of and marries Dr. Latimer, it is not for the sake of love or intimacy, but rather a shared concern for their race and a desire to fulfill religious expectations. In this sense, Harper paints the portrait of a "respectable woman" who is attempting to adhere to the politics of respectability, as opposed to a black woman who has and acknowledges intimate and sexual desires and might therefore be considered deviant or immoral.

There is a decline in the number of novels published by black women between the early 1900s and the years of the long Harlem Renaissance, expanding roughly from the 1920s to the mid-1940s. There is a clear dichotomy in the critical examinations of the depictions of black female sexuality in the works of turn of the century black women novelists, but a majority of critics seem to be in agreement with duCille in acknowledging that the black woman, along with her body and sexual desires, is explored more thoroughly during the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, Gloria Hull (1987) insists that the works of black women during the Harlem Renaissance depicted the “raunchy, woman-proud sexuality that echoed the explicitness of this licentious era” (24).

Characterized by the freedom and independence of moving away from harsh racism of the South and celebrating one’s cultural difference in the North, the Harlem Renaissance brought about a new class of black women writers who took different measures in responding to societal images of black womanhood and sexuality. duCille notes that the Harlem Renaissance brings about “a second flowering of novels by African American women—novels characterized by the gradual resexualization of black womanhood reflected in the works of Fauset, Hurston, and Nella Larsen” (9). Because of the ground laid by authors such as Harper and Hopkins, duCille suggests that black women writers during the Harlem Renaissance could find freedom to develop more “covertly sexual subjects” and literary models where:

Black women begin to become actively sexual beings, implicitly questioning their positioning as objects of male desire and contemplating, if not fully exploring, their sexual selves; marriage ceases to be celebrated on paper as the quintessential signifier of civil liberty and instead becomes the symbol of material achievement... heroines cease to be singularly and uniformly heroic, good, pure,

blameless...; they become instead multidimensional figures, full of human (and in some cases, monstrous) faults and foibles. (87)

Both Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* serve as examples of this new engagement with sexuality, and they both depict the lives of black female protagonists who, while evoking some sympathy from readers, are simultaneously viewed as wayward characters. This waywardness, however, made the characters human and more realistic than the pure and civil black female characters depicted during the turn of the century.

Consequently, this natural humanness, or ordinariness, including the tendency to both succeed and fail, please and dissatisfy, sparked a new motif in African American women's literature.

The works of Ann Petry and Gwendolyn Brooks are representative of black women novelists' turn to what Christian deems "ordinary women." During the period between the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s, black women artists were undoubtedly aware of negative stereotypes and created characters that seemed to possess those characteristics, but chose to refute those stereotypes in a way different from both their turn of the century and Harlem Renaissance foremothers. In reference to Petry's *The Street* (1946), Christian states, "Petry obviously understood the stereotypes that were inflicted on black women, for her female characters are decidedly intended to counteract them. She sets up characters with particular physical characteristics that match specific stereotypes and then proceeds to show how they are not quite what they seem" (65). Christian describes Petry's protagonist, Lutie Johnson, as "having the soul of Iola LeRoy to counteract the prevailing image that lower-class black women are whores. But since Lutie Johnson is black and poor, no one else relates to her as a decent woman" (65). In agreement, feminist scholar Barbara Smith proclaims in "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) that, "*The Street* is one of the best delineations in literature of how sex, race, and class

interact to oppress Black women” (134). Novelist and critic Mary Helen Washington (1987) has a similar view on Gwendolyn Brooks’s first and only novel, *Maud Martha* (1955), stating that “few critics could picture the questing figure, the powerful articulate voice in the tradition as a plain, dark-skinned housewife living in a kitchenette apartment on the south side of Chicago” (32). Naturally, the works of black women writing on the heels of the Great Depression, depicting figures that critics could not picture, made way for even more creative and individualistic responses to societal stereotypes of black women.

There were a limited number of novels published by black women during the decade extending from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, but the 1970s ushered in an era of creative black women depicting the lives of creative black female characters. Farah Jasmine Griffin (2007) proclaims, “[T]he atmosphere created by the political and social movements of the 1960s produced a context in which these writers could find an interested, informed, and astute audience” (339). The premier texts of artists such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and June Jordan were indicative of the creative, self-identified black woman character. Christian states, “Contemporary black women novelists,” meaning black women novelists writing during the 1970s and up to the publication of her work in 1980, “have responded to these stereotypes, both nineteenth- and twentieth- century versions, not so much by creating stereotypes as was done in the past but by attempting to create their own definition of woman within the scope of their particular milieu” (78).

To demonstrate, Barbara Smith, in an analysis of Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) discusses Sula’s sexuality and uses the following passage to declare Sula’s self-definition: After returning home unmarried, Sula replies to her grandmother, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). Smith states, “Self-definition is a dangerous activity for any woman to

engage in, especially a Black one, and it expectedly earns Sula pariah status in Medallion” (140). Despite the status this self-definition may earn a person, noted feminist theorist Audre Lorde (1978) states, “[I]f we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment” (45). Naturally, the detriment and the resulting lack of self-definition can be seen in the works of black women writers until this defining moment in the 1970s, as a majority of black women novelists prior the 1970s made tiring efforts to refute or counteract colonial and imperial images of black women. Still, these early works, indicative of their time periods, were both influential and necessary to the tradition of black women novelists and the trajectory of black female sexualities.

Hip Hop feminist Gwendolyn Pough (2004) states, “In a sense, the women of the Hip Hop generation are building a home for themselves on ground that was cleared by the Black women thinkers, writers and activists of the late 1800s and the early to mid 1900s and broken by those of the 1970s.” Pough continues, “The head start made by earlier black women has made claiming a space from which to speak somewhat easier; however, Black women today are still plagued with some of the same issues. For example, the issues of sexual stereotypes” (73). Indeed, literary foremothers’ attempts at carving out a space and mapping out of the field of black female sexuality from the late 19th century to the present is precisely why contemporary writers such as ZZ Packer and Tayari Jones can write more personal tales that on the surface seem to ignore history altogether and instead focus on the current status of the black woman. Jones (2009) insists that her projects, but specifically her first novel, *Leaving Atlanta* (2002), “felt more like an urgent matter of truth-telling rather than the academic task of ‘filling in the gaps of history,’ which is often seen as the ‘work’ of the African American writer” (8). Jones continues her argument by expressing to contemporary writers: “Although African-American

writers have beautifully reconstructed the past...we must not be so obsessed with filling the pages left blank by an incomplete historical record, that we leave no record of our own meaningful lives” (8). This truth-telling and record-keeping design is the present state of the African American woman’s novel. Although, as Pough notes, the plague of black female sexual stereotypes sometimes makes this modern-day truth-telling a little uncomfortable for some readers.

The trajectory of the depiction of black female sexualities by black women writers from the late 19th century to the early 21st century is as follows: First, black women writers attempted to refute and counteract negative societal images by creating black women characters that were asexual, usually mulatto, civil, and respected. Harlem Renaissance writers depicted a different class of black female characters who relished black (folk) culture and were covertly sexual. This characterization was followed by the 1950s and 60s illustration of the ordinary black woman character who, although somewhat sexual, was seldom desired or respected because of her class. Later, the women of the 1970s created black female characters who made their own rules regarding sexuality and developed their own definition of womanhood. Finally, contemporary black women novelists, having the luxury of ignoring history and its negative images, tell their own personal or sexual tales by creating black female characters similar to themselves, attempting to survive in late 20th and early 21st century societies.

Despite this clear change in African American women’s fiction, critics throughout the years have remained discontented with the overall portrayal of black female sexualities in black women’s literature and theories. In her 1998 article, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime,” Hazel Carby insists that as a whole, “the sexuality of black American women has been

unacknowledged in the public and critical discourse of feminist thought” (471).⁸ Likewise, Hortense Spillers (1984) insists that the narration of sexual experiences by black women was rarely seen as “empowered text,” but rather black women were depicted as “the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb” (74 emphasis original). In these regards, despite the transformation of the black female text, and on the heels of a flourishing 1970s self-identified black woman, both Carby and Spillers suggest that black women novelists and self-proclaimed feminist critics perpetuate the sexual oppression of the black female body by routinely making the black female character the object of a sexual encounter as opposed to the subject, or even initiator, of a sexual encounter.

Noticeably, this self-imposed oppression of black female sexualities as a result of colonial exploitation expands even beyond the perimeters of American literature. In a 2005 article entitled “Veil of Secrecy,” German researchers Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski maintain that “it is only fairly recently that a new generation of African women writers have dared to touch on the ‘unsafe issue’ regarding the woman in her femaleness and her corporeality” (xii-xiii). African literary scholar Ayo A. Coly (2010) agrees with Veit-Wild and Naguschewski and insists, “The colonial visual practice of disrobing the black female body has generally prompted the postcolonial African discursive gesture of covering that body” (653). In essence, although the men themselves are now generations removed from this earth, English travelers’ schemes to sustain their capital and justify slavery by depicting the black female body as both disgraceful and desirable have survived and maintain a presence and influence in both African and American societies. These depictions affect the lives and literature of black women and have made them fearful of their own bodies and sexualities. I argue that while black women novelists

⁸ Carby’s article was originally presented as a paper for the conference on “Sexuality, Politics and Power” at Mount Holyoke College in 1986. It was later edited for publication in an anthology entitled *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* edited by Robert G. O’Meally in 1998.

are more prevalent and more daring today than they were in past decades, the general consensus to cover up black female bodies in traditional literature routinely leads to limiting and circumscribing the narratives told about and projected onto these bodies. Yet, acknowledging this reality and placing these beloved, trailblazing works in critical conversation with popular fiction texts, uninhibited by burdens of representation and restrictions of academia, can add depth and diversity to the body of scholarship on African American women's literature and black female sexualities studies.

II. Why Popular Literature is Not So Popular

In her 1987 work, "The Darkened Eye Restored," Mary Helen Washington questions, "How does the heroic voice and heroic image of the black woman get suppressed in a culture that depended on her heroism for its survival?" (32). The answer to Washington's fundamental question lies in a Zora Neale Hurston article that, for quite some time, went unpublished. In "Art and Such," Hurston traces the progression of African Americans and their art from the institution of slavery to the writing of her piece in 1938. Slavery, she insists, was a mute period in literature, and the newly freed slave during the early years of Reconstruction had internal issues that were "of more importance than the turbulent doings going on external of him" (22). But, lo and behold came that savior of a "Race Man" who could read and write, and fascinate the people. He spoke an eloquent language and thus became the leader of the downtrodden tribe. At the regulation and standardization of the Race Man, it became so that "a Negro can do nothing but weave something in his particular art form about the Race," to what Hurston deems "the detriment of art" (24). As a result, African American literature has been traditionally devoted to the telling of the collective oppression of the race, as opposed to the narration of the individual struggles of

one particular human being. Those like Hurston who acknowledged this approach as a detrimental quality and therefore narrated nonstandard tales were both marginalized and ostracized and appealed primarily to those of the common people whom the Race Man had not yet encountered or converted.

Because women's issues were seen by some leading (male) scholars as inherently un-universal and therefore seemed not to "champion the race," the works of Harriet Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larson, Ann Petry, Gwendolyn Brooks, and others went unnoticed, or were not canonized, for decades. Only in the 1970s when non-traditional, self-identified black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, June Jordan, and others entered the literary scene were the works of black women writers acknowledged and taken seriously by some literary critics. Morrison, Walker, and Jordan penetrated the literary world, and, as hip hop feminist Gwendolyn Pough would say, "brought wreck." They made it impossible to ignore the fact that black women were and are artists.

Despite the strides made by self-identified black women writers, chauvinistic, elitist critiques similar to Wright's now iconic 1937 review of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* find a place in 21st century America and continue to demean and belittle the works of black women novelists. In a 2006 *New York Times* article, author Nick Chiles recalls his experience in a Georgia book store that had the "largest collections of books by black authors that I've ever seen outside an independent black book store" (¶1). Despite this improvement in the production and availability of what is already a marginalized literature, Chiles recalls being "embarrassed and thoroughly disgusted" at the "oversexed genre" that "seemed to appeal exclusively to our most prurient natures—as if these nasty books were pairing off back in the stockrooms like little paperback rabbits and churning out even more graphic offspring that make Ralph Ellison books

cringe into a dusty corner” (¶2, 5, 4). It is of no surprise that Chiles’s archetypal African American novelist is a man, or that a great many of the books that disgusted him were those written by or about black women. He insists, “Under the heading of ‘African-American Literature,’ what’s available is almost exclusively pornography for black women” (¶9). Chiles’s plea for “serious writers” echoed that of Alain Locke’s nearly seven decades prior. And, in a page-length article, Chiles inadvertently refueled the debate between high and low— literary and popular black fiction—, as he demeaned explicit sexuality and mistook or ignored the possibility that self-sexualization and self-identification plays a significant role in one’s development as a black woman in America.

Ultimately, I am not concerned in this project with the debate about whether the works of popular fiction are worthy of being called “African American literature”; nor am I concerned with whether the notion of African American literature still exists. Yet, knowing the history of the popular fiction genre is critical to understanding its present. In its current state, despite some critics’ disgust or disapproval, it is because popular fiction is in fact geared toward a general, or mainstream, audience, and their publishing houses do not limit and censor the content or language of the works, that there is a wider depiction of black female sexualities in these works. Careful study and analysis of contemporary black women’s popular fiction will add depth and diversity to the current body of criticism on black female sexualities.

III. My Theoretical Approach

In *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, the 1999 breakdown and analysis of Hip Hop Feminism, Joan Morgan notes her initial struggles with self-identifying as a feminist, implying that there are simply some things that she “kinda dig[s] about patriarchy,” that she

sometimes expects and appreciates the attention she gets from men when she puts on her sexiest outfit and matching “fuck-me” heels, but most importantly, that she was “growing fatigue[d]” with a feminism that was obsessed with talking about “male domination” and patriarchy; she instead “wanted a feminism that would allow [her] to explore who we are as women—not victims” (56-57). In this project, I examine the works of contemporary black women authors from just such a point of departure in order to understand and delineate the complexities of black female sexual identities. The foundation of such feminism was laid decades ago by radical feminists such as Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and Barbara Smith, and then built upon by contemporary black feminists such as Joan Morgan, Gwendolyn Pough, and more recently, the Crunk Feminist Collective (CFC). Although the term radical feminism has in the past been associated primarily with lesbian feminists, Hip Hop Generation feminists—heterosexual and homosexual—appreciate and adopt their audacity to speak out on any subject at any cost. More than three decades ago, Audre Lorde, a self-identified black feminist lesbian, stated in an essay entitled “Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” (1977), “[W]hat is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. The speaking profits me, beyond any other effect” (40). Similarly, in their 2010 Mission Statement, the Crunk Feminist Collective declares:

Our relationship to feminism and our world is bound up with proclivity for the percussive, as we divorce ourselves from “correct” or hegemonic ways of being in favor of following the rhythm of our own heartbeats. In other words, what others may call audacious and crazy, we call CRUNK because we are drunk off the heady theory of feminism that proclaims that another world is possible. We resist

others' attempts to stifle our voices, acting belligerent when necessary and getting buck when we have to. Crunk feminists don't take no mess from nobody! (¶3)

Ultimately, the common thread between the proclamations of Lorde, Morgan, and the CFC is that: 1) each is dedicated to the exploration of the actual woman—as subject as opposed to object or victim, 2) each acknowledges the importance and profit of speaking out on issues of concern, 3) each rejects the traditional hegemonic rule and instead advocates self-definition and fulfillment, and 4) all of these feminists, as the CFC exclaims, “don't take no mess from nobody.”

This type of feminism, whether declared lesbian or radical feminism, Hip Hop feminism, or Crunk feminism, is essentially what I call *maverick* feminism because, like most feminist theories, it involves independent thinking by someone who does not conform to accepted views but is dedicated to the initial principles of black feminism, as outlined in Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Feminist Thought* (1998): resisting and obliterating the oppression of racism, sexism and classism; maintaining a humanist vision that will reject any human oppression; defining ourselves and speaking for those common black women who may be voiceless; and finally, operating from a standpoint that acknowledges that the black female experience is not monolithic, homogenous, or uniform (18-19). Unlike these theories, however, maverick feminism is selfish in the sense that it requires a person to become self-identified, self-actualized, and self-sexualized before one can wholly and successfully participate in the uplift of others. Ultimately, it acknowledges that there is no singular black womanhood and that some women do in fact appreciate and sometimes even yearn for sexual attention, believes in the power of the utterance of words, is not afraid of hierarchies of power, welcomes a changing world, and concedes that many can learn from one just as one can learn from many. As such, maverick

feminism provides a freer, specifically more liberatory and less circumscribed, means of evaluating and understanding black women's literature. I use maverick feminism as a tool by which to unsettle and expand the fields of literature and literary criticism by insisting that despite the negative stereotypes and images of black women, neither the black woman nor her characters, in a postcolonial society, have to endure what Kobena Mercer recognizes as "the burden of representation."⁹ Black women novelists therefore are free to vividly discuss and portray sex and sexuality because, as the CFC declare, "[W]e eschew any false divide between public and private, as we hold dear the principle that the personal is indeed political" ("Hip Hop Generation Feminism: A Manifesto" 2010, ¶3).

IV. Chapter Overviews

As it is slightly different from the physical act of sex, sexuality, William H. Masters et. al. (1995) maintain, "refers to all aspects of being and feeling sexual...a dimension of personality instead of referring to a person's capacity for erotic response alone" (5). In addition, Dickerson and Rousseau insist that sexuality "consists of both behavior *and* desire" (308, emphasis original). While the works analyzed in this study involve both forced and pleasurable sexual interactions, this study will primarily focus on sexuality, how the authors treat both the sexual feelings and actions of their black female characters. I argue that acknowledged and unapologetic sexuality affects the degree to which these characters, faced with societal obstacles, are willing to "transform silence into language and action" and in essence, operate as maverick feminists.¹⁰

Each of the next three chapters is devoted to novels that grapple with, or allege to shed light on,

⁹ See Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," in: *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art & Culture*, 10, Vol. 4, Spring 1990, pp. 61–78.

¹⁰ "The Transformation of Silence into Action" is the title of Audre Lorde's work originally delivered as a paper at the Modern Language Association's "Lesbian and Literature Panel" in Chicago, Illinois, in 1977 and later published in her book of essays and speeches entitled *Sister Outsider* (1984)

the interpersonal lives of black women or the controversial concept of black female sexualities. At the core of each chapter lies critical concerns of modern black feminist scholarship—age, class, social equality, voice (meaning the right to be heard), and one’s ability to progress.

Seemingly contradictory to this project’s main premise—talking about sex—, Chapter One is an analysis of Kathryn Stockett’s *The Help*, a novel that is essentially sexless. First, I build a historical context in order to demonstrate how elite white women have long been invested in desexualizing the black women from whom they extract domestic and emotional labor. Then, I question and complicate the methods by which Stockett’s intended purpose for *The Help* is fulfilled, and ultimately argue that black female sexuality in the 1960’s was more complex than Stockett’s work suggests. Overall, the chapter suggests that Stockett’s text represents a neo-colonization of the black female body and thus further demonstrates the need for (black) women to define themselves for themselves.

Chapters Two and Three compare a once controversial but now canonized tale to a less recognized and non-canonical tale, Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* to Sapphire’s *PUSH* respectively, in an attempt to demonstrate a pattern in the academy of marginalizing difference and later praising it out of time and context. I argue that despite apparent differences between the coupled works—content, language, and audience— there are critical similarities between the two, specifically how the authors address and express black female sexualities. And, it is thus impossible to revere one text without revering the other, or marginalize one without marginalizing the other. Moreover, these chapters demonstrate that embracing an intergenerational and inter-genre¹¹ dynamic by placing the contemporary work in conversation

¹¹ Referring to conversations between two different genres, specifically fiction and film.

with its predecessor will bridge the gap between generations of scholarship and produce more innovative critical discussions concerning black female sexualities.

In the final chapter, I analyze and use Terry McMillan's *Getting to Happy* as a model for the future of the field of (African) American literature and literary criticism, particularly criticism on black female sexualities. As the sequel to *Waiting to Exhale*, *Getting to Happy* is, on the surface, but another one of McMillan's portrayals of a sad, single, unhappy group of promiscuous black women. This pejorative assessment is both superficial and short-sighted, however, because while the four women from the previous novel—Savannah, Bernadine, Gloria, and Robin—are seemingly the focal point of the narrative, it is in fact their children who are central and allude to the meaning of the text. Mothers and daughters interact and suggest that there is no one way to be a black woman and that black female sexualities are ever-evolving. The argument in this chapter is that the inter-generational dynamic between the mothers and daughters in *Getting to Happy* serves as a metaphor for the necessary intergenerational dynamic in American literature, a dynamic cultivating a ground where different generations can nurture and learn from one another by assuring that one remains aware of history but is not willfully ignorant of the present. This awareness and engagement expands and diversifies the scholarship on black female sexualities.

In summary, despite their tendencies to be controversial, and as a result of the depictions of black female sexualities in the narratives, the works of Stockett, Hurston, Souljah, Walker, Sapphire, and McMillan all serve to reveal a critical purpose of this project, which is to articulate the dangers of dismissing uncomfortable, controversial voices, texts, genres, and topics—specifically the voices and narratives of self-sexualized black women and the topic of black female sexualities. This project also makes a literal plea: Let us talk about sex. “It keeps coming

up anyhow,” specifically in the works of black female popular fiction writers who have devoted their lives and careers to the “common” people (Salt-N-Pepa). As Barbara Christian notes in her work, “The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism” (1990):

Much, of course, can be learned by all of us from all of us who speak, read, write, including those of us who look high. But as we look high, we might also look low, lest we devalue women in the world even as we define *Woman*. In ignoring their voices, we may not only truncate the movement but we may also limit our own process until our voices no longer sound like women’s voices to anyone. (51)

Let’s talk.

Chapter I

Not so *Helpful*: The Disadvantages of Desexualization

“It may be for only a moment, or for all of a life, but two fantasies have met, magically bridging time and space, and whispered their secrets to each other. This is art’s power over us; and its terror, for there are dreams we do not want aroused, ash that must remain ash. And sometimes in fear we turn and rend a poem, a book, a painting, a truth that has blown too steadily on forgotten graves of memories calling forth ghosts whom we have forbidden to walk the earth again.”

Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (1949)

“On the one hand there was the woman obsessed with matters of the flesh, on the other was the asexual woman. One was carnal, the other was maternal. One was at heart a slut, the other was deeply religious. One was Jezebel, the other a Mammy.”

Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?* (1999)

As Deborah Gray White avows, “the other” was indeed a Mammy, a (now) controversial, yet prominent, figure in the antebellum South. Mammy was big, and Mammy was black. She was great with (white) children, but not proper enough to mingle with their parents, the best cook in town, but the least likely dinner guest. Mammy knew all the remedies to life’s problems; yet, the life she lived was oftentimes noticeably disordered and troublesome. Author Kathryn Stockett is sure to remind her readers of all of Mammy’s misfortunes in her debut novel *The Help*, published in 2009. She does not confer the appellation of Mammy upon her characters, however; most often, Stockett’s mammies answer to the names Aibileen or Minny, and sometimes simply “the help.”

Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson are identified as maids during the Civil Rights era, and Stockett created them in an attempt to right a wrong in her personal life. In the Afterword of *The Help*, which Stockett titles “Too Little, Too Late,” she divulges, and one could say, confides to readers, the purpose of the novel: to give voice to black maids and allow them to tell their own stories about what it was like to be a black woman and work in the homes of white Southerners,

Mississippians specifically. Stockett is a white woman who grew up in Mississippi under the tutelage of a black maid. In her adulthood, she became ashamed of the fact that neither she nor the members of her family ever once questioned their beloved maid's feelings concerning being a black woman in Mississippi. She states, "I've spent years imagining what her answer[s] would be. And that is why I wrote this book" (530). While a noteworthy gesture, the novel falls devastatingly short of its goal, and it leaves the readers feeling as if they have recently purchased a Ferrari with a Volkswagen income; it is something they can enjoy ephemerally but ultimately cannot afford.

Structurally, *The Help* is a beautiful narrative: It is detailed and appeals to the emotions, the plot is well-developed, and the narrative is overall engaging, clearly written, and easy to follow. However, the novel does very little to render a different voice to its black female servants. Instead, the characters' actions suggest that they are archetypal mammy figures: they are strong and undersexed subordinates, similar to other black female servants depicted in the literature of white Americans. The one character (Skeeter) that is allowed to be weak, sexual, and self-actualizing is the one main character that is not an "other," therefore not susceptible to the sexual constraints of the mammy figure. Thus, *The Help*, despite its modern view, upholds outdated depictions and stereotypes of black women and serves as a neo-colonization of the black female body. It calls forth, as Lillian Smith (1949) declares in the above epigraph, a ghost whom both contemporary and maverick black feminists respect but had forbidden to walk the earth again. Still, this modern reproduction of the lives of asexual or undersexed black women lacking autonomy further supports the notion that the combination of self-identification, self-actualization, and self-sexualization potentially grants one a power and agency that might not otherwise be achieved.

I. The Sexless Servant is a Safer Servant

Upper class white Americans (women in particular) have long been invested in desexualizing the black women from whom they extract labor. If she has a family at all, the mammy figure most often found in the literature of white Americans neglects her duties as a mother or wife and commits herself to the service of her white “family,” therefore repressing her sexuality and renouncing her role as the producer of new black life. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Aunt Chloe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) sets the standard for stereotypical mammy figures such as the commercialized Aunt Jemima (1889) as well as Mammy in Thomas F. Dixon, Jr.’s unmistakably racist novel *The Clansman* (1905), but the most popularized version of Mammy is Margaret Mitchell’s Mammy in *Gone With the Wind* (1936)—which was later adapted to film and gave unlikely readers (whites and blacks alike) a pictorial view of the degradation of a race through the depiction of the happy, dutiful, dependent slave.

Author Patricia A. Turner (1994) insists that there is a difference between Stowe’s mammy figure and those that followed, stating, “Stowe’s decision to portray Aunt Chloe in a cabin feeding her three children while Uncle Tom and George Shelby looked on did give Aunt Chloe something future mammies often lacked—an implied sex life” (46). In other words, while Aunt Chloe’s sexuality is at least imagined, that of later mammy figures is completely ignored or prohibited. While this implication is still not as strong as a denotation, this difference in depiction could be a result of the fact that Aunt Chloe’s author, as President Abraham Lincoln is thought to have acknowledged, is “the little woman who made the great war”; Stowe was seemingly unconcerned with tradition and perhaps unintimidated by revolution (Valloro 20).

Post-bellum white Southerners, nostalgic of times before the war, however, preferred their black female servants to be asexual for numerous reasons, but they monitored their

servants' "extracurricular activities" supposedly under the pretense that black people, specifically black women, were the assumed carriers and transporters of diseases that could potentially be harmful to all with whom they came in close contact. And, since black worker women did everything from cook food, to change diapers, and wash the sheets of white homeowners, the homeowners were supposedly in intense danger.

In her piece, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* (2007)—a historical examination of America's obsession with the mammy figure—Micki McElya recounts the statement of the 1924 President of the Baltimore Domestic Efficiency Association, stating, "Most negro women who demand to go home at night do so for two reasons. Either they really go to their homes to do work they must neglect during the day, or particularly the younger ones, want to amuse themselves and spend much too large a portion of the nights at dances, movies, festival, etc" (222). In a similar study entitled *To 'Joy My Freedom* (1998), Tera Hunter deduces the post-bellum white Southern viewpoint by stating, "Their [black female servants] attendance at picnics, dance halls, and theaters deprived them of the rest and sleep needed to revitalize their energy in order to engage in gainful work and seduced them into 'licentious debaucheries of the most disgusting character'" (190). Hunter also acknowledges that the measures white Southerners took to monitor the personal lives of black domestics were "draconian attempts to exert more control over black female bodies in order to eliminate the scourges threatening Anglo-Saxon domination" (204). Lillian Smith, too, recognizes this fear of losing power, and in her work *Killers of the Dream*, more blatantly insists that the monitoring of the supplementary activities of black female house servants was essentially the white female's concern with to whom and what kind of extra "services" these servants were providing.

Stockett depicts examples of these and other historical accounts and beliefs in her narrative—separate maids’ toilets built in garages because “99% of all colored diseases are carried in the urine” and the inference of a maid’s inability to complete tasks at work as a result of a previous night’s activities at home (184). Although the discussion of these and similar topics has the potential to spark uneasy feelings in some people and force others to appreciate the yesteryears of segregation, this is not the sole dilemma with the narrative. A more striking concern is the fact that Stockett forces her black female characters to obliterate their own sexualities under the pretense of giving them their own voice; the mere thought of giving someone something that already belongs to them is ironic, pretentious, and self-serving, but very much indicative of traditional elite, white treatment of black female servants. Unfortunately for Stockett, the absence of sexuality in her portrayal of Aibileen and Minny dehumanizes her black female characters, rendering them flat, static, one-dimensional and thus stereotypical, warranting an equally unfavorable position for the work and its author.

In an attempt to demonstrate the claim that the black female characters that Stockett gives voice to are still subdued because they lack, or more clearly, are denied, an active sexuality, the remaining sections of this chapter are a thorough examination of each of the novel’s protagonists. The critical questions that are engaged include the following: 1) How mature is each character when she develops, understands, and expresses her sexuality? 2) How does class affect the way each character expresses her sexuality? 3) Does the community respond differently to the character based on the way she expresses her sexuality? 4) Is there a direct relationship between the display of sexuality and the character’s ability to be vocal? and 5) Does the character’s understanding and demonstration of her sexuality change or evolve as the narrative progresses? Each of these questions addresses one of the core concerns of modern

black feminist scholarship—age, class, social equality, voice (meaning the right to be heard), and progression (meaning one’s ability to evolve and develop as a woman, person, and citizen), and will therefore be instrumental in determining the roundness of a character according to black feminist theories.

II. Age is More than a Number

In March of 1965, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Moynihan issued a report documenting the poverty of African Americans, insisting that the lack of nuclear families and the matriarch-dominated culture was a cause of the race’s economic and political failure. A majority of black families prior to and during the time of the report were supposedly headed by mammy-like figures, women whose mothers and grandmothers had served as house servants during slavery, and women who themselves were working in white homes as cooks, laundry women, and caretakers. These women are often thought of as foremost old, but also fat, and asexual. Stockett’s work is set in 1962, and she does an exceptional job of creating protagonists who follow Moynihan’s paradigm. While a few young service workers make an appearance in *The Help*, Stockett seems to have thought it best—or at least less dangerous to the white character she is ultimately trying to develop—to depict the lives of the stereotypical maids and avoid shedding light on young, attractive, black maids with “normal” sexualities.¹²

Three women, two black and one white, dominate the novel’s plot. The first black protagonist, Aibileen Clark, is introduced, rather introduces herself, to readers via her

¹² Black domestic workers have not been the center of attention in recent culture or literature, but the idea of the sexual and therefore threatening colored maid is depicted in the 2013 Lifetime network series titled *Devious Maids*. In this television series, young Latina women work for wealthy families in Beverly Hills and often become involved in the personal lives of the homeowners. Intimate and sexual relations between the males and the workers are not uncommon. While this series is in itself stereotypical (in depicting Latina women as inherently licentious), it is an example of what Stockett, other elite white authors, and white mistresses during the late 19th to the mid 20th century feared in terms of engaging with and hiring (young) self-sexualized domestics of color.

introduction of the birth of her eighteenth white baby. Aibileen is immediately characterized as unsophisticated because at the age of fifty-three, her life primarily revolves around the white family for which she works.¹³ Also, in accordance with Moynihan's report, there are no men in her life. Her husband left more than twenty years prior for a more sexual woman, and her son was injured on the job and left for dead by the white men for whom he worked. In essence, Aibileen is depicted as the victim of both sexism and racism, but she is perfect for Stockett and her audience because she is stereotypical, someone white audiences are already familiar with, and therefore unthreatened by. Ultimately, despite the novel's conclusion, in which the three protagonists unite to complete a work that resists and unsettles traditional race relations, Aibileen, because of several oppressive institutions including ageism, remains the sexless, financially-dependent, timid, fat, black woman the white community loves, a flat and static character, and the epitome of the stereotypical mammy figure.¹⁴

Neither Aibileen nor the remaining two characters, when speaking to or of her, make it completely clear when she experienced her first sexual awakening. Had there been no mention of her dead son, there would be little to no evidence that Aibileen ever intimately desired or found pleasure in men. As a mature woman, all of her depictions of and thoughts about men are inherently negative or dismissed as being unrealistic for her age. She insists, "Time to time, I

¹³ This makes Aibileen unsophisticated because other than concerning herself with the health and happiness of her charges, she has very few interests, desires, or interactions. She does not seem to have her own serious social or political agendas.

¹⁴ Trudier Harris suggests that there are three stages the literary scholar must consider when analyzing a character's progression from mammy to militant. In the first stage, the maid is always accommodating and traditionally neglects herself and her community to appease her white family. The second stage depicts the mammy in transition, one who desires change but seeks it covertly because other circumstances such as economic status do not permit her to be completely active and vocal. Finally, the militant, who Harris suggests is typically a Northerner, is defiant and combative, one who both speaks out and stands up for what she believes she (and others) deserves. While Aibileen and Minny seemingly reach the transitional stage, the fact that their transition is reliant upon a white woman who goes North to a supposedly freer space and leaves them in limbo further complicates their situation because now they have experienced an inkling of empowerment but do not possess the characteristics fully to become militants. Stockett therefore leaves them in a situation even less desirable than the contented mammy because they are aware of their mistreatment but only wage battle within themselves for equality. See Harris's *From Mammies to Militants* (1982) for further analyses of depictions of mammies (in African American literature).

think I might find myself another man...Kind a man I like ain't the kind that stays around when he done spending all you money. I made that mistake twenty years ago. When my husband Clyde left me for that no-count hussy...I figure I better shut the door for good on that kind of business” (26). The comparison of a relationship to a business can be considered an indication that there is little to no pure intimacy and fulfillment in the relationship. Rather, Aibileen sees a relationship as an institution in which a woman is but a mere partner being acted upon, unless of course one is a no-count hussy like the one that ultimately claimed Aibileen's husband, in which case the woman is not viewed as a “woman” at all. Moreover, twenty years prior, Aibileen was thirty-three years young, very similar in age to the remaining black protagonist, Minny (who also finds herself without her husband by the novel's end), indicating early on in the novel the likelihood that Minny too will become the typical matriarch figure. Dickerson and Rousseau insist, “Ageism in relation to sexuality is the ultimate form of desexualization” (308). They also insist that a person that has been desexualized is inadvertently dehumanized. According to this logic, age alone deems Aibileen flat and static, but other characteristics also invigorate her depiction as a stereotypical character.

For quite some time, but especially recently during the rising debate over the single black woman crisis, it has been a common thought that the more independence a black woman possesses or the higher her socio-economic standing, the more difficult it is for her to find a suitable (black) mate and engage in (meaningful) sexual activities or relationships. In addition to being middle aged, although she is a maid and depends on wages earned from white employers, Aibileen, in comparison to the African Americans in her community, can also be considered middle class. This reality adds to the degree in which her character is inherently a stereotypical

black woman, as again, according to stereotypes, middle class in the age of a single black woman (and to a certain degree in the age of the Moynihan report) inherently equates to solitude.

In one of the opening chapters of the book, Aibileen vividly describes to readers her socio-economic status and therefore her “place” in the community, stating, “I live on Gessum Avenue, where I been renting since 1942...The houses all be small, but every front yard’s different—some scrubby and grassless like a baldheaded man. Others got azalea bushes and roses and thick green grass. My yard, I reckon it be somewhere in between”; similarly, Aibileen’s status is somewhere in between—middle class¹⁵ (18-19). Economically, she is not privileged but not disadvantaged, a truth that finds her in social solitude in her particular African American community.

Aibileen’s status in black communities is not equivalent to her status in white communities, of course. Although it is her seeming position as a single, “respectable,” middle age, and middle class, black woman that determines how white communities perceive her. Noting an example of a privilege that helps determine her status, she goes on to describe her treeless front yard with its red camellia bushes and spotty grass, but a backyard that “looks like the Garden of Eden [because] that’s where [her] next-door neighbor, Ida Peek, got her vegetable patch” (19). Because Ida allows Aibileen to pick from the patch at her convenience, she admittedly saves two to three dollars per week, is consequently more well off than other struggling African Americans in her community, and is therefore deemed more trustworthy by those hoping to hire her. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2007) agrees with Patricia Williams’s (1995) notion that many, white people in particular, see a black person’s rise to the middle class as one that was given as opposed to earned, and Collins insists that in return of the favor, some

¹⁵ Aibileen is not middle class according to traditional American standards, but her socio-economic status in her respective black community is mid-range.

white individuals expect these black women to exemplify the public face of the perfect mammy figure similar to Aibileen Clark (73).

