REPARATIONAL LITERATURE:
THE ENSLAVED FEMALE BODY AS TEXT
IN CONTEMPORARY NOVELS BY WHITE WOMEN

AN ABSTRACT
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BY

Anne Hanahan Blessing

ANNE HANAHAN BLESSING

APPROVED:

REBECCA MARK, PH.D.,
DIRECTOR

NGHANA LEWIS, PH.D.

FELIPE-SMITH, PH.D.
ABSTRACT

Using postmodern techniques and slave perspectives, late 20th century African-American authors Octavia Butler, Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison, and Phyllis Alesia Perry complexify representations of enslaved women in American literature in novels termed “neo-slave narratives”. Revising sentimentalism, exoticization and appropriation, primarily by white authors, these authors emphasize slavery’s negative legacies, memorialization of slave sacrifice and culture, and female strength and agency. Contemporary white authors, wrestling with the traumatic history of slavery and white complicity, emulate neo-slave narrative authors, using communities of women and white empathy with the enslaved female body to join the reevaluation of slavery representations.

In what I term “Reparational Literature”, contemporary white authors return to a slave setting to negotiate white guilt, to “repair” wrongs, and to explore modes of cross-racial interaction that recognize privilege. This involves destabilizing the white subject and emphasizing acknowledgement and empathy to resolve problems. Enslaved characters are agents rather than objects or surrogates, and their role in allowing the white women access to their wisdom, recognizing white contrition, and offering forgiveness is crucial to the novel’s resolution. Literature and art are often on the forefront of societal change; Reparational Literature signifies transformation in white consciousness as legal, economic, and symbolic reparations become more widely accepted.
Reflecting Foucault’s idea of the body as a site of struggle and Womanist ideas of universalism and connection to the community, these writers present the enslaved female body as the place to remember and repair slavery’s negative impact, a locus for acknowledging and merging the violence of the past and hope for the future. In Valerie Martin’s *Property*, Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Invention of Wings*, Tara Conklin’s *The House Girl*, and Pam Durban’s *So Far Back*, the white woman who is given access to the symbolic language of the enslaved woman’s natural world, to hear and see the language of her enduring body, frees herself from the artificial influences of slaveholding. These authors continue the long tradition of the black body as a symbol, but I argue that they do so with an awareness of the position of whiteness and appreciation for slave sacrifice and subjectivity.
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Our inward journey…leads us through time---forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling…As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover; and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge.

—Eudora Welty

Black writers and white writers seem to me to be writing one immense story---the same story, for the most part---with different parts of this immense story coming from a multitude of different perspectives. Until this is generally recognized, literature will always be broken into bits, black and white.

—Alice Walker
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INTRODUCTION:
REPARATIONAL LITERATURE

To be American is to be both black and white. Yet to be a modern American has also meant to deny this mixing, our deep biracial genesis.

—Grace Elizabeth Hale

And if texts haunt bodies, bodies can nevertheless produce new texts that remember, disremember, and lay old ghosts to rest.

—Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* portrays both the atrocities of slavery and the power of female community to unify, grieve, and heal. Amy Denver’s physical care for Sethe’s body in childbirth and her empathy with Sethe’s suffering allow them to interact “appropriately and well” as a team rather than as a poor “whitegirl” and a slave. When Amy massages Sethe’s bloody, swollen feet, the tender touch from a white person surprises Sethe into crying “salt tears”. Describing Sethe’s feet as well as her painful memories, Amy tells her, “Anything dead coming to life hurts” (42) and “Can’t nothing heal without pain” (92). Sethe and the other characters’ pain and healing as they actively “disremember” and “re-memory” their trauma serves as an allegory for America’s obfuscation and reckoning with its traumatic slave history. Amy and Sethe’s interaction and the support of the “singing” black women of Sethe’s community suggest that collective healing begins with acknowledgement and empathy with suffering. As the two women weave their survival stories together, soothing Sethe’s pain, their “yard chat” allows them to relate as individuals undefined by race. Supported by the strength and regenerative imagery of nature, their potential for friendship resembles the surrounding bluefern, “seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future” (99). Amy reads Sethe’s wounds as a text, translating the bloody whip marks into the powerful and
promising image of a chokeberry tree in bloom. Sethe’s body/text serves as both a memorial and a bridge between black and white. Like Sethe’s body, the enslaved female body functions as a text in contemporary literature by white authors, guiding white characters in honoring slave suffering and transcending the divisiveness of racism.

In Valerie Martin’s *Property*, Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Invention of Wings*, Tara Conklin’s *The House Girl*, and Pam Durban’s *So Far Back*, white authors present the enslaved female body and supporting tropes as texts characters read to become closer to nature and see through the artifice of slavery’s hierarchy and racism. These authors continue the long tradition of the black body as a symbol in American literature, but I argue that they do so with an awareness of the position of whiteness and as homage to slave suffering and subjectivity. In these novels, the female black body is not exotic, primitive, hypersexualized, transgressive, or unnatural as it has been so often in white-authored literature. Instead, the black female body, conflated with regenerative nature, contrasts the “unnatural”, infertile white body. The white female characters who break the limits of racism “read” a black model of nature and nurture and move away from a stifling and false model of whiteness.

Traditionally, white authors have employed an Africanist presence, as Morrison calls previous black symbolism in *Playing in the Dark*, as a distancing metaphor to depict romanticization, fetishism, desire, and primitivism. In 19th and 20th-century literature set in slavery, white authors employ this racialized symbolism for the most part without exploring black subjectivity. African-American literature of the same period presents first-person accounts of slavery and challenges figurative blackness, but the predominant focus is male. During and after the Harlem Renaissance, African-American writers such
as Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston challenged exploitative, sexualized representations by white writers but stayed away from slave settings. Building on their portrayals of complex black female characters, Octavia Butler, Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison, and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s “neo-slave narratives” reclaim literature about slavery, shifting the focus to female subjectivity and rewriting shallow and sexualized stereotypes of black women. Detailing the abuse, rape, and family separation specific to the female slave experience, these novels suggest that the black body, and thus the black subject, heal and transcend through the acknowledgement of pain and empathy from a community of women. Contemporary white authors, wrestling with the traumatic history of slavery and white complicity, mirror these authors, using female community and white empathy with the enslaved female body as a gateway to join the revisal of slavery representations and explore reparation.

The term “reparation” generally connotes financial restitution to the victims of widespread wrongdoing. Reparations have been made to Jewish communities after World War II and to black South Africans after apartheid. For the perpetrators, collective acknowledgement of harm and apology are necessary steps. Although today’s whites are not the perpetrators of slavery and many feel blameless and unsympathetic to the reparations movement, there are descendents of slave-owners who feel a transgenerational responsibility. Author Edward Ball and documentarian Katrina Browne reached widespread audiences, examining their ancestors’ involvement in slave ownership and trade in Slaves in the Family (1998) and Traces of the Trade (2008). Ball describes his urge to explain his family’s story as a feeling of accountability and “a need to reckon” rather than “ignore…or make excuses” (14). Regardless of ancestry, many
white Americans understand that they have benefitted from the institutionalized racism that is the legacy of slavery and segregation. Recognizing those privileges and inequities, they look for concrete approaches to ameliorate past wrongs. Governments, institutions, and businesses have begun to make collective apologies and economic reparations and provide for memorials, but widespread discussion around individual reparations and conversations about guilt and race are lacking. Literature offers a comfortable space for acknowledging harm, and white authors and readers can imagine the possibilities of one-to-one emotional and symbolic reparations.

In what I term “Reparational Literature”, contemporary white authors return to a slave setting to negotiate white guilt, to “repair” the wrongs of slavery, and to explore modes of cross-racial interaction that recognize privilege. This involves destabilizing the white subject and emphasizing acknowledgement and empathy to resolve problems. Enslaved characters are agents rather than objects or surrogates, and their role in allowing the white women access to their wisdom, recognizing their contrition, and offering forgiveness is crucial to the novel’s resolution. The forgiveness allows writers to project their hope for a reconciliatory outcome. By subverting the social structure or context, the novels promote change in the social fabric rather than change in one character. This writing reflects a shifting collective consciousness as white Americans address institutionalized racism and white privilege, look for a way to mourn the damage from slavery, and apologize. Literature and art are often on the forefront of societal change; Reparational Literature signifies substantial change in the white psyche in America as various forms of reparations become more widely accepted.
Focusing specifically on the female slave experience, the reparational novels in this dissertation signify on the neo-slave narratives, using the black female body to demonstrate harm, explore empathy, and symbolize renewed relationships. Reflecting both Foucault’s idea of the body as a site of struggle and Womanist ideas of universalism and connection to the community, the writers present the body as the place to remember and repair slavery’s negative legacy, a locus for acknowledging and merging the violence of the past and hope for the future. Because so much of slavery’s abuse harmed the black female body, celebrating it and giving the characters agency through their nurturing, creativity and regeneration honors the memorialization these women were denied. The authors face the challenge of connecting the slave characters to nature without portraying them as priestesses, “othering” them in the tradition of writers such as Carl van Vechten. Rather than presenting them as transgressive or exotic, these authors focus on their connection to nature as an example of fortitude and vitality. Enslaved women suffered but endured and survived, offering an optimistic metaphor for healing the wounds of a society that is still fractured by the legacy of slavery’s racial hierarchy. As these female novelists explore white guilt and complicated race relations, they focus on the suffering and healing potential of the female enslaved body and illustrate the agency they did have, allowing readers and writers to identify with the wrongs done to these women and repair white disregard for the magnitude of slavery’s repercussions.

The overall focus of reparations in America has been on restoration to the victims of harm, now the descendents of slaves whose access to various forms of equality has been hindered because of race. But many critics have explored the psychological use of the term “reparation” based on the work of Melanie Klein, which translates into an
emphasis on the perpetrator of the harm rather than the victim. Klein’s research focuses on a developmental stage called the “depressive position”, in which infants mature by merging fragmented feelings for the object/parent. “Bringing together conflicted feelings of love and hate, realizing the hated person and the loved person are one and the same leads to the most anguished sense of guilt and, in time, a wish to repair”.\(^1\) The theory has been used to frame the white position and dominant national attitude towards reparation. “With pining for what has been lost or damaged by hate comes an urge to repair. Ego capacities enlarge and the world is more richly and realistically perceived”.\(^2\) Klein argues that individuals return to the depressive position throughout their lives as they mature. It applies to the white role in reparation as a cycle of guilt, grief, and desire to repair. As the dominant white culture of America moves beyond the legacy of slavery and racism and “matures”, it is necessary to mourn the past and merge past “hatred” of African Americans with a desire to repair, which in a Kleinian reading, results in love.

Placing female slave characters in the role of object or mother and slave-owning characters in the role of the developing infant makes sense within the context of the cultural narrative of the mammy. Klein’s theory of reparation is dependent on a prior attachment between the developing party and the object, usually the mother. Without an established relationship, there is no wish to repair. Enslaved women were forced into caretaking roles, and that continued into the 20\(^{th}\) century with African American women because of economic disparity. The demeaning mammy iconography is less about accurate representation, though, than about white construction of a loving relationship. In

\(^1\) The New Dictionary of Kleinian Thought. www.melanie-klein-trust.org/uk. This period is called the “depressive position” and follows the early “paranoid-schizoid” position during the infant’s first 6 months.
\(^2\) Ibid.
Dessa Rose, Sherley Anne Williams exposes Rufel’s unrealistic perception of her “mammy” but also acknowledges the love that Rufel has, or thinks she has, for this unnamed woman. The prevalence of the mammy archetype reflects a white desire to reconcile love for and power over the nurturing potential of enslaved women. The mammy icon no longer has the same meaning in the cultural imagination, but the stereotype of black women as nurturing and forgiving remains throughout literature and popular culture.

These reparational novels follow Williams’ example by highlighting the self-centered perceptions the white characters have as well as the possibility of real bonds and affection between women living in close quarters. The authors deliberately counter the mammy characterization by individuating the black female characters and calling attention to their sacrifices and abuse. But the nurturing role remains to differentiate the enslaved women from the unfeeling white characters, make them more sympathetic to the reader, and emphasize the healing power of female connection. Tying these women to nature serves a similar purpose. The closer the character is to nature, the more evolved or contemporary she is in looking beyond race. The characters distanced from nature are those who promote the “unnatural” practice of slavery. In these novels, the sympathetic white characters are those who become more connected to nature, nurturing, and their own bodies through the example of the black female slave. Nature, empathy, and the black female body are the language the reparational characters “read” to free themselves from their unnatural backgrounds. These characters reach Klein’s “depressive position” and “wish to repair” by merging their image of the “hated” slave and loved individual and find a world “more richly and realistically perceived”. In Property, the white
protagonist does not achieve this state so she returns to what Klein calls the “paranoid-schizoid” position, which is regressive and self-centered. The characters in *The Invention of Wings*, *The House Girl*, and *So Far Back* reach the stage of remorseful guilt and sadness through reparations, and therefore mature.

The etymology of “reparation” is the Latin for “prepare again”, but the middle of the word “par” is important as the Latin adjective for “equal in power, prestige, importance, rank, status, office, or authority”. The novelists strive to make up for past inequality through their fiction. They give black characters more depth, trying to make them equal if not in power and rank than in importance or else illustrate that they should be. In doing so, they often write the black character as more hopeful, stronger, and self-aware than the white character. This can result in “othering” the black characters, which these novels do somewhat by conflating the black female characters with nature, the supernatural, and nurturing. After the female slave body was commodified for so long, overly endowing individuals with extra senses and power is an attempt to make up for the theft of the slave’s humanity and ensuing derogatory representations. Othering in this sense is not exoticizing, but instead a way to counterbalance the views of the black body as animalistic, hypersexualized, and objectified and to restore positive value to the enslaved body. The only white characters who find resolution are those who “other” themselves by stepping outside of their backgrounds, connecting with nature, emulating the nurturing of the slave women, and empathizing with their pain. In these novels, the “othered” characters are the most sympathetic and serve as role models for the white characters.
As Alice Walker writes in *The Way Forward is with a Broken Heart*, “The world cannot be healed in the abstract…Healing begins where the wound was made” (200). These reparational authors must return to slave perspectives and the body to address the origin of contemporary inequity and discord. Just as the body forms new skin over a wound to heal, the authors of Reparational Literature seek new modes of symbolism and storytelling to rewrite slavery and determine the white role in today’s race relations. In some of the novels, the white characters read and learn the healing text of the black female body and in others, they reject empathy with the body and perpetuate their disconnection from the black characters and their own bodies. Resolution occurs when white female characters empathize with the pain and suffering of the enslaved women and make changes in themselves and their settings. The white authors supplement the body as a central text with many of the tropes of the neo-slave narrative tradition to express the pain and transcendence of slave women and promote new possibilities for moving beyond racial division. The white woman who is given access to the symbolic language of the enslaved woman’s natural world, to hear and see the language of her enduring body, frees herself from the artificial influences of slaveholding. The white characters make reparations through valuing and emulating the wisdom incorporated by the black female slave body. The black characters’ recognition of the white character’s apology or change represents the white desire for contemporary reparations and forgiveness.

I. Slavery as a Subject: From Antebellum Writing to *Gone With the Wind*
Antebellum writing by white and black women who lived with slavery provides a comparison for Reparational Literature and illustrates the origination of many of the tropes and cultural narratives challenged and perpetuated by the writers in this dissertation. While feelings of guilt are evident in 20th century white writing, antebellum female writers did not generally express guilt. Prior to the Civil War, many slaveholding white women wrote affectionately of slaves in their diaries, occasionally detailing and bemoaning observed hardships and abuse. A very few Southern women such as Sarah and Angelina Grimké of Charleston were inspired to become abolitionists; these sisters revolutionarily argued in their pamphlets that white slaveholding women and black slave women had natural bonds. In practice, however, the power dynamics of slavery forced white and black women into antagonistic relationships in spite of their domestic intimacy. Although often portrayed as “victims” of the system like slave women, white women generally accepted their power over slaves without question. In The Belle Gone Bad, Barbara Entzminger makes the argument that the “Dark Seductress” character in 19th-century fiction was the Southern female writer’s subtle criticism of slavery and patriarchy. Linking these exotic white femme fatale characters to black females in disguise, she writes that the authors “create female characters who can step beyond the proper confines of ladyhood, but at the same time the authors critique those who impose the confinements” (19-20). Entzminger reads these understated critiques in the novels of antebellum authors, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Augusta Jane Evans, and Caroline Lee Hentz. She notes, however, that openly, antebellum Southern women rarely expressed guilt and criticism about the institution of slavery, nor did they challenge patriarchal authority. The Grimké sisters did eventually champion women’s rights; however, slaveholding women
in general were not moved by feminism or abolitionism. Rather, their interest in preserving social order and their own economic well-being prevented them from either questioning or protesting in a public manner.