Because she possesses the characteristics of the archetypal mammy figure, Aibileen puts the needs of others, but particularly her white families, before her own needs or the needs of her black community. The novel's white characters ultimately appreciate her because, unlike her black counterparts who may be of a lower status, they feel as if they can control her. White women often feel the need to give her items to commemorate both their appreciation and control.

After seeing Aibileen at a church gathering, Minny, Aibileen's best friend, exclaims, "She's wearing a blue dress with big white buttons that I've never seen before. Aibileen has white lady clothes out the wazoo. White ladies love giving her their old stuff. As usual, she looks plump and respectable, but for all her prim and proper, Aibileen can still tell a dirty joke that'll make you tinkle in your pants" (148). In partial agreement, Aibileen insists that she has "white lady clothes out the wazoo, ain't had to buy my own clothes in thirty years" (220). In this instance, Aibileen supports Minny's claim that white ladies love giving her their old material goods, but she later rejects the implication that she might have characteristics that would deem her anything other than plump, respectable, prim or proper. These mild characteristics are, after all, the reason Aibileen is favored by white women; she is less threatening to their womanhood and their intimate relationships.

As if to calm the fears of any potential white employers or benefactors, Aibileen suggests herself that she has very few racy characteristics, and therefore does not possess a deviant sexuality. In a daydreaming state, she declares, "I pretend we at The Raven... My man Clyde flash me his white-toothed smile and say *Honey, you want you a drink?* And I say, *Black Mary straight up* and then I get to laughing at myself, setting in my kitchen having this daydream,

cause the raciest thing I ever take is the purple Nehi” (26). With a theory in line with Aibileen’s fictitious juke joint activities with a man that is no longer hers, historian Micki McElya suggests that the body of the black laborer that was constantly under surveillance during the day “became a source of pleasure in one’s off hours. But this pleasure-seeking also came under concerned surveillance by whites who considered it not merely irresponsible and detrimental but the inevitable result of black inferiority and lack of self control” (236-7). Aibileen’s employers do not have to worry about these types of actions. She exhibits a control that has already been pre-determined and fixed, making her more favored by her employers, more suitable for the purpose of being controlled by them, more accepting of their old “stuff,” and ultimately more mammy-like.¹⁶

Both the favor and control is depicted when Aibileen describes her attempts at reaching out to past employers on behalf of her not-so-favored, loud-mouthed friend, Minny: “I call Miss Caroline over on Honeysuckle, see if she know somebody. And I call Miss Ruth, she so nice it near bout break your heart. Used to clean up the house ever morning so I didn’t have nothing to do but keep her company” (20). Reiterating her reputation, Aibileen’s current employer, Mr. Leefolt corners her and questions, “Got to keep up good references, moving around to different clientele like you do.” Aibileen responds with a “Yessir” (344). On the one hand, garnering respectability in the neighborhood and receiving gifts as a result seems like a privilege one might appreciate, but Aibileen knows that these people are controlling her, and because she lacks self-identity, self-actualization, and self-sexualization, she can do little about it.

Aibileen often finds herself pondering what to do with one bag of clothes given to her by the novel’s antagonist, Hilly Holbrook, a condescending young white lady who feels entitled and

¹⁶ Aibileen’s ability to control these desires seem to fixed by her age and class, stereotypical assertions Stockett seemed to have equated to sexlessness, or lacking sexuality.

privileged because of her race and demands such treatment from blacks and whites alike. Aibileen suggests that wearing those particular clothes would make her feel like “personal-owned property a Hilly W. Holbrook,” and while she does not wear the clothes, they occupy a space in her home and gain total control over that space (220). She states, “I shoot up and race a cockroach across the floor with my workshoe. Cockroach win. He crawl under the grocery bag a clothes Miss Hilly give me, been setting there for months” (220). Although the act of not wearing the clothes implies a bit of defiance, the cockroach finds refuge in an item in the house more dangerous than Aibileen’s shoe, a bag once owned by Hilly, a small bag that because of Aibileen’s undeniable reputation as a lackey, now has a particular kind of power over her house.

McElya’s historical study, *Clinging to Mammy*, records a post World War II house servant, Leila Parkson, describing a similar occurrence as Aibileen’s but with a different resolution: “It’s so funny, though. Every white person, rich or poor, always thought they could give me something. This family even—they give me an old blouse with stains under the arms, perspiration stains. I took it and dumped it in the nearest trash can on the way home” (228). Aibileen, on the other hand, lacks resistance and power and allows the bag of clothes, including the “pink jacket with the gravy stain on it,” to populate and overpower her home (220). So, despite Aibileen’s insistence on not wearing the clothes and her participation in the writing of a book that is intended to complicate and resist race relations in her community, because she is middle aged and has no active sexuality, and is therefore more widely accepted by the community, particularly the white community that sees her as no threat, she is in essence likewise controlled by that community.

The white community’s control over Aibileen is not simply internal or in terms of material goods, but they often control her voice as well. McElya indicates the “difficulty of

finding the historical voices of domestic workers. These women left few documents deemed worthy of the archives, and they were written *about* much more than they were allowed to speak for themselves” (209). On the other hand, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) suggests that there is indeed a body of work documenting the daily lives of black women domestic workers where “many Black women have insisted on our right to define our own reality, establish our own identities, and name our history. One significant contribution of work on domestic workers,” she states, “is that it documents Black women’s everyday resistance to [an] attempted objectification” (72). In defiance of both of these theories, Stockett allows Aibileen and Minny to tell their own stories and create favorable employer-employee relationships so that not much daily resistance is required. In the cases in which resistance is required, Aibileen most often lacks defiant qualities. Essentially, she lacks voice. And, this lack of voice is a direct relation to her lack of sexuality, which in turn is a result of her age and economic standing, as well as her communities’ perceptions of her.

Although Aibileen has only birthed one child of her own—which too could hint at her lack of active sexuality considering she was once married to a presumably sexual man who eventually leaves her for a “hussy”—she has admittedly raised seventeen children and therefore is sure that her potty training method would be more successful for her current white child, Mae Mobley¹⁷. Mae Mobley’s mother disagrees, however, but Aibileen is not one to object openly, stating, “Last time Miss Leefolt say no, I was fixing to tell her how many kids I raised in my lifetime and ask her what number she on, but I ended up saying *alright* like I always do” (108). Aibileen lacks voice and therefore lacks characteristics that could possibly be threatening to her

¹⁷ It can be argued that one child does not denote sexual inactivity, as other sexual characters in this study, namely Janie of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Winter of Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) have no children at all, but Aibileen’s lack of multiple children is nevertheless worth noting and interrogating; her number of offspring is also compellingly different from her two sisters “in Port Gibson that got eighteen kids between em” (23).

employer or to the purpose of the novel, but because of this, she also lacks dimension and intrigue.¹⁸ One of the few times in the novel when Aibileen displays militant vocal characteristics is a direct result of previous contact with Skeeter—the white protagonist who develops a heightened voice only after developing a heightened sexuality.

Skeeter, who is transcribing the book documenting the maid’s experiences, has recently fallen in love and has used those electrifying feelings as a confidence booster, indicating how her relationship has her “feeling good, strong” (208). Having had contact with Skeeter in her sexually-heightened, confident state on the previous night and recognizing how Skeeter, “has been glowing like a firefly she so in love,” Aibileen feeds off the light and speaks up for herself (222). When Hilly questions Aibileen about her opinion on integrated schools, Aibileen initially gives the answer she knows her audience wants to hear, but later retracts her statement saying, “But then I think: Why? Why I have to stand here and agree with her? ...I get my breath. My heart beating hard. And I say polite as I can, “Not a school full a just white people. But where the coloreds and white folks is together” (218). Even at this resistance, however, because of Aibileen’s every day persona as the controllable, and seemingly contented maid, her response is immediately dismissed and ignored, and she reverts back to her voiceless state, insisting, “I press my lips together,” as per usual because she is voiceless and ineffective (218). When Aibileen speaks with a confident voice, it is only in writing, and only under a pseudonym, as Sarah Ross or as Mrs. Myrna, but never as Aibileen Clark.¹⁹ So, again, Aibileen is the perfect Mammy character, always doing for others, but never effectively doing or speaking up for herself.

¹⁸ Interestingly, actress Viola Davis, who played Aibileen in the film version of *The Help*, admitted to Oprah and viewers of the documentary *Dark Girls* (2013) that she too wished that Aibileen’s character was more vocal.

¹⁹ Sarah Ross is the name Aibileen uses to tell her story in the book that she is developing with Skeeter, and Mrs. Myrna is the name given to the supposed house cleaning specialist of a gossip column for which Skeeter writes.

Despite Aibileen's clear resemblance to the typical mammy figure, one would hope that she would evolve by the novel's end. Yet, her participation in risky race relations that have the possibility of providing for her a new life with a newfound, dynamic identity yields very few changes. On the very last page of the novel, Aibileen suggests that she is free, "free, like Minny. Freer than Miss Leefolt, who so locked up in her own head she don't even recognize herself when she read it. And freer than Miss Hilly...she in her own jail" (522). One could argue that the novel ends on a hopeful and maybe even positive note for Aibileen because after insisting that "in thirty minutes, my whole life's...done," she also implies that maybe she "ain't too old to start over" (522). The primary problems lie in the fact that first, her "whole life" revolved around being a caretaker for whites; she had no other serious personal or intimate connections with anyone except Minny, who is forced to move away by the novel's end. Also, her age acts as a deterrent from living a new life; she implies that she may in fact start over, but the novel does not start over. It ends, her job ends, and so too does Aibileen end. Once the aged and stereotypical, mammy figure has been dismissed from her post, her presence in the novel is no longer needed. And, Stockett's modernly authored Aibileen could have easily been Margaret Mitchell's historical Mammy or any other stereotypical mammy crafted by elite whites.

III. Safe Sex versus Sex for Safety

Many scholars have determined that there are a few variations of the mammy figure. While Aibileen falls under the category of the matriarch, *The Help's* second black female protagonist, according to Barbara Christian (1980), seems to initially be of the Sapphire variation. Christian states:

The Sapphire heightens one aspect of the mammy image, her domineering characteristic. Loud-mouthed, strong-willed and practical...Sapphire's most salient quality is her ability to make black men look like fools, partly because she is unfeminine, that is, strong and independent, and partly because she is, by nature, emasculating. Although similar to the mammy, Sapphire is not so much maternal toward white folks as she is unfeminine in relation to black men. To them, she is cold, hard, and evil. (77)

Minnie Jackson is indeed introduced as an overbearing, loud-mouthed, superwoman character. Although she is married, she does not seem to need her husband, except for financial assistance. After she attains a new, higher paying job working as a maid for a woman (Celia) who does not want her husband to know that she is not domestic, even this financial need dwindles, and Minny's independent characteristics help to emasculate her husband, Leroy. She makes note of this emasculation several times throughout the narrative stating, "He strut around the kitchen like a plumed rooster cause he in front a the kids...Act like he the only one supporting the family and I'm just doing this to keep my poor self entertained. Later on though, we in bed, and I thought my big bull of a husband gone cry" (53). She also makes other snide comments about her income, insisting that Leroy is "no fool. He knows if I'm dead, that paycheck won't be showing up on its own" (153).

One would think that a woman as domineering as Minny can in no way be depicted as a victim or be used to portray the stereotypical mammy figure. However, while Aibileen is controlled by her age and the community, Minny is controlled by the same man that she "cuts down," so to speak. She, unlike Aibileen, is sexual, but the depiction of Minny's sexuality in *The Help* is not at all ideal. Because he cannot control her financially and mentally, Minny's husband

is physically abusive, and she uses pregnancy, therefore sex, as a form of protection from his abuse. After an intense dispute with Leroy, Minny utters, “Usually, he doesn’t mess with me when I’m pregnant...*Thank you for this baby*, I pray. Because that’s the only thing that saved me, this baby in my belly. And that’s the ugly truth” (477, 485). In essence, Minny, out of fear, populates the community with babies for whom she cannot honestly afford to provide, and by the end of the novel, too finds herself without a man and contributing to Moynihan’s theory. So, while Minny does not begin the novel as the typical aged, undersexed, mammy figure we find in *Aibileen*, Stockett creates an ending that allows readers to see Minny in just this light, therefore creating the Mammy fantasy that would not have otherwise been possible had Minny been in a non-abusive, sexual relationship.

A black woman who possesses a heightened sexuality has for quite some time been considered a danger to white Americans, particularly white women. It is thought that these women sexually provoke white men and therefore pose a threat to the white women with whom they are in relationships. So, whereas *Aibileen*’s sexuality is controlled by her age (under the short-sighted assumption that women over the age fifty do not have sexual desires, intimate relations, or sexually active lifestyles), Minny’s sexuality is controlled by a derogatory black male stereotype, the abusive husband figure. Although Minny possesses some of the typical mammy figure characteristics—big, black, good at both cooking and cleaning—her tendency to be overbearing and outspoken could have potentially set her apart. Stockett’s agenda, however, did not seem to include setting apart the black characters from other stereotypical mammy or maid figures, but rather her agenda seemed to include invoking those precise stereotypes in order to achieve an ulterior motive, to give sexual freedom and license to white females who have otherwise been forced upon a pedestal of sexual purity. Granting sexual freedom to the black

female protagonists, including a married black female character, seemed to have posed a threat to the sexual freedom of the white female protagonist. Minny's preoccupation with attaining freedom from an abusive husband distracts her from the business of being a woman and having a genuinely expressed sexuality. Thus, her character is very similar to the character of her best friend, an undersexed, financially-dependent, fat, black caretaker, ultimately a stereotypical mammy figure.

Minny is thirty-six years of age when she is introduced to readers as the narrative's second maid and protagonist. She is "short and big [with] shiny black curls [and] could probably lift [a] bus up over her head if she wanted to" (15). These supposed powers did not enable her to lift a car over her head when it seemed to pose a problem for her, however. When discussing her concerns about her fifteen year-old daughter, Felicia, wanting her driver's license, Minny insists, "I got pregnant with Leroy Junior when I wasn't much older than her [Felicia] and a Buick had something to do with it" (252). Not many responsible women are proud of having lost their virginity at a young age or mothering children out of wedlock, but Minny's depiction of what readers can assume is her first sexual encounter gives the impression that she has never seen sex or sexuality as something that can be enjoyable or empowering.

Dickerson and Rousseau suggest that "intimacy is a major aspect of sexuality and does not always require sexual intercourse, which is often mistaken for intimacy" (318). Minny's character does not even possess this aspect of sexuality, despite the fact that she lives and sleeps daily in the same house and bed with a man to whom she has committed her life. Instead, "what Leroy do[es] when he come[s] home from work [is] push her around" (215). This he sometimes does "for the pure *pleasure* of it," so much so that after a scene in the novel documenting the historical murder of Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers, Minny sighs, "I wish Leroy was home."

Aibileen doubts “them words ever been said in this house before” (359, 231 emphasis added). According to the facts presented in the novel, one can assume that pleasure is experienced in Minny’s home only during times of struggle and abuse. Even then, only Minny’s husband and not Minny herself—a stereotypical mammy figure—experiences the pleasure. Ultimately, as a result of her first sexual encounter and the ensuing abuse from her husband, Minny is a woman who has been sexually imprisoned and oppressed for nearly two decades and therefore poses no threat to the relationships between white women and their partners because she fears the consequences of expressing her own sexuality.

Furthermore, it is difficult to pose a threat to others when one’s sole survival depends on the kindness of others. Although she earns higher wages than her abusive husband, financially, Minny is even more dependent than Aibileen. The description of her yard, like Aibileen’s, denotes her economic status; she states, “I don’t even have a shrub, much less a tree, in my entire yard” (59). Just like her yard, her house is pretty bare, “no pictures or calendars on Minny’s walls,” and although she admits that it is not her favorite thing to do, she takes handouts from her employer (229). “I don’t take charity from white ladies,” Minny insists, “because *I know* they just want me to owe them. But when Miss Celia told me to take a dozen peaches home I pulled out a sack and plopped twelve right in” (61 emphasis original).

One could argue that Minny does not equate her new boss, Celia Foote, to a “white lady” because she does not possess the characteristics of a lady according to the cult of true womanhood (or Southern white womanhood)—she does not profess to Christianity, she became pregnant out of wedlock, and she cannot carry out the normal duties of the house—but Minny, only one page later, refers to Celia specifically as a “white lady,” so this argument would immediately fail. One could then suggest that Minny considers Celia a friend and simply does

not view her in the light of the typical white ladies she has worked for who have attempted to force her to owe them so that they can in turn own her. This could be a possibility, but ultimately, the gift Celia gives, like the gift of clothes that Aibileen receives, manages to control Minny and place her in an awkward, servile condition that would not have occurred had she not lacked economic stability (partially because she is married to and reproduces with an abusive man) and taken the fruit from her employer. Within moments of receiving the charity, Minny finds herself “lost in a peach-peeling reverie” and subsequently “crouched like a fool on top of a white lady’s toilet,” hiding from the white man (Celia’s husband) who pays her bills and puts food on her table (61, 62). At this point in the novel, Minny’s character is likened to that of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, a movie she dislikes because it “made slavery look like a big happy tea party,” a tea party not much different from her servile peach party, however, as she manages to lose herself in the charity of her benefactors and thus becomes momentarily enslaved by them (59).

Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins insists, “For reasons of economic survival, U. S. Black women may play the mammy role in paid work settings. But within African-American families and neighborhoods these same women often teach their own children something quite different” (74). This is only partially true in Minny’s case because along with playing the mammy role, she also enforces the rules set by her mother and teaches her daughters how to be proper servants and mammies. She recalls slapping her daughter for “talking bad” about Celia, stating, “She didn’t see the *whap* coming at her. Soapsuds flew through the air. ‘You shut your mouth, Sugar.’ I yanked her to the corner. ‘Don’t you never let me hear you talking bad about the lady who put food in your mouth, clothes on your back. You hear me?’” (334). The aggressive, loud-mouthed Minny is not more loyal to her employer than to her own child,

nor does she agree with all of the rules that constrain the black female domestic worker. But, because she is abused and belittled and cannot see past her current financial situation, she instills mammy-like characteristics in her own children. It is these characteristics in her children of which she seems to be most proud. Their respectful and servile qualities grant both them and her high esteem from individuals in her community, and she takes careful action to make certain that this admiration does not deteriorate.

For example, after one of the many beatings from her husband, Minny is forced to wear a bandage over her eye, but refuses to wear the bandage in public and bring attention to the fact that she is not only controlled and mistreated in the world in general but in her own home as well. She states, “Before I walk out, I peel that glaring bandage off, slip it in my pocket with my ice pack. On some folks around here, a cut-up eye wouldn’t even get a comment. But I’ve got good kids, a car with tires, and a refrigerator freezer. I’m proud of my family and the shame of the eye is worse than the pain” (366). Ultimately, Minny’s cause for shame, the bruised eye, is countered by respectable offspring who are a key factor in how the community views her. The children also are ironically a direct descendent of the scar-giver. Thus, because her valuation is contingent upon her eye and children, both results of physical interactions with Leroy, it is apparent that Minny is not self-actualized or self-identified. Furthermore, her reception by the community, whether positive or negative, is connected to her sexuality, one that is as bruised and battered as she is.

Minny’s character’s strength initially comes from her ability to be vocal. This characteristic of hers is praised several times throughout the narrative. Skeeter is adamant after meeting Minny that she has “never had a colored person speak to [her] this way” (191). Similarly, when Minny’s previous employer tells her “wasn’t nobody gone hire a sass-mouthing

thieving Nigra,” she does not hesitate to tell her employer, “Eat my shit” (398). But, as the narrative progresses, Minnie’s vocal strength recedes and dwindles before her character is given the opportunity to evolve fully and possess characteristics unique from the typical mammy figure. So, even in this area, she, too, falls flat.

For instance, in the beginning of the novel, Aibileen compliments Minny’s domestic capabilities by saying, “She ought to be the most sought after help in the state. Problem is, Minny got a mouth on her. She always talking back” (8). While one can argue that the community ban against Minny is one of Stockett’s ways of depicting the cruelties against domestic workers, she allows Minny to succumb to their ploys and lose the fervor and individualism that seemed to be what would initially set her apart from other maid and mammy figures. Minny finds herself “caring” especially about the feelings and needs of her employer, Celia Foote, and putting Celia’s needs before her own; she battles internally with this issue throughout the narrative. In one instance, while trying to protect her employer’s feelings, Minny states, “If I cared, which I don’t, I’d tell her those ladies ain’t worth it” (252). Immediately afterwards, Minny utters that exact phrase and tells Celia that the ladies aren’t worth her time and effort; this utterance reveals that she in fact does care about Celia. While caring for someone is not immoral or punishable, this internal warring happens several times throughout the narrative, and Minny, subsequently, can no longer vocalize in the way that she normally would, but rather she “grind[s her] teeth together to keep [her] real words in” (371).

It is no surprise that the employer who is responsible for “helping” Minny to lose her voice and abandon her “real words” is the one female character that has a clearly defined, unapologetic sexuality.²⁰ On one occasion, Minny describes her inability to tolerate Celia by

²⁰ Not surprisingly, Celia is not a black character, but she is also not a favorite of the community either, precisely because of her highly sensual qualities.

insisting, “I turn away, too embarrassed to look. Everything about her [Celia] oozes sex, sex, and more sex” (374). This dogged characteristic of Celia’s is something Minny both admires and fears. After Celia protects Minny from a sexual predator and trespasser, Minny suggests, “She’s got no goo on her face, her hair’s not sprayed, her nightgown’s like an old prairie dress. She takes a deep breath through her nose and I see it. I see the white-trash girl she was ten years ago. She was strong. She didn’t take no shit from nobody” (365). Celia is indeed something Minny, the mammy figure, is not: white, rich, strong, and sexual. Minny’s sexuality is so battered to the point that despite having five children and being pregnant with a sixth by the time the novel ends, she is the character that is least comfortable with sexuality, so much so that she cannot even vocalize the names of body parts used for sexual interactions until she is given permission to do so by Celia’s indomitable presence.

For example, the trespasser who is attacking Minny and taunting her with his penis is constantly referred to by Minny as the naked white man stroking his “po’boy sandwich,” that is, until Celia comes outside to rescue her (360). Then, Minny is able to recall Celia’s initial interaction with the trespasser by saying, “He flops his penis around at her [Celia] and she steps closer to the man, slow, like a cat” (363). Unlike Minny, Celia’s strategic attack demonstrates her comfort with sexuality and lack of fear of men and penises. The only person possessing a penis that Minny admires, in fact, is Celia’s husband, Johnny Foote. She admires his niceness, his good looks, “good hair,” and suggests that he is the only man she “get[s] the satisfaction of feeding” (164). This too is cliché—implying that there may be an erotic connection between the black house servant and the white boss—but ultimately, this interaction and Minny’s feelings about Celia and Johnny indicate that Celia possesses all that Minny does not: whiteness, money, confidence, an unapologetic sexuality, and a “nice husband.” So, perhaps it is only fitting that

she be the person to curb and obliterate Minny's overbearing, but individualistic, vocalities—vocalities that would have set her apart from stereotypical mammy figures like Aibileen.

Finally, the end of the novel finds Minny supposedly free and going on to become something different, greater even. In the final pages, she assures her friend, Aibileen, that she has taken her last beating from her husband, exclaiming, "I can't take this no more, Aibileen. I can't do this... Leroy don't know *what* Minny Jackson about to become" (515 emphasis original). However, readers of *The Help* do not know what she is about to become either because her tale, like Aibileen's, ends once she separates herself from that which has the most control over her. So, while readers do not know what will become of Minny, readers do know what she is: a stereotype. She is a big, financially dependent, black woman with an abused sexuality and takes "care a everybody except herself" (513). She is Mammy, and her author forces her to describe herself as such: "I look down at my hundred-and-sixty-five pound, five foot zero self practically busting out of my uniform. 'Too much for me?'," as if to say that there is nothing she cannot handle (42). It may be a bit difficult for her to handle raising six children alone, but the fact that Stockett leaves the tale as such further likens Minny to typical mammies depicted in the works of select white authors; she is a husbandless matriarch who lacks intimate and sexual pleasure.

Perhaps Stockett and others were unfamiliar with, or simply intimidated by, the more militant-minded black women of the 60s like Fannie Lou Hamer, a Mississippi native who radically organized domestic workers and was not "hung up on this thing about liberating [her]self from the black man." In fact, Hamer is adamant, "I got a black husband, six feet three, 240 pounds, with a 14 shoe, that I don't want to be liberated from" (Mills 274). One does not expect a woman like Hamer to serve, like Aibileen and Minny, in the capacity of "the help," but black women like her who resisted both racial and sexual stereotypes were not even factored into

the novel as a point of reference for Aibileen and Minny, who were, on the surface, doing something radical by crossing the color line and writing a tell-all about interracial relations in their community. In essence, Stockett rewrites history to allow a different voice to tell a different story, but ultimately the same story gets told: black female domestic workers plus sexualities equals a taboo in white authored literature.

IV. Who *The Help* Helps

At the heart of Deborah Gray White's *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1999) is an evaluation of the influence race and gender had on the lived experiences of enslaved people in the American South and an examination of specific myths and stereotypes about enslaved black women. The mammy and jezebel figures are of particular interest. In the midst of these examinations, however, is an implication of the influence these stereotypes had on the lived experiences of white women in the South. White maintains that "Southern white women were kept free and pure from the taint of immorality because black women acted as a buffer against their degradation...[but] many felt stifled by the sexual strait-jacket they were forced to wear" (39). Ultimately, one could argue that White's first chapter, titled "Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery," which is intended to give a historical background and trajectory of the two images, serves an unknown purpose of sympathizing with and "freeing" the white female image, insisting that "both blacks and women were ultimately subservient to white males. Thus...both groups [could be described] as slaves" (61). Stockett presents this theory in a different manner, or turns it on its head, so to speak, and gives the black female protagonists the "voice" to put themselves in a "sexual strait-jacket" while using the narrative to sexualize the white women, especially Celia and Skeeter. Perhaps it was

unfathomable, or one may even say unrealistic, for the narrative to depict the tales of both races of women equaling possessing active and pleasurable sexualities. This judgment of realism would, however, be based off previous depictions and stereotypes of black and white women, and Stockett's work makes an attempt at rectifying only one of these stereotypes.

To the reader's knowledge, Eugenia "Skeeter" Phelan is a virgin throughout the narrative, but Stockett makes calculated attempts at freeing her from her sexual strait-jacket and allows her to experiment with sexuality. At the age of twenty-three, Skeeter, the young, white, virgin, is more smugly sexual than either of the other main characters in the novel. In essence, her character is allowed to "dirty up" the narrative a bit without actually dirtying up her virtue, therefore still being permitted to adhere to certain Victorian ideals and remain a "lady." Skeeter insists that she was brought up to believe that open sexuality garnered punishment, stating, "Mother once told me tongue kissing would turn me blind and I'm starting to think it's all a big plot...to make sure no one ever has any fun" (173). For this reason, she does not feel comfortable telling her mother "about Charles Gray, [her] math study partner last spring, at Ole Miss. How he'd gotten drunk senior year and kissed [her] then squeezed [her] hand so hard it should've hurt but it didn't, it felt wonderful the way he was holding [her] and looking into [her] eyes" (65).

There are attempts throughout the narrative to demonstrate how Skeeter is different from other white women not only because she respects and appreciates "the other" race, but also because she toys with the idea of being freely and openly sexual, even as a young, middle class, unmarried, white woman. Describing a date with her first boyfriend as he asks her to stay in a hotel room with him and thinking about what her friends would say, she states, "Stuart shuts the door, kisses me quickly on the lips...and puts his cool palm on my leg... 'You mean at the

Edgewater...together? In the same room?’ They’d held on to their virginity with the fierceness of children refusing to share their toys. And yet, I considered it” (282-3). The thought of sleeping in the same room with a male, to Skeeter, a middle-class, young, white lady, automatically translates as something sexual, but for the married, black, financially dependent, Minny, sleeping in the same room is but a necessity considering the fact that the two bedrooms in her home have to accommodate seven individuals. Ultimately, *The Help*, published in an era when sexuality studies are burgeoning, provides a new light in which to view the stereotype of the lady (read white) figure, which although seen as the epitome of perfection, can also be considered dull and stiff.

Lillian Smith insists that Southern white women in particular “convinced themselves that God had ordained that they be deprived of pleasure...[and that] the sexual blankness of their life was ‘God’s way’ and hence if you were sensible must be accepted” (140). But, Smith, too recognizes that a few women “climbed down from the pedestal when no one was looking and explored a bit...did their little sabotage and sneaked up again, wrapping innocence around them like a shawl” (144). Stockett allows Skeeter to do just this. However, she is only afforded to do such a thing as a direct result of her race, age, and class, each of which are dramatically different from the two black characters—one is not permitted to explore sexually because of age, and the other is only permitted a tainted sexuality because of class, but both are stereotypical mammy figures because of their race and elite white propensity to desexualize those from whom they extract labor.²¹

²¹ Along with her occupation as a maid, Minny’s class is linked to the number of children she has and minimally provides for, and the children are often created and used as a safety net from an abusive husband. Therefore, her class is interconnected with abuse, which ultimately diminishes her ability to possess a self-governed, active sexuality.

Dickerson and Rousseau view sexuality as an economical construct, suggesting that one's identity is based on one's income, and "lack of wage-earning identification in a capital driven system, arguably, devalues a person's very humanity"; this lack of humanity inadvertently makes such a person unlikely to be considered amongst those individuals possessing an active sexuality (313). Although Skeeter is not financially independent throughout the narrative and works as a columnist for miniscule wages, she is amongst the middle class by birth. Readers are constantly reminded of her trust fund, "twenty-five thousand cotton dollars in [her] name" (67). The fact that her financial stability comes at the hands of hired and presumably struggling black laborers makes her financial independence, and therefore sexual independence, even more reason for contention, especially considering the black laborers themselves do not possess a viable identity or active sexuality. In her opening chapter, Skeeter acknowledges:

I drive my mama's Cadillac fast on the gravel road, headed home...I turn up the lane that leads to Longleaf, my family's cotton plantation... Mother is rocking on the front porch...I lean on the porch railing, look out on the three mossy oak trees in the front yard...Surrounding our yard lie ten thousand acres of Daddy's cotton fields, the plants green and strong, tall as my waist. A few colored men sit under a distant shed, staring into the heat. Everyone is waiting for the same thing, for the cotton bolls to open. (63-64)

Readers have already learned from Aibileen how one's yard is indicative of their classification and social standing. Skeeter and her family are clearly wealthier than either Aibileen or Minny. Her family does not just have a yard, but an entire plantation with cotton fields and multiple trees and a porch ornamenting their front lawn. Ironically, however, "a few colored men" are included in the description of the yard, as if they, too, are a piece of the family's property (land and

goods), again reiterating that the financial stability which allows Skeeter to have a sexuality is a result of black deficiency.

Likewise, it is because of the few colored men that Skeeter is able to take a job as a writer, accepting pay less than one quarter of what the help receives for their duties but can still manage to go into a fancy department store and charge eighty-five dollars to her mother's account for a new dress for her date, a dress that her mother would "profoundly disapprove of" because of the "cleavage the dress enables [her] to have" (131). The dress allows her to have the cleavage, the money allows her to have the dress, and the work of the domestic laborers allows her to have the money; yet, only she is allowed to have sexuality. After her relationship does not work, however, the advice that Skeeter's mother gives to her is simple, "Don't let him cheapen you" (420). This further adds to the notion that one's sexuality, at least according to this novel, is a direct result of one's economic status, and since Aibileen and Minny, unlike Skeeter, are not financially sound, and are black, they are depicted as stereotypical mammy figures as opposed to sophisticated black female characters with active sexualities.

The burgeoning sexuality that Skeeter has does not find favor with the other white women in the narrative, especially older women and those once identified as her close friends, those who she insists had "held on to their virginity with the fierceness of children refusing to share their toys" (283). Yet, she is not controlled by her community to the extent that Aibileen and Minny are. Skeeter detects that "someone always seems to be ashamed of [her]," even her boyfriend Stuart. Skeeter notices Stuart's parents while they are preparing to exit a restaurant, but Stuart nudges her toward the door, insisting, "I don't want Mother to see you in that short dress...I mean, believe me, it looks great on you, but...Maybe that wasn't the best choice for tonight'" (447). The reason that the dress may not have been the best choice for that particular

night, Skeeter later learns, is because Stuart had planned to ask for her hand in marriage while at the restaurant. Instead, he proposes to her in his car while they are parked outside of Skeeter's parents' house.

One can only assume that while Stuart admittedly appreciated the dress and the possibilities it presented, he did not want to propose marriage to a woman that the community as a whole would not approve of. After purchasing the dress, Skeeter had proclaimed, "Tonight, I'll strip off all this armor and let it be as it was before with Stuart" (447). However, neither Stuart nor her other acquaintances were completely comfortable with women being "armorless." As a result, Skeeter becomes alienated from the community and begins to compare herself to the outcast, Boo Radley in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

Ironically, while the white community rejects Skeeter, the black community supposedly takes her in. And, if Skeeter is Boo, then Aibileen and Minny must be the Finch children that she supposedly saves, only her attempt at saving them leaves them in a new and different state of turmoil and fear. Still, after the book she worked on with Aibileen and Minny has been published, Aibileen and Minny's church and community members all sign a copy and give one each to Aibileen, Minny, and Skeeter, insisting "This one, this is for the white lady. You tell her we love her, like she's our own family" (468).

Stockett often implies that Skeeter is more akin to the black women whom she is working with than she is to her white peers. In describing her hair and other physical features, Skeeter says, "To say I have frizzy hair is an understatement. It is kinky, more pubic than cranial...My skin is fair and while some call this creamy, it can look downright deathly when I'm serious, which is all the time...But my eyes are cornflower blue, like Mother's. I'm told that's my best feature" (66). Even Skeeter's description of her hair is sexual; one can only assume that Minny

would have never been comfortable saying that her hair was “pubic.” Furthermore, Skeeter also tells readers that she got her nickname because when she was born, her brother declared, “‘It’s not a baby, it’s a skeeter,” meaning a mosquito, a small, dark insect with long legs (66). Indeed, the five foot eleven Skeeter is constantly reminded of her abnormal height for a woman and her uncharacteristic hair texture for a member of the white race. Despite Stockett’s efforts, however, these features, combined with Skeeter’s ostracism, fail to make sensible readers sympathize with her as an equal to members of the darker, underpaid, and disrespected race. Moreover, just Skeeter’s cornflower blue eyes alone grant her a privilege that Toni Morrison’s (1970) Pecola Breedlove nearly dies to have. Still, other privileges differentiate Skeeter from the likes of Aibileen and Minny, particularly the fact that she is a member of the League, an organization for the “women” in the community. “Once a week,” she can go to a meeting and “actually feel like [she is] a part of things,” a feeling that Aibileen and Minny do not have the privilege of experiencing, just as they are not allowed to experience sexuality to the magnitude that Skeeter does (411).

Another difference between Skeeter and the novel’s remaining protagonists is her education level; the fact that she possesses a college degree and has been formally educated, coupled with her newfound sexuality, grants Skeeter a voice that even she did not know she possessed. As a result, she feels powerful and evokes this power at any cost. Immediately after receiving her first job as the weekly cleaning advice columnist, “oh the irony of it,” she begins to develop voice enough to stand up to her mother and torment her with the idea that she does not “want” to live at home. Skeeter insists, “I see the quick pain in her eyes. She presses her lips together at the sting. Still, I have no desire to take back my words because finally, *finally*, I have

said something she's listening to" (87, 88 emphasis original). This is only the beginning of Skeeter's vocal growth and mental strength, however.

After she falls deeply in love with Stuart, Skeeter's vocal growth and strength intensifies and increases, but it also shrinks when the reason for its growth is no longer present. The following passage describing Skeeter and Stuart's second date, their first date without another couple, depicts the event which enables Skeeter to reach the peak of her vocal abilities:

I haven't had the chance to look at too many men's faces up close and I noticed how his skin was thicker than mine and a gorgeous shade of toast; the stiff blond hairs on his cheeks and chin seemed to be growing before my eyes. He smelled like starch. Like pine. His nose wasn't so pointy after all...out of the blue, he kissed me. Right in the middle of the Robert E. Lee Hotel Restaurant, he kissed me so slowly with an open mouth and every single thing in my body—my skin, my collarbone, the hollow backs of my knees, everything inside of me filled up with light. (200-201)

Skeeter can afford and therefore is afforded intimacy (by her author), unlike Aibileen and Minny, and she is filled up with "light" as a result of it. With this enlightenment, as previously mentioned, comes the ability to publish her work and speak out against injustices towards both herself and the black female characters in the narrative. Had the black characters been permitted active and pleasurable sexualities, one can only assume that they would have been able to evoke change in their own lives without the help of Skeeter. This is not the case, however, as Stockett follows age-old traditions and desexualizes the black women who provide physical and emotional labor for white households. In essence, their civic freedom, so to speak, depends on

Skeeter's sexual freedom. Lucky for them, she and Stuart's relationship endures at least until the greater part of their project is completed.