One of the most well-known slave mistress perspectives comes from Mary Chestnut’s *Diary From Dixie*. In her extensive diary, she crosses out of the strictly delineated female domestic sphere to explore the masculine realm of her husband’s political world in a manner some critics read as subversive of paternalism. Chestnut’s words “Poor women, poor slaves” might seem a reflection of kinship or union between women and slaves and a critique of slavery (47). Chestnut was moved and appalled by some of the practices of slavery. However, for the most part, she and other writers expressed loyalty to their husbands and Southern support of slavery. Because slavery was the basis of the plantation economy and touched every part of their lives, slave mistresses took the institution for granted. While slavery and the intimate living and rules governing it often presented challenges for these women on a daily basis, they viewed interactions with slaves as their household responsibility and moral duty. It is impossible to contextualize these accounts of white and black women without acknowledging the strict codes that regulated gender roles and hierarchical roles within the plantation. Like plantation mistress Sarah Gayle, detailed by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in *Within the Plantation Household: Black & White Women of the Old South*, these women “never doubted that firm principles governed all social relations” (20), and they were schooled in the boundaries of expectations of their highly structured roles within that society from an early age. Many of these strict codes evolved from the desire to segregate the white body
from the black body. Inevitably, friction and problems arise from such an impossible structure in the intimate setting of plantations.

In her diary, Chestnut clearly delineates the mistress/slave roles and details the domestic challenges and the day-to-day logistics of running a plantation household within these strict codes. Chestnut expresses reservations about some difficulties of overseeing and disciplining slaves and exhibits distress about miscegenation as a result of slavery. However, like most slave mistresses, she does not question the institution. She blames the slave women/victims and avoids either blaming men or acknowledging any complicity: “And again I say, my countrywomen are as pure as angels, tho’ surrounded by another race who are the social evil!” (31). Chestnut’s writing reflects the commonly held views that black women were more inherently physical and sexual and biologically closer to animals than white women. Chestnut is insightful in her observations, but as Gwin points out, her background limits her ability to identify with the slaves on her plantation as women, and therefore, she sees them as “less than human” (108).

Supporting slaveholders’ views of their superior position to slaves was a paternalistic reading of the Bible, which justified their caring for and teaching their slaves Christianity as well as punishing them for their edification. Using what Joy Jordan-Lake calls “a theology of whiteness” in her book Whitewashing Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Nineteenth-Century Women Novelists Respond to Stowe, slaveholders used religious language and ideology to justify the slave’s role as ordained by God. The slave-owner’s role, they argued, was to facilitate the slaves in that God-chosen life. In fact, many critics note that guiding, teaching, and punishing slaves made many slaveholders feel more Christian. Slaveholding women also viewed punishing, even whipping slaves themselves
as some mistresses did, as part of their Christian responsibility within the system, and they reserved affection for those who presented little challenge to their household authority. Critics such as Sudie Sides Duncan have read a narcissism in “the mistress’s professed love of slaves”, which made her feel “kind, generous, and Christian”.³ Chestnut’s diary, published posthumously in 1905, is only one of the most famous of many that illustrate slaveowners’ rationalizations about their “ordained” duties to their slaves.

Finding African-American female-authored views on slavery and white mistresses, however, is more difficult. Few slave women kept or published diaries for many reasons, including laws against slave literacy. According to Angelyn Mitchell in *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction*, only 16 out of more than 130 slave narratives before 1865 were female-authored (9). The most famous extant female slave narrative is Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, published in 1861. With a middle-class Christian white readership in mind, Jacobs employed the dominant discourse of the time as Caroline Levander details, based around the “‘piety, purity, passionlessness, and domesticity’ that defined nineteenth-century bourgeois women, and the fiction they published and consumed”.⁴ While Jacobs had a sympathetic view towards Mrs. Flint, the early white mistress who taught her to read, she also suffered at the hands of white women. Like Mary Chestnut, Mrs. Flint blames Jacobs, the slave, for her husband’s advances. Jacobs’ diary, however, focuses more on the sexual abuse from her

³ Qtd. in Gwin, 78.
⁴ Levander, Caroline. “‘Following the Condition of the Mother’: Subversions of Domesticity in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*” Eds. Warren and Wolff.
white master than on the blame from her mistress. Like other literature that appeals to women on both sides of the color line, she emphasizes common female struggles against patriarchy to create kinship and evoke sympathy. Jacobs’ story differs from that of most slaves, however, in that she retained some control over her body in choosing her own lover. Although she and her children remained slaves, she was able to interact with them more than many other enslaved mothers. She uses her maternity to appeal to a female white audience.

Other accounts of white women by antebellum black female authors are varied. Minrose Gwin describes most of the white characters in autobiographies by free women of color as “insignificant personages” (7), as the primary goal of these texts was religious.\(^5\) Black authors of this period were more likely to write about cruel and jealous mistresses than white authors were, but these accounts are generally limited in detail and often depict the slave mistress also as a victim of slavery. Harriet Jacobs portrays her jealous mistress, Mrs. Flint, as a victim of the system, most likely because the slave narrative audience was primarily white. In addition, because a white amanuensis generally translated the slaves’ stories into written form, editing occurred to fit the stories to the abolitionist cause rather than to reflect exact details of the slave’s experience.

Meanwhile, the dominant narrative trend of popular 19th century white Southern fiction writers was the plantation-romance tradition, which introduced stock characters such as the “hospitable, if occasionally silly slaveholder; the lovely, capricious southern belle; and the faithful, domineering mammy” (Jordan-Lake 3). Male-authored texts of this genre mostly focus on the masculine hero’s perspective; black females are reduced to

\(^5\) She includes authors Ziltha Elaw, Julia Foote, Jarena Lee, and Nancy Prince as examples.
possessions, while white women are mostly trophies with no real voice (22). In contrast, the female-authored novels of the same genre center the story’s action on the domestic sphere. These novels were typically not politically motivated and avoid controversial issues. However, the levity of these stereotypes and plot lines obscures the actual hard work and hard living that constituted the main part of white and black plantation life. Overall the novels promoted the ideology of the plantation as a harmonious, ordered community.

Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1850 novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or Life among the Lowly employed many of the tropes and stock characters of plantation-romance but with the goal of abolition. Her novel prompted a flood of slavery apologist literature or “anti-Tom” literature, much of it penned by Southern women. A predominant theme in this genre is the conflation of the North with chaos and pollution and the South with peace and idyllic settings. “The anti-Tom novels by women in particular admit no flaws in the South’s sky or in its climate, while disease, poverty, and moral turpitude occur only above the Mason-Dixon line” (Jordan-Lake 3). Many of these authors were non-slaveholding Southern women like Mary Eastman, author of the reactionary titled Aunt Phillis’ Cabin; or Southern Life as It Is, who defended the need for a hegemonic societal structure headed by a patriarch and also using the Bible as support. As in the descriptions of the weather, Eastman’s book and others like it present only harmonious interaction between slaves and slave-owners and display no brutality.

Anti-Tom novels tend to avoid miscegenation, while abolitionist texts use it to critique the rape that was part of slavery. “The tragic mulatta” became an important stock character used to evoke sympathy. This mixed-race character often passes as white, or is
raised as white, and therefore shares the delicate sensibilities of white womanhood. The discovery of her black ancestry results in expulsion from white society, sexual abuse from white men, or death. First evident in the fiction of Lydia Marie Child in the 1840s, the character’s white appearance functions as an appeal to a white audience. William Wells Brown based his tragic mulatta novel, *Clotel, or The President’s Daughter* (1853), on the rumors of Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with his slave, Sally Hemings. The novel illustrates the problems mixed-race people have fitting in with both black and white communities. Like the authors of slave narratives and sentimental fiction, Wells uses the conventions of domestic fiction to make his protest palatable to a primarily female audience.

One important similarity in all of the writers of this period is their idealistic creation of kinship between black and white women. As Gwin writes, they “create in their fictional worlds cross-racial female bonds which generate power and strength in response to the male sphere” (10). These novels and their creation of unity do not reflect the overall reality of the mistress/slave relationship. Gwin compares their fiction to the autobiographical writing of slaves and mistresses and finds that regardless of their reliance on one another in the domestic sphere, the competition and friction produced by hierarchy and the virgin/whore paradigm resulted in more negative and lasting emotions than those generated by common experience. This enmity indicates that the creation of cross-racial bonds in these novels was political rather than realistic.

Both abolitionist and apologist texts also tend to place the women of both races in conflict with the men, giving them the voice of morality, pro-slavery or abolitionist depending on the author, but both equating women and religiosity. These women served,
Fred Hobson writes in *But Now I See*, “as a sort of Greek chorus”, reminding the reader of the overall purpose of the novel (18). Critics debate the degree to which the writers of this era can be read as feminist. But regardless of their political objectives, female writers of this genre, as in plantation romances, focus on the domestic sphere as the place to act out intricacies of cross-racial relationships, and particularly they focus on women in relation to birth, death, and maternity.

Stowe in particular equates maternity and nurturing with humanity; thus the slave-owning mothers in the novel, who neither nurture their slaves nor allow their slaves to nurture their own children, are more sinful than the men. The cruelty of the mistresses is “doubly evil” in that they then “demand maternal nurture for themselves from those same women” (Gwin 36). Eastman and other anti-Tom authors “elevate” both white and black women so the power differential Stowe uses to illustrate the evil of white mothers/mistresses is missing in these novels. Even more so than Stowe, Eastman in *Aunt Phillis’ Cabin*, creates female bonding to promote the idea of slavery as harmonious and nurturing and as an appeal to a female audience.

The focus on mothers as an audience for these novels is also a common convention of the period, illustrated by a direct appeal. These authors commonly address mothers directly, as Stowe writes: “And you, mothers of America, by the sacred love you bear your child…I beseech you” (384). The novelists reinforce this maternal appeal with mother-savior ideology and employ what Jordan-Lake calls “Christological imagery“ and “matrifocal themes” (25-6). She writes that these black and white mothers, messiah-like, comfort, redeem, and save other characters and preserve their spirituality” (25). In anti-Tom fiction, the mothers of both races “save” sinners by re-enslaving; “rather than
advocate freedom, they teach submission to white male authority” and a return to the 
slave’s ordained place in the natural order. She writes that mother-savior figures in Stowe 
do effect change, while anti-Tom mother savior figures make no real change (153). The 
appeal to mothers reinforces the domestic focus of the novels and the focus on women as 
moral center of the family. Unlike the contemporary focus on the regenerative power of 
the female body, the emphasis here is the sentimentality of maternity.

For modern readers accustomed to more realism and psychology, these 
sentimental novels seem stylistically shallow, particularly about a subject as serious and 
difficult as slavery. James Baldwin, in his article “Everybody’s Protest Novel” 
particularly objected to Stowe’s novel for “writing [that] reduces the complexity of life 
to simplistic formulas and wrenches flesh-and-blood human beings into stereotypical 
straitjackets” (Gwin 20). Written more for a cause than for verisimilitude, Stowe’s book 
and those written by her followers and protesters are, from a modern perspective, more a 
series of sketches than a novel, and the characters seem exaggerated and extreme.

Similarly, post-bellum women wrote sentimental plantation novels that continued 
the mid-19th century tradition of exaggerated characters. These novels tend to promote a 
cultural amnesia about the violence of rape and slavery and perpetuate myths about 
happy slaves. “Lost Cause” fiction often plots a marriage between a southern belle and a 
northern soldier with a “darky” narrator, creating unity between white southerners and 
northerners in comparison to the comedic figure/narrator. These post-bellum pastorals 
continue a long tradition of conflating women and slaves with the land and the white 
male hero as the caretaker and defender of his charges. Because the white virginal 
woman symbolized land, Elizabeth Jane Harrison suggests in her book Female Pastoral:
Women Writers Re-Visioning the American South, a rape could symbolize a loss of property. Although the white female usually represented purity, in some male-authored fiction of this genre, the white woman becomes a seductress and responsible for the downfall of the South and representative of the “despoiled southern garden”. Black females also had two extremes of representation: either “the dark counterpart objectified as debased sexual desire” or “the beloved mammy figure, the archetypal earth mother who nurtured black and white protagonists alike” (Harrison 4-5). Black female characters who fall outside of this binary do not exist in this period.

D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film, Birth of a Nation, translated these stock characters, gendered stereotypes, and garden imagery of the South and its Northern despoilers into film. Based on Thomas Dixon Jr.’s novel, The Clansman, the film reached a large audience and its visual images had great ramifications. The most resonating image is the rape scene in which Gus, the black-faced actor playing a freedman, pursues the chaste Southern daughter until she leaps to her death. The film, promoting images of menacing black men and white heroes protecting their women, reinvigorated the membership of the Ku Klux Klan. It was a recruiting tool for that organization until after the Civil Rights Movement. In this film, class, like gender in the earlier novels, both unifies and divides. White aristocracy and loyal black house slaves band together against the lower class Northern whites, or “white trash”, and against the lower class and “disloyal” blacks such as Gus. Throughout literature and film, classist differentiation of characters creates unity between the races, as in the movie version of Gone With the Wind, when the former slaves defend Scarlett from a “white trash” attacker. Even in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the villains are generally lower-class whites, and the evils of slavery are blamed not as much
on the masters as on the institution itself. In *Birth of a Nation*, however, classism serves primarily as a method to establish kinship between the “good” northerners and “good” slaves who did not object to the social structure.

Even more famous than *Birth of a Nation* was Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel *Gone With the Wind* and the successive film in 1939. The scenes of Tara and Twelve Oaks, a burning Atlanta, and Scarlett kneeling in the red Georgia clay constitute the imagery of plantations and the Civil War for Americans and people around the world. Played by Hattie McDaniel in the film, “Mammy” is the most famous incarnation of fictional mammies, visually large and dark with exaggerated features, spouting malapropisms in dialect, fretting over her southern belle mistress, and overall remaining loyal to her white family. Mammy’s primary function is to highlight Scarlett’s whiteness and femininity. She embodies white fantasy about the black female’s surrogate role.

This novel and film created the most enduring images that epitomize the Lost Cause mythology. In *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South*, Tara McPherson contextualizes this mythology, “as a kind of escape scenario, simultaneously underwriting and disavowing the early twentieth century’s fierce lynching campaigns” and naturalizing slaves as props in an idealized Southern landscape (45). The story and others obscure the violence of the plantation and the Jim Crow era in which the initial audience was living, but it also completely separates the plantation from the actual labor that it represented, as did the sentimental novels.

McPherson suggests that the continuation of this disconnect between romantic views of the plantation and its violence and labor reflect a displacement based on “dominant culture’s inability to imagine the traumas of slavery in a manner that connects
slavery to its historic locale and context” (45). In spite of modern acknowledgement of the problems of Southern mythology and Gone With the Wind’s particular inaccuracies, it continues to be one of the most beloved stories of American popular culture. These films and the tradition of sentimental literature promoting the happy plantation mythology allowed white writers and characters to evade guilt and responsibility for slavery, Jim Crow violence, and segregation. The Lost Cause perpetuation promotes a nostalgic memory of the plantation South, especially the relationship between white mistresses and their female slaves. The extreme stereotyping and dehumanizing of black female slave characters becomes less overt in later 20th century literature. However, the 21st century writers in this dissertation are still working on accurate representations of white responsibility and violence and realistic depictions of slave women to connect a modern audience to the trauma of slavery.

II. Racial Conversion Narratives, Black Saviors, Whiteness

Although some female writers of the early 20th century explored race, and figurations of guilt appear symbolically throughout their literature, their characters did not generally question their complicity in black oppression. However beginning in the 1940s, as Fred Hobson writes in But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative, white female writers such as Lillian Smith and Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin began a tradition of “racial conversion narratives”, in which white authors or protagonists “…confess racial wrongdoings and are ‘converted’, in varying degrees, from racism to
something approaching racial enlightenment” (2). Influenced by the strong religious tradition of the South, these writers and characters have a burning impulse to “witness” or “testify” by telling their stories about recognizing their racist surroundings in hopes of achieving some sort of absolution. The narratives resemble Puritan autobiographies, using the language of religious conversion such as “sin”, “guilt”, “blindness”, “seeing the light”, “repentance”, and “redemption” (2). As so many critics have before him, Hobson looks to Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as an early example of this confessional form. In his relationship with the slave Jim, Huck struggles between societal correctness and his conscience. Although he can be considered “a racial convert”, he is not conscious of this conversion. For the writers in Hobson’s study, however, the consciousness of the conversion is the central means of character development.

Likening these modern narratives to slave narratives or “freedom narratives”, Hobson argues that these white writers see themselves as escaping from the bondage of prejudice into “a freedom from racial guilt” (5). Certainly there are significant differences in slave narratives and white-authored conversion narratives; the white-authored narratives of past and present follow a pattern of peace-disturbance-peace, and slave narratives do not begin with peace, nor do the writers return to a comfortable white world at the conclusion. But Hobson’s point is that there is a similar feeling and use of language in the various writers of being “saved” and “reborn” and delivered from a restricted past.

For this dissertation, however, the most important difference between modern racial conversion narratives and Puritan and slave narratives is the role of the guide or savior. In the Puritan tradition, Hobson describes, there is no guide, minister, or mentor;  

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6 While Hobson’s study focuses primarily on autobiographies, the term can be applied to fiction as it is in this dissertation.
the impulse to seek redemption is self-driven. “The potential convert observes the world around him, heeds an inner voice, and crosses the line on his own” (4). Likewise in slave narratives, written in first-person voice, there is a focus on autonomy. In Frederick Douglass’s autobiography, the vehicle to freedom is literacy and his own determination rather than any one person. Female slave narrative authors such as Harriet Jacobs often credit family and children for identity and inspiration, but there is no trend of one individual spurring on the character to make a break for freedom.

Later African-American literature also lacks a guide or savior figure; rather salvation is achieved through hard work and self-will. In *To Hell and Back: Race and Betrayal in the Southern Novel*, Jeff Abernathy writes that 20th-century African American writers portray “autonomous black and white characters who must earn their own salvation or fail to gain it at all” (6). Most importantly, he notes, while many modern black novelists have found it necessary to respond to and rewrite the predominant shallow characterizations of black characters in American literature, they and their characters recognize racial inequity all along and have no need for this kind of racial “awakening”.

White characters in conversion narrative novels *do* need racial awakenings, and they rely on a shepherd to help them see their wrongs. Crucial to the tradition is the role of black characters as mother figures and spiritual guides, almost priestesses, who lead the white characters to racial awareness. Descended from the sentimental plantation novels and the minstrel stereotypes of the Mammy, Jezebel, and tragic mulatta, these characters are rarely fully drawn characters but rather vehicles to the white characters’ self-realization and feelings of redemption. Toni Morrison expresses this dynamic in
Playing in the Dark, as she writes, “the subject of the dream is the dreamer” (17). Like a dream, the space in which the racial interaction occurs is “created” by the white characters. The black characters are simply an extension of the white character’s “dream”. Lillian Smith wrote Killers of the Dream to explore the racism of her childhood. But she admits she penned the critique of her racist childhood “not to expose the South so much as to understand it---and herself” (Hobson 23). The black characters are there not as much to offer redemption or to participate in the drama of the story as to “witness” the confession and legitimize the white character’s journey.

This position of a black character as a mirror to a white protagonist has a long history. As critics such as Morrison, Abernathy, Gwin, Sharon Monteith, bell hooks and many others have detailed, the archetype of an “Africanist presence”, as Morrison calls it, is present throughout American literature; authors from Twain to Poe to Melville to Hemingway employ it as a way to further the white character’s development. At times, this role is not even a character, but figurations or representations of a black other. Morrison writes, “Even, and especially, when American texts are not ‘about’ Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation” (47). Morrison continues that these people and symbolic figurations of blackness are “markers for the benevolent and the wicked; the spiritual…and the voluptuous; of ‘sinful’ but delicious sensuality coupled with demands for purity and restraint” (ix). In these novels, the benevolent and spiritual figurations guide the white conversion. The figurations of wicked, voluptuous, and sinful signify the transgressive as white characters befriend black ones as a way to step outside of their comfort zones. The dichotomy of the familiar and the transgressive allows for the
definition of the white character’s personality. Morrison argues that this differentiation, 
construction, and racialization of blackness have been a necessary part of American and 
white self-idealization. She writes “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self 
knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but 
licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent” (52). 
The “othering” of blackness allowed for the denial of the slave’s humanity, which was 
necessary for those involved to justify the system. But the “othering” is also necessary to 
define the white subject.

Jeff Abernathy divides the drive to explore this “other” or “imagined blackness” 
into several types: desire to escape from whiteness, ‘maronage’ or being cast out of white 
society, “liberal paternalism that guides them to those less fortunate than themselves”, or 
nostalgic longing for the maternal figure of a comforting black mammy (13). Abernathy 
suggests that most stories present a variety of these scenarios. He and other critics such as 
Eric Lott, David Roediger, and Susan Gubar trace “racial crossing” to earliest American 
literature but particularly in minstrel tradition. Very often, these encounters and 
appropriations of blackness intersect with a white character’s need to explore or 
strengthen gender or class identity. Escaping whiteness can also be both a freedom from 
constraint and a transgression. As Roediger says, “to black up was an act of wildness” 
(qtd. in Abernathy 10). But that blackness is more about constructed fantasies of 
blackness than reality.

For critics Morrison and Abernathy, one of the seminal moments in which this 
type of interaction occurs is through the male perspective. In The Adventures of Tom 
Sawyer, Huck acts out the exploration of himself through a black surrogate with a
feminized Jim as they travel down the river. And traveling into that constructed black world, as Huck does with Jim through maronage on the raft is a way to experiment with this imagined blackness. While Twain’s characters are some of the most well known in American literature, female characters act out this relationship as well, often with a nurturing mammy figure as guide. Typically, the authors carve out a place for this to occur when the social order is most unstable, for example during war, a slave revolt, or in the death, absence, or lunacy of the master. Kelly Lynch Reames writes, “significant interracial interactions between women occur at the margins of society” (2). Like Huck, white women leave the comfort of the known and travel to an imagined unknown in the act of racial crossing. While the women are not necessarily on a raft in the river, authors create spaces outside of the normal social restrictions where the characters can interact.

But like Huck, these white characters are able to return to their comfortable world because the otherness is not permanent. Abernathy writes: “These white characters define themselves as black briefly in order to affirm their whiteness the more profoundly after their return to white culture” (13). The black characters are mirrors, surrogates, and enablers who are generally “cut off from any sustained connection to black culture or black community” (14). In conversion narratives, once the awakening occurs, the black “shaman” or “mammy” generally fades into the periphery because their blackness is superficial. Meanwhile, the white character returns to a comfortable world with little or no change to every day practice or the social order but feeling redeemed after the black character has “witnessed” the confession. Rhett Jones labels this as “white double-consciousness”, meaning the character “shifts his perspective…now viewing them (black characters) as full-fledged human beings, now regarding them as inferior folk” (qtd. in
Abernathy 22). Gwin describes the reaction of real and fictional black women to the white characters’ inability to see their individuality in the novels she studies in various ways: They run from it, they are enraged by it, they forgive it, they re-create it in more palatable forms (6). But their reactions are always secondary to the character development of the white character.

This symbology is so encoded in literature and language that novelists unconsciously employ it even when trying to escape it. In her critique of one southern memoir, Tara McPherson writes: “Despite its good intentions the memoir positions blackness as both cause of, and remedy to, white guilt, deploying blackness as a testament to her own and her family’s humanity” (223). McPherson’s phrase “Despite its good intentions” is important. These novels attempt to bring race to the forefront, but the white authors/characters are unable to escape the “positionality” of whiteness completely because all of the characters are constructed and seen through the white gaze of the author. Contextualizing contemporary white-authored novels depends on applying what Morrison, hooks, and other “whiteness studies” critics have written about the social construction of whiteness and subject/object relations. In White, Richard Dyer sees white “blindness” and racial dichotomy everywhere in representations of whiteness. Particularly easy to identify in art and film, techniques of lighting and positioning conflate whiteness with purity, happiness, heroism, and moral superiority. In Gone With the Wind, as Tara McPherson points out, “the figure of Mammy provides the (dark) background against which the (white) image of Scarlett can take shape” (51). Mammy and her contrast with Scarlett exemplify Morrison’s argument about the black surrogate’s role in defining whiteness.
Similarly, authors employ language that is encoded with hierarchy for the same purpose. The use of what Morrison calls “a vocabulary designed to disguise the subject” and “a master narrative that spoke [sic] for Africans and their descendants, or of them” continues (38). Critic Renee Curry categorizes this type of language in the works of authors who are “ignorant, but not innocent, inheritors and perpetuators of colonialism” and who “contribute to a positionality of camouflage” (8). Aside from equating white with good and black with negative and using fixed stereotypes, these authors employ dialect to “signify difference and Otherness” and use “comparative analyses that establish the color white as the most hierarchically desirable color” (10). The most important application of whiteness studies is to establish the arbitrariness of these categorizations, which is questioned in these novels. Based on interviews with thirty white women in *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Ruth Frankenberg focuses on the women’s particular conscious and unconscious language that reveals power and social structure. Her scientific categorization of different approaches to race (biological essentialism, color blindness/color evasiveness, and racism as social structure) and her sociological terms such as “racial social geography” ground later whiteness studies. She refers to whiteness as “a location”, “a standpoint”, and “a set of practices”, classifications reinforcing the constructedness and fluidity of whiteness.

Patricia Yaeger builds on these studies in *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women’s Writing* and argues that whiteness appears in bizarre ways as a manifestation of racial blindness “in images of fractured or scattered whiteness, in scenes filled with partial bodies, cotton lint, flour dust, displaced snow, or facial masking” (xii). However, looking for whiteness in language and text also has inherent problems, relating
back to Morrison’s main concerns in *Playing in the Dark*. One challenge to whiteness studies is that no analysis can focus simply on whiteness. The only way to recognize whiteness is in contrast with non-whiteness as Morrison does with the works of Hemingway, Poe, and Cather. Hackett writes: “white-authored primitivism such as that in the novels I discuss is often an aggressive construction of a raced other in order to identity a powerful and benevolent unraced white self” (7). This once again means that the non-white character is simply a surrogate or mirror for the white subject. The problem Dyer sees is that looking for whiteness only in texts about race or non-white people relegates them once again to the role of allowing a white person to understand himself. He writes: “Do I not analytically do what the texts themselves do [and give] the impression that whiteness is only white, or only matters, when it is explicitly set against non-white, whereas whiteness reproduces itself as whiteness in all texts all of the time?” (13).

As Dyer acknowledges, reconfiguring the positionality of whiteness is difficult. Kelly Reames writes, recognizing whiteness is the key to dismantling racial oppressions, but “because white is the dominant race, it has been far too easy for white people to assume that their experience is representative of all humanity” (21). Ruth Frye argues that abolishing whiteness is not realistic, but white people can start by refusing some of the privileges that whiteness entails (Reames 22). In Reparational Literature, the characters do not “refuse” privileges as much as acknowledge them and make the reader conscious of racial construction, allowing for the possibility of relationships that exist outside of the paradigm of whiteness as center and blackness as surrogate. Subverting or recreating the mammy and belle characters, destabilizing the centrality of the white subject, recognizing
agency in the enslaved characters, and changing the social fabric are necessary for this revisioning of white and black relationships.

III. Mammies, Jezebels, and Belles

Within the theoretical framework of whiteness studies, I will investigate these novels’ continuation and interrogation of the black female or mammy character’s role as guide, savior, and surrogate to the mistress or southern belle character. While some of the characters parody the stereotypes and typical assumptions about race, others create a range of female characters to complicate the traditional binary readings of white belle and black mammy.

All of these novels continue to feature the black female body symbolically and to effect change in the white characters; but in rewriting the mammy character, they attempt to readjust her as a representation of how perception of race has widened to include more complexity and depth. In traditional representations, the mammy, usually conflated with representations of Aunt Jemima, is exceptionally large and dark. Her dialect is meant for comedy and for “othering” her. She is typically nameless to reinforce her lack of individuality and exists only as an extension of her white family. In her role as ornament to the white family, the mammy either has no family or a minimized family. Separating the black slave from the role of mothering, sexuality, and feminine characteristics dates to the slave practice of referring to female slaves as “breeders”. Discussion of the breeding of slaves was common for male and female slaveholders. A lack of children and husband for fictional mammys also separates them from sexual motherhood. Instead the mammy focuses her time, her devotion, and attention on whites, particularly her
‘adopted’ white family, rather than her own family. Her role in performing the hard work of motherhood and housework allowed the white mistress to fulfill the image of the decorative, chaste idealized southern belle. Yet the mammy’s asexuality also lessens her ability to threaten the white woman’s repressed sexuality. A sexual woman in this intimate setting is a threat to the white woman; the nonsexual, therefore non-threatening, black woman is a comfort.

The threatening sexualized female slave or “Jezebel” character serves as an evil double and as an outlet for the stereotypical “sexually repressed belle”. Jezebel characters allowed conventional female writers to explore and experience sexual freedom through a surrogate. Another version of the Africanized, sexualized Jezebel is the white “Dark Seductress” character, outwardly a “foreigner”, but viewed as a double for the miscegenated slave. Both characters, as “Other”, embody repressed fear of sexuality and racial mixing. Betina Entzminger suggests a feminist function as well: “a disguised dark double paradoxically embodies both the freedoms the white woman is denied and the general subjection of womanhood through the abuses of white male power” (21). The “dark women” are generally punished in the end, reinforcing the patriarchal structure that restricts a woman’s power to chastity and domesticity. However, Entzminger argues that the white writers emphasized the victimhood and complexity of these characters as a subtle expression of sympathy.

As Hazel Carby writes in Reconstructing Womanhood, understanding the sexual stereotypes of black and white women must be done together because “stereotypes only appear to exist in isolation while actually depending on a nexus of figurations which can be explained only in relation to each other” (20). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese explains that
for the slaveholding woman, gender and identity become fixed from the first moment. All of the conventions of the social order reinforced her personal identity as a lady daily. In contrast, the slave woman’s identity was unfixed, and the various roles she might form for herself were “subject to constant violation. Slave women and men developed their own model of gender relations, but never in isolation from the conditions of their enslavement” (373).

Meanwhile, the mythology of the white southern female was as intrinsic and embedded as that of the mammy. The idea of the Cult of True Womanhood, the image of the chaste maiden in white that Birth of a Nation utilizes to stir up racial frenzy, was an important part of Southern mythology. Although modern critics have shown that the image and the reality of Southern womanhood are at odds, the image was a driving force behind Confederate mobilization and much of the rigid structuring of gender and racial roles, including the dichotomy between the chaste lady and the sexualized slave. Southern men used her idealized chastity and fragility to justify protection from and violence against the perceived sexual aggression of black men, particularly during the Jim Crow era. Gwin cites W.J. Cash who called this cult “downright gynecolatry”. He describes the woman in mythologized terminology as: “the South’s Palladium…the shield-bearing Athena gleaming whitely in the clouds, the standard for its rallying, the mystic symbol of its nationality in face of the foe”. She was the ideal that men fought for and talked about in their justification of the war (Gwin 49). Gone With the Wind promotes the archetype of the plantation mistress as an angel through Scarlett’s mother Ellen O’Hara; Stowe even uses the trope in her abolitionist text. Stowe and her contemporaries either employed the angel archetype or a stereotype of “good woman”
who is corrupted in her role as a slave-holder and becomes evil. There were few models of a plantation mistress in between these two characterizations, just as there were few representations of the slave woman other than the mammy or the “Jezebel”. Overall, the extreme representations of maternity and sexuality of these women provide a yardstick for measuring the different ideologies about race and also a focus for the intersection of white and black.

Setting a novel during slavery highlights these intersections due to the necessary closeness shared by these black and white women in small domestic communities. As Fox-Genovese describes, plantation women shared both “mutual antagonism and frayed tempers that frequently erupted in violence, cruelty, and even murder” as well as uncommon “physical and emotional intimacy” (35). Aside from domestic duties, sickness, childbirth, and death brought these women together in spite of their many antipathies. To add to that intimacy, black female slaves nursed their own children (future slaves) alongside their white charges (future slave-owners). It was entirely possible that one slave woman could serve as wet nurse to a white child who would later become her master or mistress, and she might even nurse multiple generations of white children. And miscegenation furthered the interweaving, as the children of slave mistresses and the children of their wet nurses often shared the same white father. Within this complicated and intimate setting, the perspective of motherhood is especially troubling from a modern understanding. How could white women be nurturing mothers and promote slavery at the same time? How could they treat slave women so brutally and then entrust them with their own children? And how could any mother watch another mother’s children be taken from her, particularly when they were at times, half-siblings to her own children?
The novels in this dissertation present black female characters as “natural”, or more nurturing, mothers, to both their own children and the white children. The white females practice an unnatural, cruel, and alienating form of motherhood, perhaps because it is difficult to reconcile motherhood and toleration of slavery. Writing about segregation, Lillian Smith acknowledged this contradiction in maternal feeling in *Journeys*: “The Mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their place” (17-18).

White mothers in novels about slavery have to be sick, insane, and/or very complex for their amaternal feelings towards their slaves to make sense to the modern reader. In much of the antebellum and post-bellum fiction, the mother is absent, dead, or a minor character, and the mammy is in the foreground. But to rewrite stereotypes, contemporary writers must have a present white mother, and she must be written as a more multi-dimensional character than the stereotypical southern belle or maternal angel. The complexity of representing the white women as loving mothers who condone slavery is challenging from a modern perspective.

Revising the mammy character is also challenging, and the writers in this dissertation do so by highlighting the mother/child relationships within the slave families and interrogating the “mammy” relationships of the wet nurse and cooks with their white children. In general, the black female characters in the novels continue the trend of serving as the calming presence and the voice of truth for the white characters, but the novels also subvert that role and the role of aloof southern belle. The novels both challenge and perpetuate the conflation of the black female body and the earth. In most of the novels, the regenerative connection with the earth is crucial to the potential for a new
relationship. In the tradition of Alice Walker and the neo-slave narrative writers, the black women draw strength from the beauty of nature. The characters are sometimes “othered”. But rather than separating them from the norm, their othering is the path the white characters must take to find resolution. When the authors employ this type of stereotyping, they consciously expose the ideology and protest it. However, like the neo-slave narrative writers, especially Morrison, these authors perpetuate a connection between nature and the black female body to contrast the “unnatural” system of slavery. The white characters who emulate this “othered” relationship to nature rise above the unnatural practice of slavery.