A short period after the aforementioned date, Skeeter walks into the house humming a song entitled "Love Me Do" thinking to herself, "I ought to go buy a short skirt like Jenny Foushee wore today... Mother would keel over if I showed up with a skirt above the knee when Stuart picks me up... I pull a Co-Cola from the fridge, sigh and smile, feeling good and strong" (208). This change in Skeeter's attitude is noticeable even to Aibileen, suggesting, "Miss Skeeter sound strange. Tight in the jaw. Lately, she been glowing like a firefly she so in love" (222). Skeeter's growth continues upon each date with Stuart. She describes one interaction, insisting, "He claps my hands to his hips and kisses my mouth like I am a drink he's been dying for all day, and I've heard girls say it's like melting, that feeling. But I think it's like rising, growing even taller and seeing sights over a hedge, colors you've never seen before" (285). Chapters later, however, Skeeter learns that even Stuart, the man who had once looked at her "like he want[ed] to eat [her] up," is not completely fond of women with voices, and when he leaves her, her voice weakens (283). Aibileen notices this change also, acknowledging, "Miss Skeeter don't smile much since Mister Stuart and her ain't steady no more... she speak in a low voice" (337). This text suggests that the lack of a man implies the lack of a sexuality, which equates to a lack of voice. And, seeing as neither Aibileen nor Minny are granted (healthy) relationships with men, their voices are inherently always stifled or nonexistent, with or without the publication of a work (Stockett's or Skeeter's) that pretends to give them a voice.

As a final point, Skeeter's character begins to evolve much sooner than the remaining characters. She insists, "I'm starting to notice things;" because she "notices" things and seems to no longer fit into the Mississippi society, she is allowed to leave and start her life anew (183).

From being dismissed from her position in the League because her friends find out about her feelings toward segregation to receiving shameful looks for wearing short skirts from “MODERN WOMEN WEAR’S,” Skeeter’s character is continuously experiencing change, particularly with sexuality. She relays an experience with the air conditioner, exclaiming, “I stand in front of the window and unbutton my blouse. Carefully, I turn the dial to ‘3’...The power blows out in about three seconds” (325). This is one of several passages Stockett devises to imply that no one and no thing is prepared for or comfortable with the idea of a white woman possessing an overt sexuality. However, the rest of the novel also implies that even Stockett may not be comfortable with the idea of black women having both an active and pleasurable sexuality, which is why she creates black maid characters that exemplify characteristics of the stereotypical mammy figure.

Not surprisingly, the novel’s end finds Skeeter preparing to move to New York, where perhaps people are more accepting and modern in their racial and sexual relations, while Aibileen and Minny, those who suffer serious injustices, are left behind. While thinking about what her life would have been like had she not written the book with Aibileen and Minny, Skeeter deduces that she would have been “tired and content and...frustrated.” She insists,

Hilly would’ve called her maid a thief that afternoon, and I would’ve just sat there and listened to it. And Elizabeth would’ve grabbed her child’s arm too hard and I would’ve looked away, like I didn’t see it. And I’d be engaged to Stuart and I wouldn’t wear short dresses, only short hair, or consider doing anything risky like write a book about colored housekeepers, too afraid he’d disapprove. And while I’d never lie and tell myself I actually changed the minds of people like Hilly and Elizabeth, at least I don’t have to pretend to agree with them anymore. (493)

For Skeeter, a young, white lady, sexuality is equal to, or even more important than, racism, motherhood, or submissiveness; yet, the black protagonists in the novel lack this same characteristic. The few black maids (such as Yule Mae—who is purported to have a nice figure, a nice husband, and two nice sons) who have the potential to defy the description of the stereotypical mammy are not granted serious attention in the novel. Their stories do not get told; this becomes a problem when the purpose of the narrative is to give voice to those who have been otherwise voiceless in order to tell the stories that have yet to be told. As a result, one can but infer that the only story Stockett really wanted told was that of the young, white woman who “climbed down from the pedestal when no one was looking and explored a bit” (Smith 144).

V. What to Conclude When there is No Good Conclusion

Notable black feminist Barbara Smith (1977) proclaims, “For books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that basic intentions of the authors are at least considered” (133). After considering these basic intentions, one can agree with the general conclusion that Katherine Stockett writes an intriguing page-turner. Mississippians can be especially thrilled to recognize a great many landmarks and towns depicted in the novel. African Americans can be pleased with the respect paid to specific historical figures and events pertinent to African American history. Woman may appreciate the sisterhood and solidarity amongst several of the female characters. For each of these three different reasons, one may have a personal connection to the work. However, as a person is only one being, as opposed to three different beings, and neither of these entities can be separated from the identity of a Southern black female, the fact that the black, female, Mississippi natives in Stockett’s *The Help* are one-dimensional may be problematic for many.

Although to different degrees, both Aibileen and Minny are portrayed as stereotypical, antebellum, mammy figures revived and slightly revised for a contemporary audience. They enhance and bring order to the personal lives of their white charges, but the maids' personal lives are muddled or nonexistent. More specifically, they lack active, pleasurable sexualities. Stockett purports to provide a different viewpoint and give voice to a group of people who had for the most part only been spoken about. While providing this viewpoint and conferring this voice, she ultimately repeats an age old tradition, as an elite white, of colonizing the black female body, and adds to the degradation of black female sexualities in literature because she permits and forces these characters to desexualize themselves.

Alice Walker, in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), proclaims after viewing Judy Chicago's feminist art piece titled "The Dinner Party," "It occurred to me that perhaps white women feminists, no less than white women generally, cannot imagine black women having vaginas. Or if they can, where imagination leads them is too far to go" (383). It is too far to go because the path leads to the back doors and shack houses of slaves where masters have left their pedestal princesses and found favor in the black vagina, or even further back to the sixteenth century where English travel men, although perplexed by the beauty and strangeness of the black female body, show profound interest in it. And, to deny a black woman sexuality as result of these unwarranted encounters is to insist that she was to blame for her own oppressions. This is not to say that Stockett, or any author of any race or gender, is to imagine and depict all black women characters as hyper-sexual, immoral beings, but to portray them all as undersexed women devoted solely to work and community, as opposed to personal, intimate, or sexual fulfillment, is to ignore reality.

Aibileen Clarke is the epitome of a devoted maid and caretaker, neither of which are terrible qualities, except that this is all she is; her character falls flat and does not thoroughly fulfill Stockett's intended purpose for the book, which is to depict what it was like as a black woman to work for a white family in Mississippi during the sixties. This is so because while Aibileen clearly outlines what it was like to be black in Mississippi and dependent upon white employers, very little attention is paid to the concept of being a woman, mainly because instead of being a woman, Aibileen is depicted as a mere servant. Because of her age, she is falsely depicted as an ineligible partner, non-desirous of sex or intimacy with the opposite sex; nor does she display characteristics that would imply that she prefers sexual intimacy with someone of the same sex. Furthermore, because Aibileen has reached a certain status in her community and receives charity from members of the community, along with charity from members of white communities, she has become controlled by these same communities, and even the slightest inklings of personal fulfillment are rendered void as a result of this lack of autonomy. Finally, she lacks a voice, and her progress as a woman, person, and citizen is uncertain. According to feminist scholarship, each of these characteristics that Aibileen lacks renders her character flat, static, one-dimensional, and thus stereotypical.

Minny's character has the potential to be a bit more round and dynamic, but the progression of the novel finds her in a position very similar to Aibileen's. She begins with a boisterous, self-confident personality, but this characteristic is soon diminished once she begins to work for a white woman who has a powerful sexuality, further illustrating the disadvantage of not being self-sexualized. But, this disadvantage, according to Barbara Christian's theory, is significant and necessary if Stockett is to fulfill the "real" purpose of her novel, which is to remove the stigma of white womanhood being ultimately dull and chaste. Christian states,

Despite the contradictions inherent in the image of the lady and its correlate, the image of the mammy, these concepts were essential parts of the South's public dream and therefore of literature. The lady was, of course, the center of the dream. But, although the black woman is seldom focused on in antebellum literature, she almost always appears in the background as the contented and loyal mammy. (11)

In the case of *The Help*, the black woman is indeed focused on, so much so that on the surface, one would presume her the focal point of the novel, but fundamentally, her role is to serve as the sexually contented (namely inactive or self-suppressed) and loyal mammy while the white woman is allowed to step down from her pedestal and live a bit. Thus, despite its purported intentions, Stockett's modern, 21st century narrative exemplifies both colonial and antebellum ideologies; because it desexualizes black female domestic workers, it effectively "simulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom," and it ultimately forces contemporary black women to (re)visit and (re)live a time when their bodies were clearly not their own (Morrison 57).

Due to works such as *The Help*, and a wealth of other historical works depicting limited and negative images of black female bodies, some academics are hesitant to discuss or write about black female sexualities in fear of possibly adding to the already negative stereotypes of this body. Those works that actively engage this topic are most often cast aside as popular or commercial fiction as opposed to literary fiction, and in an attendant fashion, are often dismissed from scholarly discussion. However, if literary and critical fields, particularly feminist studies and sexualities studies, are to continue to grow and gain vigor and depth, the works of these writers necessitate critical engagement, as they provide a wider depiction of black female sexualities, depictions inherently more complex than the traditional jezebel or mammy figure as

depicted in Stockett's *The Help*. All in all, this work demonstrates the dangers of not being self-identified, self-actualized, and self-sexualized.

CHAPTER II

“Uh Woman by Herself is uh Pitiful Thing”²²: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999)

“Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.”

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)

Aibileen Clark and Minny Jackson’s dreams were deferred before they were fully realized, as a result of their race, age, class, and sex, along with the fact that their dreams were authored by someone who possibly could not grasp fully the dreams of African American women, or was intimidated by the possibilities. Black women authors allow their black women characters to dream because they realize that the race’s continued progress depends upon the fulfillment of dreams, but they also acknowledge, as Joan Morgan (2000) proclaims, “that there is no dream I can’t pursue *and achieve* simply because ‘I am a woman’” (59, emphasis original).

However, there are dreams that some black women and their characters do not pursue because they are the dreams of others forced upon them. For example, Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie Crawford has long been an archetypal journeying, black female character, possessing dreams of horizons, bees, and pear trees. But, she is forced, by her maternal figure, in the direction of land, mules, and porches. When her initial dream is deferred, she attempts to conjure up other dreams, but as her narrator foreshadows in the opening lines of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie fails to abolish her primary dream completely and finds it always taunting her and remaining ever-present in her subconscious.

²² The chapter title is taken from a line in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This is the excuse townspeople give Janie as to why she should remarry after Joe’s death: “Uh woman by herself is uh pitiful thing...Dey needs aid and assistance. God never meant ’em tuh try tuh stand by theirselves” (110).

On the whole, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has unique aesthetic qualities, such as the use of folklore and figurative language, but the fact that Janie's dream, on the surface, seems nothing more than a longing for an intimate companion has been a matter of contention and reason for dismissal of Hurston and the novel since its publication. Donna Williams (1994) describes a love and hate relationship that some critics have had with Hurston because she did not attenuate her folk art with the political endeavors of the day, insisting, "If Zora Neale Hurston were walking the Earth today like a natural woman, folks would still, no doubt, be loving her or hating her with a vengeance. They'd either be inviting her to dinner, knowing that she would dominate the conversation...or they'd be running like crazy from her exasperating presence" (86). Williams goes on to discuss how despite mixed emotions about her, Hurston does in fact continue to have a presence in academia. Indeed, Hurston, like many foremothers before her, with dexterity, has paved the way for and impacted the way that contemporary African American women both read and write literature. Notwithstanding skillful imaginations such as Williams's, however, the fact remains that Hurston cannot and will not ever walk the earth again—like a natural woman. Still, she can gain immortal status through her works. Scholars may someday lose interest in the potential of tales nearly eighty years old, and for over forty years heavily critiqued, but Hurston's immortality may be best attained and secured if scholars find ways to make the characters and topics she explored relevant to current times, and particularly to audiences uninhibited by antebellum grandmothers and potentially unconcerned with pastoral beauties.

In her essay collection titled *Fighting Words* (1998), Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins argues that "any social theory that becomes too out of touch with everyday people and their lives, especially oppressed people, is of little use to them." Instead, she insists that this theory

must also have a functionality, but “at the same time, being too practical, looking only to the here and now—especially if present conditions seemingly offer little hope—can be debilitating” (188). Over the past few years, as sexual explicitness and sexual exploitation have become more widely addressed in mass media and everyday life, contemporary scholars have become more engaged with sexualities studies. A number of anthologies on black sexualities have been published in the past five years, including Juan Battle and Sandra Barnes’s *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies* (2009). Furthermore, Stacey Patton (2012), in a probing essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, deduced scholars’ and society’s general fear of black sexualities, while Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (2013) wrote an equally intriguing essay for *The Root* describing the moment when sex was first engaged in black literature. With the interests of black sexualities studies on the rise, while critics have demeaned the genre of popular fiction, implying that it is borderline pornographic and therefore inappropriate, these works, if engaged critically, provide varied depictions of “everyday people” and additional insight in the study of (black) sexualities.²³ They are thus a great means for bridging the gap between generations of scholarship, and allowing for both reverence for the past, recognition of the present, and a possible paradigm for the future.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999) present an opportunity for such an intergenerational reading. Like Janie, the title character of *The Coldest Winter Ever*, Winter Santiago, has been led astray by a mother with limited and outdated dreams. When Winter finds herself separated from her mother and entire family, this misguided dream becomes central to her way of life and means of survival. Whether strategic or coincidental, a worthwhile fact concerning the maternal figures in these two works is that neither is named, as Nanny and Momma (or Mrs. Santiago) are the only appellations given

²³ See Nick Chiles’s *New York Times* article, “Their Eyes Were Reading Smut” (2006).

to the two characters. Collins suggests in *Black Sexual Politics* (2005) that namelessness is equivalent to nakedness as the exclusion of names for black women was common in Western societies where women were placed naked on auction blocks in slavery, and is likewise common in hip hop culture where nearly naked black women can be seen flaunting their bodies in music videos. “One black body,” she insists, “can easily replace another” (128-9). The namelessness for Nanny and Mrs. Santiago represent a different type of disrobement, however, as they can seemingly be replaced by any black mother who misguides and forces ideas upon her daughter.²⁴

Winter’s mother plans a life for Winter that is identical to her own, consisting of limited formal education, a drug-dealing husband, lavish homes, cars, clothes, and jewels, and children with similar materialistic values. Unlike Nanny who attempts to tame or repress Janie’s sexuality, however, Winter’s mother encourages and supports sexual expression. Amongst several other comparisons between the two works, two parallel ideas are worth noting: Both protagonists have noticeable difficulties with sexuality and recognizing the power and agency that it affords or disallows. In addition, both characters ultimately become displeased with the mothers who have forced their individual ideals of womanhood upon them and, to a certain degree, distracted them from a purer dream. The characteristics that Janie and Winter possess are indicative of maverick feminism because inherit in them is the conception that there is no one way to be a (black) woman, and that following prescribed notions is much less liberating and sustaining than self-identification.

The remaining sections of this chapter provide an overview of the critical reception of the two works along with a thorough analysis—according to previously noted critical concerns of

²⁴ Mother and daughter here refer to the blood relationship between a parent and a child but can also relate to any maternal figure and an impressionable young woman (namely a female teacher and a female student). Also, Mrs. Santiago is revealed as Lana Santiago in the sequel to *The Coldest Winter Ever* titled *A Deeper Love Inside* (2013), told by the middle child, Porsche Santiago, who is only nine when she is separated from her parents and has a different, naïve viewpoint of and respect for her mother.

modern black feminist scholarship (specifically age, class, social equality, voice, and progression)—of the sexuality of the protagonist in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* respectively, in an attempt to evaluate the roundness of the character and the extent to which she may or may not possess maverick feminist characteristics, or more specifically, characteristics that are individualistic and therefore sometimes flawed, but necessary for her own growth and influential to the growth of other black women. Ultimately, this chapter illuminates the manner in which the two works—although separated by generations, genre, and critical opinion—have similar messages and when placed in critical conversation with one another, help to add depth to the body of criticism concerning (black) feminism and sexualities studies. Moreover, this and similar analyses help to achieve immortal status for historical greats such as Hurston and grant critical recognition to contemporary influences such as Souljah.

I. If You Can’t Stand the Heat...

Zora Neale Hurston is a controversial African American writer who paid the price for difference. Noted for her use of folklore and dialect, Hurston gained both admiration and notoriety during the Harlem Renaissance; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* generated, and still generates, the most approbation and disapproval. Amongst the many reviewers following the publication of *Their Eyes* in 1937, Lucille Tompkins insisted that the novel is a “beautiful...novel...about her [Hurston’s] own people...but really it is about every one, or at least every one who isn’t so civilized that he has lost the capacity of glory” (18). Similarly, Sheila Hibben was convinced that Hurston’s novel is a “lovely book” because of its “Nature and salt”—flavor (21). Not all critics were in full agreement, however. Otis Ferguson seemed equally

to like and dislike the novel, stating, “It isn’t that the novel is bad, but it deserves to be better [because the] flabby lyric discipline we are so sick of leaves a good story where it never should have been potentially: in the category of neuter gender, declension indefinite” (22-3). Alain Locke’s review of Hurston’s novel similarly displays a degree of mixed feelings as he questioned, “When will the Negro novelist of maturity, who knows how to tell a story convincingly—which is Miss Hurston’s cradle gift, come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction?” (18).

The harshest and most memorable of Hurston’s contemporaries, Richard Wright, an African American writer with an equally controversial career, utterly defames Hurston and her work by insisting, “Her [Hurston’s] characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears... The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought” (17). In an online article published by *The Root* as part of a series entitled “100 Amazing Facts About the Negro,” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests that the root cause of Wright’s displeasure with the work was “Hurston’s creation of a black female protagonist who was comfortable with and celebrated her own sexuality, and who insisted on her right to choose her own lovers in spite of the strictures of the black community” (§ 12). This type of protagonist and narrative, according to Wright’s view, was not political enough to aid in the social advancement of the race. Hurston insists, however, that “it is urgent to realize that the minorities do think, and think about something other than the race problem” (“What White Publishers Won’t Print” 56).

Unmistakably, although more covertly, scholars have for quite some time concerned themselves with narratives of desire and pleasure, but black sexualities studies are only recently

gaining popularity and acceptance. Still, Hurston clearly was attuned to and brazenly explored the field over seven decades ago, despite forewarnings against it and critical rejection of it. Poet and critic Donna Weir-Soley (2009) insists:

Their Eyes Were Watching God revolutionized the depiction of black female sexuality in African American literature...in 1937, when she wrote her second novel, the damaging effects of nineteenth-century sexual ideology on black women's subjectivities and writings were fully entrenched. The black press cautioned writers to keep their submissions free of overt sexualities (39).

In sum, publishing companies were hoping to counteract negative black female stereotypes and images by altogether avoiding depictions of overt sexuality. The depictions of sexuality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are obviously not as explicit as those in some works today, but Hurston clearly did not take heed to cautions. Her brief explanation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to librarian William Stanley Hoole demonstrates this precise disregard:

My next book is to be a novel about a woman who was from childhood hungry for life and the earth, but because she had beautiful hair, was always being skotched upon a flag-pole by men who loved her and forced to sit there. At forty she got her chance at mud. Mud, lush, and fecund with a buck Negro called Teacake. He took her down into the Everglades where people worked and sweated and loved and died violently, where no such thing as flag-poles for women existed...[T]his is the barest statement of the story. (*Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* 366-7)

Indeed, this *is* the barest statement of the story, almost as bare as the bodies of Teacake and Janie when they do the sweating and loving that they do. Ultimately, Hurston's 1937 terminology, "mud, lush, and fecund," can easily be translated contemporarily into musk, lust, and fucking.

More directly, her description of the narrative foreshadows to Hoole that the novel will definitely highlight the concept of black female sexualities and the reality that, despite socio-political upheaval, everyday lives of African Americans, beautiful-haired women included, do not exclude desires of life and earth, or sex that is orgasmic and natural.

As simplistic as this description may appear, sex and sexuality are in fact a great deal of the novel, not the entire premise of the novel, but important to its being nonetheless. In fact, Carla Kaplan (1995) insists that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* “reduced to its basic narrative components...is the story of a young woman in search of an orgasm” (“The Erotics of Talk” 115). Careful readers can discern that her search was not in vain. For example, after Janie has briefly gotten to know Tea Cake and fallen in love (or lust) with him, the narrator portrays the following scene: “But she stayed in bed long after he was gone. So much had been breathed out by the pores that Tea Cake still was there. She could feel him and almost see him bucking around in the upper air” (131-2). This premarital, post coital scene gives a brief depiction of the steam emanated between Janie and the “buck Negro” who, with his “bucking” (specifically fucking, or engaging in aggressive, but pleasing intercourse), makes Janie’s house feel less empty and “full uh thoughts, ’specially dat bedroom” (235).²⁵

On the whole, Hurston’s fixation on pleasure granted her and her work what can now be considered an esteemed and steamy place of honor in African American literature. Kaplan had already deemed it “one of the sexiest passages in American literature,” but Gates recently acknowledged that Janie’s infamous climax scene under the pear tree is “the first orgasm depicted in the entire history of African American literature” (115, ¶18). The fact that Janie is

²⁵ This point is important to note because while Janie is the archetypal feminist character, a known staple in American literature, no known critics discuss the fact that Janie does indeed have premarital sex with Tea Cake. Despite lack of discussion, or perhaps in light of it, this passage supports the claim that one does not have to be a perfect character in order to serve as a model character to others.

still a teenager when she experiences this sensation foreshadows the overall development of the character. She, as Hurston suggests, “was from childhood hungry for life and the earth.” Rebecca Walker, in her essay entitled “Lusting for Freedom” (2001), recognizes this hunger that young girls have and suggests that attention be paid to making sure that these young women are capable of making “sex a dynamic, affirming, safe and pleasurable part of [their] lives” (22). On the other hand, Nanny, restricted by the same beliefs as members of the black press in Hurston’s day, cautions Janie that sex is just the opposite—insignificant, invalidating, harmful, and disagreeable—and forces her to become rebellious, maverick-like, and to go in search of her own truths and dreams.

In a similar manner, as a conscious rapper, writer, and activist, Sister Souljah has dreams of “improving cultural, economic, and social conditions” (*The Coldest Winter Ever* 459). Her politics are aligned with Black Nationalism as opposed to black feminism, but the tale of Winter Santiago in *The Coldest Winter Ever* is undoubtedly akin to a feminist tale. In fact, Janie’s search in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* paves the way for sojourners such as Winter.

The Coldest Winter Ever is thought to be the revitalization of the urban novel after works such as Robert Beck’s (also known as Iceberg Slim) *Pimp* (1969) and Donald Goines’s *Dopefiend* (1971) had gone out of vogue. Winter is highly influenced by the drug culture that these two male writers provide vivid insight into, but Souljah divorces her work from these, insisting that although many had told the story of the rise of the drug kingpin, few had focused on the “fall of a drug kingpin, and how he descends back into poverty and slavery” (437). She is more concerned with the effects this rise and fall have on those the kingpin was supposed to protect and provide for, how the “world pimps his unprotected daughters and dwarfs then devours his sons.” Souljah insists that she wanted to “suck the romanticism out of those

blockbuster books and films,” and creating a troubled, but independent, young, black female protagonist was perhaps the best way to do so (437). Ultimately, despite mass genre classifications, this literary focus places Souljah’s work amongst the tradition of black women novelists as opposed to simply urban or street fiction novelists.

Nevertheless, Souljah clearly allows Winter to make statements that many black women in this tradition perhaps would not dare to imagine, and surely would not utter or write. Winter “believe[s] you see people when you have something to say and something to offer” (199). Yet, she casually *says* that a man “didn’t have to look no particular way to eat [her] pussy,” and she is unapologetically willing to *offer* an “ass whipping” to “some kid and her mother” after almost sitting “in a seat with red Juicy Juice drink spilled in it” (23, 223). To scholars who have not seriously engaged the work, Winter and her tale may be prematurely dismissed and deemed inappropriate and invaluable based on these lines alone. Undoubtedly, Winter is not the typical black female heroine, but she is a journeying figure with cultural and theoretical significance equivalent to that of Janie’s nonetheless.

On the surface, Winter is merely a beautiful, pampered, selfish, materialistic young woman who grows up too soon and is convinced that along with innate street savvy, her body and sexuality are a surefire way to getting what she wants. Tania Nadeem’s (2010) review of the novel recognizes and is in agreement that Winter’s sexual misconduct, bad behavior, and all around disrespect for authority and mature advice is an act of identity formation necessary for her individual growth. Nadeem states:

I would have to admit that when I initially picked up *The Coldest Winter Ever*, I was cringing...I was overwhelmed by emotions of despair and confusion as I was made to confront this alien world...adolescents engage in indiscriminate,

unprotected sex for gratification or small favors...violence is quite acceptable; and there are no role models present...Once you get over your unease about this unfamiliar way of life—which, unfortunately, is the reality for a large number of disadvantaged persons—you realize that this book, in its own way, is a touching coming-of-age story about a misguided adolescent who has taken up money, beauty, and power as her identity. (86)

Indeed, Winter is no role model, and other than Souljah herself, she has very few role models to imitate.²⁶ Thus, she finds herself on a journey for self-identity and self-fulfillment, a journey that, like Janie's, is thrilling and adventurous as well as desolate and sad. Because of these experiences, her life and narrative—bad attitude, sexual recklessness, and all—serve as a guide from which other young, black women can learn, grow, and become empowered.

Of course, Winter nor Janie's characters are to be taken as a guide and followed, but because they did not follow others and were independent thinkers, they emerge as self-actualized and self-sexualized young women who “shake up the backward notions of womanhood” (Souljah 469). Ultimately, by the end of the two narratives, Hurston's Janie Crawford and Souljah's Winter Santiago, on the surface, may appear pitiful and alone, but when the two works are engaged critically, one can see that the protagonists are independent and very influential to the women in their communities, therefore very necessary.

II. Yo' Own Daughter

When readers first encounter Janie, she is walking back into town after “burying the dead” and is judged by the community (1). Her friend, Pheoby, leaves the chatter and judgment

²⁶ Sister Souljah includes herself as a character in the novel—a positive female role model and socio-political activist—but Winter fervently rejects her guidance, insisting that “she's [Souljah] always talking some African mumbo jumbo” (46).

of the porch and welcomes Janie home by saying, “Gal, you sho looks *good*.

You looks like youse yo’ own daughter” (5 emphasis original). Pheoby uses this simile to emphasize Janie’s youthful appearance. This comparison is noteworthy because although Janie is sexual and has participated in the act of “baby making,” she does not have a baby, and particularly not a daughter.²⁷ Furthermore, she also has no mother and father (that she is aware of), and has long since become apathetic to her deceased grandmother. In essence, Janie is both a motherless child and childless mother, according to Pheoby’s philosophy, all of which play a major role in how she develops as a woman and as a character. Her sexuality, though slightly constrained by rigid upbringing, is a great part of her identity and an even greater part of her life

²⁷ Although motherhood, for women, is often thought of as a consequence of expressed sexuality, readers do not get the impression that Janie is susceptible to pregnancy. Over six decades later, however, this possibility was made very clear to Winter, as she is prescribed birth control pills at an early age and yet finds herself impregnated. Referring to contemporary generations and including herself in the group, Joan Morgan insists, “We walk through the world with a sense of entitlement that women of our mothers’ generation could not begin to fathom. Most of us can’t imagine our lives without access to birth control, legalized abortions, the right to vote, or many of the same educational and job opportunities available to men” (59). Janie’s beauty and sexuality are what grant her the attention and support of wealthy men who make it possible to survive without equal education or occupation, but beauty and sexuality do not suppress pregnancy. In fact, beauty and sexuality were contributing factors to Winter’s pregnancy. Yes, she “handles” the pregnancy by using her generational entitlement to abortion, but Janie is more privileged than Winter in this case because she is allowed to express her sexuality without fear of an unwanted pregnancy. How might Pheoby have felt about Janie had Janie divulged that she did have a daughter left alone somewhere on the muck? How might supportive readers’ opinions of her change? Is Winter less respectable for using her privilege? While it is arguable that Janie was not privileged at all and was in fact sterile instead, all in all, these examples are meant to suggest that topics of pregnancy, abortion, or contraception are unlikely when discussing *Their Eyes* in isolation, but pairing the text with a more contemporary work adds depth to its analytical possibilities.

On a similar note, despite the fact that Janie’s character existed in the early 1900s, she is noted for having “left” more than one husband and for having a hefty sexual appetite, attributes which have made her and her author a main staple in (African) American (women’s) literature today. However, not once is a contraceptive mentioned amidst Janie’s freely expressed and experienced sexual encounters. This gives readers the impression that women, or people in general, during this period of time, were immune to sexually transmitted diseases. But, while physicians have only been privy to knowledge of A.I.D.S. since the late 1970s to early 80s, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment is evidence that sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhea were indeed prevalent during Hurston’s, and therefore Janie’s, time. When one uses the intergenerational dynamic, a lineal discussion can be made between *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* to determine why an issue as serious as disease was frivolous or irrelevant at one point in history but was and is a major campaign in the 20th and 21st century. In fact, Souljah appears as a character in *The Coldest Winter Ever* that speaks at a women’s prison facility to a wing of women all H.I.V. positive, stating that women often become so consumed with men, love, and sext that “we [often] forget to strengthen our minds so that we can learn how to think, how to build. How to survive. We forget how to live our lives to protect our spirit, to be clean and decent. We forget that everything we do matters so much. (272-3). We forget to be self-identified, self-actualized, and self-sexualized.

choices. Rightly so, in the foreword to the novel, Edwidge Danticat grapples with Janie's life choices and lack of mother(hood), along with critical opinion of her character, and ultimately determines that "Janie did not have to be a role model at all. She simply had to be a fully realized and complex character..." (xv). This she is indeed.

Although Hurston gives a brief glimpse of Janie's life as a child, readers come to really know Janie at the age of sixteen, as Janie too comes to know herself, when "her conscious life...commence[s] at Nanny's gate" (13). Scholar Tiffany Townsend et al. suggest in their essay, "I'm No Jezebel; I am Young, Gifted, and Black: Identity Sexuality, and Black Girls" (2010), that young black girls are susceptible to risky behaviors, oftentimes sexual behaviors, during adolescence, "a stage marked by intense, rapid change in identity formation" (273). The risky behavior, in Janie's case, begins at the age sixteen when springtime and budding flowers had "called her to gaze on a mystery" and allow Johnny Taylor to "lacerate" her with a kiss (15). The fact that Nanny is half sleep during the escapade and awakens to establish that the kiss is a laceration, or deep wound Johnny violently forces upon Janie, early on distinguishes Janie's dreams and realities from those of Nanny's and foreshadows their ever-evolving difference of opinion on womanhood and sexuality.

The infamous orgasm scene indicates Janie's cognizance of the importance of women being active agents in their sexual encounters, something Nanny's antebellum mentality did not seem able to fathom. Aside from the entire scene being beautiful and powerful, note that the interaction between the bees and the plants is not one-sided; both participate in the delectation. Hurston writes, "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of the bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight" (14). Ultimately, the bee sinks, and

the calyxes arch; both act. This revelation at the age of sixteen is what provokes Janie's brief encounter with Johnny, separates her from her grandmother, causes her to be displeased with relationships where she is not permitted active participation in what she deems a "marriage," and ultimately helps to formulate her overall identity and distinguish her as the "fully realized and complex character" Danticat suggests that she is—a maverick feminist in a manner of speaking.

After the pear tree scene and continuously throughout the narrative, Janie's age and sexuality combined are the center of unrest for both Janie and the communities of individuals she encounters: From being sixteen and married off to an older man who "don't even never mention nothin' pretty," to finding out that she is no longer sexually attracted to her second husband at "twenty-four and seven years married," to being thirty-five and having her youth and womanhood mocked by Joe's accusation that her "rump hang[s] nearly to [her] knees," and ultimately being forty and marrying the twenty-something Tea Cake and coming back to town after his death in overalls as opposed to a dress, "wid her hair swingin' down her back lack some young gal" (28, 85, 94, 2). These different experiences and obstacles indeed contribute to the complexity of Janie's character and reiterate the claim that a character with an active sexuality is more dynamic, round, sophisticated, and ultimately more realistic.

Along with Janie's age, her economic status has a deep impact on her identity and the extent to which she practices her sexuality. A common stereotype in African American literature and society is that of the "jezebel, whore, or 'hoochie'" (*Black Feminist Thought* 81). According to Collins, jezebel "may be a 'pretty baby,' but her actions as a 'hot mamma' indicate that she just can't get enough. Because jezebel or the hoochie is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable, it becomes a short step to imagine her as a 'freak'" (83). Also intrinsic to jezebel's identity is the proclivity to use her body and

sexuality for financial gain. Overall, Collins suggests, “Because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary ‘hoochies’ represent a deviant Black female sexuality” (81). Hurston’s Janie is even more deviant than a jezebel in that while she has an insatiable appetite for a “marriage” or a perpetual orgasm, Janie is financially stable throughout the narrative. Even as a child living with Nanny, she is provided the best possible lifestyle for a young black girl being raised by a house servant and domestic worker. She recognizes the power of socio-economic stability but oftentimes rejects materialistic offers along with the status these materials afford her. In this sense, Janie defies the jezebel stereotype and cannot be pigeonholed or categorized; she desires intimacy and pleasure over goods and status, and her acquaintances are neither prepared for nor appreciative of this oddity and demonstrate such in their criticism.

Upon Janie’s return to Eatonville, the townspeople seem little concerned with her physical and mental well-being and more concerned with her physical appearance and material possessions. They ponder, “Where’s dat blue satin dress she left here in?—Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?...Where she left that young lad of a boy she went off wid?...Where he left *her*?—What he done wid all her money?...why she don’t stay in her class?” (2). Ultimately, staying in her class would mean that the townspeople would have more access to Janie; to the community, it would mean that she would be more rooted and stable, less of a hot mamma. This, despite her financial situation, would make her easier to tolerate and control, less questionable, and therefore less powerful. Hurston implies that the natives of Eatonville, who seem to live according to outdated gender standards similar to Nanny’s, are inwardly jealous of Janie, not simply because of her economic status, but because she lives an affluent life, is self-realized, and does not agonize over the politics of respectability, especially where sexuality is

concerned. So, the members of the community, particularly the women, hope to use what they assume to be a decline in economic status as a weapon against her overall self-assurance and strength: “The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength...” (3). Janie’s strength, in this case, is a direct result of her class and sexuality.

By and large, this strength is what both separates Janie from and makes her closer to the members of her communities. In order to be able to die peacefully, one of Nanny’s main concerns is that Janie does not allow “de menfolks white or black [to make] a spit cup outa” her (24). In essence, she wants Janie to refrain from being the “mule uh de world” and avoid being used and controlled by, as well as forced to carry the burdens of, a patriarchal society (18). Ironically, Nanny assumes that the way to alleviate and reduce Janie’s chances of becoming a mule is to marry her off to a man who specializes in and has gained his wealth by handling mules. When Janie is unsatisfied with her first marriage, Nanny consoles her by saying, “...youse uh married ’oman. You got yo’ lawful husband same as Mis’ Washburn or anybody else!...You come heah wid yo’ mouf full uh foolishness...Heah you got uh prop tuh lean on all yo’ bawn days, and big protection, and everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis’ Killocks” (27). Oddly enough, during Janie’s short marriage to Logan, Joe Starks is the only person to tip his hat to Janie and acknowledge her as Mrs. Killocks, only days before he runs away with her and provides a lifestyle for her that moves the community of Eatonville to tip their hats off to her and call her Mrs. Starks.

Even after Joe’s death, residents of Eatonville “were all so respectful and stiff with her, that she might have been the Empress of Japan. They felt it was not fitting to mention desire to the widow of Joseph Starks” (112). Despite what would be Nanny’s presumed posthumous

appreciation for and satisfaction with this treatment, Janie is one that is slightly more concerned with the fulfillment of desires, which is why despite the community's approval, "she goes sashaying off to a picnic in pink linen [with Tea Cake and]...Done took to high heel slippers and a ten dollar hat!" (135). Disapproval aside however, "They had to give it to her, she sho looked good, but she had no business to do it. It was hard to love a woman that always made you feel so wishful" (143). This purported lack of right is a result of oppressive cultural norms, those which Janie disregards. She states, "Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine" (139). Though Janie rejects Nanny's "way," one could maintain that she fulfills Nanny's desire of not being the mule of the world and allowing men to use her. In fact, after Janie leaves the man that Nanny forces upon her and realizes that Joe Starks likewise is not the man of her dreams, she goes out into the world and seemingly takes reign of the mule and fertilizes the earth with her own spit, and perhaps other white secretions as well.