IV. Challenges

In Playing in the Dark, Morrison writes about white writers and “the process of entering what one is estranged from” (4). Writing about black characters presents many pitfalls for white writers. William Styron famously brought many of these problems into focus with the publication of The Confessions of Nat Turner in 1967. The awarding of the Pulitzer Prize contrasted sharply with the vehement and emotional responses from African American critics. The issues of appropriation of sacred subjects, white apologists, perpetuating damaging stereotypes, dehumanizing black characters, and manipulating history are still relevant. Styron’s choice as a white writer to utilize first-person narration for the voice of a slave evoked particular protest. bell hooks puts words to resentment about the appropriation of black culture and suppression of black voice in Yearning:

No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself….Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk (152).
Nicknamed “The Confessions of Willie Styron” by John Oliver Killens, the book symbolized the rewriting of the slave’s story and identity that began with colonization.\(^7\) The positive outcome of Styron’s writing was the collection *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* that Tim Ryan writes created a new discourse about slavery, characterized by a “renewed respect for the truth and value of slave testimony, the significance of slave cultures, and the importance of slave resistance” completely altering past-1960s literature about slavery.\(^8\) Ryan continues that critics have steadfastly refused to label Styron’s novel a neo-slave narrative but rather a “distorted and racist white exploitation of the form” (67).

Aside from the pitfalls of cross-racial writing, the lack of evidence about antebellum women is a challenge. As Fox-Genovese sets out at the beginning of her book, these diaries and narratives reveal an important part of the lives of free white and enslaved black women during slavery, but they do not tell the whole story. She writes that this evidence “disproportionately favors the literate and introspective over the illiterate and circumspect, favors white women over black women, favors slaveholding women over yeoman and poor white women” (37). She wants to make sure that women like Sarah Gayle and Harriet Jacobs are not read as typical but that their works illustrate themes that can relate to women who did not have access to writing. She also acknowledges the plurality of experiences. We must not assume that the dominant discourse is the one view of history. Contemporary critics view various narratives and

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experiences as part of an ongoing conversation. Critics like Linda McCutcheon have encouraged viewing histories, rather than history, recognizing multiple voices: winners, losers, regional, colonial, unsung, female, etc. (Ryan 5). Still today, with the Women’s Movement, and the terminology used, there is a danger in seeing a monolithic experience. Even the word “sisterhood”, Sharon Monteith notes, “pretends a homogeneity of experience that is difficult to prove or to imagine” (36).

Without a variety of voices, race can be reduced to a simple binary. In their collaboration on Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, the editors Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen found that in spite of their hard work, they still continued to reproduce the binary that overlooks the varied subjectivities of women of both races (3). Critics have noted neo-slave narratives, particularly Williams’ and Morrison’s novels, as examples of challenging these binaries. Although the novels in my study challenge the binaries as well, they also occasionally “reproduce the dominant black-white binary”. At times these writers subvert the gender binary, but all of them perpetuate it as well. Even the binary of North and South is difficult to avoid, but it is important to note there were so many different types of experience in antebellum America. Most white southerners were not involved with plantations and slaves, and not all white northerners were abolitionists.

Along these same lines, the identifier “Southern” can mean many different things. For most of the 20th century, “Southern” has meant white Southerners, and African-American writers have had a separate designation. Here, I have chosen to apply Southern to the content of the novels. I label these black writers “Southern” because their novels are mostly set in the South and feature slavery. In writing about race, there are many
ways to describe “white” and “black”. In this dissertation, I have chosen to apply “white” rather than Caucasian and “black” and “African-American” to describe my writers and characters, understanding that these terms are not ideal. Particularly difficult is the label “black” for mixed-race men and women. I have retained “black” in several places to define these characters to reflect their historical identification. Many contemporary writers replace “slave” with “enslaved African”. I have primarily used “slave”, assuming that my critical approach establishes interest in the slaves’ individual identities although the term “slave” was assigned in oppression. Angelyn Mitchell and many other critics refer to slave narratives as “emancipatory narratives”. Again, I have stayed with the traditional term for recognition and simplicity but recognize the problematic identification of the authors.

One of the challenges for every writer is language and the constraints and inaccuracies of language. There are no doubt terms that I am using in this dissertation that will be better expressed elsewhere and in the future. I look forward to reading other accounts and reserve the right to edit this work.

V. The Need for Reparational Literature

When Barack Obama was elected president, various pundits explored the idea of America as a post-racial society. Most Americans would agree that this is not the case and that the “ghost” of slavery hangs over us, as Toni Morrison suggests in Beloved. But 150 years after the Civil War, why is the film Twelve Years a Slave considered groundbreaking for foregrounding the violence of slavery? Why are authors still using the setting of slavery and obsessing about race? Minrose Gwin’s words from her introduction
answer this question for me. Whether we wish it or not, she writes, the past informs the present, and “we can come to know modern literature differently and more fully by examining its relationship with the past and the texts and subtexts that relationship may produce” (9). Writing about race and slavery are necessary to understanding the particulars of the Southern past and present.

And as recent films and books such as *Ebony and Ivory* and the novels in my dissertation illustrate, writers and audiences, white and black alike, are still interested in slavery as a subject.⁹ In *Calls and Responses*, Tim A. Ryan states that it is necessary that as a country, we face the trauma of our past. As much as we are disturbed by the violence of cruelty of slavery, we are compelled to try to find meaning in it. He writes: “The impossibility of thinking about slavery is matched only by the impossibility of not thinking about it” (2). For white writers and filmmakers, facing the trauma of the past has often been reflected in Hobson’s racial conversion narrative format with white protagonist and black guide. I argue that this form has evolved in recent female-white authored literature. While 20th century conversion narratives emphasized confession and conversion, Reparational Literature is less focused on awakening and more centered on redemption of the white role in race relations through acknowledgement of the horror of slavery, balanced perspectives, and individual relationships. In these novels, the black characters do not recede in favor of the white character’s spiritual journey. Rather the novels spotlight the intersection of black and white. The novels continue to focus on the white characters’ relationship with race, but they do so with a focus on memorializing the

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suffering and contributions of slaves and making the slave character’s story and agency equally and often more central to the plot.

These novels are models for working through the legacy of slavery through individual relationships. They can be read in relation to the nation’s changing attitudes about slavery apologies and reparations. Although economic reparations have not been widely made, various American companies and governments around the world, including the U.S. Congress in 2008, have acknowledged wrongdoing and issued apologies. As authors such as Edward Ball in *Slaves in the Family* (1998) and Katrina Browne *Traces of the Trade* (2007) have recognized, Americans as a whole cling to stories celebrating famous ancestors and the founders of our country and forget the slaves who made it all possible. Tara McPherson refers to the split in our view of plantations and slavery as “cultural schizophrenia about the South”, with a split between the voracious desire for the romanticized history of the South and the inability or unwillingness to connect the horrors of slavery to that same past (3). The foregrounding of the brutality and rape of slavery and its interconnectedness with our history and recognizing the holocaust that occurred are a necessary steps towards apology and doing away with this “schizophrenia” between glorifying the plantation image and recognizing the violence it symbolizes. As Americans move in this direction, changing attitudes and modes of representing slavery become more evident in literature.

Striving to take part in the neo-slave narrative authors’ memorialization of slaves and their sacrifices, reparational writers go beyond the conversion novel genre. In the process of defining their own reparation, they also seek to return something that was taken from the victim/object. These novels are about redemption, but rather than focusing
solely on the white journey, they return to the original site of harm, slavery, and
memorialize the injury that occurred. Rewriting plantation novels through the
perspectives of enslaved characters and challenging iconic representations of black
women allows white writers to make up for the blindness of past American literature and
history and make artistic reparations.
CHAPTER ONE: SLAVERY FILTERED AND UNFILTERED, EPIC AND QUOTIDIAN: 20TH-CENTURY WRITING ON SLAVERY

I. Why Are These Novels Different?

Continuing into the 19th century tradition, 20th-century white female writers create temporary domestic union or “sisterhood” across the color line in relation to patriarchy and trauma, using black characters and figurations of blackness to facilitate self-discovery for white characters. After the white self-realizations occur, the black characters fade from the story, and no sustained changes occur in social or political structure. Particularly in the 1970s and 80s, African-American writers challenge the master narrative of slavery and shift the literary focus from white awakening to acknowledgement of racial inequity. In female-authored neo-slave narratives of this period, black and white women cannot be friends until they have confronted racism and the trauma of slavery. In this same vein, Reparational Literature suggests that Americans cannot fully move forward as a fully integrated society without addressing the ongoing legacy of slavery and racism.

As in previous 20th-century female-authored literature, black and white female friendship develops in the domestic sphere, often around childbirth, death, and everyday life. William Faulkner, the most recognized male Southern writer of the century, concentrates racial interaction and white awakening around vital and momentous events. Until recently, critics disregarded the importance of racial representations by such major female writers as Porter, O’Connor, and Welty, whose
characters interact cross-racially in the domestic, mundane, and everyday. Southern studies have evolved as contemporary readings, particularly by Welty critics, acknowledge the importance of these female representations of race relations and expand the definition of racial writing. In fact, Yaeger argues that Welty’s subtle style, writing racism as “a set of practices so incessantly, so boringly enacted within the everyday that they seem to be hiding in plain sight”, is a more effective means of subversion than the Faulknerian style (DD 99). Yet the contemporary need to acknowledge and repair slavery’s damage necessitates writing both the subtle, everyday insults of slavery as well as the climactic and violent events.

The reparational novelists in this dissertation bridge the gap between the “epic horror” of Faulkner and the “epic nostalgia” of Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind by both placing the brutality of slavery at the center of the text and by continuing the Welty tradition in their attention to the everyday details of race relations (DD 99). These writers differ from their 20th century predecessors in that they strive to create equality of agency and subjectivity in the interracial female relationships or else highlight the inequities that previous white-authored “sisterhood” literature and conversion novels often overlook or minimize. Welty critics make a strong argument for the critical power that lies in the absence of, marginalization, and commodification of bodies of black characters in her writing, and many aspects of 20th-century literature do illustrate moments of white blindness and racial disparity. In general, however, 20th century white female authors privilege white subjectivity and continue the tradition of black characters as props or a means of fulfillment for the white characters.
Along with marginalizing black characters, these 20th-century writers have also either obscured or indirectly addressed the violence and trauma of slavery. The tradition of avoiding unpleasant topics, or as Toni Morrison writes, leaving “unspeakable things unspoken” pervades Southern literature and practice. Tara McPherson describes “willful acts of forgetting” and writes that this “intricate dance of memory and repression damages the white mind of the South” (206-7). Yaeger uses a similar description for the lens of white racial blindness, or “white unseeing”. She calls the unwillingness or inability to see what is visible in the everyday “the unthought known”, which she sees in “the omnipresence of ideas in Southern literature that are known but not acknowledged”. Yaeger argues that these indirect references, symbolized by relics and fragments, are more frightening than the actual events because they represent the moments of breakage and the haunting and ghosts of slavery. In language, she calls this a “stutterance” rather than an “utterance”, meaning “a stammer that does not refer to overt, consciously adduced racism but to a covert violence in the social order in a world where race is the site of so much delirium” (88).

Reparational novelists follow in the footsteps of Morrison and others to acknowledge this covert violence more directly. Writing trauma resists conventional narrative structures so the novels call attention to the stutterances and limits of language to highlight the fragmentation of trauma. Using unconventional feminized tropes accentuates the symbolism of the fragmented and healing female black body,

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10 Yaeger attributes this term to Christopher Bollas in *Dirt and Desire*, p. 101.
11 Yaeger, Patricia. “Ghosts and Shattered Bodies, or What Does it Mean to Still Be Haunted by Southern Literature?” *South Central Review* 22.1 (Spring 2005): 87-108.
which functions like a pastiche, blending together multiple perspectives, generations, and ethnicities to create collective memory. The pain of the memories must be reconciled with the pain of the body to achieve healing, and this occurs through recognition by a community of women. The body is the text of history, and healing it becomes the road to healing the trauma of the past. In literature, this begins with rewriting the limiting stereotypes of the past and foregrounding the interactions of white and black women.

II. 20th-Century White Female-Authored Literature

*Gone With the Wind* is largely responsible for celebrating the status quo of the plantation culture and imprinting racial stereotypes on the national conception of the region, but Mitchell did challenge some plantation conventions by inverting the image of the chaste, passive Southern belle. Scarlett fills the role typically accorded to a male hero. She is sexually aware, has a powerful influence on the plantation, land and people, and crosses into the masculine economic realm. However, Elizabeth Jane Harrison writes that viewing Scarlett, and similarly Cather’s Sapphira and Katherine Anne Porter’s Grandmother, as feminists is problematic because their power exists not in a revisioned hierarchical structure, but rather in place of an absent male figure.12 They assume the patriarchy rather than challenge it. So the belle does become a more assertive woman in post-suffrage literature, but traditional gender roles and structures remain in place. Consequently, whether the belle character is

12 “Re- visioning the Southern Land”. *The History of Southern Women’s Literature*. 
demure or assertive, the position of blacks within the patriarchal system does not change. In literature, they continue to function as surrogate characters.

However as the Civil Rights Movement and Feminist Movement of the 60s and 70s reexamined racial and gender roles, the belle connoted a negative past, while the entire structure changed and became more inclusive. Critics cite the Feminist Movement or around 1970 as a turning point in the change of the belle from an attractive character to a vain, pitiful, and sexually repressed character. As Kathryn Lee Seidel points out, before and during the Feminist Movement, chivalric traditions still prevailed in the South. The ideology of gender roles is entrenched, causing slower change than in other parts of the country. However, the southern belle does transform significantly into a negative symbolic character, representing a lifestyle that is “not only destructive but also absurd and meaningless”. Meanwhile, her counterpart, the mammy figure, undergoes a physical update to a thinner, more “hip” woman, but she continues as the traditional supportive surrogate in these white-authored representations.

Mitchell’s belle and mammy remain the standard from which these characters evolve, but other Southern women in the 20th century experimented with plantation literature and perpetuated racial blindness and Lost Cause nostalgia. In Entitled to the Pedestal: Place, Race, and Progress in White Southern Women’s Writing, 1920—1945, Nghana Tamu Lewis addresses the degree of power and agency in the patriarchal structure of writers who reflect the influences of both modernism and their

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experience as white Southern women in hierarchical positions. Using Julia Peterkin, Gwen Bristow, Caroline Gordon, and Willa Cather, she contextualizes their work in the mythology of the Southern woman and the “agrarian-imagined society” between 1920 and 1945.\(^\text{14}\) She reads their objectives as two-fold: “to lay claim to the mythic pedestal upon which white southern women have historically been positioned and to indemnify plantation culture” (6). As a result, they both reinforce the myth of White Southern Womanhood and Plantation Mythology and introduce progressive ideas influenced by modernism and feminism. In most female-authored novels of the early 20\(^\text{th}\) century, characters like Scarlett O’Hara become more assertive and less passive and docile in order to succeed in the modern world. Lewis argues, though, that the cultural contexts of the plantation and conventional gender and racial ideologies endure into the 20\(^\text{th}\) century, partly due to the anxiety that white Southern women felt about change and black progress even when they consciously sought to support that change and progress.

Julia Peterkin viewed herself as an advocate for the post-bellum plantation blacks she used as a basis for her characters. Contemporary Southerners denounced her for her 1920s and 1930s “realistic” portrayals and sexual content, while white and black critics of the Harlem Renaissance praised her short stories and novels. Her 1928 plantation novel, *Scarlet Sister Mary*, was the first Southern novel to win the Pulitzer

\(^{14}\) The authors in this dissertation use slavery and plantation life as a setting. Although Lewis includes Lillian Smith, I have excluded her and many other important 20\(^\text{th}\) century female novelists who write about the postbellum South and/or race, but not slavery. Some of these authors are Ellen Glasgow, Nella Larsen, Lillian Hellman, Carson McCullers, Zora Neale Hurston, Harper Lee, Shirley Ann Grau, Elizabeth Spencer, Gail Godwin, Doris Betts, Dorothy Allison, Bebe Moore Campbell, Bobbie Ann Mason, Lee Smith, and Rita Mae Brown.
Prize; in this novel and in *Black April* (1927) and *Bright Skin* (1932), her unconventional focus on black life, use of Gullah dialect, and black subjectivity made some critics label her a “black” writer. However, she primitivizes and mythologizes the characters, and because she limits black and white interaction, she diminishes the realities of racial hierarchy of this time. Peterkin herself recognized the problems of appropriation and misrepresentation that her status as the white plantation owner presented. She often described her impetus for writing about the people on her plantation as confessional or purgative, putting her in the role of white writers’ utilizing black characters for their own guilt and redemption. Lewis notes that Peterkin’s position of power ensured her perpetuation of the status quo plantation order, and she argues women like Peterkin were not passive pawns in the upholding of Southern myth and commodification of black culture but that they actively engaged for their own benefit and success. H. L. Mencken enabled the appropriation; when Peterkin wanted to shift to an autobiographical project, he encouraged her to stick to the black point of view. Eventually appreciation of her novels waned. By the time she published the collection *Roll, Jordan, Roll* in 1933, the *New York Times* criticized her for limited representations of kind masters and happy slaves. Her work has been somewhat forgotten and dismissed as local color, and her subject matter and use of dialect, subversive for her time and background, can be awkward for modern readers.

Gwen Bristow, popular in her time for her historical novels but dismissed by modern critics as melodramatic, consciously tried to do something new with her focus on strong white female characters. These women are not stereotypical belles; Lewis
likens her to Erskine Caldwell in her use of poor white characters as protagonists, some of whom rebel against plantation culture. Her black characters tend to conform more to prevailing stereotypes. Lewis highlights an interesting interchange between a young white girl and a black couple in *This Side of Glory* (1940), where “a class alliance that transcends race” is possible but not realized (102), perhaps because it might seem utopian for the 1949 audience. The white character names her child for the black man, a move which Lewis calls “symbolic, though ultimately empty, gesture” (181). In general, the slave characters in Bristow’s plantation trilogy provide comic relief, further the plot, and reveal more about the white characters than about themselves. Rather than promoting racial unity, *This Side of Glory* concludes the plantation saga with a message of unification of white social orders: aristocracy and “poor white trash”. Lewis characterizes Bristow’s vision as one that perpetuates a “pattern of ‘black’ elimination and omission” (107).

Like Peterkin and Bristow, whose social status and hired black servants connected them to the myth of Southern white womanhood in spite of their espoused breaks with the past, Caroline Gordon enjoyed a position of power. Her letters patronize the blacks and white tenant farmers around her plantation, but Lewis discourages thinking her racial views are constant or simply a product of her time. She argues the Southern white view of race was less monolithic than earlier critics suggest; rather “whites perceived blacks as progressive, as resistant, as threatening, and as oppressed” (110). Gordon’s letters exhibit these multi-faceted feelings in her interactions with her hired black help, but she includes few black characters in her novels. Lewis reads Gordon’s work as limiting black and poor white character’s
“access to agency” and suggests her “feminist conservatism [is] rooted in black racial and poor white trash proscription” (116). Gordon uses an antebellum setting in some novels, but the slaves are more vague symbols than expanded characters. Critics read her work, particularly in Penhally (1931) as both promoting nostalgia for the plantation past and critiquing Southern history. None Shall Look Back (1927) focuses on heroic Civil War characters, specifically Nathan Bedford Forrest’s cavalry. As in many of her books, the characters strive to “preserve the Old Order”, serving as Gordon’s “invocation of a conservative racial and class politics” (121). Including Gordon and Mitchell as “Southern Renascence” writers, Entzminger notes that these novelists often use black characters as “silent shadow figures who knowingly observe[d] the actions of the bad belle” and serve as a register or witness for the guilt that the bad belle should but does not feel (137). Again, the black characters function as a mirror for white character development.

Fetishization of the black female body and surrogacy drive the plot in Willa Cather’s Southern novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940). Cather includes black characters with more subjectivity and detail than many novels of the period. However, Cather focuses more on the damage that slave owning and racism cause on white characters. Slave mistress Sapphira Colbert’s obsession with Nancy and plans for her rape consume her, while her daughter Rachel frees herself from this legacy by helping Nancy escape. As Morrison points out, the difficulty of the novel is that it “obscures even as it makes a valiant effort at honest engagement: the sycophancy of white identity” (19). The white/black relationship has a specific visceral focus; the ailing, aging Sapphira has a cannibalistic attraction to young, sexualized Nancy.
Critic Robin Hackett reads this in the context of “Sapphic primitivism”, meaning that figurations of blackness underpin “white-authored representations of female sexual autonomy including homoerotics” (3). The 19th century understanding of sexuality conflated whiteness with sexual normalcy, and blackness with sexual aberrancy. Blackness, then, becomes a metaphor for lesbianism in this novel and others, another variation of the use of blackness or black bodies to express “other”. Jezebel, the slave who came directly from Africa, serves as a savage double for Sapphira. Her history of biting off the sailor’s “thumb” and wanting to eat a “little pickaninny’s hand” underscore Sapphira’s obsession with Nancy’s body.

Cather also makes the whiteness of Sapphira’s body grotesque, reinforcing the idea that the bodies, black and white, are symbolic sites. Sapphira’s colonization of Nancy’s body is a radical critique of white appropriation of the black body for this time period. This dynamic, as Hackett suggests, also places this book in the lesbian tradition of Gertrude Stein, Lillian Smith, and Cather’s other writing in focusing on the politics of a racialized other as a deflection from writing about the “unspeakable” aspects of lesbianism.

Yaeger reads the pervasive use of the color white as symbolic of “what cannot be thought or organized” in the period Cather wrote the novel (DD 105). This disconnect in language underpins the “inconsistencies in characterizations and narrative techniques” of the novel. Cather did not state her racial politics, but Lewis suggests that “the resonance of racial violence and sexual exploitation in Sapphira implies their haunting influence on Cather’s aesthetic politics” (139) Any critique the

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15 Gwin p. 134.
novel makes, however, is complicated by its plantation nostalgia. In the end, the five-year-old autobiographical narrator looks back longingly at this story, framing it as an entertaining story to nurse her through an illness. Nancy and Till’s reunion, and story, centers on her: “The actual scene of the meeting had been arranged for [my] benefit” (282). Morrison argues that not only is Nancy a surrogate for Sapphira but the text itself is a surrogate for Cather, a way for “safe participation in loss, in love, in chaos, in justice”. Till justifies Sapphira’s behavior because of her reduced social status on the remote Colbert farm. Morrison sees the final obsequious words of Nancy, which “reinforce the slaveholders’ ideology” as subverting any protest the novel makes against slavery (28).

Katherine Anne Porter’s “Miranda” stories do expose the hierarchy of race and the limits of white perspective but in the end confine the primary black character, Nannie, to a position of mirroring and facilitating the white character’s emotions. Published between 1935 and 1960, the stories contrast the values and social mores of Miranda’s generation with the restrictive patriarchal codes of “the old order” represented by her grandmother, Sophia Jane, and “Nannie”, the black family servant. In a series of short stories, the women reminisce about their shared experiences. As children, Sophia Jane received Nannie as a slave, and they have raised children, farmed together, and rarely separated. Porter fabricated a southern belle history in detailing her own past, but she avoids belle and mammy stereotypes for these characters. Yet Sophia Jane’s inability to see the disparities in their lives causes what Chandra Wells calls “tension produced by these gaps [that] create[s] a quiet irony”
From Sophia Jane’s point of view, she and Nannie are somewhat twinned, and their relationship is harmonious. However, she remains in the position of power and wealth, while Nannie lives simply and works for the family her whole life. As Porter writes, “…they fought on almost equal terms, Sophia Jane defending Nannie fiercely against any discipline but her own” (19). Nannie’s thoughts and feelings are narrated, but she rarely speaks directly, limiting her agency. In the later stories, Nannie’s perspective and the fact that she “did not care whether they loved her or not” (42) become clearer in the text. Sophia Jane’s inability to acknowledge the ruptures in the harmonious relationship she envisions reveals her myopic view of interracial friendship.

The majority of “The Old Order” stories emphasize the common ground the women share in childbirth, childrearing, growing old, and various adversities, and this partnership contrasts with Sophia Jane’s “deeply grounded contempt for men” (24). Interestingly, as in Dessa Rose, Sophia Jane nurses one of Nannie’s children when Nannie cannot, subverting the mammy stereotype but also linking the two women and their children. Sophia Jane likens this to Nannie’s wet nursing of her white children, but Nannie’s later lack of connection to Sophia Jane’s children undercuts this. Rather than causing her to transcend her position of whiteness, Porter uses the cross-racial breastfeeding as a liberatory moment for Sophia Jane that connects her to her own body and frees her from patriarchal restriction.

Wells, Chandra. “‘Unable to Imagine Getting on Without Each Other’: Porter’s Fictions of Interracial Female Friendship”. The Mississippi Quarterly. 58:3/4 (2005).
Ultimately, Nannie serves as a means for Sophia Jane’s, and later Miranda’s, rebellion against the strict patriarchal codes of the “Old Order”. Sophia Jane’s husband loses her money, and their sex life does not satisfy her. The men who visit become sexual predators threatening the black women in her care, and she feels she must “keep silent and give no signs of uneasiness” to preserve order (24). Interactions with men represent oppression, and her alliance with Nannie allows her to both survive and exert power of her own over Nannie. Also by stepping outside of the social expectations with Nannie by entering her name in the family bible and breastfeeding Nannie’s baby, Sophia Jane rebels against that male-represented oppression. The friendship between the two women remains one of the enduring images of Porter’s work, but it perpetuates the same mistress/slave dynamic of earlier literature.

As in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, Yaeger reads in the subtext of Porter’s work a racial melancholy and gargantuaism that reflects the trauma of racial hierarchy, or as Sarah Robertson describes “a tension between verbalized accounts of the past and the things too terrible to utter” (1)\(^\text{17}\). Yaeger describes the children’s playground as a landscape of “trauma unspoken” and “bodies unhealed or uncared for” in the Miranda stories (18). Miranda and the other children have a strong interest in ghosts, bodies, and digging in the dirt. Yaeger argues that these unheard slave voices find an audience in the child’s perspective and represent the excess of a slave culture where the only mode of expression is excess and gargantuaism.

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Although she sets her stories in small Southern towns during segregation rather than during slavery, Flannery O’Connor also experiments with gargantuanism and excess and trauma in the landscape. But her story, “The Artificial Nigger”, like many of her others, interrogates whiteness in spite of its stereotypical use of blacks and figurations of blackness. In “The Artificial Nigger”, the use of a representation of blackness to facilitate Nelson’s coming of age illustrates the need for the “other” that characterizes many 20th century white protagonists. O’Connor considered this her commentary on integration; the lawn statue of the title represents for her “the redemptive power of Black suffering for us all” (qtd. in Fitzgerald 410). In Race and Identity in Southern Fiction, John Duvall posits that O’Connor’s “moments of grace” are also “moments of race”, in which white salvation occurs at the moment the character’s whiteness becomes visible and that “[w]hiteness is revealed as idolatry, a false faith that fails those who believe in it” (xvii). In her stories, “Revelation”, “Everything that Rises Must Converge” and “The Displaced Person”, her characters’ “racechanges” illustrate the arbitrariness of racial construction as forced awareness undermines the racist characters’ whiteness. Duvall suggests that unlike writers such as Faulkner, who use encounters with blackness as a way to explore sexuality, O’Connor uses blackness as a trope to unite the mind and body, a construct that many of the contemporary writers explore. Although O’Connor’s stories do promote recognition of racial disparity, she does not give her black characters any dimension. As Alice Walker writes about “Everything That Rises Must Converge”, it is a good story, but it is “only half a story” because the angry black mother leaves after hitting

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18 Duvall references Susan Gubar’s Racechanges.
Julian’s mother; once again the white characters’ resolution takes center stage. But Walker also acknowledges that O’Connor “destroyed the last vestiges of sentimentality in white Southern writing; she caused white women to look ridiculous on pedestals, and she approached her black characters…with unusual humility and restraint”.

Like O’Connor, Eudora Welty and Ellen Douglas provide some exceptions to the tradition of avoiding violence and perpetuating stereotypes. Welty told interviewers that she hated the Civil War and did not feel “burdened by the Lost Cause”, but she uses the Civil War in one short story, “The Burning”, written in 1951. While that setting is unusual for her, other aspects of the story are even more unusual for a writer of Welty’s time and white background. Here, she writes a very violent story that includes rape, physical abuse, and suicide, and she uses the unconventional perspective of a black slave. In addition, she focuses on the power and violence that white women held on a plantation, while contemporary stories usually attribute that role to the white men. Welty’s “difficult, beautiful style” and “gorgeous prose”, “refusing to specify the white ladies’ trauma”, make the reader question if the terrible violence is real, but closer reading reveals rape and violence throughout. In addition to the abuse Delilah has suffered as a slave, one of the sisters offers Delilah to the soldiers as a rape victim in place of her sister, and they leave Delilah’s young son, their own nephew, in the burning house to die. In a final

19 Walker. “Beyond the Peacock”. In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens. 51, 59.
symbolic act of abuse and commodification of Delilah’s body, they use her back as a step to reach their nooses as they commit suicide.

Welty expressed concern that this story might be “too involved and curlicued around with things”; her layered style makes her racial representations complex and beautifully symbolic but also hard to decipher. In fact, she considered this one of her least favorite stories, possibly because she faced the difficulty of capturing slavery in words. Yaeger finds valuable symbolism in stories like this one, though, “where African Americans who are defined as “others” become the site of neglect, of the overlooked, the throwaway: the site of ungrieved grief that never bothers to come to white consciousness---a “nothing omnipresent and utterly obvious and yet quite difficult to see” (DD 105). In Welty’s contrast of the overabundance of material goods with the sisters’ treatment of Delilah and her son as disposable commodities, Yaeger reads a critique of the limited white lens.

Welty was often criticized for her indirect approach to race. In “Must the Novelist Crusade?” (1965), she responded to the idea that writers must “better the world” that fiction should show the complexity and texture of life, not crusade for neat solutions. She writes, “the zeal to inform, which quite properly inspires the editorial, has never done fiction much good” (804). Perhaps giving the slave character Delilah more interiority would have reflected a radical “zeal to inform” for this time period. However, using Delilah’s perspective does endow the story with a unique focus for a Southern white woman of Welty’s background. The conflation of Delilah with the Venetian mirror marks her role as mirror to the white sisters; Welty employs

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this trope more deliberately than other white writers. In allowing Delilah to appropriate the symbols of the mirror for her own story, Welty endows her with some agency over her role as surrogate.

*Can’t Quit You, Baby* (1988) by Ellen Douglas is not in the time frame of this study but fully investigates the myths and realities of black and white female relationships. Black Tweet works for white Cornelia during the Civil Rights Movement. I include this book because of its realistic exploration of white guilt and the possibilities of cross-racial friendship. Like neo-slave narrative and reparational authors, Douglas uses metafiction to undercut typical assumptions about this type of relationship and destabilize the authority of the narrator. Monteith points out, though, that Douglas does not “privilege metafictional play over the political reality of their social positions” (118). Like Martin, Kidd, Conklin, and Durban, Douglas’s work shows the influence of recent literary criticism, “a feminist politics that emphasizes the intersection of gender, race, and class” (Monteith 116). The novel suggests black and white women can find new ways of relating to each other. Douglas and Welty differ from other writers of the century, recognizing their whiteness and the invisibility of blackness and the problematic position of writing black subjectivity.

Other white Southern writers who grew up during segregation and the Civil Rights Movement committed politically to racial progress, but they fell into the same patterns of using black characters as surrogates. In *On the Occasion of my Last Afternoon* (1998), Kaye Gibbons’ protagonist, Emma, reflects on her Civil War and post-War experiences with modern sentiments, but in the final pages, the novel’s resolution depends on the faithful black friend, Clarice, who reveals the secrets.
behind Emma’s abusive father. This allows Emma to come to peace with her violent past, and the novel ends abruptly. As a freed slave and a fairly independent character, Clarice belies the physical stereotype of the mammy, but she serves the same purpose as previous black spiritual guides.

Using the representation of the black female body as an emblem of evolving attitudes, Sharon Monteith observes many 20th century white writers changing the physical appearance of the mammy or nanny character from the stereotypical rotund image to a thinner, more “hip” character. Updated black female characters appear in other popular fiction such as Ellen Foster (1990) by Kaye Gibbons, one of the most critically acclaimed white-authored novels featuring cross-racial relationships. Other popular novels that utilize this trope include Before Women Had Wings (1997) by Connie Mae Fowler, Anne Rivers Siddons Low Country (1998), and The Christmas Pearl (2007) by Dorothea Benton Frank. Like Gibbons, the authors confine the black female characters to the same surrogate position in the novels.

Monteith also sees the use of “shorthand” in white writing. Because the image of the black female domestic is so ingrained in the imagination, a few sentences suffice in comparison to the descriptions of other characters. In her view, white writers tend to create female slaves and domestics who are confined and have limited social agency, while black writers create domestics who resist oppression.23 She concludes that Ellen Gilchrest’s work reinforces the formulaic and oppositional relationship of “mistress and maid”, whether as mistress and slave or southern lady

23 She uses Sofia from Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. White references pertain primarily to works by Anne Tyler, Ellen Gilchrist, and Kaye Gibbons. While most of Monteith’s examples take place during or after segregation, her analyses apply to novels of slavery.
and black domestic (109). So while Rhoda Manning and her maid seem modern, and Rhoda presents their relationship as one of equality, in the end the black characters have no significant part in the story except to witness and support Rhoda’s character development.

In spite of the lack of background stories for black characters and their use for white character development, Yaeger and other critics argue that the 20th century female writers did address race, but they encode it in ways we still have not fully addressed and uncovered. When describing Welty and other 20th century female Southern writers, Yaeger and other critics use terms such as “oblique”, “circular”, “fragments”, “referents”, “vestiges”, “gestures”, “ghosts”, and “relics”. The Reparational Literature in this study certainly uses abbreviations, symbolism, and metonymy but the difference is that, as in the neo-slave narratives, the “unspeakable” acts of rape, violence, and family separation are central to the texts, and the authors confront race directly.