Still, it is debatable that while Janie fulfilled Nanny's wish and did not become a "mule," she may have become a "Bitch." She is demanding, knows what she wants, and wanders from place to place until she finds what she is looking for. In essence, she "puts her looks, sexuality, intellect, and/or aggression to service," and, according to Patricia Hills Collins (2005), that makes her a "Bad Bitch" (*Black Sexual Politics* 124).²⁸ Janie's best friend, hoping to one day become a Bad Bitch herself, is seemingly the only person in Eatonville who appreciates Janie's strength and ability to be a Bad Bitch and share the knowledge she gained after going "tuh de horizon and back" (234). Pheoby proclaims, "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah ain't satisfied wid myself no mo'...Nobody better not criticize yuh in mah

²⁸ According to Collins, Bitch with the capital B has been contemporarily adopted as a term of endearment and power, as opposed to bitch with a lower case b which is an offensive term "designed to put women in their place" (123).

hearin'” (235). This viewpoint is significantly different from Pheoby's initial demand that Janie avoid being the topic of gossip by making “haste and tell 'em” all about her relations with Tea Cake and the financial situation he left her in (7). As a result of Janie's abilities to create her own path and act as a Bad Bitch, she has helped Pheoby to start on the path of becoming a self-actualized individual and built a stronger camaraderie between the two friends.

Furthermore, although only Pheoby admits her growth, each individual in the community, particularly the women, benefit from Janie's experience, and therefore help to justify the overall argument that acting as a maverick feminist and actively sharing and relaying individual knowledge with a group can be more beneficial and liberating for all parties involved. In her essay titled “Crayon Enlargements of Life: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Autobiography” (1990), Nellie McKay insists, “Exchanging outsidership for individuality within the community, Janie becomes a feminist heroine with an assured place within that community, and her life becomes an influential source through which other women will find a model for their own self-empowerment” (68). Similarly, Barbara Christian, in *Black Women Novelists* (1980), notes the difference in Janie's perspective on her return versus the community's perspective stating, “Janie does not see her life as tragic; she sees it as full and rich. It is essentially this message that she brings back to her community, that self-fulfillment rather than security and status is the gift of life” (59). In noting this grand message sharing, this community building, one must not lose sight of the fact that Janie left the community as a result of a desire to fulfill her own individual dreams, dreams of endless sexual expression similar to the life of bees and plants, and her return is only as a result of her bee losing his stinger and ultimately his life, preventing her from continuing her expression in that particular place: “Tea Cake is gone. And dat's de only reason you see me back here—cause Ah ain't got nothing to

make me happy no more where Ah was at” (8). Thus, in relation to community, sexuality both prevails over and provides for, demonstrating again how strong a role sexuality can play in a woman’s life.

The narration of the *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is another indicator of the impression Janie had on her community as a result of sharing her individual dreams. Several critics past, namely Robert Stepto (1979) and Mary Helen Washington (1987), have found fault in the fact that Hurston does not allow Janie to tell her story completely in first person, in her own voice, insisting that the third person narration takes away Janie’s voice and makes her less powerful, and therefore less of the heroine that feminists critics have designated her as. Stepto argues that the third person narration implies that “Janie has not really won her voice and self after all,” and Washington argues that the novel “represents women’s exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech” (166, 27).²⁹ Deborah Clarke comes to Hurston’s rescue in her 2001 essay titled “The Porch Couldn’t Talk for Looking: Voice and Vision in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” suggesting that “Janie’s achievement of voice is critical to her journey of self-awareness, but the highly ambivalent presentation of voice in the novel indicates that voice alone is not enough...For Hurston, then the construction of African American identity requires a voice that can make you see” (599-600). She goes on to suggest that Hurston’s “privileging of ‘mind pictures’ over words...[indicates an] ability to use voice visually [and] provides a literary space for African American women to relate their experiences...[and ultimately] opens up different ways of conceptualizing the African American experience” (600). So, whereas other critics have seen Hurston’s third person narration as a flaw, Clarke sees it as a break from dominant tradition, one worthy of recognition and praise.

²⁹ Stockett’s *The Help* is evidence that first person narration does not equate to power.

Still, each of these arguments misses Hurston's personal argument for why the story is told partially in third person: "You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's jus de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (7). Despite Janie's seeming lack of interest with sharing her story with the community, the above statement that she makes to Pheoby is a clear indication that she is willing to share, but because she is a maverick feminist, she is simply not willing to sit in their presence and be mentally or physically burdened by the judgment of their one dimensional, out-dated thoughts and beliefs (7). Yet, she does as Joan Morgan insists and "giv[es] the gift of survival experiences freely," as she is not obligated to tell Pheoby her story in order for Pheoby to tell others (232). In essence, she participates in the oral tradition, a message conveyed through oral speech or song and passed down from one generation to the next. To say that this tradition has been praised by critics for the tremendous affect it has had on African American literature is an understatement, and to demean this same tradition in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is to suggest that the folktales and songs passed down for over nine generations have long since lost their influence and strength since they are not conveyed in first person.

As Clarke maintains, indeed, Janie's presentation of voice is not enough to indicate the extent to which her voice is powerful, which is why Hurston allows another narrator, or perhaps several narrators to convey Janie's message, to make certain that even after Janie follows Tea Cake in death and is "finished feeling and thinking," her strength can still be known because her story can still be told, and her voice can therefore still be heard. One can assume that when Janie herself is not the narrator, it is someone who has gotten the message via her friend's mouth and (generations of) porch talk. Even further, one could argue that Janie is not at all telling her story but rather people generations removed from the initial telling are relaying the tale and are

incessantly reviving her voice by acting out the visual picture Clarke indicates. Ultimately, perpetuality is the most powerful standing one individual voice can attain, and Hurston grants Janie this perpetuality. Janie's tongue sharing friend declares, "If she got anything to tell yuh, you'll hear it" (5). She does not say that they will hear it from Janie, or when they will hear it, but it will ultimately still be Janie doing the telling because she relayed the first story, similar to how other stories are passed down orally.

Overall, the above argument indicates that Janie is indeed a complex character; her sexuality plays a great role in all aspects of her life, ranging from the age in which she matures to how she views her economic standing, also how others interact with her, and finally to the extent to which she is vocal. All in all, Janie's characteristics are representative of maverick feminist characteristics. However, while she has accomplished her goals and followed her own dreams, the ending of the narrative does suggest that Janie finds herself at a standstill. After completing her tale, urging Pheoby to grow, and proclaiming that she has been to the horizon and back, Janie mounts the stairs of her house as "everything around downstairs was shut and fastened" (236). This line does not simply pertain to the physical infrastructure of the house; everything is shut off in the downstairs area of Janie's body as well. One can assume that this is due in part to Hurston's cognizance that ultimately society sees free and open sexuality as a reason for punishment.

In "Lusting for Freedom," Rebecca Walker states, "For giving our bodies what they want and crave, for exploring ourselves and others, we are punished like Eve reaching for knowledge" (23). In Janie's case, her Eve-like punishment is the loss of her Adam, and therefore the ending to her real life dream. So, while Janie gets freed of charges for Tea Cake's killing and escapes the physical infrastructure of the prison, she pays for this crime with a punishment more serious

than a jail sentence, and is forced to return to Eatonville lacking the object of her quest: a marriage, a bee for her bloom.³⁰ This is not to say that she is not self-actualized or that her journey was without good cause, but rather, although her author was groundbreaking in the sense of allowing a young, black woman to possess proudly an active and overt sexuality in 1937, perhaps even she was aware of the fact that allowing her black, female character to live sexually ever after would be unfathomable by some of the most progressive critics of her day, and today for that matter.

III. Daddy's Girl

As the protagonist in what can be thought of as the sister novel to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or rather the granddaughter, as *The Coldest Winter Ever* is more than two generations removed, Winter Santiago is likewise punished for her sexuality. Social workers and friends all try to convince Winter to stay in a group home and abide by the system's rules after she is unexpectedly separated from her parents and a cushiony lifestyle at the age of sixteen, but she is adamant on being independent and taking care of herself by her own means.³¹ The end result is serving time in the prison building that Hurston allowed Janie to escape.

Told in a more traditional manner than *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Coldest Winter Ever*, narrated solely by Winter, begins with her worldly birth, literally, and ends with her sexual death, figuratively. The opening lines depict Winter's birth day, or the moment "I came busting out of my momma's big coochie on January 28, 1977, during one of New York's worst snowstorms" (1). The closing lines of the novel paint an opposite view of both Winter and the

³⁰ An argument could be made that Janie's blooming season had passed. However, as she is only in her late forties when she returns to Eatonville, she is still a ripe age to express her sexuality. Moreover, such an ageist and one-sided argument would be equivalent to Stockett's choice to desexualize Aibileen and Minny in *The Help* for a similar reason, amongst others.

³¹ Sixteen is the same age that Janie begins her journey.

city, however. She states, “When we got to the city, I was placed in a prison vehicle. New York street sounds brought back memories of so many things. Mostly memories of freedom. Being able to go to the store or the movies. Getting fucked in a parked car by the river or in the grass or on the back of stairs...I’m doing fifteen years for having a bad attitude” (425). Of course, Winter is not solely serving prison time for having a bad attitude; she is serving time because she was dating a drug dealer and was found, by police, in his car containing drugs intended for distribution. Still, like Janie’s return to Eatonville, Winter’s return to New York only brings about memories, memories of when she was free, free to express her sexuality, whether in parked cars, in the grass, or on the stairs. There is a linear path from the beginning to the ending of the novel, as readers are taken on a journey with Winter from birth and dangerous streets to adulthood and seemingly conquered streets. One consistency, however, is the presence of a strong female sexuality. Yet, as society sees overt sexuality as an offense worthy of punishment, both Hurston and Souljah acknowledge memories as a reminder of once sought-after dreams resulting in their protagonists’ newly-imposed sexual deaths.

In order to make an argument concerning the attitude and conversations necessary to help young girls deal with sex and develop unapologetic sexualities, Rebecca Walker reveals to readers the age she lost her virginity, stating, “If you are a girl, sex marks you, and I was marked at a young age. I am too ashamed to tell people how young I was, but I am too proud to lie. Eleven. I was eleven...” (20). Winter, too, is marked at a young age and quickly begins the process of learning about sexuality. However, the knowledge she gains does not come from a feminist scholar, a traditional school, or even rational parents.³² Instead, Winter’s epistemology is the result of apartment lessons, alley teachings, and backseat experiences.

³² Winter very seldom attends school. She does not see the importance of it: “There was just nothing live about it”, and her parents do not force school upon her as long as she babysits her three younger sisters (21).

Naturally, her teachers have conflicting views. Winter's mother is convinced that "when a woman wants to get fucked, she gets fucked. She gets fucked whether it's in a car or a closet," so she gets Winter a prescription for birth control pills and sends her to get fucked, literally and figuratively (8). On the other hand, Winter is a daddy's girl, and her father is certain that Winter is "not a woman yet" and insists to her that "only a hardworking man, a sharp thinker who doesn't hesitate to do what he gotta do, to get you what you need to have, deserves you" (9). The problem is that she has blurred visions of what she needs to have, so the sharp thinkers on the corners who watched amazed as her "titties sprouted" in just "one year, from age twelve to thirteen" excite her (8). And, this excitement brings about curiosity, curiosity that is cured in an apartment when no parents or adults are around to cause confusion. Winter states, "Chanté, who was older than us, taught us all the sexual positions. She let us watch while she got down with boys when her mother was at work. She liked the idea of being our 'teacher'. She even taught us how to suck a dick" (17). One can only imagine how a dick sucking lesson is carried out. Winter does not leave readers wondering how she uses these lessons, however, as several sex scenes depict Winter practicing and exercising her misguided discipline.

Winter's description of losing her virginity is a prime example of teachings gone wrong. She and her friends got their "cherries busted" and "lied to each other about how good the first time felt, when the truth was those big dicks ripped [their] tight little twelve year-old tunnels apart" (16). One who is proud of her sexuality, like Walker mentioned above, has no quarrels with relaying her loss of virginity to others, and one who is self-actualized, unlike Winter at this age, will not likely lie about the experience. Several years after this occurrence, Winter has another sexual experience that is exemplary of the ill-advised and convoluted teachings of her past. This experience takes place when she is eighteen, after Winter undergoes an abortion and

does not want to tell her controlling, drug-dealing boyfriend. The long, but pertinent scene is the most vivid and most telling sex scene for both Winter and her readers; it follows:

A dick-suck cures everything. So I unfastened Bullet's belt, dropped down to my knees and went to work. I centered myself so he could see my lips sucking and pulling. So he could see my tongue. He needed to know he was the boss. I had no problem with that. When I saw his mouth open wide, a look of pain covered his face, but I knew it was just the ecstasy of him busting in my mouth...He rolled on his side with another hard on. He began to undo my pants. 'I'm on my period,' I said, trying not to panic. I bent over to lick his balls again. He pulled my head up and said, 'A nigga wants pussy. This is my pussy, right?' he questioned. I answered with a nod. 'A little blood ain't gonna hurt this big dick.' He was all up in me. How can I describe this feeling? It wasn't pleasure. It wasn't pain. It was nothing, like a dick plunging into an ocean. But still I conjured up some moans for him. (406-7)

All of the lessons Winter learns prove to be ineffective in this scene: Bullet has proven that he is willing to work hard to give her what she thinks she needs (mainly material goods), but he is anything but the gentleman her father had hoped she would attract and desire. Furthermore, Winter's "titties" that magically grew are not appealing to Bullet as he is more interested in "his pussy," and the long nights spent with Chanté in her dick-sucking class do not pay off. But, most importantly, Winter learns that a woman does not just get fucked when she wants to get fucked. Despite the distressing issue at hand—the fact that Winter is raped by her mate—this lesson learned is important to Winter's eventual evolution. She learns that sex and sexuality, although

powerful, is not the sum of her existence and is more rewarding when expressed in a self-sexualized manner.

The above mentioned scene is different from that of Janie and Tea Cake's when they, too, have a very physical sexual interaction. After Tea Cake and Janie are disputing Tea Cake's presumed infidelities with a "little chunky girl" on the muck by the name of Nunkie, Hurston's narrator insists, "They wrestled on until they were doped with their own fumes and emanations; till their clothes had been torn away; till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible; kissed her until she arched her body to meet him and they fell asleep in sweet exhaustion" (169). By this time, Janie has matured and learned that, although physical, sex is a mental and emotional union that requires the voluntary engagement of both partners in order to be fulfilling. "The next morning," Hurston suggests, "Janie asked like a woman" if Tea Cake was in fact involved with Nunkie instead of repeating previous actions of drawing ill-advised conclusions and inflicting violence upon her mate. Hurston implies that, like Winter, Janie grew because of this experience. Knowing that experiences are essential to growth, Walker also suggests, "The way we experience, speak about and envision sex and sexuality can either kill us or help us to know and protect ourselves better" (19). It is clear that Winter, at this point, had not yet learned how to protect herself, and the fact that she is only speaking about sex to young women who, like herself, were not mature, suggests that Winter will have multiple unhealthy experiences before she finally understands the power and ramifications of an overt sexuality.

While Winter has not fully grasped an understanding of the power and advantages or disadvantages of sexuality at this point in the narrative, she does understand the power of economics. This understanding is likewise a driving force in her identity and actions. In the same

breath as the pulsating description of her birth, Winter assures readers, “Brooklyn-born I don’t have no sob stories for you about rats and roaches and pissy-pew hallways” (1). This suggests to readers that despite the events that follow—some indeed tragic and deplorable—sympathy or pity is unnecessary, as the twenty-five year old narrator is indeed a self-actualized woman.

Winter’s description of her home and the material wealth her family possessed follows: “We lived in the projects but we were cool with that. We weren’t wanting for a damn thing...Our apartment in the projects was dipped. We had royal red carpets on the floors, top-of-the-line furniture, a fully loaded entertainment center, equipment and all that good stuff” (2). To say that Winter is materialistic is an understatement, but a major reason she is materialistic is because material goods (aside from family and respect) have been iterated and reiterated to her as being of chief importance.

According to Winter’s mother, the “finer” the woman, the finer things she should expect to receive because beauty “was a full-time occupation that left no room for anything else...[and] beautiful women are supposed to be taken care of” (4). By taken care of, she means provided with name-brand clothes, shoes, jewels, and a lavish home worth bragging about. Winter states, “One thing I learned from my mother is a bad bitch gets what she wants if she works her shit right” (11). In a similar but slightly less unrefined manner, her father, Santiago, too suggests, “You, Winter, you deserve better. You deserve to relax, kick back, have the easy and finer things in life. No stress. One of these big-headed doctors, lawyers, engineer boys around this neighborhood can give you that. A man in Midnight’s line of work can’t” (69). These notions are reminiscent of Nanny’s insistence that Janie marry a wealthy landowner with an organ in his parlor, have a prop to lean on, and have people tip their hats off to her as a sign of respect. Still, Midnight is Winter’s dream, her idea of a husband. The tall, chocolate, toned, young man is

Santiago's immediate assistant (Midnight found himself in trouble and without family as a teenager and was taken in by Santiago, shown the procedures of his drug operation, and granted immediate respect and protection in the streets).

Because they are aware that she is of the dating age, both Winter's parents have desires to class her off, but their viewpoints on class differ. Mrs. Santiago is perfectly fine with Winter being with someone just like her father, while her father unwittingly admits that even he cannot give her what she deserves, as he, himself, is "a man in Midnight's line of work." Yet, when her father is imprisoned, her mother is high on drugs, and Midnight—much smarter than the average drug dealer—rejects her because "a smart man never chooses a dumb woman," she turns to the only lifestyle she had known, and connects with men who are able to provide a lifestyle similar to the one her father had provided, the lifestyle that her mother cherished (142). In fact, Winter's list of qualities, characteristics, and material goods that her mate must possess in order of importance are "money, car, clothes, jewelry, apartment, masculinity, big dick, clean, white teeth, nice body" (263). Finances and sex appeal are mainly the sum of this list. It is different from the traditional or common list of positive male traits, ranging from being God-fearing and hardworking, to being a protector and a provider, to finally being respectful, responsible, and then handsome. However, Winter is not a traditional woman. She is not pious, pure, domestic, or submissive, but rather she has an active sexuality, has since birth been wealthy, and is determined to continue that lifestyle. And, since the two seem to go hand-in-hand, she is adamant that "pussy should never be free" (159).

Apparently, family and friends are not free either, and Winter soon learns that it is a bit difficult to continue her lifestyle without her community of supporters. In the beginning of the novel, Winter boasts about how close she and her family and friends were; community seemed to

be very important to her. She acknowledged her familial bond, stating, “I had three aunts, four uncles, and a whole slew of cousins. As far as we were concerned it was live for all of us to be chilling in the same building, or at least the next building over. We never had to worry about getting into fights because around our way we had a reputation...Everybody understood that our family had the neighborhood locked down” (2). Similarly, she discusses how she and her girlfriends “were mad tight, many of us born and raised in the same spot...we did everything together” (16). This closeness and respect only existed when her family’s wealth existed, however. When the money stopped piling in, the people started filing out. Of course, Winter plays a role in how people treat her, as she goes about life selfishly, not truly thinking about the feelings of others. Nonetheless, she realizes that there is a distinct difference between the way people, specifically men, treated her now, and how they treated her “before Santiago got knocked” (225).

After living here and there for a while, Winter finally returns to her Brooklyn neighborhood and resides with her Aunt B. Aunt B expects payment for her generosity. Winter notes, “I woke up that afternoon to Aunt B wanting a loan. Since I wasn’t crazy, and Aunt B’s husband was locked up with my father, I knew that if I gave her any money, I’d never get it back” (158). After her failure to provide for her aunt, Winter soon learns that amongst the items that she would never get back was the loyalty and respect her aunt once showed. Aunt B steals money from Winter’s underwear while she is showering and releases her to child welfare. After this incident, Winter announces, “I decided I would think of everyone in my family as dead” (206).

In a similar manner, while Winter may have initially implied that she and her friends did everything together, some things she decides that they do not do well together are date the same

man and wear the same quality of clothes. Winter learns that her supposed best friend is dating a notable up-and-coming drug dealer and wearing the fashions that only she had once been known for. While at a concert, she insists, “Everything was cool until I saw [Natalie] standing up, clapping with a sky blue thirty-five-hundred-dollar Chanel skirt-suit on. This bitch pops out of nowhere with some wears that was strictly my style and over-reaching for her...My body shook with anger at Santiago and Mom...Now what was I supposed to do while Natalie was up there pretending to be me?” (162-3). Because Winter is selfish and materialistic at this point, she does not see Natalie’s supposed imitation of her as a compliment, but rather she is displeased with the fact that she and the members of her once tight-knit community may actually have a socio-economic status equal to or greater than her own. In fact, she is adamant that she “definitely wasn’t gonna give [Natalie] the pleasure of feeling like now me and her was on the same level” (110). Conversely, Natalie makes it known that she and Winter are indeed not on the same level, but rather she is above Winter because Winter has a “crazy-ass crackhead, bald-headed mother,” and Winter herself is “*broke [and] homeless*” (168, emphasis original).

This hatred and jealousy between Winter and Natalie is not caused simply by material envy, however, as Winter is sure that her beauty and unapologetic sexuality played a huge role in her status and relationship to the people in her community. The fact that Natalie has the clothes and the man means that she seemingly has an advantage over Winter in the sexuality department as well, but Winter makes it clear, “If all [Natalie] had to do to get that Chanel suit was suck his dick good, *I could’ve gotten a whole wardrobe*” (165, emphasis original). This implies that even Winter’s sexuality or sexual skills were superior. Since sexuality is so deeply tied into her identity and relationship to the community at this point, when Winter does not have her community and is forced to fend for herself and suffer alone, with the exception of recurring

thoughts and dreams of Midnight, her sexuality and desires to be pleased take a backseat to other matters. For this reason, she is not seen as the typical jezebel figure; Winter's character is more complex. She is both beautiful and ugly, too dependent and too independent, and ultimately likable and detestable. She does not rely solely on her sexuality to (re)gain prominence.

One could argue that sex(uality) is one of Winter's many "talents." She is not simply a body to be used by men for money, but rather she is business-minded. In fact, when taken by child welfare to an all-girls group home called The House of Success, she uses her knowledge of fashion and people skills to become an entrepreneur and gain an extensive clientele. Winter states, "I spent every day up until Friday getting to know the girls in the house... Who had extra money and what kind of taste they had... My first customer, the person I volunteered to be my best customer, was Claudette. I figured if I could fix her up, make her pay for it, she'd be a good example of what my work was worth" (193-5). Interestingly, Winter makes enough money to support herself from her room while her loyal customers, the remaining girls in the home, go out on a daily basis to work for others. She proclaims, "At the end of twenty-one days, I had two thousand five hundred dollars in my pocket and I had never left my room" (198). Though her father and the community he provided no longer existed, one can only conclude that having knowledge of her father's business helped Winter to understand the influence of supply and demand.

Another of Winter's strong points, which plays a significant role in her roundness as a character, is her ability to choose when to be vocal and when not to be vocal. Ultimately, Winter's voice strengthens and weakens depending on the intensity of her sexuality at a particular moment. As previously mentioned, the narrative is told in first person, and Winter makes it clear to readers that this is her story and no one else's by stating, "...*that TV shit ain't*

real. Don't run ahead of me. Let me take my time and tell my story (1). Of course, this is also Souljah's attempt to make it clear that she plans to fulfill her goal to not write another "Hollywood" story, but rather create a more authentic tale with the girl as the subject as opposed to the object, and possessing a voice that is realistic and her own (438). Still, some critics will argue that Winter is not in total control of her voice at certain parts of the narrative and that she is likewise not in control of her life. This would be a very accurate argument because as previously mentioned, the strength of her voice depends on the situation. Furthermore, to create a character that always has a strong and powerful voice would be to perpetuate the strong black woman stereotype, as opposed to creating a more realistic character with flaws and weaknesses. In addition, Winter is only sixteen when she begins to experience the world alone; it would be very much unrealistic to assume that she would be able to control every aspect of her life. Despite certain weaknesses, however, Winter's voice is apparent throughout the narrative, and although it may weaken depending on circumstances, it is always hers.

For instance, when Winter's father tells the family about the unexpected move from Brooklyn to Long Island only months before he is incarcerated, Winter proclaims, "I did something that I normally wouldn't do. I questioned Santiago" (15). In a similar manner, although Winter does not verbally question her mother while her mother and father are having a disagreement, she mentally questions her and determines the importance of voice while realizing when and how she must utilize hers. Winter insists, "The tone of mother's voice was rare. I can hardly say I ever remember it being this rough...I expected Santiago to yell back but he didn't. Instead mother just continued blowing her cool and doing something she told me not to do." (44). It is in this moment, one can conclude, that Winter determines that her mother is not the best model to follow, especially since her mother does not follow her own advice.

In most cases in the narrative, Winter's voice is particularly strong, for instance, when she convinces the girls in the group home that she has the best fashion advice they will ever receive and also when she curses a man for assuming that she is an exotic dancer simply because she is beautiful and has "long sexy legs" (234). Still, there are other times when her voice weakens, for instance, when someone pulls a gun on her and when she is raped by her boyfriend and can only answer with a nod and conjure up moans. These particular experiences and different reactions to them make her more relatable to readers, more realistic. Like Janie's before her, the gist of Winter's voice is similar to the essence of her life; there are highs and lows. Linguist Denise Troutman (1995) suggests, "One mark of attaining womanhood is knowing when to be polite and when to assert oneself" (214).

Because the narrative ends with Winter incarcerated, one can conclude that she tells her story as a cautionary tale. Nevertheless, at one of the most pivotal points in the narrative, when she can impart wisdom to her younger sister, Porsche, she chooses to remain silent. Seeing her teenage sister for the first time in over seven years at their mother's funeral and assuming that Porsche—dressed provocatively and "pushing a whip it would take the U. S. president's salary to pay for"—is following a similar path as her, Winter states, "I wanted to warn her about certain things in life. Usually I'm not at a loss for words. But I didn't feel good enough to tell her what I really thought. I knew she would think: Winter, you're just saying that 'cause you're in jail...old...ugly...jealous. Instead of saying what I had learned, what was on the tip of my tongue, I said nothing at all...She'll learn for herself. That's just the way it is" (428, 430). Winter possesses maverick feminist traits and is aware that self-fulfillment is essential to the potential uplift of others, but she has not achieved her "dream" and therefore has not yet reached the stage of putting her tongue in her friend's mouth. Instead, in so many words, she makes a

deduction similar to Janie's when she insists to Pheoby that you've got to go there to know there. Furthermore, Winter has the words to say but refuses to say them in the attempt to avoid sounding preachy; in addition, she is aware that contemporary women, like herself, are not too keen on following paths charted out for them. This is not to say that they will not watch for the outcome of taking certain paths and choose to, or not to, repeat one or more actions, however.

Souljah suggests that her idea to create several different types of women in this narrative was with hope that "it will help girls living in and outside the hood to understand that there are many women who you may model yourself after, as you attempt to come into your own womanhood" (438). In doing so, one may gather several different characteristics from several different women in order to design a life(style) that is suitable and most productive; this dynamic differs from simply assuming that all women must follow guidelines or adhere to particular value systems such as the cult of true womanhood or the politics of respectability in order to be a "respectable" or accomplished woman, or even a feminist. Winter is respectable for reasons different from Janie or a real life first lady. The fact that Winter has had experiences and been to many places mystifying enough to be recognized as "there" makes her a perfect example of a learned and self-actualized woman. Moreover, despite her insistence on not "meddling in people's business [and] making no speeches," her life touches the lives of others (430). In fact, the sequel to *The Coldest Winter Ever* told in the voice of Porsche Santiago revisits Winter's life and depicts the impact that she had on the lives of others, specifically her younger sister.

Finally, in *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost* (2000), Joan Morgan insists, "Without financial independence, education, ambition, intelligence, spirituality, and love, punanny alone isn't all that powerful. The reality is that it's easily replaceable, inexhaustible in supply, and quite frankly, common as shit. Women who value their erotic power over everything

else stand to do some serious damage to their self-esteem” (224). When Winter is shielded and provided for by her father, she indeed values her erotic power over everything else. She has a genuine love for Midnight, but assumes that beauty and sexuality is enough to attract him and is confused when this is not the case. But, by the end of the novel, she has grown. Of course, one could argue that she does not necessarily progress, but rather being incarcerated simply humbles and tames her. Indeed, she suggests, “There ain’t no special clothes or fashion in here [prison]. When I first came, I tried to make myself stand out the way I always did. But after while, you’d figure, what the fuck for? You can’t get no dick. I don’t want no pussy” (421). And, upon returning to Brooklyn for her mother’s funeral, and seeing Midnight for the first time in years, she admits, “For the first time in many years, I became self-conscious. I felt ugly. I wanted to fix myself...He looked more amazing than I remembered him being...It was a piece of me that was dead, that was somehow coming to life again” (427). One can deduce that after being incarcerated with women for eight years and having no desire for “pussy,” this feeling of rebirth relates to her sexuality and feelings of being a “natural” woman. Again, in this case, critics could argue that life after prison would be no different from life before prison if an attractive man is all that is needed to push her to this vulnerable and exhilarating state. Midnight, though, is not just a man to Winter; he is her dream: “Each time that the phone rang I was hoping that it was Midnight. Above everything else, I always pictured him as the man who could rescue me” (312). And, as Hurston makes it clear, “The dream is the truth” (1). Moreover, it is clear that Winter understands the consequences of reliving the life she lived before prison, as suggested by the above mentioned passage discussing her concern for Porsche, but other previously cited passages are an indication of growth as well. All in all, although still not perfect, she progresses from an incompetent girl to a learned woman.

In the end, because of the path she chose and the lessons she learned, Winter, like Janie, demonstrates that one does not have to be the perfect role model in order to actually serve as a model. A woman can make her own path and live her own life outside of what others see as the standard for perfect womanhood and still serve as a critical example for young women because she is learned and others can learn from her. Still, this particular woman must be prepared for the consequences of her chosen path and actions. Hurston and Souljah's protagonists chose sexuality, expressing it at an early age, allowing it to influence their life decisions and how they interacted and communicated with others. Not surprisingly, because overt sexuality is unacceptable in mainstream American society, the consequences they faced were a form of imprisonment or sexual death.

IV. Closing Gaps, Opening Minds

Naturally, one's sexuality is influenced by one's life experiences; life experiences are in return influenced by one's sexuality. In a previously mentioned essay, Rebecca Walker discusses her change of character after losing her virginity and becoming comfortable with and confident in her sexuality and insists that it carried over to multiple aspects of her life. She maintains, "I was able to carry that pleasure and confidence into my everyday life working at the hair salon, raising my hand in English class, hanging out with my best girlfriend, and flirting with boys" (19). Suffice it to say, some (black) critics have yet to gain this confidence as even reputable scholars cannot bring themselves confidently, objectively, and publicly to engage works with highly charged language, violence, and vivid sexual conduct. Although many scholars are not publicly discussing and analyzing the works, however, it is a known fact that black women as a whole, educated black women included, are the top consumers of this genre of literature. Joan

Morgan insists, “Lack of college education explains why ’round-the-way girls aren’t reading bell hooks. It does not explain why even the gainfully degreed would rather trick away our last twenty-five dollars on that new nineties black girl fiction than some of those good, but let’s face it, laboriously academic black feminist texts” (53). A possible explanation for this phenomenon is the fact that the gainfully degreed can also sometimes be particularly self-conscious. And, despite the fact that these academics seem to necessitate an occasional “black girl fiction” novel, they succumb to the burden of representation which suggests that all should be model citizens, that there is a difference between the private and the public, and the two should never meet. However, as mentioned in a previous chapter, the two are essentially one entity, as, specifically for black women, the personal is inherently political and vice versa.

In sum, Hurston’s Janie Crawford and Souljah’s Winter Santiago are two characters—one highly praised, the other often overlooked—that by the end of their narratives, are not controlled by the above restraints. They are not model citizens and do not privatize their intimate feelings. Instead, they are journeying figures who experience life and learn lessons that can be beneficial to others. The protagonists experiment with sexuality, become self-actualized, and ultimately deduce that womanhood is totally subjective. One major difference between the resolutions of the two characters, however, is that Winter’s dream is never fully realized or made a reality. Perhaps Souljah will write a follow-up and reveal to the world Winter’s self-identified and self-sexualized persona, and allow her to fulfill her dream and not shut off and fasten everything downstairs; perhaps not. Either way, the two narratives serve as examples of the realistic truth that sex(uality) plays a significant role in the lives of black women, and therefore cannot be ignored; moreover, due to self-sexualization, women obtain power and agency that influences

and benefits others in their communities, even in light of society's general tendency to shun overt and unapologetic sexuality.

CHAPTER III

“Everything You Done to Me”³³: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982)

and Sapphire’s *PUSH* (1996)

“I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass between my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. Then inside look like a wet rose.”

Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (1982)

“[M]y pussy popping like grease in frying pan.”

Sapphire, *PUSH* (1996)

In the seminal collection of nonfiction, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), Alice Walker explores racial politics, literary ostracism and longevity, motherhood, childhood, and many other aspects of feminism relating to the beauty and complexity of the black female mind and body. Noting that black female sexuality is often disregarded by white feminists, Walker states, “...to think of black women as women is impossible if you cannot imagine them with vaginas.” These vaginas, she insists, are “the color of raspberries and blackberries—of scuppernongs and muscadines—and of that strong, silvery sweetness, with, as well, a sharp flavor of salt” (383). According to this logic, the black vagina is much like the black race in general; it comes in an array of shades and can be both sweet and salty, or pleasant and disagreeable. It is no secret that many black vaginas, in all their beauty and flavor, however, serve as the sites of turmoil, tragedy, and trepidation. *The Color Purple* and *PUSH* protagonists, Celie and Precious respectively, at an early age, endure physical and sexual abuse from parental figures that cause trauma to and ultimately influence how the daughters view their own vaginas.

³³ The chapter title is taken from the film version of *The Color Purple* (1985) when Celie finally takes her independence from Mr. _____ and curses him. The line in the film was slightly modified from the original text, which states, “A dust devil flew up on the porch between us, fill my mouth with dirt. The dirt say, *Anything you do to me, already done to you*” (210, emphasis added). The film version makes Celie’s declaration a bit more powerful as Mr. _____’s abuse is undoubtedly considered a thing of the past whereas the passage in the novel suggests a potential of future abuse. This is one of the many differences between the novel and its visual counterpart; other differences will be discussed later in this chapter.

Raspberries and blackberries are the farthest images from Celie and Precious's minds as they are trampled upon by their father and husband, and mother and father respectively. The abuse causes the protagonists to have a growing disregard and dislike for the same womanly possession that characters Janie and Winter esteemed and enjoyed. For this reason, Celie and Precious's characters, too, emerge in a different light from Janie and Winter in the final scenes of their narratives.

Whereas Janie and Winter are outspoken, carefree, overtly sexual black women, Celie and Precious are timid, troubled black girls/women who most often have sex forced upon them. Readers last see Janie and Winter alone and imprisoned, paying the price for previous sexual choices, while Celie and Precious are last seen free and surrounded by a community of supporters, receiving justice for previous sexual victimizations. These outcomes are the result of the novels being created in a world where sexuality (specifically black female sexuality) is seen as a private or closeted state of being that is reprimanded publicly if executed outside of prescribed, "respectable" norms. Despite the obvious or limited resolutions of the narratives, *The Color Purple* and *PUSH*, however, provide intriguing and complex depictions of black female sexualities, as neither Celie nor Precious gain mental or physical independence in their lives without first gaining an understanding of and appreciation for an active, self-governed, pleasurable sexuality.

In "Handing Back Shame: Incest and Sexual Confession in Sapphire's *PUSH*" (2005), Elizabeth Donaldson states, "In a certain sense, *Push* is a realist, urban version of the romantic, pastoral *Color Purple*" (53). Indeed, Donaldson and many other critics have done tremendous work comparing and contrasting Walker and Sapphire's texts. Other scholars, critics, and literary theorists have also compared *PUSH* to additional works such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

(1970) and even real life narratives such as that of Harriet Tubman, asserting that *PUSH*, along with these works, vividly engage incest and explore the importance of when, where, and how the victim finds and expresses her voice.³⁴ Even Sapphire herself mentions in an interview that a great many of the topics dealt with in her novel have already been dealt with in works by other African American women novelists before her; she expresses, “We’d had *The Bluest Eye*. We’d had *The Color Purple*. And *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which explicitly dealt with male/female sexual abuse” (Hardy ¶3). For these and other reasons, this chapter is not concerned with specifically comparing and contrasting *PUSH* to other works in the tradition, but rather the focus is on devising and promoting an intergenerational dynamic that can be used to generate deeper, diverse discussions on black female sexualities and ultimately add to the body of criticism on the topic.

The remaining sections of this chapter will provide an overview of the critical reception of *The Color Purple* and *PUSH*, followed by an illustration of the intergenerational dynamic—placing less focus on the unconventionality of the texts and instead recognizing the relationship between food and sexuality as a common literary motif—and end with an exploration of how the choices made in adapting the works to film affect the overall narratives, specifically as they pertain to the development and strength of the sexualities of the black female protagonists. This final section demonstrates that the male directors’ attempts forcibly to reduce the power or presence of the female characters’ sexualities result in a reduced degree of womanhood conveyed by the central characters in the films. Largely, the analysis in this chapter, like that of the previous chapter, suggests that: 1) sexuality is an undeniable part of one’s identity (to be

³⁴ See works including but not limited to Elizabeth Donaldson’s “Handing Back Shame: Incest and Sexual Confession in Sapphire’s *PUSH* (2005), Monica Michlin’s “Narrative as Empowerment: *PUSH* and the ‘Signifying’ on Prior African-American Novels on Incest” (2006), Darrl Lorenzo Wellington’s “Looking for *Precious*” (2010), and Barbara McCaskill’s “Multiple Oppression, ‘Multiple Consciousness,’ and the Spirit of Harriet Tubman in Sapphire’s *PUSH*” (2012).

regarded but not valued over everything else), 2) the acceptance of this reality potentially results in greater control over or pleasure received from one's sexual expressions and lived experiences, and 3) the intergenerational (and inter-genre) dynamic allows for wider, more diverse depictions of and critical conversations about black female sexualities.

I. An I For An I

Editors Elizabeth McNeil, Neal A. Lester, DoVeanna S. Fulton, and Lynette D. Myles insist that Sapphire has already made a literary breakthrough, as *PUSH* has garnered attention in the academy and is taught in many classrooms across the country. Their collection of essays entitled *Sapphire's Literary Breakthrough: Erotic Literacies, Feminist Pedagogies, Environmental Justice Perspectives* (2012) is the result of enthusiasm sparked by a conference at Arizona State University in February of 2007 titled “*PUSHing* Boundaries, *PUSHing* Art: A Symposium on the Works of Sapphire.” The reportedly successful conference, along with positive reviews—from renowned scholars and authors such as Ronald L. Jackson, II, Trudier Harris, and Sonja L. Lanehart—on the collection and the work it does suggests that *PUSH* rivals other works in the (African) American and feminist literary canons, or at least follows in their tradition, and indeed the novel has gained respect in the academy. For this reason, the current critical valuation of the novel, unlike Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* discussed in the previous chapter, is not a matter of contention in this chapter. This is not to say that the work is without critics who oppose or object to its method or intentions, however. In fact, the recent 2009 release of the film version titled *Precious*, named for the teenage, black female protagonist, has brought additional attention to the work, some positive, some negative. This detail—being

regarded, revered, and rejected by both academic and general audiences and critics—further enhances the kinship between Sapphire’s *PUSH* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*.

Set in rural Georgia during a period that coincides with the long Harlem Renaissance (circa 1910-1945), *The Color Purple* is the tale of Celie, first introduced to readers as a 14 year-old who is raped and bears two children by her supposed father and is later married off to an older widow who also uses her body for personal satisfaction. Celie’s father has frightened her to secrecy and silence, and Walker relays Celie’s tale to readers via her letters to God. Although the spiritual father is the reader for these letters, Celie’s journal-like entries recall unholy incidents in the most base and uninhibited language.

In a 1990 essay on Walker’s third novel, bell hooks insists that “*The Color Purple* broadens the scope of literary discourse, asserting its primacy in the realm of academic thought while simultaneously stirring the reflective consciousness of a mass audience...It is truly a popular work—a book of the people—a work that has many different meanings for many different people” (454). Molly Hite (1990) agrees, stating, “The publication of *The Color Purple* transformed Alice Walker from an indubitably serious black writer whose fiction belonged to a tradition of gritty, if occasionally ‘magical,’ realism into a popular novelist, with all the perquisites and drawbacks attendant on that position” (431). hooks’s and Hite’s claims could not have been more accurate, as the 1982 novel for the people won the Pulitzer prize in 1983 and faced a possible ban in 1984.

Commenting on the proposed ban, writer R. Wolf Baldassorro (2011) reports that Celie’s is a “heart-wrenching story of neglect and abuse”; he questions how a “touching and heartfelt story admired by millions [can] be at the mercy of the censor’s axe, and ultimately determines that “the list of charges includes homosexuality, offensive language, and being sexually explicit”

(¶ 2-3). Upon reviewing these charges, it is not surprising to find the generalized list of accusations comprises the identity of Celie: a lesbian who learns the power and significance of language around the same time that she learns the power and significance of her own sexuality. These characteristics, the reason her narrative faces a ban—along with her identity as black, impoverished, and a mother—make Celie a protagonist readers know and either respect or rue.

In addition to the novel's ability to appeal to multiple audiences, as noted above by hooks and Hite, other feedback and criticism of Walker's work mainly focuses on the seemingly flawed structure of the novel and the supposed misrepresentation of black males via the characters of Mr. ____—the brute, Mr. ____'s father—the regulator, Harpo—the softy, and other unappealing male characters. Reviewer Mel Watkins (1982) suggests, “If there is a weakness in this novel—besides the somewhat pallid portraits of the males—it is Nettie's correspondence from Africa... Appearing as they do, after Celie's intensely subjective voice has been established, they seem lackluster and intrusive” (7). Similarly, Trudier Harris (1984) declares:

My basic contention is that the portrayal of Celie was unrealistic for the time in which the novel was set, that Nettie and the letters from Africa were extraneous to the central concerns of the novel, that the lesbian relationship in the book represents the height of silly romanticism, and that the epistolary form of the novel ultimately makes Celie a much more sophisticated character than we are initially led to believe. (157)

Robert Towers summarizes these reviews by ultimately stating that “Alice Walker still has a lot to learn about plotting and structuring what is clearly intended to be a realistic novel” (¶18).

Overall, the problems that critics had with the novel upon its publication are problems that still persist for readers today, especially concerning the awkwardness of Nettie's letters. It is

indeed proper to gauge that each of the negatively portrayed male characters is met with an equal and opposite female character that is more tolerable to and preferred by readers. Mr. _____'s brutality is of course met with Celie's mildness, old Mr. _____'s regulations are met with Shug's licentiousness, and Harpo's softness is met with Sofia's strength. Notwithstanding these more likeable female character(istic)s, note that even these characters' endings are not desirable, with the exception of Celie, as she is reunited with her children, has a successful business, her own home, and a friend in both Mr. _____ and Shug—an ending that suggests that she will live happily ever after.³⁵ And, in defense of this difference, Walker states, "I liberated her from her own history...I wanted her to be happy" (Bloom 67). One would think this defense sufficient enough to ward off criticism, but Celie's happiness clearly displeased others, literary scholars specifically.

As mentioned in Chapter II of this project, Barbara Smith (1977) suggests that an author's basic intentions must be considered before one can even begin to understand a particular text. However, Sapphire, like many of Walker's critics, seemed to have disregarded and disapproved of Walker's basic intentions. She adamantly refuses to give her protagonist the expected happy ending, insisting that realistically, all lives do not have happy endings: "maybe that's not gonna happen to everyone" (Hardy ¶17). To add emphasis to this unlikelihood, Sapphire allows Precious's character to idolize Walker and notice similarities between her life and the life of Celie. And, in spite of Ms. Rain's proclamation that *The Color Purple* is thought to have an unlikely fairy tale ending, Precious is also adamant that "life can work out for the best sometimes" (83). As if to prove a point, however, the paragraph following Precious's declaration

³⁵ Although not the sum of her existence, in the final pages of the novel, Shug is, in a nutshell, older, fatter, no longer a singer, and without a man. Plainly put, Celie states, "[she] come home with bleary eyes, rotten breath, overweight and sort of greasy (214). Sofia, on the other hand, is beaten, battered, and humbled—a far cry from the outspoken, aggressive, strong woman readers initially meet.

of hope and positivity begins the scene in which her mother, Mary, discloses to Precious that her father, “Carl[,] had the AIDS virus” (85). This passage and news eradicates immediately the possibilities of Precious having a similar highly criticized happy ending as Celie in *The Color Purple*.

Despite Sapphire’s break from a fabled ending, however, critics still manage to find fault in Precious’s outcome. Martha Southgate, specifically, thinks that the amount of unhappy and unappealing circumstances Precious endures is a bit excessive and unnecessary. She declares, “I had issues with the book. I think it’s a flawed novel. One of the major issues was the piling on of bad things happening to this girl. In the novel, both her father and her mother are sexually abusing her. The real deal of many mid-lists authors is this is the kind of story that gets covered. Why are narratives of oppression the most popular?” (qtd. in Wellington 26). This view of the novel, and novels of oppression in general, ignores the fact that Precious’s oppression facilitates personal growth, and while the abuse may not have been necessary, her growth also may not have been fostered under other more ideal circumstances. Apparently, opponents of this work are not fond of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975), or Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), as each of these tales house narratives of ongoing trauma and abuse—oftentimes uncontrollable—inflicted upon unsuspecting and uninformed black female protagonists. Nonetheless, it is ultimately made clear from Southgate’s critique and the critique of others, that in the world of literary criticism, an author, to be clichéd but accurate, cannot win for losing. A work will perhaps never be “good enough.”

Nevertheless, flawed or not, Sapphire’s *PUSH* portrays attributes of black female sexuality that have not been frequently, if ever, tapped into by, one might say, “top-list” authors. One traditionally uncharted characteristic is the extent to which Precious inwardly enjoys sex

and sometimes even enjoys it with her father, only she wishes that it was not her father with whom she enjoyed it. Precious's enjoyment of and curiosity about sex brings attention to and complicates the fact that sex is generally frowned upon by society (specifically as it pertains to unwed or underage women of color); despite her sexual abuse, she has strong desires to have a serious intimate and sexual relationship with a boy of her choosing but hides these feelings from others, including her teacher, Ms. Rain, with whom she otherwise shares everything.³⁶

Sexuality is indeed powerful and complex, and Sapphire's work demonstrates this intricacy via both narrative convention and language use. Hip hop novelist Sofia Quintero, better known as Black Artemis, recognizes the irony in Sapphire's narrative conventions and has a similar view as Southgate but does not want blatantly to tear down the novel, suggesting, "There are people who are criticizing *Precious* because they don't want to see things, but there is also something to be said for diversity of images. I would like to see films where the 'hood is portrayed as a bright and positive place" (qtd. in Wellington 26).³⁷ In an attempt not to be too critical, she is in essence separating herself from the "people" who are criticizing the work because "they don't want to see things," but is making it clear that she would rather see something else as well. Suffice it to say, Toni Morrison's famous words still apply; one is responsible for writing the book she wants to read; although, in addendum, if one tears down every work previously written in that genre, chances are one's own work will be torn down as well.

Recognizing this personal saving power early on in her career, Alice Walker makes note that in the literary world, "the life we save is our own" (*In Search* 14). Other critics have also apparently recognized this truth, and as such, not all find Walker or Sapphire's novel flawed. In

³⁶ See pages 102 and 109 for a quick reference; this point will be elaborated on later in the chapter.

³⁷ This review is directly commenting on issues with the film, but in this case, as it relates to portraying positive and negative images of the 'hood, the film and the novel are interchangeable.

fact, some critics actually see Precious's positive status and tragic end as positive reinforcement to avoid other tragic ends.³⁸ Reviewer Darryl Wellington states, "*Push* derives its title from Precious' determination to forge ahead in spite of the abyss. From the point of view of real survivors of rape and incest, her endurance itself and the very darkness of Precious' story is a source of inspiration. Precious never considers suicide or drug use. *Push* has frequently been used to counsel victims and survivors of mental, familial, and sexual abuse" (27). Although Precious never admittedly attempts suicide, as Wellington points out, she does admit to getting "Daddy's razor out cabinet. Cut cut cut arm wrist." She insists, however, that she is not trying to die, but rather trying "to plug [her]self back in" (112). Despite her suggested intentions or implied intentions for that matter, Precious's actions make her more realistic and human. She rejects the strong black woman stereotype, and in this act, admits that her life is difficult.

Cultural worker Ebony Golden (2010) sees Precious's rape, self-inflicted bodily harm, and other frowned upon acts as "the book[']s way of] allowing people to take a gritty look at the culture of violence against women and the culture of silence in our country. It is a graphic airing of dirty laundry—not only the violence in Black society, because incest isn't a Black issue, but in America" (qtd. in Wellington 26). Using Golden's logic, Sapphire's airing of dirty laundry is no different from the airing that Harriet Jacobs does in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) or the airing that Gayl Jones does in *Corregidora* (1975), as the fundamental objective is to make certain that violence against black women is recognized, reduced, and ultimately eradicated. However, the distinctiveness of *PUSH* is indication that tradition is not synonymous to prescription, and that it is possible for an individualistic and nonconforming tale to display

³⁸ Although it is not disclosed in *PUSH*, as readers can only speculate what will happen to Precious after she ends with a hopeful poem about dreams, *The Kid* (2011)—narrative of Precious's son, Abdul—reveals that Precious loses her battle with HIV nine years after his birth.

characteristics indicative of and beneficial to a previously defined group. This is maverick feminism.

To demonstrate exactly to what extent they wanted their novels and specifically their main characters to be individuals, Walker and Sapphire, as many critics have noticed, allow their protagonists to tell their narratives in first person. In other words, the story is about “I,” not “she” and especially not about “they.” As such, the materialization and strength, or lack thereof, of the individual protagonist’s sexuality is all the more visible. Elizabeth Donaldson suggests, “Sapphire’s decision to write in first person, from the point of view of an incest survivor, has a powerful, emancipatory effect. Precious has a political agency that Pecola can seemingly never attain” (54).³⁹ One year after Donaldson’s claim, Monica Michlin (2006) states, “[T]he fact that Pecola does not survive psychically and that the story is told by everyone but her is one of the things that feminist writers have necessarily revised since... This is exactly what first Alice Walker, then Sapphire tried to do in *CP* and *Push*” (181). The narrative convention of the two novels has a powerful effect, but the protagonists’ emancipation does not come simply by telling their stories in first person. Celie and Precious are not only the subjects of their respective narratives, but they, ironically, are the objects as well.

As noted in the title of this chapter, most things are done to Celie and Precious, as opposed to Celie and Precious actually *doing*. For this reason, despite the fact that they are telling their own stories, Celie and Precious do not become active agents, or subjects, until they begin to make things happen, particularly when they begin to value their own sexualities and the unapologetic sexualities of others. Overall, and regardless of possible negative connotations, a self-conscious and self-actualized sexuality is powerful in many aspects of life, and it is at the point of gaining this knowledge and power that Celie and Precious too get something akin to

³⁹ Pecola is a character in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) that is also a victim of incest.

vengeance on their victimizers and effectively assert themselves as *I*, therefore evolving from the multiple oppressions that plague them and dishearten their critics.

II. Finger Lickin' Good: Food and Sexuality in the Two Narratives

Food is one specific tool that is used as a weapon of abuse or manipulation against or by the protagonists in both Walker and Sapphire's texts.⁴⁰ It is an unconventional tool that tends to cause the novels' characters to become vulnerable. Noting the power and ecstasy of food, in the self-help book titled *Oprah, In her Words, Our American Princess* (2008), the noted godmother of the film *Precious* is quoted as saying, "My idea of heaven is a great big baked potato and someone to share it with" (Palmieri 47).⁴¹ In a like manner, many of the meals and feasts described in Walker's *The Color Purple* and Sapphire's *PUSH* yield an illusory or trance-like intimacy between those in attendance. The culinary gatherings and meals depicted in the two works are a demonstration that food is in indeed political, promotes community, has a tendency to influence vulnerability, and ultimately is interconnected with sexuality. Characters often use the enticement of food to gain intimacy in order to transport themselves to an ephemeral heaven on earth; even the often victimized Celie is guilty of this deceptive deed.

In the end of the *The Color Purple* and *PUSH*, the two protagonists seem to conquer the obstacles once hampering their abilities to be "normal" operating citizens. Yet, because Celie

⁴⁰ Celie is often portrayed as the victim of the novel, but she in fact uses food as a manipulative tool.

⁴¹ Food and companionship, for some time, have been known to be interconnected, particularly in black communities. African Americans tend to commemorate almost every significant event with a feast, whether a wedding, a death, a birthday, or just a Saturday. Barbequing, a tradition practiced by Africans before their arrival in America, is specifically prevalent in black communities; chicken, beef, and pork are favorites at barbeques. Noting that the barbeque is "always inherently political," culinary historian Michael Twitty suggests "...highly spicing meats...the use of the wooden grill framework, the slow cooking process...and the social context of barbeque...hearken back to the culture's African roots...it was enslaved Africans and their descendents who became heir to multiple traditions and in turn incorporated those traditions into a standard repertoire known as Southern barbeque" (¶5-6). The barbeque is noted as a communal event; many bonds are formed, strengthened, and sometimes even weakened over these feasts, as they usually require intimacy amongst the people in attendance.

and Precious are victims of abuse—verbal, physical, and especially sexual—throughout the majority of their narratives, readers may view them as unlikely agents in their own sexualities, basically not self-sexualized. Indeed, Celie is raped by her stepfather; she recollects the beginning of the abuse as such, “First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold of my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it. But I don’t never git used to it” (1). This paints the picture of an innocent, naïve girl who is victimized during her first sexual encounter. Readers learn that Celie is no more intimate, dominant, or pleasantly active in sexual encounters following this one, including encounters with her husband years later. She maintains, “I lay there thinking about Nettie while he on top of me, wonder if she safe. And then I think bout Shug Avery. I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it” (12). The two passages together, as previously mentioned, indicate that despite telling her own story, Celie has many things *done* to her and is the object of someone else’s actions very regularly in her narrative. Yet, this indication is not completely suggestive of Celie’s control over her sexuality. As sexuality is often interconnected with food in this novel, readers observe that Celie knows the power of both and thus uses food to instigate a physical and emotional bond between her and Shug. In retrospect, she is indeed a “much more sophisticated character than we are initially led to believe” (Harris 157).

After coming to the realization that she “sure *is* ugly” and therefore is outwardly undesired by “the most beautiful woman [she] ever saw,” Celie lures Shug into a companionship by showering her with the feast that ultimately opens the figurative door for them to feast upon one another in the future (46 emphasis original, 6). Celie’s dream of becoming one with Shug comes true shortly after she entices Shug with food. Celie states, “I ast Shug Avery what she

want for breakfast. She say, what yall got, I say ham, grits, eggs, biscuits, coffee, sweet milk or butter milk, flapjacks. Jelly and jam...I feel like something pushing me forward. If I don't watch out I'll have hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth...Nobody living can stand to smell cured ham without tasting it" (51-2). In this passage, the usually dormant Celie has to "repress" her feelings in order to avoid "pressing up on" Shug. Celie gives Shug more options than she can handle in one sitting and ultimately, and somewhat violently, equates Shug's body, her fingers specifically, to the food that is to be taken in and consumed. More importantly, however, Celie notes the power of the smell of cured ham, insisting that nobody alive can resist it.

The irresistible smell of the ham is comparable to the smell of the vagina's natural pheromones, which are "meant to attract a sexual partner" (Rankin 67). Moreover, the process of curing the ham, adding salt, sugar, and other chemicals that add flavor and a pink or reddish color to the meat, is not unlike the description of the black vagina illustrated by Walker and mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter. In addition, the vagina, in popular culture, is frequently referred to as a "ham wallet" because of the vagina's similar coloration (presumably taste and smell as well) to the meat, along with its ability to hold and contain valuable objects. Whether Walker was or was not aware of all of the different correlations between the first item of food on Celie's lists and the actual female sexual organ Celie has yet to *feel* the intensity of, the depictions in the narrative highlight what is implicitly Celie's full awareness that food, specifically cured ham, makes one vulnerable.

Celie notes how the otherwise confident and bold Shug is intimidated by her culinary prowess and like a hungry rodent, has fallen into her trap, stating, "I put my plate down on the card table by the bed. I go dip her up some water. I come back, pick up my plate. Look like a

little mouse been nibbling the biscuit, a rat run off with the ham” (52). Shug’s stature is now equivalent to a minute rodent, one that finds ham irresistible. Shortly after Shug and Celie’s interaction at breakfast, Celie is helping to “scratch [songs] out of [Shug’s] head;” they become practically inseparable, and Celie’s food enticement encourages Shug to *open up* in multiple ways (53). Later in the novel, Celie notes how Shug “haul[s] off and kiss[es her] on the mouth”; then she “feels something real soft and wet on [her] breast, feel like one of [her] little lost babies mouth,” a lost baby that is apparently *hungry* (114-115). All in all, this example demonstrates that while Celie may in fact be a victim of sexual abuse, she too is a sexual and sensual manipulator who realizes the intimate power of food. Her identity as a self-actualized and self-sexualized woman may come later in the narrative, but this particular engagement with Shug suggests that Celie is not simply a victim, that she desired pleasure, and ultimately that sexuality is complex and unavoidable.

In an essay titled “Spiky Green Life: Environmental, Food, and Sexual Justice Themes in *PUSH*,” Joni Adamson states, “*PUSH* illustrates that our bodies, like our communities and our homes, are our first environments, and that our bodies have been placed at risk, poisoned by toxins, by too much or not enough food, or even killed due to social and physical harms that may be exacerbated because of gender and sexuality” (85). In summation, Adamson’s essay suggests that the body is a dwelling that should be kept clean, not simply by maintaining good hygiene, but by taking in healthy foods moderately as well; however, poverty-stricken communities such as those depicted in *PUSH* have little knowledge of or access to these healthy foods. The lack of proper nutrition and other necessities due to socioeconomic impediments lead to physical violence that further destroys the already improperly nourished body. This argument is significant because it highlights the multiple purposes and effects of food. It is not simply used

for nutritional or sustenance purposes and, if abused, has side effects expanding beyond weight gain. Instead of using food to entice a lover, Precious is a victim of food abuse, but like Celie, she too recognizes that the sensual body and food are deeply interconnected.

Throughout the novel *PUSH*, Precious has a propensity for using similes and metaphors. She unwittingly compares almost any unpleasant situation to a crude sex act. For instance, when she does not turn her math book to the correct page and is asked by the teacher, Mr. Wicher, to leave class, Precious disrupts the class and insists that she “ain’ going nowhere mutherfucker till the bell ring.” Her description of Mr. Wilcher’s reaction follows: “He look like a bitch just got a train pult on her. He don’t know what to do” (5). In a similar situation, when she makes an unexpected comment to the guidance counselor, Precious notes, “She look at me like I said I wanna suck a dog’s dick or some shit;” then, “Mrs Lichenstein look at me like I got three arms or a bad odor out my pussy or something” (7-8). When life’s situations appear immoderate or unbearable, Precious compares them to sex acts. This is undoubtedly a result of how she experiences sex, in an uncomfortable and violent way. However, when sex acts themselves are immoderate or unbearable, Precious compares them to food.

During the course of the novel, Precious narrates the details of many immoderate and unbearable sex acts carried out on her, but the most vivid of these depictions are connected to food. For example, it is understood that Precious’s mother, Mary, sexually abuses her daughter to compensate for the fact that “Miz Claireece Precious Jones [is] fucking [her] husband...[and] he done quit [Mary]. He left [Mary] ’cause of [Precious]” (19). Yet, only one scene actually depicts this abuse. Mary uses food to intoxicate Precious and then fingers her daughter, or penetrates her digitally, while she is in a food induced stupor. Precious describes this ghastly event by stating the following:

I eat 'cause she say eat. I don't taste nothin'...Eating, first 'cause she make me, beat me if I don't, then eating hoping the pain in my neck go away. I keep eating...and I just fall back on the couch so full it like I'm dyin' and I go to sleep like I always do; almost...I feel Mama's hand between my legs, moving up my thigh. Her hand stop, she getting ready to pinch me if I move. I just lay still still, keep my eyes close. I tell Mama's other hand between her legs now 'cause the smell fill the room. Mama can't fit into bathtub no more. Go sleep, go sleep, go *sleep*, I tells myself. Mama's hand creepy spider, up my legs, in my pussy. God please. Thank you god I say as I fall asleep." (20-21)

The God that Celie writes her earnest letters to is the God that Precious prays to when Mary is using Precious's food-filled body in an attempt to transport herself to "heaven." The dinner that the two eat could likely serve a family of five, but Mary herself has a food addiction and forces Precious to eat so that she will become fat and hopefully undesirable by her "husband." But, the gross intake of food does not hinder Mary, but rather encourages her, to desire Precious herself. Not surprisingly, the two are having ham hocks for dinner, along with a spread of collard greens, corn bread, fried apple pies, and macaroni 'n cheese. Ham is a commonality between Celie's enticing breakfast and the intoxicating dinner prepared by Precious; however, as Adamson notes about the eating habits of those living in impoverished areas, Precious and Mary either prefer or could only afford the less expensive hock as opposed to the ham proper.⁴² Nevertheless, the meal "fills" Precious up and makes her vulnerable to be "felt up" by her mother.

The correlation between food and sex(uality) becomes so apparent and distinct in Precious's life that when her body is used by others, even when she is not physically eating, she

⁴²In relation to food customs, it is interesting to note that Precious's meal is considered a Southern tradition. Her mother and grandmother are originally from Greenwood, MS.

conjures up a dish. When she is pregnant with her second child, the “baby feels like a watermelon between [her] bones getting bigger” (57). Furthermore, she recollects instances of abuse at the hands of her father, describing the uncontrollable and unwarranted pleasure she feels, insisting that she “feel the hot sauce hot cha cha feeling when he be fucking [her]” and her “pussy popping like grease in frying pan” (58, 111). When her son is finally born, he devours her body as well, and Precious notes, “I feed Abdul. My body is his breakfast. I gotta get something to eat myself” (78). Although her body is a feast for others, because Precious has very few intimate companions, she herself is depicted as hungry throughout the novel.⁴³ This hunger is both physical and mental, aspects that ultimately drive her to find fullness via alternative avenues, alternative education specifically. The relationships Precious build at the alternative school are influential in helping her, like Shug helped Celie, realize her own desires and gain a sense of physical, mental, and sexual autonomy.

Overall, the depictions of food and sexuality in Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Sapphire’s *PUSH* provide a significant example of how the two novels work together and can be used to form an intergenerational dynamic and add depth to the body of scholarship on black female sexualities. The two narratives depict that sexualities are attractive aspects of womanhood that are to be appreciated and respected, not feared and defamed. Once the protagonists learn to appreciate and respect their own sexualities and not fight the sensual desires they have for others—or even the feelings of pleasure they have during or in the midst of their victimization—they gain a power over themselves which in turn brings a sense of control over their situation.

⁴³ One particular instance is when she has no money for food and steals chicken from a diner. See page 37.

In essence, self-actualized black female sexuality is both a prize and a weapon, and, as reasoned, food has the ability to strengthen or weaken it.⁴⁴ However, as Adamson's essay suggests, economic status plays a grand role in the food choices individuals make. Celie grows her own crops, and Precious's mother receives welfare assistance, but the two are both on the lower end of the economic ladder. In fact, many will argue, and to a certain extent this analysis supports, that the economic standing of the two protagonists are directly related to their victimization. All the same, it is important to note, and literary works support, that food abuse and sexual abuse are common amongst those in higher economic classes as well, especially if the victim is not self-actualized and self-sexualized.

For example, the popular novel by Terry McMillan titled *Disappearing Acts* (1989) adds to and enhances the discussion of food and sexuality in *The Color Purple* and *PUSH*. The novel is set in Brooklyn and Queens in the early 1980s, a time and place not far from when and where Sapphire's Precious lived and grew up. However, the female protagonist, Zora Banks, is a college graduate, music teacher, and aspiring singer and songwriter. Born in Ohio, she moves to New York to pursue her dreams. In the interim, she meets and has relationships with several men; these relationships are oftentimes more sexual than emotional and never end well. Most importantly, however, Zora's description of losing her virginity, although voluntarily, is not much unlike that of Celie and Precious's, specifically because of the lack of pleasure she experiences during—as well as the lack of knowledge she expresses about—sexual intercourse.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Secondary characters in *The Color Purple*, Harpo and Sofia, are also an example of how food is thought to influence one's sexuality. Harpo eats excessively hoping to gain weight and be manly enough to control and ultimately beat his wife, Sofia. However, he fails, and Sofia is continuously the dominant one; "She not quite as tall as Harpo but much bigger, and strong and ruddy looking, like her mama brought her up on pork," ham perhaps (31).

⁴⁵ Celie and Precious's experiences are undoubtedly depicted as more traumatic because they unwillingly lose their virginities to abusive father figures. However, during their first encounters, Celie, Precious, nor Zora actually enjoys or understands why one would potentially enjoy sexual intercourse.

Concerning the event with a college basketball star after her senior prom, Zora states, “I did it because I was tired of saying no and figured if I got pregnant at least I’d be out of high school when the baby was born. And it hurt. I was grateful when it was finally over, and couldn’t understand why everybody had made such a big deal about sex if this was supposed to be the thrill of a lifetime. I never did feel electric. But I didn’t care; I still wanted Champagne” (19). She becomes immediately content with meaningless, unfulfilled sex and relationships, and this reality leads her to unhealthy comfort eating. After Zora gains a significant amount of weight, has two abortions, and is displeased with her physical appearance and relationship status, she begins to evaluate her life as a whole, joins Weight Watchers and vows not to make the same mistakes with men again. Not long after this personal promise, she meets Franklin Swift, a very attractive high school dropout and aspiring carpenter who works odd construction jobs to pay for his tiny room in a boarding house and semi-support both his two children and a nasty drinking habit. Zora and Franklin’s relationship begins innocently enough but quickly spirals into an unhealthy, abusive relationship.

Because Zora can support herself financially, for a short period of time in the relationship, she has a bit of control over Franklin as well. He recognizes this control but is initially mesmerized by the fact that she is independent. His preliminary view of her is that “Zora didn’t sound like she was concerned one way or another about what I thought. I liked that shit. And she’s the first woman I met in a long time that ain’t leaning on nobody.” He is also fascinated by the fact that she has “fancy ceramic type cup[s],” “good taste,” and “real art work” (41). Even more impressive, however, is the fact that she can cook “like a gourmet. And she’s got good eating habits too. No junk food whatsoever. The woman don’t even eat sugar, don’t drink no sodas and no alcohol...I’ve been eating food I can’t even pronounce” (116).

There are three distinct differences between Zora and the two protagonists previously mentioned: more education, a higher economic status, and healthier eating habits. These three differences are precisely what trigger the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse that she later receives from Franklin. And, the one similarity, a lack of a self-confident, self-actualized sexuality, is what permits her to stand it as long as she does, despite obvious educational and financial means to remove herself from the abusive situation.

The first instance of physical abuse happens when Franklin cannot afford to buy Zora a fancy gift for her birthday, “no cheap shit, ’cause she know the difference”; he gets drunk in an attempt to free his mind of the fact that he is unable to provide for Zora and is therefore seemingly less manly (110). The result is a ruined birthday as he walks out in the middle of a movie and “grabbed [Zora] by the wrist and pulled [her] down the stairs with much more force than was necessary” (121). Franklin and Zora rarely go out on dates after this incident. Although he admits that he has not paid rent for months, and Zora buys all of the groceries, he does not prefer to go out and not be able to pay or provide; ultimately, the realization of what his public image must be destroys the image he has of himself. However, because he is bigger and stronger than Zora, he uses what manhood he has left to attempt to weaken her womanhood. He stays home all day and demands that she cook because it is her “job” (216). He also physically abuses and rapes her. There eventually comes a time when she, similar to Minny in *The Help*, uses her child as protection, hoping that “Franklin might be less likely to do anything to hurt” her when Jeremiah is in bed with her (356).⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, Franklin gains over twenty pounds in the

⁴⁶ One difference between Zora and Minny is that Minny actually uses pregnancy as a form of protection whereas Zora hopes that the presence of her and Franklin’s child will invoke sympathy. More importantly, however, Zora actually desires an intimate relationship with Franklin whereas Minny is described as having no intimate desires at all.

course of the relationship and uses the extra weight to aid in overpowering Zora, something Harpo was unable to do to Sofia in *The Color Purple*. Zora states:

This couldn't be the man I had fallen in love with. This couldn't be Franklin Swift doing this to me. But it was. He managed to get his clothes off, and to my surprise he was erect, which meant he'd had this whole thing planned. I wasn't about to try to fight him because there was no telling what he might do to me. So I gave in. He put all 238 pounds of body weight on me, and even though I could hardly move, I didn't say a word. I just lay there numb as a ragdoll. He jabbed in me as deep as he could... "I want it to hurt," he said. "Now move goddammit." So I moved. (349)

This passage illustrates the total control Franklin has over Zora not simply because he is a man, but rather because he is a big, strong man who has been nourished by the many intimate meals she prepared for him. Since he cannot keep a job and provide for her or support her as he feels a man should, the only other way he knows to assert his manhood is to insert himself into her vagina, whether welcomed or forced. Her lack of control, lack of fight, lack of self-sexualization permits her to remain in this toxic relationship and act as a numb ragdoll.

Eventually, the fancy cups and the unpronounceable meals that spark Franklin's interest in Zora become the reason he can no longer tolerate her or himself. He finally leaves to attempt to better himself for the both of them. Because Zora lacks the strength to disassociate herself from a man she both loves and loathes, one can only assume that had Franklin not left, the abuse may have continued and escalated. She uses their time of separation to evaluate her life yet again and resolves that she will no longer disappear into the worlds of the men she loves and will instead focus on her own dreams and happiness. As a result, when the final pages of the novel

find Zora and Franklin reunited, eating a final meal, and playing an extra friendly game of Scrabble, she has made it clear that she is moving away from New York, going back to church, and seriously writing music. In essence, like Janie, she adamantly asserts that she is refocusing on her dreams. At this point, Franklin “look[s] like he [is] back down to his old size” and is therefore less intimidating. Too, because Zora is again self-confident and now has more governance over her own sexuality (meaning she is in the process of becoming self-sexualized), she regains the power she lost during the relationship (373).⁴⁷

On the whole, these three works depict the lives of three diverse women with one similar problem: they have accepted the role of victim and are objects, as opposed to subjects, of the occurrences in their own lives. Once they realize their own physical and sexual desires and actively assert themselves, they become subjects, self-actualized individuals. Furthermore, the narratives suggest that while economic status and lack of education play a grand role in improper food consumption and the victimization of many bodies, self-sexualization even more important to one’s overall wellbeing. Celie, Precious, and Zora, develop and become more visible as self-governing characters once they learn how to manage food intake and sexual feelings. And, where critical discussion is concerned, as this analysis illustrates, putting less focus on the unconventionality of a work and focusing more on a centralized issue—such as food and sexuality—and how that issue affects the narrative and characters is but one way to employ the intergenerational model to ensure that significant historical or traditional texts do not perish, and simultaneously make certain that contemporary or popular texts are discussed critically and have longevity. Furthermore, such engagement adds diversity to the critical discussion on black female sexualities.

⁴⁷ When Franklin comes over this time, she has decided that she undoubtedly desires him, but, unlike past instances, she wants to have sex on her own terms. So while he sits passively and nervously, she kisses him, laughs, steps back to unzips her blue jeans. “Then she pulled her Saratoga T-shirt over her head and took off her bra” (384).

III. Not Seeing is Believing: From Fiction to Film

A close examination of how other forms of art depict the lives of black women who become self-actualized in literary narratives also invigorates critical conversations on black female sexualities. As previously noted, despite its current canonization, *The Color Purple* has not always and is not currently a favorite of all scholars and educators. In fact, according to Trudier Harris, the work should not have been initially canonized. She states, “The tale of the novel’s popularity is the tale of the media’s ability, once again, to dictate the tastes of the reading public, and to attempt to shape what is acceptable creation by black American writers. Sadly, a book that might have been ignored if it had been published ten years earlier or later has now become the classic novel by a black woman.” Harris is also adamant that “the damaging effects reaped by the excessive media attention given to the novel will plague us as scholars and teachers for many years to come” (155). Indeed, the media does play a large role in what is and is not acceptable in American culture and in American education to a certain extent. Although, as time has progressed, it is a reasonable assessment that the academy, specifically the field of literature, is not influenced enough by popular culture and media impact; traditional departments typically engage mainly classical works and topics—works and topics that are undoubtedly essential, but in essence are not all too appealing to modern readers. Without question, popular narratives and media depictions oftentimes add value and complexity to discussions in the academy. Even so, it is important to note, especially for teaching purposes, that while films, specifically *The Color Purple* and *Precious*, are based on novels, they are not completely parallel to their respective novels and thus can be viewed as a separate entity, as the depictions of black female sexualities in the two art forms often contrast one another.

Amiri Baraka (1963) states, “An A flat played twice on the same saxophone by two different men does not have to sound the same” (194). This is especially so when these two “men” are from different racial, class, and gender backgrounds. Thus, it is not too surprising when film directors (a male dominated occupation) get some things “wrong” in the process of transferring fiction, specifically black women’s fiction, to film. They inherently incorporate themselves into the work, and film directors also have a reputation to uphold that is slightly different from that of the original author. They, therefore, adhere to personal guidelines to make certain that their supportive viewers continue to come back. Additional characters and scenes are often added for a desired effect; yet, the characters and scenes in the novel that do not make it to the big screen are most telling. Often times, but specifically in *The Color Purple* and *Precious*, the scenes hidden from public view are those involving sexuality and its importance to the development of a character, along with scenes that display a less than happy or “appropriate” ending. A careful analysis of the differences between the two (film and fiction) provides even more insight into the importance and strength of black female sexualities and again adds depth and diversity to the body of scholarship on black female sexualities, as the novels’ protagonists develop and become more complicated and self-actualized characters than their film counterparts as a direct result of their explicit, intimate experiences and engagements with others.