III. Black Reclamation of Slavery and Maternal Ancestors

*Iola Leroy* (1892), by African American abolitionist and author Frances Harper, follows in the footsteps of William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* with the tragic mulatta plot. When the family discovers Iola’s black ancestry, they sell her to a slave trader. She must evade sexual predation from various southern and northern whites. Harper intended to condemn slavery from a post-bellum perspective but also implicate northerners in the racism of the 1890s. She celebrates black soldiers and

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24 Fox-Genovese in Perry and Weak. 163.
slaves who fought in the Civil War to challenge the white self-perception as sole saviors of the black race. Susanne Dietzel contrasts the romanticized and comedic slave characters in white-authored plantation literature with Harper’s characters, who dictate their own history, resist slavery, manipulate their masters, and strive for freedom (Perry and Weaks 165). Unlike many tragic mulatta heroines of white and black writers, Iola manages to overcome the “tragic” circumstances of her birth.

Like Harper, Pauline Hopkins utilizes the tragic mulatta in her novels, *Hagar’s Daughter, Contending Forces*, and *Of One Blood*, as a symbol of the connection between the races. In *American Body Politics: Race, Gender, and Black Literary Renaissance*, Felipe Smith locates Hopkins and other Progressive Era black writers in the political and symbolic reclamation of black characters from primitive representations grounded in fears of atavism and racial mixing. Describing the widespread white paranoia about black blood and African influence, Smith reads a political imperative in Hopkins’ participation in “the literary construction of America”. Influenced by Charles Waddell Chesnutt, she works “within the ‘tragic mulatto’ theme to establish the fact that hybridity [was] a normative condition arising out of a long tradition of consensual relations across the color line, including marriage” (55-6). In Hopkins’ work, the characters discover both aristocracy and Ethiopians in their genealogies, “allowing black American readers to envision their contemporaneity to both mainland Africans and white Americans” (53). Her novels re-envision the “marriage plot”, popularized by writers like Thomas Dixon in *The Clansman*. Instead of uniting northern and southern whites against “the Negro problem”, Hopkins’ novels bring together white blood and black blood to strengthen
the body politic. Working against the dominant discourses of “hybridophobia”, black males as rapists, and black women as hypersexualized, the writers follow Chesnutt’s example of using fiction “as a means of systematically defamiliarizing notions of black incapacity for national kinship” (Smith 55). In a time of increasing segregation and lynching, these writers re-imagine the black body not as a contaminant, but as an enhancement to the national body politic.

Harper and Hopkins’ slave characters and Civil War settings stand out; their turn-of-the-century black contemporaries and later Harlem Renaissance writers generally move beyond a plantation setting and focus more on the Jim Crow South and urban settings. Gone With the Wind in 1936 dominated the stage of plantation narratives to the degree that few plantation novels appeared in the following decades. Authors such as Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston added dynamic characters who broaden the limited representations of black female characters but used contemporary settings. The Civil Rights Movement and the publication of Styron’s Confessions of Nat Turner in 1967, however, prompted a renaissance of writing about slavery and plantation life that resulted in changes in the meta-narrative of slavery. Historians elevate first-person accounts of slaves in the quest to find primary documents and more “authentic” voices, and they highlight the importance of slave culture and signs of resistance.

Writing at a time when African-American women were redefining the black woman’s role in America, authors Margaret Walker, Alice Walker, Octavia Butler, Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison, and Phyllis Alesia Perry revise and “signify” slave narratives to celebrate and honor the resistance of female slave characters,
whose perspectives have often been overlooked. Like Alex Haley’s *Roots* (1974), the novels do not obscure the brutality and violence of slavery, but they focus on the female perspective that *Roots* lacks. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu writes that these authors celebrate the extraordinary endurance of female slaves and “the acts of resistance that enabled enslaved women to mother in the fullest sense of the term” (xv). The emphasis on women, and therefore family, shifts the focus of the genre that had been dominated by Frederick Douglass’s work and his theme of literacy. In reclaiming the stories of slave women, the novelists in a sense restore the gender identity that was denied in forced reproduction. But the work also affects modern contexts; these writers have changed the perception of black women and families in America by “exposing and repositioning the role that gender plays in narrativizing history” (Beaulieu 4). Celebrating female slave culture and resistance links present-day African American women to a rich heritage.

Considered the first novel detailing the life and perspective of a slave woman, Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966) serves as a turning point in African-American literature and a precursor to Butler, Williams, Morrison and Perry’s novels. Definitive neo-slave narratives arose in the 1970s and 80s. This novel fits more in a category of realism than post-modernism, but it anticipates the female style of the neo-slave narrative, which celebrates female strength, maternity, and domestic community. Termed the “Negro *Gone With the Wind*” on its cover, it shares a sense of sentimentality with Mitchell’s novel, but Walker infuses her own family’s oral history, folk culture, and speech patterns to detail everyday life on the plantation for slaves. Tim Ryan calls *Jubilee* “a bridge between two different traditions of slavery
fiction because it is black-authored and black-centered and also a plantation melodrama that resembles *Gone With the Wind* in terms of its narrative structure and generic conventions” (74). Ashraf H. Rushdy explains that Walker and the other writers adopted characteristics of slave narratives because it was a way to reclaim the appropriated black voice and novelistic form. The majority of extant slave narratives are male-authored and centered on a male hero. Harriet Jacobs’ narrative, however, focuses on the domestic and maternal, and *Jubilee* continues this tradition.

In “Mothers, Grandmothers, and Great-Grandmothers: The Maternal Tradition in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*”, Betty Taylor-Thompson and Gladys Washington write that “the maternal figure is for Walker an icon of endurance whether in the form of the grandmother slave, the surrogate mother, or the mother torn from her offspring” (39). These women endow Vyry, the slave character based on Walker’s own ancestor, with a strong life-affirming sense of self in spite of her slave status. They share with her empowering stories of strong, heroic slave women and give her a legacy of spirituality and artistic creativity. Walker provides an unprecedented agency and strength in her characters. At the end of the novel, Vyry has moved beyond her slave past to become an important member of her community, respected by black and white members.

Walker’s novel also subverts the dominant mammy image but keeps in her female black characters “the positive aspects of nurturingsness, kindness, faith, and strength; the resulting characters are both believable and recognizable (Taylor-Thompson and Washington 42). Unlike white-authored mammies, Vyry very clearly prioritizes her own children over the white children but manages to have a loving
relationship with the mistress’s daughter as well. Interestingly, Walker also subverts the image of the frail Southern belle, as Vyry’s mistress, Salina, is physically strong and powerful within the plantation. The violence on the plantation originates from the white characters, but Walker does not explore what Gwin calls “the dark web of racism in cross-racial female relationships” (15).

Rather, using what she calls “a humanistic tradition”, Walker celebrates African American folk tradition and creativity and promotes racial reconciliation. While Vyry’s husband Ware promotes separatism, Vyry believes integration is achievable, saying:

We both needs each other. White folks needs what black folks got just as much as black folks need what White folks is got, and we’s all got to stay here mongst each other and git along (485).

The conclusion of the novel supports this possibility; as a midwife, Vyry becomes a leader in an integrated although idealized community. Walker’s optimism contrasts with contemporary Black Arts Movement writers, who are more focused on protesting the continuation of racial oppression and exclusion. Her work supports one aspect of the Movement, though, in highlighting black creativity in nontraditional forms. Like Alice Walker’s writing, Jubilee illustrates the importance of handing down the creative spirit of black women through the generations. Beaulieu describes the symbolism of Vyry through “her soup kettles, her quilts, her soulful spirituals, and her hearty cooking” as representative of a whole generation of black women “whose stories have been, until now, virtually invisible” (22). Jubilee is the story of one slave woman, Vyry, but critics like Hortense Spillers have noted that Walker often focuses less on her individuality than on Vyry’s story as a collective experience. Butler,
Williams, Morrison, and Perry build on Walker’s matrilineal focus but complexify characters through “subversive strategies such as reversal, blurring, and the creation of myth to dramatize gender identity” and a focus on “the multifaceted nature of motherhood as slave women experienced it” (Beaulieu 25).

Like Margaret Walker, Alice Walker has centralized motherhood and the appreciation of domestic traditions and art throughout her career. Her novels and short stories typically fall outside of the neo-slave narrative sphere, but her theories and representations of African American women are crucial to the reclamation of black women’s stories and importance to literature. In “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens”, she writes about forgotten black mothers and grandmothers as “Creators”, whose spirituality is the basis for art. Walker celebrates matrilineal oral history and creativity in the domestic sphere, in cooking, quilt making, and gardening, as Margaret Walker does in Jubilee. She also has a strong theme of nature or Mother Earth as a source of strength and inspiration for women. In all of her writing, she shares the message that wounds can be healed. Novels like Meridian (1976) suggest that while racial difference is a complex issue, racial healing is possible through honest dialogue within individual relationships. Her “Womanist” theory specifically celebrates black women who created in spite of slavery and oppression, but Walker’s life-affirming and women-centered theories influence the black neo-slave narrative writers and thus the white writers in this dissertation.
IV. The Neo-slave or “Liberatory” Narrative Tradition

The neo-slave narrative tradition builds on Margaret Walker and Alice Walker’s work in recovering oral history and lost traditions. Alice Walker’s essay “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens” about recovering Zora Neale Hurston’s work stresses the importance of these ancestors and traditions: “We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away”. She puts the responsibility on the artist to “recover” the stories of slaves “to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone” (92). Revisiting the slaves’ stories includes addressing the violence that is sometimes indirectly referenced in the original slave narratives themselves. Many 19th century readers found the details of the strenuous work, slave auctions, physical and mental abuse, and rape too graphic. So slave narrative authors had to balance representing their traumatic experiences and appealing to a sensitive audience.

Capturing the complexity of the slave experience and the “unspeakable” eventually prompted innovation in form combining aspects of slave narratives and post-modern forms where time, memory, beginnings and endings, and the reliability of the narrator are interrogated. Angelyn Mitchell explains that postmodernism’s focus on the inability to represent the past accurately makes it a more suitable genre for slavery as opposed to realism. She writes, “…realism remembers the past so as to forget it, while postmodernism remembers the past, rendering it impossible to forget”. She sees the “fragmentation, non-linearity, discontinuity, and cognitive disruptiveness” of postmodernism reflecting the slave’s broken sense of self, memory, history, and culture (11). The novels frequently employ polyvocality to
subvert the narration and emphasize the constructed nature of metanarrative. Ryan points out the dangers of familiarity as another reason for writers to experiment with form: “The continual use of standard, long-established strategies for representing slavery in literature risks making the institution seem commonplace and overly familiar, thus diminishing its impact” (189). Post-modernism employs what Morrison calls “participatory reading”, so the reader becomes part of the pastiche and construction of the narrative. Unlike the slave narrative authors, who cloak the violence and employ the sentimental conventions of the dominant literary style, these authors use conventions that accentuate the violence and fragmentation of slavery.

Angelyn Mitchell applies Linda Hutcheon’s definition of “historiographic metafiction” to the genre, as novels that use literature, history, and theory to promote awareness of history, fiction, and “reality” as constructed (11). The polyvocality and blurring of past and present promote the effects of circularity, movement, and change. Facts are fluid as more information and perspectives are added to the collective story. Stefanie Sievers stresses the importance of the contemporary political context, describing the genre as “constructive dialogues between the writers’ 20th-century present and the past”, focusing on the premise that the “past” is a construction. Neo-slave narratives respond to both the extant narratives of slave life and the politics of the Black Power Movement and the Feminist Movement surrounding their publication time, and they are considered oppositional literature because they work against the extant tradition. Rushdy likens the novels to belated participants in a

cultural dialogue with the varied goals of nostalgia, revision, and reshaping future
dialogue about race and culture.

Building on the work of Hortense Spillers, he categorizes the genre as a
“literary discontinuity”, works that highlight hidden perspectives, “expose the acts
that go into premising a tradition on excluding certain voices”, and “discover the
formal innovations minority writers have made in their resistance” (17). One of the
important elements of this discourse is intertextuality, or “texts speaking to other
texts”. The novels rewrite important themes of texts like Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in
the Life of a Slave Girl*, but also interrupt “what we think we know about slavery”
(Mitchell 11). In resuscitating and celebrating the writing of Hurston and other black
artists, Alice Walker illustrates Mary Helen Washington’s description of this
intertextuality as women talking to other women, literally and figuratively (Mitchell
11).

Henry Louis Gates popularized the theory of “the signifying monkey”, “a
literary tradition of grounded repetition and difference” that applies specifically to
African American writers’ building on and revising each other’s work. He details the
two types of signifying as unmotivated and motivated signifying; unmotivated
employs pastiche and is generally a tribute to the work it signifies, while motivated
signifying uses parody and “seeks to erase previous texts through revision” (Mitchell
14). Critics read the female neo-slave narratives in the tradition of unmotivated
signifying, as their use of pastiche celebrates connection to their female literary
antecedents. The following chapters place contemporary novels in the historiographic
metafictional, intertextual, and signifying context of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979),

Octavia Butler explodes traditional modes of slavery representation in her time travel novel, *Kindred* (1979), mixing elements of fantasy, slave narrative, historical fiction, and science fiction to interweave the problems of slavery with modern perceptions and misunderstandings about slavery. The novel differs from many African-American-authored novels in that the protagonist, Dana, lives like a modern Californian in the 1970s, disconnected from her culture and slave ancestry. In her time travel, Dana struggles to negotiate slavery and her abusive master, Rufus, in spite of her disgust, because she must save him to ensure her own birth. Each time Dana returns to the plantation, Rufus ages several years. So she witnesses his development from an innocent child to a powerful and abusive slave master. She competes with what his family and society teach him in an attempt to make him a more humane slave-owner. With forced interdependency between a modern African-American protagonist and a sometimes-sympathetic 19th century slave-owner, Butler problematizes slave ownership on an individual level. Rufus at various times sees Dana as a mother figure, a servant, and a potential lover and rape victim, while she alternates between maternal and sympathetic feelings and disgust and fear. One of the worst aspects for Dana is how easily she loses her confidence and becomes passive to the system: “How easily we seemed to acclimatize…it seemed as though we should have had a harder time adjusting to this particular segment of history” (97). Butler describes the genesis for the novel as her response to Black Power condemnation of the slaves’ servility. Dana conforms to survive.
Rufus also puts Dana in the ethical dilemma of helping him win Alice’s attention. Dana views sex between them as rape, yet she has to facilitate it to ensure her own family’s birth. To further complicate the racial interrogation, Dana begins to question her interracial marriage after she endures slavery and the constant threat of rape from white men. The novel blurs the differences in the time periods to emphasize the effects of slavery on Dana’s modern life, illustrating Mitchell’s criticism of the term “neo-slave narrative”. Aside from her problems with the word “slave” (enslaved person) and “slave narrative” (emancipatory narrative”), Mitchell believes the term for the novels should have less stress on the antecedent genre and more focus on the connections with the present. She argues “liberatory narrative” better reflects the novels’ exploration of “the construct of freedom” and the slave’s “conception of and articulation of herself as a free, autonomous, and self-authorized self” (4). The novels are not a “new” version of slave narratives but more a commentary on the present. To emphasize the relativity to the present, Alice serves as Dana’s slave double. This experimental comparison gives Dana an appreciation of her modern-day freedom, while illustrating the lack of freedom from her slave past.

Symbolizing her inability to break free of the past completely, Dana loses her arm on her last trip to the past. She gains an understanding of her slave past and a connection to her maternal ancestors, yet loses a part of herself as she abandons and stabs her white ancestor, Rufus. Dana fails to save Rufus from the corruption of slave owning, but she gains strength from witnessing the endurance of slave women, her own ancestors, whom she protects and befriends. Angelyn Mitchell reads a reconciliatory message in *Kindred* through Dana and Kevin’s struggle as an
interracial couple. As a metaphor for the legacy of slavery, they are both wounded and survive together, but only after they have confronted the past. He symbolically accompanies Dana to the past to help her survive.

Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* also connects slavery to present-day concerns and to “contemporary antagonisms between African American and white women” (Reames 114). The novel creates a space where black and white female friendship can exist in a slave setting to interrogate the complications of present-day interracial friendship. Traditionally, white writers have created an idealized kinship in characters during times of stress, but the bonds neither last nor is there lasting acknowledgement of racism. Black novelists, on the other hand, address the sexual stereotypes and competition and “present friendships that may survive when the women confront their racism” (Schultz qtd. in Reames 3). She notes, however, that these friendships fall apart when white women return to their habitual role of power.

To create a believable environment for Dessa and Rufel’s relationship to grow, Williams eliminates a white community and Rufel’s husband, “the slave-holding society and the patriarch”, as both would reinforce the racial code that Rufel has always followed (Reames 115). Rufel fits the belle stereotype as a dreamy, unrealistic girl who has no practical knowledge or skill. This begins to change when Dessa confronts Rufel about her misguided interpretation of her Mammy, suggesting Mammy had a life beyond Rufel. Dessa explodes Rufel’s perception of intimacy with Mammy by asking her if she knows Mammy’s real name. Rufel’s ignorance of Mammy’s given name forces her to reexamine her entire paradigm. Initially, both
women think they are discussing the same woman, which emphasizes the subjective and constructed nature of the mammy figure.