Both *The Color Purple* and *PUSH (Precious)* gained attention and notoriety after the production of the motion pictures based on the novels. After the release of *The Color Purple* in December of 1985, Tony Brown (1986) criticized the film, stating that it was “the most racist depiction of Black men since *The Birth of a Nation* and the most anti-Black family film of the modern film era” (qtd. in Bobo ¶1). Other black male critics, specifically Ishmael Reed, were in agreement. Some reviewers of the film version of *The Color Purple* were not pleased by the fact

that a white male director was chosen to relay the narrative of a black woman but ultimately believed that it was Steven Spielberg's interest in the film that allowed for its production, as the black woman's story had otherwise been overlooked. Donald Bogle (1986) suggests that this is a "schizophrenic reaction," as there are disagreeable scenes in the film, and the overall premise of Celie's story is one of tragedy, but ultimately, the film is one to be respected and praised because "you know that in American films in the past, in the 1930s, 1940s, [Whoopi Goldberg] would have played a maid" (qtd. in Bobo ¶11). Although Goldberg is not the typical maid, Michelle Wallace (1986) suggests, and this chapter supports, that representations in the film are still tantamount to stereotypes of black womanhood. Wallace states, "Spielberg juggles film clichés and racial stereotypes fast and loose, until all signs of a Black feminist agenda are banished, or ridiculed beyond repair" (qtd. in Bobo ¶10). Despite the positive or negative reviews and the backlash Walker or Spielberg received because of the film, Walker has noted that she sold the screen rights because she wanted unlikely readers of the book to see the film and be exposed to the critical message in the narrative: the ability of a naïve, victimized, young, black girl to evolve and develop into an independent woman through sisterhood and self-fulfillment. Although, as a result of the scenes added and deleted by the film's director, Celie's independence is not quite realized.

With a similar critical message and a similar desire to affect change, Sapphire sold the screen rights for *PUSH* because she wanted to "show this diseased situation with the hope that we can see it as something that needs to be healed as opposed to something that we need to hide from the public's view." She also goes on to express that Lee Daniels—not a white male director but a man nonetheless—was chosen over other potential directors because "he had gone over the edge in some cases with his own work...I felt this would be someone who would not back up

from the material and would present something true and vital to the public” (“Sapphire’s Story ¶20, ¶16).

The 2009 release of the film and Daniels’s ability seemingly to “not back up” sparked film critic Armond White’s declaration that “not since *The Birth of a Nation* has a mainstream movie demeaned the idea of Black American life as much” (qtd. in Wellington 26). White’s review is akin to Brown’s criticism nearly twenty years prior. Although, according to his logic, *The Color Purple* is presumably tame in comparison to *Precious*, as White yet refers to *The Birth of a Nation* as the demeaning, racist prototype that *Precious* rivals. Pearl Cleage, on the other hand, supports Sapphire and Daniels’s boldness and suggests that the presentation of black art is not about “putting our best face forward.” She states:

Michelle Obama is a Black mother—and she isn’t Mo’Nique in *Precious*. We have both, and every gradation in between...But in Mo’Nique’s character, as terrible as she is, I still saw an explanation. She says, ‘Who’s gonna love me? I’m fat, I’m Black, I’m unattractive...Even if we choose not to do anything about it, it deepens our understanding. That’s all a work of art has to do. I still want us to go beyond talking about the images and talk about the issues. (qtd. in Wellington 26)

The degrading images that are often talked about include but are not limited to an abusive father, an overweight, illiterate, abusive mother, an uncharacteristic grandmother, a “retarded” child, and an overweight, illiterate teen mother. However, the issues to be discussed are homosexuality, homophobia, down-low African American men, incest, self-esteem, health risks of obesity, societal views of beauty, single parenting and its effects on children (even as adults), education, child welfare services, and media influences. Even people who are not raised in a family or

environment similar to *Precious*'s have to deal with these issues because they deal with people in the world. Thus, as Cleage suggests, the topics are beyond worthy of critical discussion, especially in the academy, as some of the "images" may very well show their faces in college classrooms. It is again important to note that fiction and film are inherently separate entities, but congruent critical discussion of the two provides a unified logic for scholars interested in the issues and topics—black female sexualities specifically—brought out in the two mediums.

Attentive scholars have noted the additions made to the films *The Color Purple* and *Precious* respectively, as well as the effects of the additions on the author's original narrative purpose. In response to Spielberg's *The Color Purple*, Molly Hite notes that Spielberg "reinscribed Mr. _____ (whom he named simply Mister, so that the title of authority became this character's identity) at the center of the novel...". "More strikingly," she suggests, "Spielberg went on to reinscribe the law of the father exactly where Walker had effaced it, by providing Shug with a textually gratuitous 'daddy' who is also a preacher and thus the representative of the Christian white father-God explicitly repudiated in the passage that gives the book its title" (440). Indeed, the renaming of Mr. _____ has a grand effect on the novel, as Walker's initial naming and spelling (including the blank space) recalls a void in naming that can be filled by any man, making him far from honorable, but instead dispensable. In addition, the naming seems to be a play on the secrecy forced upon Celie by her stepfather, as all men that she comes in contact with, with the exception of Harpo, Jack, and Grady, are simply referred to as Mr. _____ or Rev. Mr. _____. Harpo, Jack, and Grady are portrayed as quiet and somewhat effeminate and therefore are not a threat to Celie or women in general. Thus, their characters are respected rather than feared and their names revealed. This difference (between the naming in fiction and film) alone has the potential to spark an interesting discussion about naming and the affects it has on a

character's appealing qualities and reception. Overall, whereas the original spelling may have left room for Celie simply to be exhibiting politeness and discretion, the renaming in the film calls for her to be more submissive; unending submission to Mister in the film does not allow for the eventual freedom she attains from Mr. _____ in the novel.

Furthermore, the fact that Shug's dead father (in the novel) comes to life (in the film) to forgive her of her sins and welcome her back to his fold in one of the closing scenes is indeed striking, as Hite offers, especially since this forgiveness and welcome is the exact opposite of what Shug suggests she needs in the novel. While meeting with an adult son she left to be raised by her parents, Shug acknowledges that she had traditional parents who did not approve of her sensual way of life and insists that "they had a lot of love to give. But I needed love plus understanding. They run a little short of that" (273). Before talking with her son, she does not even know that her parents had "*been* dead" for nine or ten years, stating, "You know I never think bout mama and daddy. You know how tough I think I is" (273, emphasis original). Yet, the film takes away a great deal of Shug's toughness, as her father is brought to her mind and the minds of movie watchers periodically throughout the film; he is perched upon a pulpit preaching damnation against the very acts his daughter is committing. His constant rejection burdens her, and in the end, he is not required to have the understanding that Shug (of the novel) hoped for because she changes her life to please him.

Assuming parents are important, the fact that Spielberg did not feel the need to bring both parents back to life is undoubtedly chauvinistic but also a testimony to the overall lack of significance that society places on the lives of black women, as if satisfying a man (even a

father) is one's ultimate goal.⁴⁸ Though Shug's sisterhood and relationship is what helps to free Celie, in Spielberg's depiction, her own freedom lies in the hands of a man. This male-controlled freedom exists because Shug is originally depicted as a strong, independent, self-actualized, and self-sexualized woman; these characteristics apparently require redress and forgiveness.

As noted in the above two variances, when Spielberg has the theoretical saxophone, many notes in *The Color Purple* sound and look differently. Other added scenes include but are not limited to his allowing Celie to hold her daughter when she meets Corrine in the store, Celie and Nettie's spelling dialogue before Nettie is kicked off Mr. _____'s property, Mr. _____'s failed attempt at cooking Shug breakfast when she is first brought to the place, a brawl between the men at Harpo's juke joint after Sophia knocks out Squeak, Mr. _____ slapping Celie after catching her reading Nettie's letters, and an all-around repentance of sin in the final scene. In essence, the majority of these additions allow Mr. _____ (and men in general) to be brought to the center of the novel or depict Celie as the ignorant maid Walker liberated her from being or remaining. Ultimately, Spielberg does to Celie what Stockett does to Aibileen and Minny in her novel nearly three decades later: he controls her and limits her sexual development under the guise of allowing her to tell her own story of growth. However, Spielberg seemed to have missed that it is difficult to grow and fully develop as a woman without understanding all aspects of a woman, including a fully realized sexuality. Or, perhaps Spielberg was very much aware, but rather chose, similar to Stockett, to focus on more fully developing or more positively portraying his white manhood instead.

In an interview with *Show Biz*, Spielberg suggests that he "never really looked upon [the film] as just a black movie" and that he "made the book personal...wanted part of it to belong to

⁴⁸ While some critics may view the choir director and lead singer as Shug's potential mother and daughter respectively, these suppositions are not made as explicit as the fact that the reverend is indeed the father that Shug must please.

[him]” (“Steven Spielberg”). Whether Spielberg saw the text as a racial one or not, it is very unlikely that a malleable item belonging to a black woman will look and feel the same after it has been possessed and used by a white man. This is precisely why there are traditionally patriarchal additions in the film. Equally so, there are deleted or *whitewashed* scenes that would have clearly centralized Celie and illustrated her growth as an independent woman who is aware of and confident in her sexuality, as opposed to depicting her as the perpetually naïve, fearful, underdeveloped character movie viewers see. These viewers are not permitted to see Celie’s initial abuse by her father, Mr. _____’s sisters come over to lavish compliments on Celie and force Mr. _____ to buy her new clothes, Celie’s interaction with Shug when she cooks her the tempting ham-centered breakfast, or Celie’s time and introduction to different viewpoints and cultures in Memphis, Tennessee. Each of these scenes in the novel adds depth that is otherwise obliterated from Celie’s character in the film.

Two other very significant scenes, both involving some instance of sex or sexuality, are also omitted from the film. Of course, during the year 1985, society was not as comfortable with sexuality as it would become in the 21st century; not to mention, current day comfort with sexuality is not infinite or conclusive. Nevertheless, there were mainstream films produced even in 1985 that involved conspicuous nudity and sex. However, very few involved lesbianism amongst black women or sex between black individuals in general, and Spielberg seemed not to want to change this depiction because then it would not be “a part of him.”

Yet, in making the story personal to himself, Spielberg of course makes it less personal to Celie (and black women as a whole), and more appealing to his audience, an audience notably different from that of the novel. The first significant omission involves a secondary or seemingly insignificant character, Squeak. Although she is a secondary character, Squeak’s development is

parallel to and affects the development of the protagonist because a critical message of this narrative is the strength of black sisterhood. In the novel, after Sofia is beaten and jailed by white men, her family develops a plan to appeal to the white warden on terms that white men have been historically known to admire and exploit. They tempt him with a well-dressed mulatto, hoping that her innocuous voice and alluring presence, in addition to the fact that she is ultimately a part of “his family,” would sway him into releasing Sofia. The plan both works and backfires when the white warden does what powerful white men have historically been known to do to attractive, powerless black women. Squeak is raped, and Sofia is released from jail. This scene, and ultimately this white man, is deleted from the movie because he very well could have been any white man in ante- or post-bellum history, and since Spielberg (a white man) has made this his personal tale, this history and therefore this man does not exist, or at least is hidden. Nevertheless, in the story by the black woman, Alice Walker, “Poor little Squeak come home with a limp. Her dress rip. Her hat missing and one of the heels come off her shoe...He saw the Hodges in me, she say. And didn’t like it one bit...He say if he was my uncle he wouldn’t do it to me. That be a sin. But this just little fornication. Everybody guilty of that—” everybody except Spielberg and the potential white ancestors he is trying to protect, that is (97-98).

Oprah Winfrey, who plays Sofia in the film, defends her director, stating “Spielberg said he couldn’t include every incident, and that if he had, the film would’ve been too depressing. As it is, it’s a joyous picture, a triumphant one. The essence and spirit of the book are there and that’s most important” (qtd. in Rice ¶9). While the above scene is undoubtedly “depressing,” it does depict the essence of the story. After this incident, Squeak, otherwise quiet and timid, gains her voice and asserts herself as “Mary Agnes,” which in turn affects Celie, since it is the community of strong women that ultimately encourages and nurtures one another. Squeak’s

newly developed voice and assertions give way to Celie's; without this incident, Celie is not the vocal, self-identified woman readers find near the end of Walker's narrative.

Furthermore, Shug is definitely important to Celie's growth as a self-actualized and self-sexualized woman. She shows Celie the powerful button that Spielberg never shows movie viewers. As such, he leaves Celie powerless. Although Spielberg allows Shug and Celie to engage in a friendly kissing session, it is watered down and looks very innocent, or comical even, as opposed to romantic. He treats the interaction as if Shug is simply building up a torn down sister (which she is), but Shug is also gaining pleasure from Celie's affection and companionship, and teaching Celie the significance of pleasure as well. In the novel, Shug shows Celie how to enjoy herself during moments of intimacy and how to depend solely upon herself for enjoyment. Shug questions, "What, too shame even to go off and look at yourself?...All dressed up for Harpo's and scared to look at your own pussy." After much hesitation, Celie finally looks and discovers that her "pussy lips be black" but the "inside look like a wet rose." Then, she states, "I look at her and touch it with my finger. A little shiver go through me. Nothing much. But just enough to tell me this the right button to mash" (78).

In learning about this sensual part of herself, Celie sparks what eventually becomes her independence from Mr. _____ and ultimately anyone who may have once had control over her, including Shug. While Shug and Mr. _____ are being intimate, Celie "pull[s] the quilt over [her] head and finger[s her] little button and titties..." (80). Representing both a form of self-consolation and self-empowerment, perhaps this kind of self-pleasure, this black female independence, was too much for the white male Spielberg (and his audience) to fathom or tolerate. All the same, the film, read in conjunction with the novel, fortifies the discussion on black female sexualities, as the choices made in the film adaptation bring to life Walker's

underlying argument, that society fears independent, self-actualized and self-sexualized black women.

Spielberg seems to have indeed feared Celie, who has developed a new and independent identity by the end of Walker's novel. Because of his apparent fear, audiences of the film alone may not be aware that the self-sexualized Celie knows she "can live content without Shug" and that she turns down a proposal from Mr. _____ "who done ast [her] to marry him again, this time in the spirit as well as in the flesh" (288). All in all, Spielberg's choice to add scenes that were less woman-centered and delete scenes that demonstrated the magnitude of Celie's sexuality ultimately reduces the strength of his protagonist, as Walker's novel (and others in this project) clearly indicates that sexuality is an undeniable part of one's identity. The acceptance of this fact, along with encounters with self-actualized and self-sexualized individuals—or maverick feminists—can potentially allow for one's mental and spiritual growth and the possibility of self-governance and self-fulfillment, characteristics Walker's Celie possesses but Spielberg's Celie does not fully realize.

In comparison, Daniels's adaptation is truer to original form, perhaps partially because Daniels's saxophone, although masculine, is black. Still, attentive critics notice the modifications in his work as well. In reference to the film *Precious*, which was renamed altogether from the original title *PUSH*, Christopher Burrell and James Wermers (2012) insist that "Daniels's film is not a valuable tool for elucidating or engaging Sapphire's novel, as the film is far too reductive to capture the novel's richness... [although] *Precious* can, in fact, be an effective teaching tool for engaging a number of issues that are important to the novel and in contemporary society" (212). While it may not be a valuable teaching tool to engage the novel as a whole, *Precious* is an extremely valuable tool to engage the complexity of black female

sexualities in Sapphire's novel, specifically for one of the main reasons Burrell and Wermer suggest that it is reductive. The critics find fault in the film's illustration of colorism, or society's depictions of beauty and superiority, as the dark skinned, wildly dreadlocked Ms. Rain from Sapphire's novel is portrayed in the film by the light skinned, silky haired Paula Patton. To this end, Burrell and Wermers insist, "The undeniable horrors of the world in which Precious lives will be her inevitable and unrelenting reality unless she chooses to accept salvation at the hands of her clearly superior light-skinned saviors" (213).

In reference to Ms. Rain's sexuality (fiction and film version), one can interrogate the implications and connotations of lesbianism in a darker-skinned woman versus a lighter-skinned one. Is one woman less threatening or more forgivable? Threatening to whom? Forgivable of what? Lighter skinned, mixed race black women like Paula Patton have long been considered a prize to men in American culture but, in retrospect, also have been seemingly impossible for African American men to obtain or possess because powerful white men long for the prize as well. As such, the cinematic Ms. Rain—or the light-skinned, silky-haired lesbian—is easily conceived of as another one who "bites the dust." However, it is not a white male but another light-skinned lesbian who makes Ms. Rain unattainable. This lack of attainability is manifested in the film when Lenny Kravitz, a male nurse who does not appear in the novel, is intrigued by Ms. Rain but is redirected—by Precious—to the darker skinned, kinkier haired receptionist simply referred to as Cornrows in both the novel and the film. Sapphire's novel is indeed more radical and innovative, but Daniels also sheds light on stereotypical or societal views of what is acceptable for or expected of black women.⁴⁹ Cornrows, the seemingly more authentic and therefore easily accessible black woman, presumably needs saving, like Precious, from a weave

⁴⁹These expectations are governed by restrictive belief systems such as the politics of respectability, which shun deviant sexualities such as homosexuality and premarital sexual practices. Other oppressive institutions such as ageism, colorism, and classism also affect societal perceptions and expectations of black women.

of sexual or intimate misconduct while the light-skinned lesbian frolics on happy and free of sexual constraints. The juxtaposition of the two works (fiction and film) only enhances the overall discussion of the novel; specifically, the contrasting depictions of the teacher, Ms. Rain, enhance the discussion about and the progress of black female sexualities.

In addition to a male nurse character and light-skinned teacher, Daniels's adaptation also includes a young girl who Precious pushes around and ignores before finally making her feel loved and special at the end of the film. Also, Precious's mother, Mary, has an interesting love for—and owns multiple—cats. Daniels seems to have hoped that each of these additions would add a bit of light—aside from the light-skinned characters—to what otherwise would have been a dark movie. Mary seemingly cares for something even if she does not care for her daughter, and Precious touches the life of another young girl in the way that she had hoped someone would have touched hers.

On the other hand, Sapphire's *Precious is* influenced by one of her peers in a manner similar to how she touches the life of the young girl, but neither filmic Precious nor film watchers, however, are privy to this kindness. Because of the film's fixation on stereotypes and audience appeal, Daniels's viewers do not see or know that Precious has a really close relationship with fellow "Each One Teach One" peer Rita Romero. In the novel, Rita, a Puerto Rican, is depicted as an ex-addict and high school dropout who *does* mothering well.⁵⁰ She became an orphan after watching her father murder her mother; she also was a victim of rape, worked as a prostitute, and contracted HIV. As a result, she is not typically seen as the best role model for youth and teens. Yet, Sapphire's novel, like Walker's, illustrates that a woman's strength is interconnected with the strength of those in her immediate community. In the film,

⁵⁰ During one of the class exercises, Ms. Rain asks each student what she does well; Rita's response is that she is a good mother.

Ms. Rain, although a lesbian and therefore deviant, is conceived of as a more responsible adult due to her educational and socio-economic background. She is consequently portrayed as the likely (and only) hero or savior for Precious. However, in *PUSH*, as well as *The Color Purple*, the growth of the black female protagonist depends on the lessons learned from the women around her, particularly women of color with similar experiences and misfortunes. In Sapphire's novel, Rita is Precious's example. But, in Daniels's film adaptation, other than her introduction to the class at the beginning of the term and a slip at the museum that causes her to grab Precious's hand for balance, Rita is barely a visible or memorable character. The omission of Rita as a significant character affects the magnitude to which Precious learns to speak and be heard, her eventual assertion as a subject as opposed to object, and the extent to which she questions her own sexuality and intimate engagements.

Because Rita is a young mother who has experienced sexual abuse and is living with HIV, she is important to the development of the character of Precious in Sapphire's text. She is part of the reason Precious is able to continue to push after Mary tells Precious that her father died of AIDS. Rita escorts Precious to Incest Survivor meetings, treats her to meals, and is depicted as a true friend.⁵¹ With her, Precious is able to ride buses and see parts of New York she had not been familiar with; she learns that the world is much bigger than Harlem, but specifically that New York is bigger than Harlem.⁵² In the first Incest Survivor meeting, Precious is initially in a daze, afraid to tell her story until she realizes that Rita supports her; she states, "Someone is holding my hand. It's Rita, She is massage my hand. I come back from being a bird..." (129).

⁵¹ In *The Kid*, Rita also has brief custody of Abdul after Precious dies, although there is suspicion that she altered the name on his records so that she could continue receiving assistance for him while he is in foster care. Despite this implied deceitfulness, their relationship was seen by others as significant enough for Rita to look after Precious's child.

⁵² Rita helps to broaden Precious's horizons in a similar manner that Shug helps to broaden Celie's horizons by taking her to Memphis (which was likewise not clearly depicted in Spielberg's film).

This supportive touch is far different from the accidental clasp Rita gives Precious in the movie. This is not their only physical interaction in the novel, however. Immediately after the meeting, Rita and Precious go “out for coffee,” and Rita puts her arm around Precious’s shoulder as a sign of support while she is ordering because this is another first for Precious (130). She also hugs Precious, and Precious states, “I like how Rita is, she know the world, how to act and stuff. Sometimes I don’t have a clue!” (131). The exposure Precious (of the novel) gets from being with Rita helps her realize her lack of knowledge, whereas in the movie, it seems okay for Precious to have no clue. More importantly, surviving does not seem to be of importance because although a joke is made about “incest” versus “insect,” filmic Precious never even attends the Incest Survivor meetings in order to have this interaction with Rita, and the joke is clearly incorporated again to add light and humor to a serious issue. Needless to say, people experiencing situations such as Precious’s would hardly see the acknowledgement of the meetings via a short joke as a replacement for the actual meetings themselves.

In essence, while Precious is indeed the narrator of the film and tells her story to audience members, the film portrays her as someone to be looked at as opposed to someone to be listened to. She does not get the opportunity in the film to share her story with people who understand and have experienced similar events and traumas. Similarly, she does not “push” and is simply “Precious”, no longer invisible but still not heard.⁵³ In the novel, after gaining comfort from Rita’s massage, when Precious raises her hand at the Incest Survivor meeting to tell her story, she equates it to “going up through the smell of Mama, my hand is pushing Daddy’s dick out my face” (130). She does not have this privilege in the movie and therefore is yet susceptible to the internal, if not physical, effects of her parents’ actions. Simply put, in the film, even after her father’s death, his dick is still in Precious’s face, holding her back from life and survival. On the

⁵³ This is a note of the obvious title change.

other hand, in the novel, it is Rita's support that gives Precious the push and the courage to rid herself completely of her mother (and father) when they meet in the final scenes. Ultimately, Precious experiences several firsts with Rita, and they are not significantly noted in the film perhaps because Rita overall does not stand out to audiences as one to offer assistance or guidance. These firsts aid Precious in being dependent upon herself just as Shug's introduction of firsts to Celie aids Celie in being dependent upon herself. Without Rita, Precious might still be controlled by her daddy's dick and have no clue about life or her own personal desires.

Overall, in the novel, Rita is Precious's immediate example of strength: a single, infected mother like herself, but one who is strong and continues a "normal" life with a normal boyfriend. She states, "Rita got man. Rhonda God. Ms. Rain a fren. Jermaine say hole worl her lovr" (102). Who does Precious have? More specifically, who does Precious want? She states that she "GOT frens," but she also contemplates what it would be like to "have sex wif a kute coot boy thas [her] own age" (102). Because sexuality is a potent aspect of one's being, Precious, although seemingly traumatized by sex, does not inwardly repress her desires to experience pleasure in a positive way. She does outwardly repress these feelings, however; because society has placed such as great stigma on expressed sexuality, she does not want her teacher, whom she shares almost everything else with, to know her desires.

Despite the longings, however, Sapphire makes it clear in several interviews that she had no intentions of giving Precious a happy ending, specifically not a boyfriend. Daniels also does not see fit to allow Precious actively to express her sexuality with a "kute coot boy" her own age, but he does attempt to give her a happy ending. In the final movie scenes, audience members see Precious taking Abdul swimming, and they see her walk away from the social services building with Abdul on her side and Little Mongo in tow. In the novel, however, she only takes on

responsibility for Abdul because Mongo is in a mental institution. Precious states, “They put her in a mental institution, say she severely (mean real) retarded, and Toosie hadn’t been doing things that would help her—Like colors on wall and books ’n shit, so she really in bad shape.⁵⁴ They say even if she could be help, take a lot more than me to help, and ain’t I got a full load with Abdul. Anyway...” (84). With the realization that she really can’t save Mongo, Precious brushes the idea off, hence the word “anyway.” Ultimately, black families are not depicted in the novel (or film) in a positive light, but Daniels’s permitting Precious to take responsibility for both children paints her as a better parent than her mother and grandmother. He does not give her a boyfriend, but he gives her a family, assuming that her happiness and fulfillment is always dependent upon others.

As opposed to making certain that the protagonist herself is well-developed, Daniels’s depiction seems more concerned with painting an image the audience can tolerate. Thus, Precious, like Celie in the ending that critics including Sapphire condemn, is reunited with her children and thought to live happily ever after. This happiness, however, is situational because although Precious is a victim of sexual abuse and has subsequently contracted a sexual disease, Daniels, as a result of diminishing Precious’s relationship with Rita, does not allow her to become completely self-identified, self-actualized, or self-sexualized.

In summation, although Daniels and Spielberg undoubtedly address sensitive issues and depict graphic scenes that were not typically being addressed and depicted by other directors during the time of their productions, there is no mistaking that fluff is added to each of the films to make certain images more positive and tolerable. More importantly, pertinent character-developing scenes are eliminated for this same reason. As a result, an otherwise complex image

⁵⁴ Toosie is Precious’s grandmother and Mongo’s caretaker, although Mary actually received welfare assistance for her.

is reduced to a stereotype. Some may see these discrepancies as negative issues. Indeed, while Daniels seemingly did a better job than Spielberg of “sticking to the script,” they both clearly had their own personal investments; neither of these investments seemed to include the development of a self-actualized, self-sexualized black woman. However, in the field of literature and literary criticism, particularly that related to black female sexualities, the discussion of these stereotypes in comparison to the more complex black female characters depicted in Walker and Sapphire’s novels illustrates a progressive interest in real life occurrences and popular culture, as opposed to a conventional fascination with outdated fiction. Thus, while the protagonists of Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Sapphire’s *PUSH* do not become fully realized characters and meet their intended end in their respective films, one can determine from this analysis that the plague of media can be counteracted and used to a literary and critical advantage, particularly when the topic is black female sexualities.

IV. Forward Thinking, Forward Motion

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Sapphire’s *Push* have undeniable commonalities. Those I analyze in this chapter—including the relationship between food and sexuality, the difference between being a subject and object, and the independence and power resulting from self-sexualization—are but a few. Lack of initial critical acceptance and popularity resulting from film and media attention are other similarities between the two works. Recognizing the novels’ attention to the development of black female protagonists with strong sexualities and the resulting disapproval of the works as their most salient qualities, this analysis provides an example of how the intergenerational dynamic can serve to expand the conversations on historical and canonical texts while simultaneously enhancing the critical discussions on

contemporary and non-conical texts, and demonstrates that the engagement of popular media entities does not reduce but rather strengthens the potential to discuss critical issues and topics brought out in the narrative, particularly the topic of black female sexualities.

Elizabeth Donaldson recognizes that “we have structured a silence around sex, the body, and violence, especially in the literature classroom” (55). Assuming “we” refers to Americans, this silence is essentially due to the historical context of sex, the body, and violence in American culture. However, if Americans, specifically those in institutions of higher learning, are to move beyond this horrible history of black female exploitation and degradation, it is necessary that they release themselves from societal chains—including negative and limiting images of black female sexualities—resulting from this history. Alice Walker and Sapphire depict the lives of characters who suffer from sexual and physical violence and have personal dissatisfaction with their own black female bodies but ultimately determine that their strength comes from loving that very sexually abused body.

Uplifting black women is one purpose of black feminism; in many cases, this uplift comes with teaching black women the skills to uplift themselves—by finding voice, individuality, self-love, self-pleasure, and self-actualization. Literary works, such as *The Color Purple*, *PUSH*, and even *Disappearing Acts*, depicting these themes are often considered inappropriate, too graphic. However, the analysis in this chapter indicates that when sensual aspects of these texts are censored or removed, the protagonists’ strength and development are resultantly diminished, lacking self-actualized characteristics.

Ultimately, limited thinking on a topic as important to humanity as black female sexualities often begets limited thinking, unless budding scholars are already inherently revolutionary and forward thinking. This group of forward-thinking scholars is slowly

increasing—specifically amongst the black feminist academic community with groups such as the Crunk Feminist Collective developing and gaining prominence—but are still a minority in academia. Knowing this, DoVeanna Fulton suggests that “the likelihood of contemporary writings going out of print is not impossible, which is a substantial reason to ensure that works are critiqued by scholars and taught in courses” (161). The intergenerational approach I carry out in this chapter provides a means for doing just this. The analysis also supports the claim that one’s sexuality is a pure component of one’s identity, meaning that its powers are unadulterated and unavoidable. Once a person accepts this fact and works (with others) toward becoming a self-governing individual, she or he can become the subjects of one’s own life, as opposed to having everything done to her or him.

Chapter IV

“*Getting to Happy*”: Finding an Equal Balance in Literary Studies

“She’s the daughter. I’m the mother. What makes her think her opinions or her little teenage insights are worth their weight in gold? I know she means well. And there’s a small chance she may be right. But you shouldn’t let your kids know they know more than you do.”

Terry McMillan, *Getting to Happy* (2010)

“Times have changed”; this is the sole argument in Terry McMillan’s novel, *Getting to Happy*. This phrase is expressed in some variety throughout the novel, and by several different characters. McMillan seemingly recognizes the significance of the ticking clock emphasized in the closing of Sapphire’s *Push* (1996). The clocks of McMillan’s four protagonists tick for several different reasons, including age, health, love, finances, and career. The four women—Savannah, Robin, Bernadine, and Gloria—from the novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) are revisited fifteen years later in this sequel. At or nearing fifty years of age, they have different dilemmas from the women introduced to readers in the previous work, but are plagued with disagreeable life circumstances nonetheless. However, while Savannah, Robin, Bernadine, and Gloria, along with their respective problems, joys, and successes, are seemingly the focal point of the narrative, it is in fact their children who solidify and help to fulfill the narrative’s purpose.

Because of the significant generational divides, in order for the four women to have healthy relationships with their children and grandchildren, a meeting of the minds on middle grounds is required. This meeting is the fictional equivalent of the intergenerational dynamic necessary in literary studies. Therefore, the analysis in this chapter demonstrates the importance of such intergenerational dynamics by examining the relationships between the two generations of women in the novel and illuminating the magnitude to which each of their identities and sexualities are realized and strengthened as a result of the interactions. As a result of the

intergenerational dynamic, each of the four protagonists evolve as more complex individuals possessing tools to become maverick feminists who are self-identified, self-actualized, and self-sexualized.

I. Following Greatness: Expectations of a Sequel

Getting to Happy picks up effortlessly where the storyline of *Waiting to Exhale* leaves off; readers are left with few, if any, uncertainties about what has happened to the four women in the fifteen years that have passed. Not surprisingly, Savannah opens the novel discussing her career and deadlines, as she was previously portrayed as a woman who was too devoted to her job and professional achievements to settle down with a man. However, she has been settled now for approximately ten years. Still, Savannah's devotion to her own career and seeming lack of interest in the career of her husband appears to be the cause of the disagreement the two are having in the opening. This disagreement foreshadows the ensuing separation between Savannah and Isaac, and when the novel ends, Savannah is officially "Divorce[d] with Dignity" (101).

Robin has never been married, but is the proud mother of a bright, 15 year-old daughter, Sparrow. Robin and Sparrow, in a sense, live as sisters, and since Sparrow's father was no more than a "good lay," Robin no longer interacts with him, and he does not noticeably play a significant role in Sparrow's life (31). In essence, Sparrow is Robin's only sense of companionship until the end of the novel when Robin has an encounter and falls in love with a man from her past who has changed his physical appearance. However, while Robin is excited about her first potential wedding and marriage, Bernadine is divorced for a second time and addicted to prescription drugs such as Xanax, Ambien, and Zoloft. Bernadine's medical dependency is a result of depression caused by the second divorce. She finds out, via his first

wife, that her husband, James, is going by an alias and has a second family, does not work in the career he professes, and has pilfered a great deal of her money over time. In the end of the narrative, Bernadine has completed rehab, adopted a new habit—yoga— and is considering possible business ventures to reestablish herself financially by becoming a culinary expert.

Gloria already has an established business—a hair salon—and she has an ongoing and complicated relationship with food. On their anniversary, Gloria learns that her husband of fourteen years was the innocent victim of a gang shoot-out. She turns to excessive eating as a way of coping with the loneliness and depression of losing Marvin and gains nearly twenty pounds. This amount of weight gain is naturally unhealthy, but specifically unhealthy because Gloria has already experienced one heart attack. After becoming reacquainted with a friend and soon after learning of her death, Gloria joins Weight Watchers and makes plans to use Marvin's life insurance settlement to provide for her grandchildren and expand her salon.

As in the prequel, the narrative technique of *Getting to Happy*, meaning the choices McMillan makes in terms of voice and expressed sexuality, is suggestive of the amount of control each woman has over her own life, and thus the amount of influence she has on the lives of others and vice versa. Savannah and Robin tell their stories in first person while Bernadine and Gloria's tales are relayed to readers through an omniscient narrator. Savannah and Robin are more self-sufficient, and although they have a few insecurities, are also more self-actualized. Robin, above all, is self-sexualized as well. For example, happiness is represented in this novel in terms of color (as in hues of the rainbow, not race), and because Robin is self-actualized and self-sexualized, when the novel ends, she is fittingly “draped in a sequined explosion of

every color you could find on a Las Vegas Showgirl,” while the remaining three women don less vibrant colors (413).⁵⁵ Ultimately, the sections narrated in first person, like the clothes these women wear in the final scene, are more vivid and engaging; they flow effortlessly and at times seem more realistic and relatable than the sections narrated by the omniscient narrator. But, the fact that McMillan chose two different ways of recounting the protagonists’ experiences suggests an awareness of the reality that, despite commonalities, there is not simply one type of black woman, and some black women do in fact have a greater voice and more control over their lives than others. Perhaps she did not seriously consider this idea at all and instead simply wanted to “mix things up.” Either way, attempting to present all of the protagonists as dominating, autonomous women would have been to paint a picture very different from the reality McMillan admittedly attempts to represent. All in all, the novel is a fitting depiction of the events occurring in the lives of the four women that readers and movie watchers alike grew to love nearly two decades ago.

Scholar Gwendolyn Pough (2004) has recognized the success of Terry McMillan’s enterprise, noting that she “helped to create a multibillion dollar market” (70). However, Pough also notes that despite this successful market, little critical attention has been devoted to Black women’s text, specifically in the genre of popular fiction. In an attendant fashion, *Getting to Happy* has gained virtually no critical attention from scholars despite the popularity of its prequel and the novel’s release more than three years ago. Still, a few book reviewers have decided that the novel is worth a read.

⁵⁵ Bernadine is wearing a “dark gold dress with black spaghetti straps,” and Savannah is wearing a “two –tiered teal-and-cream floor-length dress” (411). Gloria’s dress is not mentioned. Other lines expressing a character’s magnitude of happiness by color include the following: “What I do know is I’m tired of feeling navy blue when I have the right to feel lemon yellow,” and “I’m also glad she understands that her mom’s been feeling a little purple since she got axed,” spoken by Savannah and Robin respectively (9, 317).

Laurie A. Cavanaugh is one of these reviewers; however, despite giving the novel her approval, she reads it from a limited viewpoint, insisting, “Men let you down, sometimes by accident but more often not, so don’t rely on them for happiness. That’s the message of this sequel to the 1992 blockbuster *Waiting To Exhale*, which picks up the story of four smart, capable, black women...15 years later” (76). Based on the attention paid to describing these women, the fact that McMillan’s four female characters are smart, capable, and black is of particular importance in this review; the reviewer apparently thinks it significant that the protagonists “beat the odds” so to speak. Cavanaugh seems to see the characters as a counter to and reinforcement of common stereotypes of black women—the welfare queen and the strong black woman. Moreover, while the protagonists indeed learn not to depend on men for happiness, Cavanaugh fails to recognize that the novel is not about men at all, and her comment that “male characters get short shrift” denotes a negative assessment and misses the fact that this narrative’s focus is on the happiness of women, not the happiness of men (76).