The novel upends the traditional assumptions of whiteness Morrison describes; Dessa has a terrible fear of the color white, both in Rufel’s room and her skin. Thinking Dessa will be thankful for her ministrations, Rufel is shocked when Dessa is scared and repulsed by her because she is white. For Dessa, whiteness takes the place of the traditional pairing of blackness and death. The nursing scene subverts the mammy image of the black breast and white child. Rufel nurses Dessa’s baby, and it unsettles the women of both races. The act connects Rufel to her own body and motherhood since she has been raised in the tradition of white womanhood to disconnect herself from her own physicality and capability. In spite of her own motherhood experience, the act of empathy and transgressing boundaries allows Rufel more self-awareness. Rufel’s transgressive act of miscegenation separates her completely from the southern belle she was at the start of the novel. Dessa facilitates that change, but unlike the previous characters in her position, she is no surrogate but has power over the situation. She chooses to engage and educate Rufel, and she narrates that process. Similarly, she narrates her own history and punctuates the story that Nehemiah is writing about her; Williams uses oppositional signifying to rewrite Styron’s “official” history of Nat Turner.

Williams also gets right to the root of the sexual competition between white and black women. Rufel makes many assumptions about the black women’s sexuality and refuses to accept that Ada’s master raped her and wanted to rape her daughter. Gradually, she concedes that she understands where the light-skinned children come
from and that she has not wanted to acknowledge white men’s attraction to black women. From the opposite perspective, Dessa exhibits jealousy and hurt when her fellow slave Nathan has an affair with Rufel. She considers him a traitor for desiring a white woman over a black one, mirroring the same feelings she has about Mammy’s love for Rufel. There are overt misconceptions on both sides of the color line, which they consciously acknowledge and discuss. The women symbolically unite when Dessa saves Rufel from a rape by a white man. Although an unrealistic premise for the time period, their dialogue about their differences provides a model for contemporary cross-racial relationships. Because they have confronted their racial difference, their friendship does not have to fade after the rape scene. To cement that they have come to see each other as individuals beyond their race, they call each other by their “real” names, Ruth rather than Rufel, and Dessa, not Odessa. They part in the end, but the possibility of their friendship provides hope for change in contemporary cross-racial interaction.

In *Beloved*, Morrison explores cross-racial friendship through Sethe and Amy Denver. Inverting the dominant image of a black “mammy” attending to a white women in times of need, Amy pauses in her own fugitive experience to tend to Sethe’s wounds and help her deliver the baby eventually named for her, “Denver”. While most white women treat the black body carelessly, Amy tenderly cares for Sethe’s wounds from the whipping and gives her the positive image of her scars as a chokeberry tree. This one positive black and white relationship continues the tradition of women uniting through birth and death, but the friendship is possible, like that of Dessa and Rufel’s, only because the women are outside of the limiting social
structure. Amy Denver’s low-class, indentured servant background and desperate situation suggest that black-white friendship is more realistic when there are no class and economic differences.

Unlike Amy, the other white characters in Beloved threaten Sethe in various ways. Mrs. Garner, the slave mistress, and Mrs. Bodwin, the reformer, treat Sethe kindly but illustrate the often self-serving and condescending nature of white philanthropy and the limitations of white understanding of slaves’ humanity. Authors of slave narratives very often had to assert their humanity to an audience conditioned to think of slaves and Africans as less than human. Morrison addresses this in her novel through Schoolteacher’s scientific cataloging of the slaves’ human vs. animal characteristics and his nephews’ theft of Sethe’s breast milk. The authors also seek to overcome commodification of women’s bodies and the division of slaves from gender identification. Characteristics of femininity were generally denied slave women. They were essentialized as “breeders” and mammies or harlots, but not wives and mothers in the conventional sense. All of the female-authored narratives of this genre focus on mothering, but Morrison’s does so most of all. By centralizing the debate of what it means to love one’s own child and the difficulty of mothering in slavery, Morrison prioritizes the restoration of gender identity and humanity to her slave characters. She frames infanticide as Sethe’s only way to have agency as a mother in a world where this most basic biological function is perverted.

As in Kindred, the lines between past and present blur to emphasize the inescapable influence of the past. Brian Finney describes Morrison’s method of encouraging participatory reading as she “positions the reader in the text in such a
way as to invite participation in the (re)construction of the story, one which is usually complicated by an achronological ordering of events” (Mitchell 89). Thus the reader participates in piecing together the fragments of the story as the characters do. Central to the text of Beloved is the idea of memory, or “re-memory” as Sethe, Baby Suggs, and the other characters attempt to acknowledge what happened to them.

Acknowledgement and “recovering” black history was a conscious objective for Morrison. In an interview about the novel, Morrison said that acknowledgement is just one of many necessary steps in reclaiming those “disremembered and unaccounted for”.

Yaeger differentiates black and white authors of the ghosts or haunting in southern literature into white writers writing about the return of the oppressed and black authors writing about the return of the dispossessed (emphasis Yaeger’s). The character Beloved represents many things, including the ignored the “disremembered”, “dispossessed”, and the legacy of slavery that cannot be repressed. She also embodies the “unspoken”, a physical manifestation of all of the horrors of slavery. Sethe must face the pain of her past before Beloved, the ghost, can rest, and they can move beyond the trauma.

Similarly, Lizzie DuBose, the protagonist of Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata, cannot fully live in the present until she acknowledges the suffering of her ancestors and accepts that their pain is part of her. As in Kindred and Beloved, Lizzie’s body becomes the physical manifestation of slavery’s legacy. As she explores her great-great grandmother Ayo’s diary and studies the quilt that tells the story of Ayo’s

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27 Yaeger, Patricia. “Ghosts and Shattered Bodies, or What Does It Mean to Still be Haunted by Southern Literature? South Central Review. 22:1 (2005), 87-108.
kidnapping, Middle Passage crossing, and terrifying slave life, Lizzie dreams the details of these events and the details of her grandmother’s life. She also exhibits stigmata, physical wounds like those Ayo received from manacles and whips. Eventually, Lizzie accepts that she is a reincarnation of her grandmother and great-great grandmother, but their spirits will not let her live her own life until she has passed their stories on, which she does in the form of a new quilt. As she and her mother Sarah make the quilt together, she ensures that their stories are remembered by all of their descendents, not just those who have “the sight”.

The new quilt that Lizzie and her mother make symbolizes the necessary fusion of the past and the present to move forward. As in *Beloved*, the quilt represents comfort and female community. Lizzie spends 20 years trying to make sense of the quilt and her ancestors’ voices by herself. Her father commits her to an insane asylum after he interprets the stigmata as self-mutilation. The asylum and the treatment are conflated with masculinity. All of the doctors are male and want to impose their own interpretations of Lizzie’s problems. The only people who recognize her reincarnated status are other “crazy” female patients. Only when she pretends to agree with her father and the male doctors, they release her from the asylum. Then she engages her aunt and her mother in constructing the collective story through the construction of the quilt, she can live in the present and move on to the future. Like Butler and Morrison, Perry emphasizes collectivity and maternity through the blurring of Lizzie’s female predecessors. Throughout the novel, the women are blurred, sometimes referred to as grandmother, other times referred to as great-grandmother, and who is mother to whom at different moments fluctuates. As she realizes and
accepts her reincarnation, Lizzie is both daughter and mother to her own mother, Sarah. The result is a not a linear masculine ancestry but a female circular one that emphasizes the communal mothering of her African and slave ancestry.

As in Alice Walker and Toni Morrison’s writing, the quilt also acknowledges the rich artistry of Lizzie’s ancestors, including the Africans. From the moment she sees it, Lizzie has a fascination with the creativity and the legacy it represents. Her ancestors have passed down a small piece of indigo cloth that Ayo’s mother made, and she returns again and again to the dream/memory of Ayo’s mother dying the cloth. When Lizzie adds the frayed, faded piece to the quilt as the finishing piece, all of their stories and fabrics are unified in one place. Lizzie states that she is ready to move on from quilt-making to a future of her own. Now that Sarah has learned the art, and in conjunction the story of their ancestors, Sarah can pass on the story with new quilts.

Telling the story of slavery through the quilt points to the inadequacy of words. Just as Lizzie gives in to the fluctuating and circular nature of her psyche and history, she accepts that she cannot explain her story in words or even make sense of it. Authors have long understood that words do not always suffice for capturing trauma accurately. Critics consider the neo-slave narratives, particularly Beloved, as coming closest to capturing the widespread holocaust and personal suffering that was slavery and illustrating the subjective and discursive nature of history through a variety of means, including the symbolism of the quilt. Although few books share the complexity of Morrison’s work, contemporary authors follow in her wake by trying to get closer to the horror of slavery in spite of the limitations of words.
V. Reparational Novels

Reparational Literature appropriates various aspects of the neo-slave narratives, particularly tropes connected to and supporting the suffering and regeneration of the black female slave body. These representative objects are generally tactile, utilitarian, and artistic. *The House Girl* uses folk paintings to trace the slave’s legacy to modern day and to express her pain and creativity. In *Stigmata*, *The Invention of Wings*, and *So Far Back*, the women pass down a tiny piece of cloth that represents their varied stories and their legacies. Including white characters in this chain, such as Sarah in *The Invention of Wings*, Lina in *The House Girl*, and Louisa and Ann in *So Far Back*, suggests that racial reconciliation is possible and that white people can access this medium of expression and reconciliation if they become empathetic to the enslaved female body and learn to “read” the tropes associated with the body.

In many of the books, seeds and flowering plants “speak for” the female characters. *The Invention of Wings*, *The House Girl*, and *So Far Back* use seeds, and flowers to illustrate female artistry, pain, strength, and legacy. Seeds sometimes bloom for later generations, in spite of trauma, emphasizing the multi-generational legacy, good and bad. In *The Invention of Wings*, these ideas manifest in the symbology of birds. The characters who are associated with birds/eggs are closer to the earth, their own bodies, and the black female community. When they go away from that, they become disconnected from female community, disembodied, and more associated with the mind, reason, and artificial structure. The flowering and the
eggs conflate the black body with regeneration. The female slave characters’ ability to transcend their dire circumstances allows for birds and flight to figure largely in all of the novels, particularly *The Invention of Wings*, which starts with a mythology of blackbirds. In *The House Girl*, Lina’s last name is “Sparrow”. And in *So Far Back*, Louisa is a bird watcher, but she learns how to empathize with the birds, and black women, too late.

The importance of these symbols is their connection to the black body. In all cases, they are either a representation of or a product of the black female body. The female black characters’ descriptions are fraught with images of bodily fluids: breast milk, urine, sweat, and tears. A focus on hair and fingernails functions similarly. Often the white characters’ descriptions are devoid of these bodily details and focus more on the mind. As the white characters become more aware of the suffering of the slaves, details of their bodies push into the text. The writers draw on the example of writers like Morrison who celebrate the body. As Baby Suggs encourages in her sermon, “In this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard… (88). The white characters who read the text of the female slave body connect and love their own bodies.

Can the authors be criticized for appropriating elements of an African American genre while they protest that type of appropriation in their characters? The danger of white writing in the African-American tradition is the lack of historical context. One can argue that a white writer cannot fully appreciate the African American experience. This argument reflects bell hooks’ criticism of white approaches to racism: “It is far easier, especially for academically trained white
women, to get an intellectual/political ‘fix’ on the idea of racism, than to identify with black female experience” (281). Attempting to appreciate cross-racial experience requires the white writer to view herself as “other”, or at least as Barbara Christian writes, recognize her own perspective as a racialized and constructed paradigm (Reames 19). Because whiteness is so often an invisible paradigm, this can be challenging for white writers. I argue, as Reames does, that reparational writers’ recognition of the lens of whiteness in their character’s development symbolizes a step towards widespread awareness of white privilege and more equality.

If we alter the view of slavery literature from a continuum to a discourse, then writers of Reparational Literature enter the conversation with something new to say, or at least with a new way of saying it from a white perspective. The novels draw on Alice Walker’s “womanist” tradition, if white writers can borrow not the blackness, but the celebration of women’s strength, love, and life, and the commitment to “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female, not separatist”. They also fit in the female pastoral tradition, and they signify the postmodern aspects of the neo-slave narratives mentioned before. Alice Walker asserts “the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer’s story. And the whole story is what I’m after”.

And yet the small pieces, especially the language in these novels, as well as in this dissertation, are challenging. In Playing in the Dark, Morrison describes “a language that can powerfully evoke or enforce hidden signs of racial superiority,

28 Walker, Alice. In Search of our Mother’s Gardens. xi.
29 Qtd in Collins, Patricia Hill. Black Feminist Thought. p. 49.
cultural hegemony, and dismissive ‘othering’ of people and language” (x). White writers are by no means free of this language, but within that reality, a focus on when “racial “unconsciousness” or awareness of race enrich[es] interpretive language and when…it impoverish[es] it” is warranted (xii). While each novel might include traces of such language and tropes of past slavery literature, overall each novel attempts to reconstruct contemporary discourse about slavery and race relations with ideas of promoting reconciliation.

In the following chapters, novels will be contextualized with several questions in mind. How are these novels continuing the tropes of 20th century conversion narratives and encoded language, particularly in relation to the black female body? How are the endings therapeutic, or in what way do they ignore the realities of contemporary cross-racial interaction? How do these novels, like neo-slave narratives, subvert the plantation myth in form and content? The four writers in my study continue some of the problems that have long existed in white-authored literature about race. In contrast, they do so more self-consciously, acknowledging violence and constructed racial difference, resulting in a more effective and comprehensive cross-racial representation.
CHAPTER TWO: VALERIE MARTIN’S *PROPERTY* 
SUBVERTING PAST TROPES

In many neo-slave narratives and the reparational novels in the following chapters, nature, motherhood, and symbols related to the female body connote hope and rebirth. These texts conclude with a sense of optimism for eliminating the divisiveness of slavery by connecting black and white women. Valerie Martin’s *Property* contrasts this hopefulness with an abrupt disconnection between slave mistress Manon Gaudet and her slave Sarah, indicating that kinship between them is not possible. Critic Amy L. King likens Martin to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, in that she “takes issue with the projection of current feminist optimism onto a complicated time and place” (212). In her words, Martin expresses disdain for trying to interpret the past with a modern perspective:

I think the current vogue of circumscribing the past within the context of our enlightened sensibilities (such as they are) is largely a result of contempt for readers, who are perceived as too weak-minded to face the fact that … our forbears were not us in the making, but rather stubborn supporters of the status quo.^[30]

Martin depends on an enlightened perspective, however; Manon’s “status quo” has meaning only in comparison to the alternative of curative female connection. In order for Manon’s selfishness, corruption, and adoption of a patriarchal slave-owning approach to make sense, Manon alienates herself from symbols of female community and hope, particularly those associated with the black female body. In spite of Martin’s words, by subverting Manon’s narration with these symbols, the text reveals

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[^30]: Qtd. in Ryan. p. 171.
a place where “enlightened sensibilities” inform the past. A contemporary understanding of patriarchy frames Manon’s rejection of Sarah as a woman and objectification of her body as “property”. A firm connection between the black female body, community, and hope is necessary in the reader’s mind to condemn Manon’s perpetuation of an alienating and masculinized status quo and her rejection of a femininity embodied by her slave, Sarah.

Critics such as King challenge the optimism of any equitable relationship between a white mistress and black slave within the power differential of slavery. Although the other novels in this dissertation present hope and possibility for cross-racial friendship, they do not suggest these relationships come easily, especially within slavery. Like Amy Denver and Sethe in Beloved, the women take positive, but small steps towards friendship. In fact, many of the books use Dessa Rose’s model, removing the hierarchy of slavery so friendship can occur. Tim Ryan sees Dessa Rose, which is so often cited for its potential for understanding between a white mistress and black slave, as having a discursive purpose rather than one aiming for historical accuracy. Martin’s novel is more grounded in realism, “lacking the postmodern discursive knowingness and self-consciousness that we find in the pages of Kindred and its ilk” (151). Martin’s novel does displace the white subject as many postmodern novels do. But without the postmodern elements Ryan mentions, Property is especially dependent on female archetypes to frame and challenge Manon’s narration. With an unsympathetic protagonist who resists empathy, female bonds, and her own body, Martin illustrates the alienation engendered in white
women by slave ownership. To function within slavery’s cruelty, Manon denies her female instincts and the healing regenerative possibility around and within her.

In Manon, Martin explores how a white female of this period justifies slave ownership and operates within its inherent abuses. In the first few pages, Manon unemotionally relates that Sarah’s newborn son was sold and her daughter will be sold as soon as she is weaned. She separates herself from any responsibility, musing, “I sometimes think Sarah blames me for her fate, though I had nothing to do with it. She sealed it herself shortly after I arrived by getting pregnant” (23). From a modern perspective, it is difficult to understand how plantation mistresses reconciled traditional nurturing feminine roles with the cruelty, abuse, rape, and separation of slavery. The solution in many slave novels is a brutal, one-dimensional, and mostly absent character. Martin departs from this tradition by using Manon’s first-person perspective as the story’s only lens, allowing for a more dynamic exploration of her relationship to slavery. Just as she watches her husband’s actions through the spyglass to learn about power, she filters the characters around her and projects emotions on them, particularly Sarah. At first, Manon seems to distance herself from the abuses of slavery. But rather than challenge “the lie at the center of everything, the great lie [we] all supported, tended and worshiped as if our lives depended on it”, Manon chooses to uphold “the lie” as her father and husband have before her (179). Manon uses Sarah’s body as a frontier to experiment with the type of male perspective and power she sees through the spyglass to perpetuate “the lie” of slavery.