Toni Cade Bambara (1970) contends, “When sisters get passionate about themselves and their direction, it does not mean they’re readying up to kick men’s ass. They’re readying up for honesty” (134). The honesty in McMillan’s novel is that all encumbrances either have to be totally eradicated or minimized in order for her protagonists to get to the state they consider “happy.” And, as exemplifiers of maverick feminism, the women in *Getting to Happy* demonstrate that the way to aid in the active reduction of oppression in someone else’s life is to first have an understanding of or control over the potential oppressors in one’s own life. Men, like food, shopping, and drugs, simply happen to be one of those oppressors.

Expressing disapproval of McMillan’s work, a reviewer in *Publisher’s Weekly* refers to this sequel as a “disappointing and uninspired outing” that the previously adored characters

embark upon, stating, “The beloved cast isn’t given a story worthy of them; instead, this reunion reads like a catalogue of personal catastrophes annotated with very long, rambling discussions, with more emphasis on simple drama than character” (25). Indeed, the novel is by no means perfect; in fact, portions of the plot are a bit predictable and sometimes drawn out, particularly those passages narrated in third person. However, the review is akin to Southgate’s review of *Push* (1996). The reviewer seems to be overcome by the mere fact that the characters are overwhelmed with “personal catastrophes” and would prefer a more upbeat and non-depressive narrative, which would clearly overlook the fact that the characters are trying to attain happiness as opposed to maintain happiness.

More importantly, however, while the story may not seem worthy of the characters introduced to readers two decades ago, it is worthy of the generations of black women they hope to build and uplift. The changing times, as well as the changing characters, and the intergenerational dynamics presented in this text serve as a fictional model for necessary collaborative efforts in society as a whole and in academia in particular. They suggest that one can acquire a better understanding of one’s own strengths and weaknesses when looking through the preceding or succeeding eyes of others who have had or may potentially have similar life experiences or circumstances as a result of similar racial, class, or gender constraints; the characters ultimately learn that evolving as self-actualized and self-sexualized women is but one major result of this dynamic.

Shortly after the publication of *Getting to Happy*, McMillan acknowledges in an interview that she does not see her protagonists as characters at all, but rather as real people with extensive backgrounds and real life “drama,” as the above mentioned reviewer recognizes. In an interview with Gabriel Packard (2012), McMillan admits that because she completes “long

drawn-out biographies,” she knows more about her protagonists than may be necessary: “[I know] what their favorite class was in elementary school to their favorite color, if they’re allergic to anything, had their hearts broken, have they ever been arrested, do they cheat...what’s the biggest hurdle in their life...I know who these people are and what makes them tick” (24). More importantly, she insists that an author should “write without looking over [her] shoulder. Write as if no one is going to read it...[and] telling the story—hopefully a compelling story, and an emotionally honest story—is more important to me than trying to impress a critic” (24). Having been in the field for quite some time and having helped build a multibillion dollar industry, McMillan seems to have anticipated the negative backlash she might receive for the sequel, and therefore dismisses the criticism and encourages others to ignore condemnation as well. Still, because of human nature, authors themselves are sometimes the critics; McMillan is no exception. In fact, she may very well not be pleased with the situation of her work in conversation with the likes of Sister Souljah and other authors that have been deemed “lowbrow.”

To clarify, in 2007, McMillan’s criticism of seeming lowbrow work was the highlight of the popular fiction world, as she is noted for writing a scathing email to specific street lit publishers, insisting that they were “harming black consumers by publishing ‘exploitative, destructive, racist, egregious, sexist, base, tacky, poorly-written, unedited, degrading books’” (quoted in Alexander ¶6).⁵⁶ Conceivably, she recognized that she was in essence threatening her own literary being and as a result later retracted some of her words. McMillan understood that she could not use degrading attacks effectively to change the quality of texts being published,

⁵⁶ McMillan was upset by and responding to the specific fact that these publishers had recently permitted her ex-husband to join the ranks of street lit writers by publishing his tell-all about being married to her while living as a closeted homosexual. In essence, she had made a living by telling fictional tales of often struggling but relatable black women and did not want that success or image to be tainted by the factual, and suggestive, events of her own life with a closeted husband.

and she grasped that her survival was contingent upon the survival of others, others that have gone before and will come after her. The significance of an intergenerational dynamic is made evident in her more reticent comments in the follow-up correspondence.

II. I Am My Mother's Daughter: Robin and Sparrow

In the 2007 essay titled "That the Mothers May Soar and the Daughters May Know Their Names: A Retrospective of Black Feminist Literary Criticism," Farah Jasmine Griffin comments on and is dismayed by the fact that there was once a deficiency of recognized and widely studied black feminist ancestors. She recalls the rigorous process of many critics, particularly during the 1970s and 80s, of "locating, teaching, and writing about earlier 'lost' works by African American women" (340). Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara amongst other feminists were influential in making certain that black feminist foremothers did indeed soar and that their names and deeds were known by future generations. The characters in *Getting to Happy* are, too, focused on this generation-building: The daughters encourage and often assist in the mothers' elevation, the reverence of names is mutual, and the characters all benefit from this intergenerational approach to nurturing self-actualized and self-sexualized women.⁵⁷

Yet, the fact that both mothers and daughters in McMillan's narrative ultimately benefit from engaging in the life of the other by no means indicates that the relational dynamics or the results of every engagement are always positive. For example, the mother-daughter duo most involved in one another's affairs has the most setbacks, but the process itself enriches the two women and allows for both a stronger sense of respect for the counterpart and a deeper love for

⁵⁷ Mutual reference means that each generation of women shows respect and pays homage toward one another in an attempt not to diminish or overlook their counterpart's significant contributions to their lives and well-beings.

and understanding of self and individuality. These results are pertinent to effective and positive generation-building.

Robin and Sparrow are both quirky, free-spirited individuals. To highlight their eccentricity, McMillan allows an older woman with no personal connection to the two to refer to them as Robin and “a different bird” (415). Naming, along with upbringing, greatly affects Robin and Sparrow’s personalities and equally affects the height of their soaring. Sparrow is aware of her unconventionality and is determined to get her mother to understand that difference is not at all a bad quality. In fact, Robin and Sparrow’s first dialogue consists of Sparrow encouraging her mother to sign up for an online dating site to avoid the unfortunate potential of never “getting laid ever again in life.” Robin insists that although she and Sparrow are “best friends and talk about most everything[, t]his topic, however, is off-limits” (20). Sparrow, product of a popular culture influenced generation, exhibits what Brittney Cooper (2012) calls the politics of disrespectability—a knowing disregard for and discarding of the long burdening respectability politics—and insists that her mother “catch what [she] just said,” indicating that no topic is off-limits, specifically not the topic of sex (20).

Why should this one topic be off-limits, particularly if the mother-daughter duo discusses nearly everything else? Based on this suggested limitation, one might assume that Robin is an uptight, asexual or, at the most, only moderately sexual woman. However, Robin obliterates this potential assumption and admits to readers, “Back in the good old days, I was a little loose,” and her friends agree (31). Savannah insists that Robin is a Miss Congeniality type who “worked in an executive capacity at an insurance company but was still on the verge of becoming a slut” (11). These acknowledgements indicate that Robin had and seemingly still has a high interest in sex and sexuality and clearly rejects the politics of respectability as well. The seeming

discomfort she exhibits when discussing the topic with Sparrow, one can imagine, is a result of negative societal perceptions and stereotypes. Negative images and connotations of sex and sexuality cause Robin to refrain momentarily from sharing her experiences and insight. Sparrow, nevertheless, again ignores the politics of respectability and reiterates the necessity of the intergenerational dynamic.

At the age of fifteen, Sparrow admits, and Robin has already discerned, that she has lost her virginity, “tried not to, but it was difficult, almost impossible to say no” (21). Earlier critical conversations on this off-limits topic might have demonstrated to Sparrow that she had both the power and agency to say no, that pressure from high-strung high school boys should not have been stronger than her will and desire for own self-preservation. On the contrary, earlier critical conversations may have helped Sparrow recognize and embrace her own sexual desires, her own eroticism. In either case, critical conversations about sex could have potentially taught her to make wise and healthy choices about when and with whom she was willing to share her body.

Another reason these critical conversations are important is because sex and sexuality are partly physical, partly mental, and partly spiritual. It is unadvisable for one to engage in intimate activity without knowing the risks of the interaction. The possibility of pregnancy and disease are the most commonly discussed risks, oftentimes discussed in an attempt to frighten adolescents and irresponsible adults from engaging in sexual activity, but few mention the possibility of acquiring an unwanted negative behavior from a sexual partner. Lawrence Wilson (2011), a medical doctor, insists that “some entities love being inside a woman’s vagina” and that entity attachment is especially common during sex because the individuals involved are vulnerable (§10). So, as much as one believes the phrase “you are what you eat,” equally might

those engaging in sexual activity be aware that there is a strong possibility that one becomes who she or he “freaks.”

Sparrow’s first sexual encounter is with a guy who is unsure of his sexual orientation; he confesses to her that “he *thinks* he’s gay.” The negative entity of uncertainty is transferred to Sparrow when she later declares to her mother that she “*think[s her] heart was broken*” (303 emphasis added). The ambiguities of their sexual and intimate feelings are not simply due to age and immaturity, but due to a lack of self-actualization and self-sexualization, both of which have the potential to lead to further risky and detrimental behaviors.

For example, Shaneska Jackson’s 1997 novel, *Li'l Mama's Rules*, depicts both the physical and spiritual effects of not being self-sexualized and engaging in sex simply because one does not know how to or feels it is impossible to say no. Li'l Mama, or Madison Maguire, is a thirty year-old private school teacher who develops her own rules about life, dating, and sex once her only love and fiancé moves from Los Angeles to Chicago after admitting that he had been unfaithful. Madison admits to readers throughout the narrative that while she developed a list of over thirty rules, including never invite a man back to your house and never date a man who’s shorter than you, she rarely follows her own rules. In fact, in the opening pages of the novel, she describes how her condo has been overtaken by a man who escorted her on a less than enjoyable dinner date. One time she wishes she had followed her rules is when she has casual sex with a professional football player who she knows little to nothing about. Madison states:

There I was in this stranger’s bedroom. He was high. I knew what he wanted from me...I wasn’t different from any of those other girls who stood out[side his locker room]...For that night I was a two-bit whore. A groupie. A slut. That’s the way that Ronald saw me. That’s the way I felt. I didn’t even put up a fight...He was

rough with me. He didn't care. And I deserved everything I was about to get. He treated me like the whore I'd allowed myself to be. I didn't deserve better. A respectable woman does not wind up in the bedroom of a complete stranger at one o'clock in the morning. What was I supposed to do now?...I had to take my punishment. (166)

Li'l Mama goes on to describe how Ronald entered her from the rear, how the punishment only lasted two minutes, how she tissue-padded her underwear to absorb the blood, and how she walked a great distance home afterwards. Five years later, she describes it as "the one night that to this day still brings shame to [her] name"; coincidentally, it is the one night she fully relinquished control of her sex(uality) (167). She later learns that Ronald died of AIDS, and she is HIV positive; thus Ronald lives on in her body and spirit even after his physical death. Had she not been consumed by stereotypes and societal perception, and instead been fully self-sexualized and confident that she did not deserve disrespect regardless of the awkward position in which she placed herself, she may have remained untainted by disease and possibly had peace of mind with regards to her sexual exploits.

Perhaps knowing the consequence of not being self-actualized and self-sexualized, although Robin is not comfortable sharing her own experiences, she is thankful that, seemingly unlike Li'l Mama, her daughter "has a mind of her own"⁵⁸ (22). She is not always willing to try to understand or support Sparrow's thought process, however. And, when she does consider Sparrow's viewpoints, Robin insists in secret that "you shouldn't let your kids know when they know more than you do" (24-5). Like scholars who are opposed to engaging contemporary popular fiction texts or texts that unapologetically engage the off-limits topic of sex, Robin sees

⁵⁸ This is despite the fact that Sparrow seemed to have succumbed to the initial pressures of participating in sex. Ultimately, Robin is pleased that Sparrow does not use drugs and attempts to avoid consequences by being "smart about" sex and using contraception (21).

herself in a power struggle, afraid that if she engages ideas proposed by someone traditionally thought less erudite or sophisticated, then she in retrospect will relinquish her authority and command, perhaps even lose the respect of her daughter.

Equally so, scholars may assume that engaging the texts and ideas of “common” people places them on an equal footing with said people, and to be frank, very few individuals, if any at all, attend post-baccalaureate institutions for five plus years and gain multiple terminal degrees only to be equally positioned with people who may have never set foot on a college campus. However, this superiority complex has the potential to cause a major disconnect between some theorists and the people about whom they theorize.

Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, noted artists during arguably the most influential time period of African American literature, acknowledge both the importance and the potential of engaging the folk. Too, Mary Church Terrell, like W.E. B. Du Bois, insists that the advancement of black women and the race is dependent upon one’s ability to lift as one climbs. The process of lifting requires an intimate interaction with these communities of people and a critical engagement with their cultures.⁵⁹ In terms of *Getting to Happy*, the younger generation is the “community” budding with potential but needing the uplift. Robin states, “Savannah and Gloria think I’ve created a cross between a little Oprah and Annie Oakley.⁶⁰ My daughter has chutzpah and a lot of insight for her age. She also thinks she knows everything. I’ve told her

⁵⁹ Personally, a doctoral degree has afforded me an expanded worldview and helped me financially to join what I assume is the middle class, albeit the lower middle class, but degrees or money do not change the fact that I grew up in a small town, in the poorest county in rural Mississippi, where cotton fields seem to outnumber the residents, unwed mothers are a commonality, drugs and alcohol satisfyingly replace meals, and food stamps are an honor and privilege. To separate myself wholly from this environment or assume that I am superior to these images or those depicted in street narratives is to insist that I am superior to my upbringing, superior to my mother, and no amount of degrees can ever make this possible. I am not ashamed of my past because it is equally my present; I live between two worlds and consider it a privilege to be educated-street.

⁶⁰ Oprah Winfrey is an African American most noted for her inspirational and influential talk show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Annie Oakley, born in Ohio in 1860, was an American sharpshooter, of English descent, until her health declined in 1925 and her eventual death in 1926. The mixing of these two individuals is an example of an intergenerational dynamic as well as a mixture of what some may consider high and low culture. Oprah promoted education and personal well-being; Annie starred in violent Western shows and was implicated in a cocaine scandal.

hundreds of times she can't learn everything there is to know about life from watching *Real World* and *Survivor*" (32). However, if *Real World*, *Survivor*, and the likes are the only references she has to the topics she is interested in, she will indeed consider these popular references representative of her reality. In fact, Sparrow insists that she knows nothing about love "except what [she has] seen on TV" (26).

Noting the significance of television depictions in the lives of growing adolescents, in an essay titled "Gang Wars: The Academy vs. the Streets" (2014), the author engages popular fiction and culture and compares the silencing of it in the academy, particularly in traditional literature departments, to having to mute the television while sneakily watching music videos in her home as a child. She states:

A decade removed from my parents' household and authority, and having received proper education and degrees from several prestigious institutions of higher learning, I find myself again being denied access to a world of cultural expression because of its seeming improbability to advance cognition and its unsuitable depictions of violence and sexuality...I have found myself having the urge to mute the television again, but I remember that I am a rebel, a rebel who now has a voice. More importantly, I am no longer that young, impressionable, and uninformed youth my parents thought I was. Still, I recognize that there are some battles I cannot fight alone. Some intellectuals are not as progressive as others, and to these intellectuals, crossing the line from the academy to the street is not quite fathomable. (Randle 11)

The author, a self-proclaimed rebel, represents maverick feminism and recognizes the importance of engaging what is viewed as a lesser form of artistic cultural expression in order to

enhance and deepen the discussion of the works thought to be of a higher form of cultural expression. She is aware that there must be an equal balance. And, while the protagonists in *Getting to Happy* are initially hesitant about engaging their two worlds—one learned and safe, the other new and risky—they ultimately demonstrate the positive effects of finding an equal balance between the two worlds.

While attempting to convince her mother to try online dating, Sparrow also encourages interracial dating. Robin retorts, “Just because you only like white boys, don’t try to get me to follow in your footsteps, sweetie.” Sparrow assures her mother, “I don’t like them because they’re white, Mom. I just like them. A lot of black guys at school aren’t attracted to girls like me.” “I’m my own person,” she proudly confirms, “I don’t fit the mold” (27). It would definitely be a little difficult to imagine how Sparrow could fit the mold when she, at the age of fifteen, has been described as a cross between Winfrey and Oakley.⁶¹ Still, the fact that stereotypes exist and are controlling figures in her life at such a young age reflects how young women (and men) will possibly view themselves in adulthood. The black girls who fit the mold may not actually fit the mold at all, but because they are not self-actualized or self-sexualized and may have placed themselves in an uncompromising situation perhaps once, like Li'l Mama, they may continue to allow the young men to “punish” them and ultimately allow the stereotype to control their lives and their perceptions of self.

Likewise, societal perceptions have indeed affected Robin’s decision, and while she does not accept Sparrow’s views on interracial dating, she does take her advice and tries online dating, mainly because this is something she thinks she can do in secret. Unlike Sparrow, Robin tries to

⁶¹ Another interesting tidbit about Sparrow is that she is a practiced violinist, and Robin is adamant that her daughter will be a professional violinist one day. Sparrow’s possession of this particular skill coupled with her admiration for reality television further demonstrates that high and low culture can exist in one space and not affect one’s productivity. Sparrow also makes jewelry and will eventually sale it in Gloria’s new shop.

fit a particular mold. She has, for a moment, found herself lacking in confidence and full of desperation, hoping that exaggerating her personal characteristics on several dating sites will attract someone who is “promising.” The only promises she gets are unfulfilled ones as the only man she is attracted to stands her up for their first date, lies about being single and childless, and attempts to take money from her under the false pretense of self-publishing a book of poetry. After this realization, Robin insists that she is done with online dating.

While it is apparent that Sparrow’s modern dating convention was not effective for her mother, Robin’s failure at finding love online is not equivalent to the failure of the intergenerational dynamic. In fact, after this experience, Robin is now more confident in who she is as a person and as a woman and is more aware of what she wants and is unwilling to accept from a man. Shortly after the failed new-age attempt at dating, Robin meets an old friend, Michael, at a gym, and rekindles a relationship with him. Needless to say, the reason she did not appreciate him when they were younger was a superficial one—he was overweight; her reason for being intrigued by him at the age of forty-nine follows: “I like who you are. What you stand for. I like that you have integrity. I like what you value, and I like your values. Always have. You respect me. You make me feel smart, even though I am smart. You make me feel good. Like warm pudding...It’s also nice not to have to apologize for what I’m not” (378). What she is not, she finally determines and accepts, is a person who fits the mold. In fact, as opposed to waiting for Michael to take on the traditional male role and ask for her hand in marriage, she asks him, “Would you like to marry me?” and vows, “Even if you put those forty pounds back on, join a circus, get a job flipping burgers at Micky D’s—you ain’t going nowhere, boyfriend (377, 378). Because of Sparrow’s seeming meddling and the revelation as a result, Robin has determined that it is not only okay for her to not fit the mold, but the man she loves does not have to fit the

mold either (although he does have to be black). Robin portrays identifiably feminist characteristics and consents to the changing times, specifically times which suggest that self-sexualization is an honor-garnering concept and that one is not required to yield to gender norms or relational traditions (specifically the belief that it is “inappropriate” for women to propose marriage).

All in all, an intergenerational dynamic is designed to benefit both or all parties involved. Robin, at the end of the narrative, can be found soaring (according to Griffin’s logic), and Sparrow notices and appreciates her growth and even does a little growing of her own. According to Sparrow via Taylor, Robin “has finally gotten laid and [is] much nicer...she’s fallen for this super-nice guy Michael, a real blast from her past, and things have gotten hot and heavy and are picking up more steam than a locomotive around their crib, and...they’re in Napa Valley...but they’re not picking any grapes. They’re bonding” (390).⁶² Sparrow also feels the need to bond, but no longer solely with her mother. Although she may not be fully self-sexualized, Sparrow is becoming more self-actualized and thus desires continuously to soar. In the many attempts to talk to her mother about men and sex, Sparrow grew eager to develop a solid relationship with her father, the man whose sex(uality) is the reason for her existence. She states, “You know what occurred to me? That my very own father lives in the same city as I do, and I’m his daughter and I wouldn’t know him if I passed him on the street...He’s actually a nice person who made some stupid choices and he’s paid for them...You have to open your heart and learn how to forgive others when they disappoint you, Mom. Haven’t you always told me that?” (262-3). Without saying it, Sparrow acknowledges that despite their difference of viewpoint, she is her mother’s daughter. And, ultimately, Robin and Sparrow learn that sharing with one another—via an intergenerational dynamic—and sharing each other with others helps them to

⁶² Taylor is Bernadine’s first husband’s daughter; I will discuss her in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

see the world from a newer, more diverse viewpoint and increases their communal and individual growth. Even more, Robin's sexual experiences or misfortunes are no longer mute and therefore no longer hinder or disadvantage Sparrow. Instead, because she can learn from her mother's experiences, Sparrow can foster more actualized engagements with the opposite sex, her father particularly.

III. A Mother to the Motherless: Bernadine and Taylor

Next to Robin and Sparrow, the mother-daughter duo that garners significant reader's attention is Bernadine and Taylor. Actually, Taylor is not Bernadine's natural daughter; she is the daughter of her first ex-husband and his second wife, the white office assistant for whom he left Bernadine. Taylor's position as a young, interracial child automatically situates her in the conversation about intermingling, or the joining of two seemingly separate worlds, oftentimes in the attempt to benefit them both. However, Taylor's parents clearly have two distinct views on what it means to benefit from their union.

When readers meet Taylor, she is fourteen years old and distraught by the fact that her mother has left her and her father and gone to London with another man. As a result, Bernadine is the only mother figure she has. However, because Bernadine is dependent upon drugs and not often in control of her own life, she can do little to assist Taylor during her personal trauma. Thus, Taylor steps in to help build Bernadine back up so that Bernadine can in turn be the positive mother figure she needs in her life. In this case, and similar to the critical and literary searches performed by feminist scholars, the mother soars because the daughter desperately needs her to.

Taylor affectionately refers to Bernadine as “MomMom,” indicating that she is a second mother to her. Although, in pleading with her second mother to take her first mother’s place and take her in, Taylor expresses to Bernadine, “You’ve been more of a mom to me than she has” (166). Bernadine denies this assertion; still, Taylor insists, “I can’t live with my dad, MomMom. I just can’t. Things are so screwed up in our house. He’s never there, and then let’s throw in my slutty mom who bails on her own kid just so she can get screwed by some British guy” (165). Undoubtedly, Taylor’s reference to her mother as slutty is inappropriate and disrespectful. However, in her eyes, she may be justified in using this language. Her father, John, has already revealed to Bernadine that Kathleen, Taylor’s mother, had “been fooling around for a while [and] made [Taylor] swear to secrecy” (121). These actions, to a teen living in a society where women with deviant or unapologetic sexualities are intrinsically demeaned and shunned, might be equivalent to sluttiness; in addition, she cannot seem to fathom any reason other than slut-like (read sexual) practices as the reason why her mother would even consider “bailing” on her and her father.

Taylor pleads with Bernadine, “Even though I’m a teenager, I’m still a child and I don’t want to grow up and become a totally twisted grown-up just because I was deprived of some basic shit they say we need as children—like love and attention. Is that like asking for too much?” (171). Despite Taylor’s crass language, readers might want to sympathize with her and utter, “No, of course that is not too much to ask.” One might also question the identity of “they,” the omniscient dictators of a child’s needs. Is it true that Taylor will inadvertently become a “twisted” adult because she has no mother to soar before her? Like Walker, Bambara, and other feminist critics in search of soaring mothers, this is not a risk Taylor is willing to take. Although

she quickly learns that her own survival might be a bit too much for Bernadine to handle in her current state, Taylor is adamant in deciding that she will not lose two mothers.

In the midst of Taylor's plea for a mother and guiding figure, Bernadine begins to feel a lack of control and suffers from great mental discomfort; she turns to her pill bottle. Taylor recognizes this dependency and offers advice and guidance to Bernadine instead: "If you're strung out you should check yourself into a facility" (167). Bernadine denies being "strung out," but Taylor's rebuttal to every single reason Bernadine suggests she needs her pills forces Bernadine inwardly to consider the fact that she might indeed be strung out. Taylor maintains that she, too, has trouble sleeping some nights, and also has a few worries about certain issues; yet, she does not resort to medication each time one of these occurrences takes place.⁶³

Furthermore, because Bernadine sees Taylor's youth as an indication of a lack of experience suggesting no valid cause for worry or concern about life, Taylor clarifies, "Duh. Just finals and driving, and sex and drugs and boys and why did my mom desert me and my dad, and what do I want to be when I grow up and is there a college out there waiting for me and what box do I check when they ask my race? I could go on" (169). Taylor's concerns range from juvenile to more serious to universal. But, unlike Bernadine, she is not attempting to ignore or even face those issues all at once. Her concern is having a mother she can look up to and confide in when a particular problem is a bit more unbearable than the others.

Although Taylor is still hopeful, she is aware that Bernadine is not fit to be this person in her current state. So, without Bernadine's approval, Taylor begins to spread the word,

⁶³ Sparrow gives Robin a similar explanation, stating, "I'm not running from anything. I haven't had anything tragic happen to me yet, so I'm cool with my own head" (22). When she makes this statement, Sparrow does not yet recognize not having a father as being potentially "tragic," but it is clear that both she and Taylor lack the ideal family upbringing. Because Sparrow has always had her mother, her sentiments of living with a single parent may be different from a young girl who does not have this motherly figure. Either way, the two girls decide against allowing ensuing restrictions and oppressors to dictate their lives.

specifically to her father, that Bernadine is going away “on a trip” to “attend some special cooking course,” having full awareness that the fear of telling people she has a problem is a central part of Bernadine’s problem (229). Bernadine, in a sense, adheres to and is a victim of both the politics of respectability and the strong black woman stereotype because the image she presents to others is far more important than her own self-image, and admitting that she uses drugs and therefore lacks control presumably makes her both weak and undeserving of respect. Taylor attempts to protect her MomMom’s image and pride and sets her on the proper path for necessary flight. In essence, she is helping Bernadine to become a maverick feminist; she encourages Bernadine to help herself first so that she can in turn aid in the uplift of other women, but particularly her stepdaughter since she no longer has a mother to fulfill this role. Bernadine, like Robin in reference to Sparrow’s intergenerational involvement, realizes “that Taylor was on to something and that as soon as her head stops spinning, she should make that call” (230).

Ultimately, Sparrow and Taylor have different methods but the same objectives: to have a whole, happy, and self-actualized mother, and to have a fulfilling relationship with that mother. Their difference in method can be attributed to their different interests and upbringings. Whereas Sparrow and Robin watch “stupid movies” together, Taylor’s father, on the other hand, makes her watch *Sixty Minutes* and CNN (210). She states, “I hated it at first but now I feel like I know a lot of important stuff, fascinating stuff, actually. Plus, Anderson Cooper is such a fox—gay or not” (167). Sparrow and Taylor’s different interests are equivalent to what scholars have deemed highbrow versus lowbrow, serious versus trivial, ZZ Packer versus Wahida Clark. However, both girls (and genres) impart helpful life lessons that can be important during different aspects of positive intergenerational connections.

As previously mentioned, Robin hated to admit that Sparrow was knowledgeable for her age; equally so, Bernadine notices how much “important stuff” Taylor knows and admits that “this girl reminded her so much of Rona Barrett from way, way back, it wasn’t funny” (390).⁶⁴ Note that Rona Barrett is from “way, way back.” This notation suggests that Taylor possesses recognizably mature and curious characteristics, but she has learned to adapt them in her twenty-first century teenage world in a way that benefits others, particularly Bernadine, who admits that she gets a “kick out of” Taylor’s mannerisms and language, her unashamed and self-assured display of disrespectability politics. Taylor’s freedom frees Bernadine in a manner that she was not aware existed.

When Bernadine finally does make “that call,” and admits to herself, the receptionist, and her family and friends that she has a problem, she “feels a sense of calmness inside. Xanax has never made her feel this way” (313). Because of Taylor’s seeming meddling, Bernadine rejects and throws off the shackles of the politics of respectability and the strong black woman stereotype. While in rehab, she could not deny, as she previously had to Taylor, that she was strung out. Her daily introduction was as such, “Hi, I’m Bernadine, and I’m an addict from Pheonix”—although she admits that what she wanted to say was, “Hi, I’m Bernadine. I’m a great cook. I live in Scottsdale. I’m here because I’ve been doing a number on myself for years, but guess what? Game over” (355).

Tayari Jones (2009) insists, “The trouble with labels is not with the label itself, but with the reactions some readers have to those labels. Traditionally, labels have been used to designate lesser status. Simply avoiding the label doesn’t address the caste system that gives rise to the labels in the first place” (8). As Taylor’s interaction with Bernadine suggests, rehabbing labels

⁶⁴ Rona Barrett is a Caucasian American born in New York in 1936. She is most noted for her gossip column that was popularized during the 1960s; she currently runs a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing affordable living and services to senior citizens.

and adhering to an intergenerational dynamic has the potential to reduce the significance of labels and produce a more sound being. Furthermore, to recognize Bernadine only by her addiction would be to ignore the assets that she clearly possesses. Thanks to Taylor's insistence on Bernadine checking herself into a facility, Bernadine is better able to recognize her own assets, become self-actualized, and reject as well as ignore popular opinion, not for the mere purpose of being oppositional or confrontational but for the necessity of being free within herself. As a premise of maverick feminism, this personal freedom is a requirement for soaring above and uplifting others.

After Bernadine completes her time in rehab, she has officially gained a new appreciation and respect for Taylor and her difference of perspective. John picks Bernadine up from the facility and relays a message that his "other daughter" would like to speak with her; he uses other to indicate the fact that she is not the daughter of whom he and Bernadine share parentage. However, Bernadine quickly corrects him and refers to Taylor as "*our*" daughter (387 emphasis original). Before her newfound revelation, Bernadine refers to Taylor as one of the "unfortunate mixed-race children who got too many genes from one parent and not enough from the other"; now she in fact refers to herself as the other parent (164). Taylor meets her goal of helping to uplift her MomMom so that she can in turn help to uplift her. However, because Taylor is not the traditional teen girl, and as previously mentioned, is not focused on portraying a particular image and is therefore not worried about all of the problems she could have, she continues the intergenerational connection by also bonding with her father.

When Bernadine assures Taylor that everything in rehab "went fine," Taylor replies, "I'm glad to hear it, MomMom. So. The other thing is this. I've been doing some serious thinking and I have come to the conclusion that it would be better if I stayed with my dad because he's lonely

and he's got that big prostate issue and I think he needs me. Plus, he's been coming home earlier and we've been talking about all kinds of things. I never knew he was so interesting" (390). This response portrays Taylor as an intelligent young lady very much capable of assisting in the growth of others well beyond her years; it also indicates that she recognizes and appreciates the value of the intergenerational dynamic, or talking about "all kinds of things" and validating the interests of others.

Overall, like Robin and Sparrow, both Bernadine and Taylor benefit from their exchange. Taylor, as demonstrated above, gains a soaring mother and is in the business of helping her father to soar as well, and both parents recognize that they need her just as much as she needs them. Bernadine, of course, becomes clean again, although not in a virginal or sexual sense because her intimate and sensual interests actually increase after she becomes (newly) self-actualized; she jokes with her girlfriends in a bridal shop about virginal brides versus brides who "couldn't wait" (409). During the final scene of the novel, the women "look like they have seen a ghost" when Bernadine agrees with Robin's viewpoint on sex and admits that she one day hopes to have both a relationship and relations again. She states, "I'm not dead. I've been frozen for a while. As you guys can tell, I'm thawing out" (419). Indeed, actualization and sexualization are interconnected, as her thawing out is equivalent to not necessarily letting "loose" but rather making herself accessible so that she can both give to others and receive from them as well. In addition, she plans to thaw out a great deal of food in her future also; Bernadine enrolls in school, "a one-year program at the Culinary Institute"—seriously this time (418). As Robin reveals to her friends in the final scenes that she is returning to school as well, the two of them seemingly get over the stigma that there is a particular age limit for school attendance or growth and again reiterate the importance of the intergenerational dynamic, of learning from and

cooperating with people with different perspectives. More specifically, they recognize that times have indeed changed, that they do not want to get left behind, and that they also want to know and be confident in themselves when they get to where they are going.

IV. Words of Wisdom: Gloria and her Grandchildren

In Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), the protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, grapples between trying to rectify or dismiss a past that has haunted the lives of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother before her. The words of Ursa's ex-slave great-grandmother remain poignant in her mind as she attempts to operate and have relationships in the mid to late twentieth century. Ursa was supposed to reproduce the next generation, leave evidence of the trauma of slavery and forced miscegenation, "*because they didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn't be held against them*" (14 emphasis original).⁶⁵ After the actions of Ursa's abusive husband, she undergoes a hysterectomy and determines that she has let down her foremothers, that "there'd be plenty [she] couldn't give back now" (6). As a result, she continues on a path of rememories and regrets, allowing words from generations pass to determine her life's path.⁶⁶ In McMillan's *Getting to Happy*, words between grandmother and grandchildren are equally life-altering. However, the wise words are not handed down from the older generation to the younger; the wise words come from Gloria's toddler and preschool age granddaughters.

⁶⁵ "They" in the quotation refers to slave owners, particularly those who used their slaves as concubines.

⁶⁶ Rememory is a theory coined by Toni Morrison. What differentiates the concept of rememory from that of a simple memory is the fact that in a rememory, the character remembering the particular event may or may not have physically experienced the event, but is psychologically affected by it. Lucille P. Fultz recollects a 1989 conversation with Morrison at Princeton— "She suggested that I think of [rememory as] a radio with its volume turned to the lowest point, beyond audibility but never turned off—"and therefore defines rememory as a "remembrance fraught with abhorrent images at times too painful and frightening to face, at other times poignant and memorable." (118, 75). See Lucille P. Fultz, *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*, Urbana and Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

When readers first meet Gloria, she is preparing to celebrate her fourteenth anniversary with Marvin, her loving husband. She is reportedly the only one of the four women who is happily married; this quickly changes, however, when Marvin is killed in a gang shooting on his and Gloria's anniversary. After Marvin's death, Gloria resorts to silence and little to no interaction with others. But, ultimately, words both spoken and not spoken by her grandchildren are a main factor in Gloria's eventual continuation on a positive path.

Gloria has four grandchildren, two boys and two girls. The boys, Brass and Stone, are 12 and 6 years old respectively; the girls, Blaze and Diamond, are 4 and 2. Gloria loves how each of her grandchildren has his or her individual personality. Brass is cocky, Stone is smart, Blaze is high-spirited, and Diamond is a "sweet little devil" (63). The presence of her grandchildren reminds her how generational changes have affected the naming of children and the children themselves:

Years ago, black people gave [their children] African and biblical names but then they just seemed to stop and started making up the most ridiculous combination of sounds and syllables, most of which didn't make any damn sense. They were just tongue twisters. Nowadays parents were naming babies after anything and everything: numbers, letters of the alphabet, trees, spices, flowers, the weather, seasons, colors, perfume, cars, designers, alcoholic beverages and a slew of other inanimate objects...Robin was no better. She named her daughter Sparrow. So now there are two birds in their house...Gloria feels sorry for some of these kids although she's gotten used to and has even grown rather fond of her grandkids' names. (65-6)

Gloria recognizes that “times have changed,” and in some cases to the extreme. Interestingly, she notes that her friend, Robin, is amongst those who have taken this different route. Robin, in this sense, while a part of Gloria’s own generation, has a clear connection with the women of “nowadays,” which is perhaps all the more reason why the intergenerational dynamic between she and Sparrow was effective. Still, although Gloria does not personally identify with the new generation, she does somewhat fetishize the results of their conventions (specifically her grandchildren’s names).

While mourning Marvin’s death for nearly seven months, Gloria admits that her grandchildren brighten her day in a way that no one else does; she looks forward to spending time with them. After her daughter-in-law, Nickida, goes to jail for mishandling money on her job with the IRS, Gloria gets to spend even more time with her grandchildren, and it is during this time that her own growth takes place. She picks Blaze and Diamond up from preschool one day, and Blaze and her friends teach Gloria a lesson while she kindly and excitingly participates in playtime with the girls before taking her grandchildren home. Gloria enters the classroom viewing it as “Santa’s workshop of little black elves” but leaves viewing the children, particularly the girls, as substantial human beings, keepers of society, and for that reason gives them all the more nourishment and care, despite already clearly defined different viewpoints and generational perspectives (271).

Ultimately, Gloria joins Blaze and four of her preschool classmates in the children’s play kitchen, as they prepare a meal over the stove, wash dishes in the sink, and handle business on a headset, carrying out what they assume to be traditional female roles. She offers them an additional job and asks if she can get her hair and makeup done. When she offers to pay with a check, one of the young girls boldly states, “No! They don’t take no checks only credit cards.”

Gloria notes that the girl, who “looks like she’s already seen some things,” is a bit too certain about her statement, “as if she has had run-ins like this before” (273). As a result of this and other conversations, upon leaving the group that she now determines is made up of wise children as opposed to little elves, Gloria hugs them and thinks:

All these miniature people are real people. That one day they’ll grow up and become real adults and they’ll fall in love, and some of them will have their hearts broken and cry and wonder if they’ll ever recover. Some of them will probably get married and have babies and their husbands might die when they least expect it. Or one day they’ll be grandparents and their adult children will need them again, which is why Gloria is going to take two of these children to her house until their father, her only son, tells her just how long he needs all of them to stay. (274)

During Gloria’s time in the play area—the scene depicting an inadvertent intergenerational dynamic—she realizes that it is beyond time to end her own course of self-pity so that she can be strong enough to aid in the uplift of the next generation. Like Taylor does for Bernadine, Blaze and her classmates unwittingly urge Gloria to become a maverick feminist, to work on her own personal issues so that she can be sound enough—self-actualized—to aid in the uplift of the next generation of women, because, as she notes, they too will get married, have children, lose husbands, become grandparents, or like Sparrow and Taylor, lose their virginity or lose their mother. Essentially, the purpose of the intergenerational dynamic—in life and in literature—is not to make a paradigm so that future generations will have a model to follow, but rather the purpose is to elevate both parties to their highest height by first recognizing, attempting to understand, engaging with, and ultimately gaining an appreciation for differences and change.

Shortly after the playtime engagement, Gloria recognizes a change in her youngest grandchild, Diamond, and although she is not pleased with all she hears, she is undoubtedly enlightened. Diamond is nearing three years-old. She has talked previously, but when readers are introduced to her, they learn that she speaks very few words; it is assumed that her lack of communication is a result of autism. However, while Gloria is again helping out her son by overseeing her grandchildren, Diamond speaks. Her words are not eloquent or poetic in the sense that one would be surprised to hear a two year old utter them; she simply says “Thank you” after Gloria presents her with candy. “Can you say that again, sweetheart?” Gloria asks. And, when she does repeat herself, Gloria honors her with “a hug so strong it lifted Diamond high off the ground.” The sassy, intelligent Blaze feels compelled to enlighten her grandmother: “She can say more than that...She just talks when she feels like it” (330). Readers quickly learn that while Diamond’s failure to talk may have been initiated by her disease, she knowingly limits her communication as a form of resistance.

After learning about Nickida’s imprisonment, Gloria asks the girls if they miss her presence. Blaze of course speaks up and suggests that she does not miss her mom “all the time” because she is mean and “hits hard”; Diamond nods her head in agreement. Attempting to salvage her mother’s image and appease her grandmother, Blaze assures Gloria that her mother has never hit Diamond; she simply “shaked her back and forth” in an attempt to get her to talk (329). However, as demonstrated via Diamond’s interaction with Gloria, and in accordance with Blaze’s wise words, it is clear that Diamond, at an early age, has learned the power of words and has determined to share them only with those whom make her feel comfortable and will most appreciate her words. When Gloria details to Tarik her excitement of Diamond’s speaking, he,

like Blaze, is not surprised. This form of resistance that the child has learned at such an early age can be both advantageous and disadvantageous, however.

On the one hand, because of her ill-treatment and mandates, Nickida, unlike Blaze, Gloria, and Tarik, may never experience the full beauty of Diamond, and this, one assumes, might crush even the harshest mother's spirit. So, Diamond has an advantage because it is her choice, even at nearly three, of whom she shares and does not share herself with. On the whole, however, in only sharing words and tales with those who make one feel comfortable and those who will appreciate those words, the words and tales lose their ability to invoke change on a wider audience.

If Hurston (and other black women writers), knowing the views of her contemporaries and critics—the race men—had only shared her thoughts with those who openly and readily accepted, there might be no Janie and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and ultimately no foremothers to soar. Equally so, if contemporary black women writers with interests of depicting the complexities of black female sexualities all chose not to speak, or perhaps speak subtly, in light of critical reception such as that of Chiles's, the body of literature and literary criticism on black female sexualities would continue to lack the depth and diversity the field merits. McMillan notes in an interview that “sometimes you have to give yourself permission to do things even when other people think it's not a good idea... Write as if no one is going to read it. That's what frees you” (Packard 24). Ultimately, she suggests that one's own freedom is far more important than critical opinion.

To aid in the freedom of her grandchildren, after Gloria had been harboring the \$300,000 insurance check for Marvin's death for several months, she notes that there was no reason to deposit it until she recognized how much her grandchildren need her and how much she needs

them. All in all, Gloria understands that her own survival depends on the survival of future generations, and the survival of future generations depends on her own survival and investment in them. She gives half of the \$300,000 to her son, Tarik, to aid his unexpected status as a single parent, sends a gracious amount to Hurricane Katrina victims, and sets “aside a nice sum to guarantee Oasis was going to be one of the hippest, sexiest, up-to-the-minute state-of-the-art-salon-and-spas in Pheonix” (399). The hipness of her salon includes unique jewelry, “some of which will be made by Ms. Sparrow,” a “bird” whose wisdom and distinctiveness altogether is impossible to deny.

Ultimately, Gloria’s investment in the future is a plan to avoid getting caught in the past and instead maintain a dynamic presence in an ever-evolving society. Furthermore, she aids in the strength of her character by attempting to become self-actualized and self-sexualized when she joins Weight Watchers and makes a purchase at Good Vibrations, an adult novelty store. Marvin had previously been the person to prepare healthy meals for her and make sure that she walked the necessary miles to remain healthy and fit; he, too, had been the sole source of her good vibrations. Earlier in the novel, “Gloria also felt a tinge of excitement at the thought that you could actually buy the kind of penis you always wanted. Not that she had been thinking about one. If she had, it would’ve been Marvin’s. As things stood, she had accepted the fact that she might never be sexually active again. And it was okay” (187). However, as a result of a few unexpected life events and interactions with her grandchildren, she, by the end of the novel, recognizes and accepts the significance of being able to do for one’s self; pleasing oneself sexually is no exclusion. All in all, Blaze and Diamond help and urge their grandmother, or Gawa as they call her, to soar, and she thus continues on a path akin to maverick feminism, evaluating and enriching self in order to be fit to uplift others.

V. Cut From the Same Cloth: Savannah and her Relatives

Unlike her three best friends, Savannah has no offspring with whom to interact directly. She has no children of her own and therefore no grandchildren, nor does her now ex-husband have any children from other relationships to whom she can serve as a guiding figure or second mother. However, she is also the only one of the four friends who has a somewhat tight community of other relatives. And, these relatives, miles away, help Savannah realize the importance of family and relationships, despite and in light of their differences of opinion and way of living. Savannah builds a stronger relationship with her mother during the course of the novel and eventually determines that while she and her sister chose different paths and have different viewpoints on success, love, and what is and is not acceptable, there is no denying that they both are ultimately cut from the same cloth, so to speak, and finding a balance between their differences is far more productive and beneficial than ignoring, running from, or discrediting them.

Terry McMillan's Savannah Jackson is akin to Toni Morrison's (1973) Sula Peace in the sense that they both come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and have deep ties to their place of birth although they no longer allow themselves to fit in or connect with the place. Because of their adventurous and calculating characteristics, they leave home and experience life in a fuller, less restricted manner. Too, both Savannah and Sula question their upbringings, specifically the fact that their mothers do not represent an image of wedded virtue. However, while readers are allowed to see Sula make a physical return to her hometown of Medallion, Ohio, Savannah's return to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is only figurative, via phone interaction with her mother and sister. Yet, like Sula, Savannah learns that she is indeed her mother's

daughter and that the people and community she ultimately fled from are what keep her connected to life in other places.

Although Savannah is the last protagonist analyzed in this study, she is the first of McMillan's four characters to introduce herself to readers.⁶⁷ She is turning down an invitation to go on a business trip with her husband, Isaac, insisting that she is not the type of wife who simply wants to "sit around the pool all day reading romance novels...[or] sip on margaritas and eat nachos, or linger in the malls for hours with their husbands' credit cards, trying on resort wear for the cruise they're all going on in the near future." "I'm not crazy about cruises," she insists; "I went on one with Mama and my sister, Sheila, and those long narrow hallways give me the creeps...by day four I was ready to jump off our balcony and backstroke home" (2). This passage in the opening pages of the novel reveals Savannah's character. It suggests that she is independent and is not the stereotypical wife who relies on her husband's income or presence for fulfillment. In fact, based on the circumstances of her marriage, one can deduce that she simply married because she assumed that that is what she was supposed to do at that particular time in her life; she was "a forty-year-old love starved black woman who'd never been married" (5). In her life and marriage, however, like on the cruise ship, her family has a strong presence, and her desire to jump off the ship and swim home is indicative of her need for agency and control over her circumstances and surroundings. This desire to determine her own surroundings is precisely why she visits Pittsburgh as little as possible. Given that she rarely visits Pittsburgh, one might wonder what place she is referring to when she has the desire to go home; likely, she is referring

⁶⁷ The order of character analysis is designed according to the significance of mother-daughter relationship: Robin and Sparrow are actual mother and daughter, Taylor is Bernadine's step-daughter, Gloria skips a generation and makes a special connection with her grandchildren, and Savannah does not have offspring, so she in turn has to forge and strengthen a relationship with her equal and the generation before her.

to Phoenix, a place where she has seeming control over events, but by the end of the novel, home becomes the place where her mother is.

Savannah has a very intriguing relationship with her mother and sister, and after she informs them of her imminent divorce, their relationships seem to become all the more interesting and poignant. These relational developments are important because her relatives remind her of who she is (and is not) as well as who they are (and are not). As a result of the mirror-like images presented and oftentimes forced upon her by her mother and sister, Savannah becomes a more self-actualized and self-identified individual. In this sense, her divorce becomes more about reconciling her past and less about “short shriving” Isaac.

Ultimately, Savannah, like Taylor and Sparrow, is a member of the budding generation in this exchange, and her mother’s ability to soar impacts her ability to soar; and, it follows that Savannah’s ability to soar impacts the potential soaring of future generations. Specifically, Savannah’s intergenerational exchange involves evaluating the conditions, appreciating the actions, and elevating the status of her foremother while simultaneously and effectively navigating the spaces of a more contemporary setting.

As mentioned several times, Savannah is a woman who likes control. The fact that she does not have offspring is a result of her choosing to control her own body. She has a tubal ligation and cannot have children. Her sister sees this as an act of selfishness because “the only person [Savannah] has to worry about is Savannah” (199). However, Savannah’s professional interests indicate that she is indeed concerned with more people than herself. The work that she does with the television program is geared toward depicting tragic events and circumstances of African American communities in hopes of changing perceptions and opinions about how African Americans do and should live life. She insists that “producing television shows about

cultural and social issues” is just as interesting and important as anything anyone else could do to beautify or enhance humanity (2).

Savannah prides herself on painting accurate pictures of both “good and bad” in the black communities, but does not like the pictures of good and bad depicted in her own family. As a result, she is slightly repulsed and sarcastically ignores her sister when Sheila suggests that she do a television show about the teen girls in Philadelphia who “act like they never heard of birth control. They get excited about being pregnant. A diploma is not their ticket to financial freedom. A baby is income” (199). This reality seems to literally be too close to home for Savannah to be comfortable with the idea, especially since her own sister, although not a teenager or single mother, struggles significantly with her husband to provide for their six children, none of which Savannah has an active relationship with as an aunt. In fact, Sheila is adamant that Savannah does not “even know [her] kids’ name” (199). Savannah seems to use not knowing her nieces and nephews as a forced separation technique that makes her more comfortable with facing the fact that they may be amongst the group of troubled teenagers in Pittsburgh. She cannot make, and is not allowed to make, this separation from her sister, however, because she has known and loved her all of her life.

Savannah admits, although to readers and not to her sister, “The thought of Sheila coming out here made my heart race. I think I’d take GoGo—whoever he is—over her, which is pretty sad to admit.”⁶⁸ In addition to the sad admission, Savannah also confesses that her sister is “one of the main reasons I’ve sent Mama tickets to come out here to visit instead of going back there so much. The way Sheila’s been struggling for the past twenty-odd years breaks my heart. She has settled for so little, it’s like she never had dreams.” In spite of all of these feelings, however,

⁶⁸ Gogo is Savannah’s nephew, Sheila’s sixteen year-old son, who has been expelled from school for using illegal drugs. Sheila thinks it would help his attitude and keep him out of trouble if he spends a few weeks at Savannah’s house in Pheonix.

Savannah comes to the conclusion that she and her sister are “a lot alike when it gets right down to it. We are our mother’s daughters” (203). And, since she makes no reference to her father, Savannah is indeed her mother’s daughter only, which is all the more reason for her to come to terms with their differences.

Although she reverences her mother outwardly, Savannah’s feelings about her mother’s situation are not always ones of comfort and support. When Savannah is reminiscing about how Isaac contributed to the household, she becomes annoyed by the fact that she is a little less self-sufficient than she thought. In a like manner, she is reminded of and annoyed by her mother’s views on solitude. She states, “I can’t help but be reminded how Mama always used to sing, ‘It’s so nice to have a man around the house...’ even though she never had one” (246). Savannah’s mother not having a man around the house undoubtedly influences Savannah’s actions and concerns. She admits early on in the narrative that she does not “need a man to *complete*” her (9 emphasis original). And, while many feminist would utter this same refrain, news that Savannah receives at the end of the novel suggests that whether she needs a man to complete her or not, her existence is dependent upon at least one man, her father, the man that her mother did not have around the house.

Savannah learns that she has diabetes, and the doctor questions the medical history of her parents. She can speak to the mother’s side of the family but can only utter in a seemingly nonchalant manner that she never met her father. Because of how Savannah views her upbringing (specifically her mother’s ability to provide a pleasing lifestyle as a single parent), she is not at all remorseful that her father has not played an active role in her life. However, Savannah has confused her mother’s coping with solitude as an acceptance of solitude, strength even. She insists, “I had a history, too. I was raised in a Pittsburgh ghetto. Thanks to my mama, I

never felt deprived or disadvantaged. In fact, she had me believing that when I grew up my life was going to be remarkable” (366). Her mother, on the other hand, continues to reiterate that “it ain’t no fun being old and lonely,” suggesting that desires for intimacy do not go away with age and that without significant people in it, life is not always so remarkable (143).⁶⁹

All in all, the overarching issue between Savannah and her mother and sister is a different viewpoint on marriage and relationships (with intimate partners, family members, and friends). However, like the genres of literary and popular fiction, the reasons for these differences are also accredited to a difference of educational views, economic statuses, and ways of relaying information. Savannah’s friends regularly acknowledge that she has an issue with profanity, which perhaps can be attributed to her background and being raised in the Pittsburgh ghetto, but because she lives a more cushiony lifestyle, Savannah adheres to the “bootstrap” model of life and cannot fathom why her family is trapped and wants to entrap her in the place she escaped from years prior.

Sheila tells Savannah, “You don’t exactly break your neck to come to Pittsburgh—where you were born and raised in case you forgot. The only time we see you is when somebody dies or you just feel guilty...” (198). After being diagnosed with diabetes and feeling guilty while listening to her mother suggest that she did not have to go Paris in order to get away, that “Hell, Pittsburgh is foreign to you. It ain’t exactly no postcard but you ain’t been here in years,” Savannah finally realizes that a relationship with her family, in all their “dysfunction,” is imperative to her own wellbeing; she puts her pride to the side and suggests, “I would like to come home for Christmas if that’s all right with you” (368). This home and the home of the beginning of the novel are two different places. In the end, Savannah has to be roused by her

⁶⁹ The admission that desires do not go away with age is different from the portrayed viewpoints of the black protagonists in *The Help* (2009), as they seem not to require the same magnitude of intimacy.

mother and sister and diagnosed with an illness that might ultimately prevent her from continuing to engage with them before she accepts the fact that there is “good and bad” in her own family. Furthermore, she consents that while her mother and sister do not have the education or status that she does, they do have a clearer understanding of the social injustices she is concerned with. Their consistent disapproval of how she presents cultural and social issues encourages her to change her television format, from more of a documentary layout to a “talk show” format in order to keep up with the times and really reach the people she theorizes about (418). After all, in order to teach the people, one has to be able to reach the people.

Ultimately, like the aforementioned protagonists, Savannah gains a great deal from this intergenerational dynamic. One can conclude that while her single relationship status places her in a similar predicament to her status in *Waiting to Exhale*, she inevitably “gets to happy.”⁷⁰ She begins eating healthier in an attempt to live longer, she changes the format of her television show in the attempt to reach a wider audience, but most importantly, she “remember[s] who [she is]. And what [she’s] going to do about it” (255). She is the daughter of a single mother, the sister of a low income woman in an unstable relationship, the ex-wife of a porn addict, and the aunt of a drug abuser. Still, she is Savannah Jackson, a wealthy and successful black woman whose main goal is to “paint portraits of our lives, good or bad [because] we need to be able to see how we behave instead of ignoring it,” a lesson that was made plain to her through the intergenerational engagements with her mother and sister (101).

⁷⁰ Savannah does meet a man, Jasper, whom she likes, but at the end of the novel, maintains that she “just want[s] to have fun” and is not looking for anything serious. This is a more self-actualized pronouncement than her once traditional assumption that relationships between men and women should lead to marriage (419).

VI. Happy Medium

Fundamentally, Terry McMillan's *Getting to Happy* serves as an example of how happy mediums can be reached, particularly when multiple generations are involved. The novel confirms and reiterates that the differences and similarities between the generations have the potential to result in enhanced viewpoints and stronger bonds because each group's significance is realized by its counterpart. In addition, this work is one of the few African American texts in which the black daughter is not the obvious protagonist but has a clear and essential voice. In essence, the features that seemingly banish the daughters to the margins—age and controversial beliefs—are precisely the features that make room for their presence and insight to even be considered.

The daughters, specifically Sparrow and Taylor, can be considered nonconformists. Because the academy continues to be a historically elitist institution, scholars have ultimately learned that the space between popularity and infamy is the thin line they tread when they are nonconformists. For example, both Hughes and Hurston's works and lifestyles are indicative of the notion that youth, or younger generations, "intend to express [their] individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame" (Hughes 30). Somewhere along the line, perhaps with social, economic, and educational status, in addition to numerous bouts of societal rejection, however, one seemingly becomes more susceptible to the fear and shame that was previously unacknowledged. In fact, Hurston's final novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), is the result of this rejection, as it is literally a whitewashed version of the unafraid and unashamed texts she had previously authored. However, Ann DuCille argues in *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (1993) that Hurston's attention to individualized womanhood, intimate attraction, folk culture, and anti-patriarchal societies is no less prevalent in

the text about a white woman and her community than it is in the text Hurston is most known for, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which depicts the encounters of a black woman and her community. In either regard, the willingness and tendency to be new and bold comprises her work and is a mandatory component of the intergenerational dynamic as depicted in *Getting to Happy*.⁷¹ The novel's younger generation of characters possesses these characteristics and is determined that their mothers possess them as well.

All in all, the encounters between mothers and daughters in *Getting to Happy* serve as a guide by which a happy medium can be accomplished in literary studies. As illustrated, the success of the intergenerational dynamic is not based on the senior individual getting "hip" and conforming to the belief system of the junior, nor is it comprised of the junior individual's adoption of the senior's belief system. However, the eventual outcome of Robin, the first mother analyzed in this chapter, implies that a recognition of and honest engagement with the supposedly hip practice may in fact help one to think more critically about who she or he is as an individual, as opposed to who one is in the larger scheme of the world and repressive gender norms. Thus, Robin's attempt at trying to find love Sparrow's way, by "looking for a guy the same way you look for a job. Online..." was not at all a failed endeavor (26). She emerges self-identified, self-actualized, and self-sexualized, qualities akin to a maverick feminist who can share her experiences with others in an attempt to provide them with the right tools to free themselves from their own restricting circumstances.

Furthermore, it is precisely Taylor's unfavorable circumstance, being abandoned by her biological mother, which propels her to persuade Bernadine to rid herself of her personal restrictions and addictions. However, in this intergenerational exchange, unlike in Robin and

⁷¹ This project's general focus is indeed the depiction of black female sexualities via an intergenerational lens, but new and bold here does not equate to ill-advised hipness and hyper-sexuality.

Sparrow's, Bernadine learns that Taylor's specific belief was indeed more directly beneficial to her. The stigma associated with rehabilitation centers had initially been more important to Bernadine than her own health, wellbeing, and happiness. Although, in refusing to admit her addiction, she chose one stereotype over another. She chose to present herself as a strong black woman type when she was in fact weak and vulnerable, as opposed to being labeled as weak and vulnerable by others after admitting herself into rehab in an attempt to gain strength. Because Taylor is young, and seemingly shameless and fearless, however, she helps Bernadine to understand that one's thoughts should not be corrupted by stigma, but rather should be focused on improving the wellbeing of the individual. Ultimately, this maverick-like selfishness is both essential for oneself and beneficial to others.

Gloria had not practiced selfishness for quite some time until her husband passed and her daughter-in-law became imprisoned. She did not have to spend time alone with herself to know herself, or to know what was most important to her or those around her. Her grandchildren, although old enough to recognize repressive norms, are not old enough to be tainted by them, and Gloria's time spent with her grandchildren drives her to both evaluate her existence and acknowledge theirs in a new and fuller way. Too, while she realizes that they may grow up to potentially have the same or similar problems as her, she also learns that she will be ill-equipped to assist them in their dilemmas if she is not secure in or relieved of her own. Most important, however, Gloria's grandchildren and their engagement with her suggest that forceful attempts at prescribed notions do not guarantee expected results. Besides, a world in which each generation carries out the practices and beliefs of the one that precedes it would seem to evoke perpetual dismay and dullness, a world where Harriet Tubman would not have dared to free slaves, Rosa

Parks would not have dared to remain in her seat, and Michelle Obama would not have dared to hug Queen Elizabeth.⁷²

In a similar manner, Savannah can be considered the daring “game changer” in her family, mainly because she moves away from her hometown, acquires degrees in higher education followed by a well-paying job, and becomes neither a single parent nor a parent of six. However, unlike Tubman who returned to the slave-holding South multiple times, Parks who continued to fight for equality, and Obama who did not apologize for being affectionate, Savannah attempted to avoid her past by returning to Pittsburgh as little as possible. Yet, when she found herself newly single and divorced, the mirror presented a portrait of herself not unlike the people she had seemingly elevated herself above. The engagements she has with her mother and her sister are what ultimately lead her to be able to perform better on the job she gained as a result of her degrees. Ultimately, Savannah’s tale makes evident that it is often impossible to reach someone when one has exalted herself or himself above and does not effectively communicate with those needing to be reached.

In sum, Terry McMillan’s four protagonists are each oppressed by gender constraints or other societal norms, despite the fact that they are “four smart, capable, black women,” as indicated by reviewer Laurie Cavanaugh. The intergenerational dynamic they engage in with their daughters, grandchildren, and mother help to free them from specific oppressions and 1) consider and analyze difference based on their own honest and personal beliefs as opposed to the beliefs forced upon them by others, 2) look beyond social stigma and engage in activities that best benefits their own wellbeing, 3) recognize that the younger generation will one day become

⁷² This particular event occurred in 2009, and although it may not as of yet seem as significant as the previous two, there is no denying that the first lady’s actions were outside of the norm (as far as customs and protocol is concerned). And, since she made such a positive impression on the Queen, there is a potential that relationships between the Queen of England and the First Lady of the United States may be positively changed for quite some time.

adults and society's leaders who will only perpetuate society's present errors if they are swayed against individuality and forced to carry out prescribed practices, and 4) concede that ignoring a past is not the best technique when one is attempting to prevent others from having similar experiences. These acknowledgements are beneficial to the field of literature and the body of criticism on black female sexualities because they represent the kind of concessions and lessons that other authors and critics may make and learn in order to produce and analyze more diverse narratives that can potentially reach more diverse groups and individuals without either the author or the reader being overwhelmed by negative opinions of those in society who have prematurely or rashly elevated themselves above the masses. In due course, this approach may potentially allow all scholars to get to happy.

Conclusion

“Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons of autonomy.”
Combahee River Collective, “The Black Feminist Statement” (1977)

“Progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation.”

Angela Davis, *Women, Culture, and Politics* (1990)

“I had sex young and, after the initial awkwardness, loved it. For days and nights, I rolled around in a big bed with my first boyfriend, trying out every possible way to feel good body to body. I was able to carry that pleasure and confidence into my everyday life working at the hair salon, raising my hand in English class, hanging out with my best girlfriend, and flirting with boys. I never felt any great loss of innocence, only great rushes of the kind of power that comes with self-knowledge and shared intimacy.”

Rebecca Walker, “Lusting for Freedom” (2001)

Black sexualities studies is a burgeoning field in the academy—despite the lack of critical attention to the topic from many traditional disciplines and scholars. This fact is evident in the great number of scholarly conferences either devoted solely to this theme or that include several panels of scholars presenting primary or secondary research on this topic. Recently, I had the privilege of attending a conference titled “Unleashing the Black Erotic: Gender and Sexuality (Passion, Power, and Praxis)” jointly hosted by the College of Charleston’s Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture and The African American Studies Program.⁷³ Keynote speakers and performers included Joan Morgan and E. Patrick Johnson. Panelists evaluated the depictions of black sexualities (heterosexual and queer) in a range of genres and spaces including film and television, historically black colleges, inner cities, the Caribbean, hip

⁷³ The Chair of the African American Studies Program expressed that next year’s topic would be music; this demonstrates the sponsors’ recognition of the glaring overlap between popular culture and academic culture.

hop music and culture, gospel music, poetry, literary fiction, popular fiction, romance fiction, and strip clubs.

One of the most provocative presentations, an essay titled “All I see is Your Booty Cleavage: Sex and the Contemporary Gospel Song,” was presented by Deborah Smith-Pollard of the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Smith-Pollard is an Associate Professor of literature and the host and producer of a contemporary gospel music radio program. In the essay, she recognized that some contemporary gospel artists have deliberately incorporated discussions of sex and sexuality in their worship because as they see it, problems of sex and sexuality do not simply go away when one becomes a Christian, but rather self-evaluations and critical conversations are imperative to assisting in the holistic improvement of self and black communities at large. Based on Smith-Pollard’s analysis, these gospel artists have recognized the importance of the intergenerational and inter-genre dynamic, especially in relation to critical conversations on black sexualities. And, taken as a whole, the conference was a reiteration that critical discussions of black sexualities are vital and necessary. The sponsors hoped that the collective scholarship would encourage and spark further conversations in and outside of academia.

While my project was well underway before I attended this conference, the critical conversations that took place at the event helped to crystalize the necessity for research such as mine. The authors and works discussed in this project depict tales that defy traditional norms of accepted womanhood, tales that suggest that one’s individual growth and the propensity to assist in the growth of others depends on whether or not one is self-identified, self-sexualized, and self-actualized. This form of self-development is attained not only from personal experiences but from critical conversations like those engaged at the “Unleashing the Black Erotic” conference.

Despite strides being made in sexualities studies and the critical conversation held within confined conference spaces, the research in my project helps to illuminate the reality that, overall, black women have yet to attain total expressive freedom, in part because of oppressive institutions which suggest that a black woman with an unapologetic sexuality is perhaps most captivating and most offensive simultaneously. The conflicting views are the result of a societal duality not unlike the one W. E. B. Du Bois described over a century ago when he identified the state of and coined the term double consciousness. On the one hand, it brings joy to black women and to others to know that they have full control over their bodies, what goes in them, on them, and how they are presented. Being able to reclaim and repossess one's own body after it had belonged (by virtue of slavery and servitude) to others for so long is one of the greatest delights a black woman can attain. Yet, because of the negative depictions of black female bodies when they were unlawfully owned and misused by others, the stigma of moral filth and dishonor initially attached to these bodies remains, and many people—black women included—become ashamed of or repulsed by black women who expresses their sexualities without restraint.

This project champions literary depictions of unapologetic black female sexualities, especially those developed as a result of intense personal investigation, critical conversations with others, and positive intimate experiences. On the whole, my project does the following: 1) traces the evolution of black women's literature from the late 19th century to modern times, 2) shows the connection one's sexuality has to one's overall well-being by analyzing texts depicting self-sexualized black characters, and juxtaposing them to texts with characters whose sexualities are not self-governed, 3) demonstrates and validates the intergenerational (and inter-genre) approach by placing canonical texts in critical conversation with non-canonical texts, and 4)

ultimately determines that the black female body, more specifically black female sexuality, is not simply a symbol or trope in American literature or society, but is an honest defense and offense mechanism, and depending on one's level of self-actualization, self-identification, and self-sexualization, can either produce a sense of confidence and empowerment or create an air of doubt and lack of authority.

Ultimately, I believe that any great research has a foundation in practicality and benefits those engaging the findings, and I agree with E. M. Forster (1937) that the best writing is meant to wake us up. I also agree with the students at San Francisco State who insisted that the history and culture of black Americans be included in their curriculum. The research in this dissertation was carried out with these agendas in mind. Therefore, the black female characters analyzed in this project range from teenage to middle age, lower socio-economic class to upper middle class, sexually inactive to sexually promiscuous, and nearly silent to aggressively vocal. Despite their diverse characteristics, however, they all help to support the notion that one's ability to live a fulfilled life and one's ability to help uplift the lives of others is contingent upon one's possession of a self-governed, active, and unapologetic sexuality. This dynamic is characteristic of a praxis I identify as maverick feminism. It is the belief that there is no one specific theory or genre that appeases each of one's scholarly and social needs, that one has to resort to non-conforming, individualistic thinking instead, and most importantly, that it is imperative first to fulfill self in order to wholly and attentively assist in the obliteration of racist, sexist, and classist oppression amongst others.

The chapters in this work are organized to support the objectives of this project. Therefore, the first chapter, "Not So Helpful," presents a contemporary portrayal of a time and space when the black female body did not belong to the black woman and depicts some of the

limitations she experiences as a result. The characters in Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, along with the author herself, are undoubtedly an anomaly in this study, but this chapter helps to demonstrate that characters such as Stockett's maids are significant to the study of black female sexualities (and sexualities studies in general) because the juxtaposition of the novel's non-autonomous beings (Aibileen and Minny) to its autonomous beings (Skeeter and Celia) is a clear indication of the power and mobility that self-identification, self-actualization, and self-sexualization can potentially afford an individual. Overall, this chapter demonstrates that Stockett's work, and works like hers, is a modernized presentation of the age old problem of colonizing the black female body, and is all the more reason why some contemporary black female writers find it necessary to tell and create their own individual tales of bodily and sexual empowerment, no matter how explicit or seemingly degrading.

To demonstrate black women writers' propensity to narrate unflinching tales of black women with active sexualities, the second chapter, titled "Uh Woman by Herself is a Pitiful Thing," presents characters who are polar opposites from those depicted in *The Help*. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* are analyzed in comparison to one another and stand as a counterargument to a known pattern in the academy, of marginalizing difference and later seeking and praising it out of time and context. Too, this chapter establishes that the very sexual protagonists in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Coldest Winter Ever* operate as maverick feminists and are influential to the growth of other black women as a direct result of their self-sexualized mentalities. However, because both Janie and Winter operate in a society where an overt sexuality is seemingly punishable, the protagonists in the end of their narratives are banished to some form of imprisonment. Hence, while the works are undoubtedly groundbreaking, and the depictions of black female sexualities

portrayed in them add depth and diversity to the body of criticism on black female sexualities, they are also ultimately representatives and indications of the societal two-ness imposed on the black female body.

The third chapter, “Everything You Done to Me,” more clearly depicts an example of the intergenerational and inter-genre approach because it compares *The Color Purple* and *PUSH* (as well as *Disappearing Acts*)—works of decidedly different generations—and also engages the works in cinematic form. This chapter demonstrates that engaging literature using the intergenerational and inter-genre approach allows one to analyze literary fiction texts in a way that they may not have otherwise been examined had they only been placed in conversation with works obviously similar to them. The diverse potentials of an analysis using this approach are due in part to the realization that attempting to find similarities between works of different generations and genres has the tendency to force one to think beyond the common tropes and stereotypes presented and encountered in literary fiction. Ultimately, Chapter Three presents an analysis of characters, Celie of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Precious Jones of Sapphire’s *PUSH*, who lack education and are mentally, physically, and sexually abused by their respective father figure. By their novels’ ends, the protagonists are attached to communities of women that possess and help the characters develop necessary tools for freedom (namely self-identification, self-actualization, and self-sexualization), a freedom that is taken from Janie and Winter, who themselves possess similar tools. Ultimately, the outcomes of *The Color Purple* and *PUSH*, in comparison to the outcomes of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Coldest Winter Ever*, demonstrate a need to detain the liberated and relieve the oppressed, and therefore reiterate the fact that Americans live within a dichotomous system (good or bad, black or white, male or female). Furthermore, the outcomes also problematize the fact that an overt and

unapologetic sexuality is seen as both commendable and censurable, as it frees some but imprisons others.

Finally, Chapter Four uses Terry McMillan's *Getting to Happy* to examine the way the intergenerational dynamic has the potential to advance the field of literature and diversify the body of criticism on black female sexualities. While the work is a revisitation of and seeming reunion with the four charismatic, driven, and sensual women from *Waiting to Exhale*, the purpose of *Getting to Happy* is to express that "times have changed." To demonstrate these changing times and the need to be proactive, McMillan uses the offspring of the four protagonists to highlight the importance of reverencing one's past and understanding one's present in order to be productive in one's future. This is especially important in the field of literature because while one does not want to denounce the importance and significance of works dating as far back as the 19th century and beyond, neither does one want to denounce the importance and significance of one's own scholarship, or the scholarship of one's contemporaries. And, finding a common ground, or a space in the median where both bodies of work can equally soar, alleviates this problem of denouncing altogether. On the surface, this idea of the happy medium may appear too idealistic and seemingly unsophisticated, but Chapter Four illustrates that the happy medium approach is undoubtedly more beneficial to and representative of the avant-garde, diverse, and continuously changing world in which we live, operate, and theorize.

In sum, this project engages several fields, including 20th and 21st century African American literature, women's literature, feminist theories, sexualities studies, and cultural criticism, and contributes to three active and interesting critical discussions: the emergence and acceptance of sex and sexuality in black literature, the current role of popular culture in the

academy, and the evolution of black feminism. It advises that ignoring or diminishing black female sexuality in academic discussions because of societal perceptions forces one to ignore characters that, like *The Color Purple* and *Push* protagonists, negatively experience sex and are bereft of understanding for lack of critical conversation. Second, the project offers an intergenerational (and inter-genre) approach to utilizing popular fiction and culture in the literary classroom and in academic scholarship. Finally, it provides maverick black feminism as an alternative critical lens—one that is more liberatory than traditional feminism or other more prescriptive critical social theories such as Marxism or Modernism—for evaluating both historical and modern texts and experiences.

While my research is narrow in the sense that it is mainly literary, I plan to do more interactive research in the future. Potential goals sparked by this project include the following: first, archival work that will require close study of the lives of African American women who have been noted and historicized for their radical acts and positive contributions to American society. I hypothesize that these women's radical tendencies are in direct correlation to their self-actualized and self-sexualized characteristics. Harriet Tubman, Zora Neale Hurston, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Michelle Obama are but a few examples of black women who presumably fit this paradigm. Second, I plan to collect and analyze syllabi of African American Literature, African American Studies, American Literature, American Studies, and even Composition courses from self-proclaimed diverse institutions to determine what manner of African American (women's) literature is being engaged. I believe that popular and contemporary fiction is not read and studied in large numbers in these programs. However, I hope to support my argument that it is more practical and beneficial to engage students with these popular and contemporary works by conducting a case study with three separate groups—one in which students only engage

canonical texts, another in which students engage both canonical and popular texts, and a final group in which students only engage popular texts. I predict that students will prefer the contemporary works that they can most relate to but will ultimately determine that an intergenerational dynamic between the canonical and popular is most beneficial to student learning. Finally, I hope to use the information collected from archival work and the responses from students to develop an anthology of texts that focus on black women and sexuality that can be used for both academic and nonacademic enrichment. In conducting future research, I am open to different perspectives and ways of thinking in order to advance my understanding of the subject of black female sexualities; I hope to collaborate with scholars across disciplines to acquire and reproduce the results of these diverse viewpoints.

As I hope continuously to be a part of critical conversations such as those at the “Unleashing the Black Erotic” conference, my research in literature, and on the topic of black female sexualities, is guided by the belief that I am responsible for generating and circulating knowledge about the way that African Americans are portrayed to and in mainstream society and therefore instilling a sense of self-definition and self-actualization in a community of people who have been marginalized since their arrival in America over three and a half centuries ago. Marcus Garvey (1923) expresses, “Education is the medium by which a people are prepared for the creation of their own particular civilization, and the advancement and glory of their own race” (6). I plan to use my research from this project, “Revising the Concept of Black Female Sexuality in American Literature,” to educate others so that they can become maverick feminists and fulfill the purpose of advancing themselves and their communities...Let’s talk about sex.

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