The book opens with Manon as a voyeur of a voyeur. Watching her husband play an erotic and abusive game with the slaves foreshadows her eventual abuse of
Sarah’s body. As she looks on from the interior domestic space, she is both connected to and separated from the transgressive exterior, where focus is on the body and controlling the enslaved body. Manon’s use of the spyglass signals her liminal status as she fluctuates between dualities of white and black, female and male, human and animal, and mind and body. Using an artificial aid to her eyesight distances her from her own body and sets her up as hybrid. The phallic symbol also projects the masculine course that she will follow. Eventually, Manon rejects the feminine world and follows her husband and father by exerting control over Sarah’s body. Although she condemns her husband in this passage, Manon’s complicity via the spyglass is the first step in her emulation of his practices. Sarah is in the room with her, a possible ally against her husband’s abuse, but Manon cannot see her potential because of her obsession with her husband’s exhibitions of power.

Gaudet exhibits that power by forcing sex on Sarah and by fetishizing male slaves’ naked bodies. When they have erections in the game, he beats them. Gaudet claims the game demonstrates connection between blackness and animals, equating slaves to the body as opposed to white connection to the mind or “reason”. “This is what proves they are brutes, he says, and have not the power of reason. A white man, knowing he would be beaten for it, would not be able to raise his member” (4). Exerting his dominance over slaves emphasizes her husband’s freedom and eroticizes him. As he beats the slaves with the phallic stick, “The servant’s tumescence subsides as quickly as the master’s rises, and the latter will last until he gets to the quarter. If he can find the boy’s mother, and she’s pretty, she will pay dearly for rearing an unnatural child” (4). Manon and Gaudet justify brutal treatment of slaves through a
belief in hierarchies of nature. As in Jefferson’s categorizations of racial stratification in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, white men and reason are naturally superior, and blacks and their “animalistic” qualities make them inferior in mind and body, less able to reason and “unnatural”. 31

Manon is overcome with hatred for her husband, but she shares his hierarchical perspective: slaves are “fiendish brutes” (101). Watching her husband’s games, she views the black body as animalistic: “The steam made their bodies glisten and steam like a horse’s flanks after a long run” (3). Feeling she is more refined than both the slaves and her husband, Manon describes them metaphorically as animals to elevate herself. The fluctuation in Manon’s role and relationship to Sarah at the beginning of the novel emerges in her dream of hunting a fox.

As I approached the animal it opened its mouth as if panting and a high-pitched scream came out. I woke up inside that scream, which was in my room, a shriek so loud and harsh I thought a woman was being murdered outside my window (13).

With Sarah sleeping beside her, it is unclear whether the hunted and screaming woman is Manon or Sarah. Birdcages, yokes, and other images of entrapment and suffocation support Manon’s feelings of oppression as a wife in this society who must “scream” to be heard. But Manon indicates her role as hunter or oppressor as she “approaches” the fox in her dream. Throughout the text, she delineates herself from animals. She envisions Sarah as inhuman, Gaudet as a bull, Sarah’s children as “creatures”, and her mother and Sarah as snarling dogs. Her continued attempt to label animalism in those around her emphasizes her own innate animalistic tendencies and her eventual embrace of animalism and masculinity. As Manon transitions from

hunted to hunter, the woman being murdered in her dream is her own feminine self. She reinforces her evolving role in her vision of the man she sees watching her through her bedroom window. She is unsure whether he is a rebel or her husband’s sentry, but she is afraid. The next night, she soothes her fear by taking his place while Sarah is in the window. “Sarah appeared, holding her baby…She just stood there, her dress half-opened, looking down at me coolly” (42). Gaudet begins the novel as the sexual predator of Sarah’s body; Manon assumes that role and other symbols of Gaudet’s dominance and masculinity.

Manon’s body reflects this change from femininity to masculinity. In contrast with her husband who “attacks his food like a starving man”, Manon eats very little and is constantly lethargic and disembodied (8). She often feels dead, unable to move her limbs (31), and her husband encourages her to “take some exercise” (33). The drugs she takes to avoid sex accentuate her disembodiment. “I was there and not there at the same time” (56). Images of whiteness reinforce disconnection from her body and contrast images of blackness associated with Sarah. These images connect Sarah and the swamp to the unknown world. Manon fluctuates between seeing Sarah from a feminine perspective, as a comfort or a competitor, and seeing her through a masculine gaze. She uses a sexualized image of Sarah to comfort her when memories of her father’s suicide upset her. “The image of Sarah as I had seen her leaving my husband’s room filled my head, banishing these unendurable recollections” (48). The sight of Sarah coming from sex with Gaudet prompts both a physical and emotional reaction in Manon. “Her hair was all undone, her eyes bright, she was wearing a loose
dressing gown I’d never seen before and a dark mantle pulled over it” (48). Various parts of Manon’s body react:

   My head began to hammer. The room was so hot I was suffocating...It was if someone had slapped me...I gripped the table and hung my head forward, trembling from head to foot. A feeling of dread crept over me as I realized that I was laughing (49).

Sarah’s image, her blackness, her sexuality, her maternity, and her status as object affect different parts of Manon’s personality so that her body seems to be exploding as these parts struggle.

   Eventually, Manon embraces blackness in the “animal” and unnatural behavior she associates with her husband and slaves when she nurses from Sarah’s breast and then escapes from the slave revolt into the swamp. Nursing at Sarah’s breast symbolizes her rebirth. Drinking Sarah’s milk stimulates her appetite. As she “swallows greedily”, her headache disappears and her chest expands” (76). Reinforcing her newfound connection to her body, she takes charge of her salvation during the revolt. Covering her body with the mud of the swamp, as she has seen slaves do, symbolizes an “unnatural” baptism. An increased appetite and immediate connection to her body after both acts signal the change within her. As with her use of the spyglass, adopting power and transgression by crossing into the spheres of her husband and the slaves liberates her. Physical participation in her husband’s exertions of power connects her to her own body. Gaudet, and then Manon, use Sarah to reinforce masculinity and physical dominance.

   Various critics have focused on triangularity in the novel, introduced on the first page when the jealous overseer beats a field hand over a woman they both desire. Sarah and Manon form two side of a triangle in their sexual relationship to Gaudet,
although neither wants that role. At one point the two women are both twinned in the mirror, as if interchangeable. “As she leaned across me…her reflection obscured my own” (50). Because the images are reflections in the mirror, though, they reflect the split between what Manon perceives and what is real. In that moment, she can choose to be like Sarah or reject her. Controlling Sarah becomes an obsession that overcomes her ability to see herself. Meanwhile, Gaudet places himself as “the point” of the triangle relationship and what defines them in this society: “You women should think about what would become of you if I wasn’t here” (16). Manon’s descriptions reinforce this perspective as she imagines Gaudet pairing and comparing her with Sarah. During the revolt, she assumes Gaudet’s phrase “the three of us” refers to him and the two women. Her mistake reinforces her obsession with Sarah, though. Gaudet refers to the two of them and their captor, not Sarah. He focuses on defeating the rebels, while Manon is caught up in her competition with Sarah. But Manon competes with Sarah for power and freedom, not for Gaudet’s attention. Sarah wins the race for the horse during the slave revolt and escapes, just as she beats Manon to living like a man. To escape north, she travels in disguise as Mr. Maitre, the French word for master. Resentfully, Manon tells her aunt that Sarah “…has tasted a freedom you and I will never know…She has traveled about the country as a free white man” (189). Manon’s goal evolves from experiencing hierarchy indirectly as a “wife” to seizing the freedom her father and husband enjoy as “master”. Sarah’s adventure points out the inevitable failure that she faces in achieving that freedom. She strives for a masculine wielding of power, but she cannot fully give up her femininity in this strictly gendered society. Like Dana in Kindred, Manon loses use of her arm in the
swamp. Her crippled arm, like the scar on her cheek, symbolizes the damage to her femininity and a constant reminder of that part of her. In Manon’s case, this is a remnant of her damaged and crippled femininity and her inability to completely transition to a male position.

Manon does strive for “freedom” by acting like the “man” in her name. Her struggle against Gaudet for this sort of power, illustrated through Sarah’s body, eclipses the women’s rivalry. Both women despise him, but they neither compete for nor bond against him. Critic Amy L. King examines the suggestion of a “lesbian counterplot” in the novel, meaning that the female union of a triangle relationship dominates the text and overtakes a male-centered triangle to undermine patriarchy. This positive relationship allows women to “forge new identities outside of patriarchal norms” (213). King concludes that the power differential in a slave society makes it impossible for the mistress and slave to have that type of relationship. “Thus while Property extensively parallels the lesbian counterplot, the novel ultimately destabilizes the optimistic outcomes Terry Castle sees in the triangle of female desire” (213). 32 Manon’s relationship to Sarah is about power, not desire or alliance. She does not challenge society as it is because she enjoys the comfort of slave ownership. Instead, she seizes an already existent, but “unnatural” means of power. She emulates her father and her husband.

32 King paraphrases Terry Castle’s The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture.
Manon frames her relationship with these two men in triangular terms, evoking Eve Sedgwick’s description of a male-male-female relationship.\textsuperscript{33} There is no desire between Manon and her father, but in her mind, the two men compete in what Castle calls “the legal, economic, religious, and sexual exchange” of a woman.\textsuperscript{34} Every recollection of Manon’s father contrasts a description of her husband. Both men focus on her hair, her clothing, and her value as a wife, various signifiers of her femininity, so they clarify her role as “daughter” and then “wife”. Initially Manon sees these associations as her only means to power. She hates her husband, but she also enjoys the comfort of her hierarchical position as a plantation wife. “Though his ruin entails my own, I long for it…” (17). His death does mean the loss of her feminine role, but from watching him, she discovers empowerment through dominion over Sarah’s body. Denial of Sarah’s freedom reinforces Manon’s position of authority, just as her father and husband’s control over the women and slaves means domination. King points out that both Manon’s father and her husband “ultimately neglect their white women” (216). Because these men are her models, Manon, too, neglects the white women in her life, her aunt, her mother, and her own femininity.

At the start of her marriage, Manon values her femininity. Gaudet’s desire for her empowers her. She believes she has “some value, something more desirable to my husband than money” (151). She is strengthened by “some power I ha[d] over him, which must somehow accrue to my benefit” (152). She learns quickly that monetary value is more powerful than her femininity. Just as she learns about her husband’s

\textsuperscript{33} Sedgwick, Eve Kosofky. \textit{Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire}. in King. P. 212.

\textsuperscript{34} Qtd. in King, p. 214.
reinforcement of his power through sexual domination, she is a voyeur of his financial life as well. She sneaks into his office and reads his account books. “He doesn’t know I can read an account book, but I can, and I’ve been looking into his for some time now…I never speak to him about such things” (16). Initially, she compares his financial concerns to her emotional “business”. “Perhaps he’d care to have a look at my accounts: on one side my grievances, on the other my resolutions, all in perfect balance” (11). But in the second half of the novel, Manon becomes obsessed with the plantation and her parents’ accounts. Every human interaction becomes a “transaction”, taking her farther away from her body and feminine self. Peek, who represents the connection between Manon’s mother and aunt, is renowned for her healing knowledge. Manon tells her aunt, “Mother swore by her remedies” (85). Peek rotates between the sisters’ houses and in the community, depending on who needs her. Manon does not value Peek’s potential for healing or connection with her family and sees her only in monetary terms, “She wouldn’t bring one hundred dollars at sale” (85). A similar lack of emotion and personal reference in her father’s journals offends her. But she emulates him as “her accounts” change from emotional and feminine to financial, and her relationship to Sarah’s body emblematizes that change.

As Manon becomes disillusioned with her lack of control in her household and over her own body, Gaudet’s sexual authority over her body as a wife in this society repulses her: “His eyes swept over my figure in that rapacious way I find so unsettling” (10). His sexual attention causes her to drug herself and divorce herself from the femininity that attracts him. Rather than empathizing with Sarah as a similar victim, she differentiates herself from Sarah and uses her as a means to power and
escape from objectification. She adopts Gaudet’s rapacious gaze and looks at Sarah this way. “I watched her long fingers smoothing back the waves at my temple” (12) Sarah is likened to candy as she is called a “prize” (19), and Manon focuses on her “golden skin, her full pouting lips” (5). Eventually, Sarah’s body connotes monetary wealth, and thus patriarchal power, for Manon. As Manon realizes she has been a commodity and tool for men, she transfers that role to Sarah. Obsessed with denying Sarah the freedom she seeks, she goes to “considerable expense to recover what is [mine], by right and by law, and recover her I will” (171).

Turning Sarah into property, Manon blinds herself to Sarah as a person. When Sarah escapes, Manon’s aunt suggests that “she is still here among us, but we just don’t see her” (155). Manon’s aunt and uncle have finer perceptions of Sarah’s speech than Manon does, and they are able to recall details of Sarah’s clothing, and even the scar behind her ear. They know things about Sarah’s history that Manon, who has been isolated with Sarah on the plantation, has never thought to ask. This mode of not seeing or seeing part of the whole is introduced by the spyglass and reinforced throughout with images of blindness. During the slave revolt, Manon sees “the upper part of a black face with only one eye showing”. After this bizarre image, she calls attention to her own questionable perspective: “In the same moment I saw it, it slipped away, leaving me unsure of my own eyes” (105). Her body reacts to this blackness while her mind is frozen. Her eyes are unsure and she is unable to speak, but her body “has no such fatuous doubts…The blood that rushed to my brain left my knees weak and my head as clear as a street swept by a hurricane” (106). Sarah validates what Manon has seen at the door, but Manon says, “My mind was not made
easier by this revelation” (106). Manon often describes a threatening “blackness” outside of her room that, like the black man she sees watching her at the window, threatens the domestic space that she and Sarah share in her room. Confrontation with this embodied blackness presents potential for Manon to bond with Sarah against a threat, but Manon rejects alliance with Sarah.

To contrast the blackness of the swamp and the “unnatural” that Manon eventually chooses, Sarah is associated with light and lamps throughout the text. Like Manon’s use of “revelation” when Sarah sees the rebel, Sarah often has potential to lead Manon in a direction towards the other women and a positive outcome. She reflects connection, but Manon cannot “see” this. Just as the lamp connects Manon’s Mother and Celeste in grief, Sarah’s lamp suggests solidarity, but also Sarah’s potential to lead Manon to freedom or self-understanding: “Sarah came behind me, holding up the lamp so that I was outlined in light” (107). The two women stand together as the rebel looks through the spyglass as if they have united against the threat, but in her desire for power, Manon cannot see Sarah’s light. Manon sees only the parts of Sarah that reinforce her position. Manon chooses to “other” Sarah and focus what she perceives as her blackness so that she can experiment with power and transgression.

As a symbol of Manon’s limiting and defining gaze, the spyglass on the stair landing repulses Sarah. When Manon asks her to look through it at the game, she “back[ed] away as if I’d asked her to pick up a roach” (17). Instead Sarah looks down at the ground, denying Manon’s gaze. Manon’s inability to “read” Sarah as a person rather than a body worsens as the novel progresses not only because she objectifies
Sarah, but also because Sarah shields her emotions and thoughts from Manon. To her, Sarah’s face is “a mask” (16), expressionless, or “as blank as a death mask” (55). Sarah resists being a negative “text” in spite of Manon’s projections. Her impassioned speech at the novel’s end reveals all she has withheld from Manon in their relationship. Sarah also shields Nell from Manon’s gaze. In every scene with the baby, Sarah covers her or hides her from Manon. While Manon looks through the spyglass, Sarah removes her baby to a separate room. If Manon cannot see Nell, she cannot define her. Sarah’s resistance to being a passive body subverts Manon’s characterization of her.

The phallic spyglass and focus on deafness, muteness, and blindness reinforce Manon’s active denial of Sarah and the women around her. Like Cornelia, in Can’t Quit You, Baby, Manon’s narration is punctuated by “silences, habits of willed deafness and amnesia, refusals, and outright disavowals”. While Sarah tends to her baby, Manon uses the spyglass to learn what she “need[s] to know” about her husband’s abusive practices. The spyglass is one of many symbols of Manon’s narrow perspective and her inability to see what she needs to know. Looking through the spyglass, she notes, “It was an eerie scene to watch through the glass because there was no sound” (17). The moment foreshadows Manon’s rejection of the maternity Sarah represents in favor of her husband’s lifestyle. Being “deaf” to the humanity of Sarah and her children and the female community produces an eerie response in Manon, manifesting in tension between what is “natural” and “unnatural”.

Manon seemingly chooses the “unnatural” path because the “natural” paths of wife or mother are not available. However, close reading of the text reveals an alternate female model like her mother’s and a web of female connection Manon refuses to see or hear. This web connects the women to nature and each other. Manon is aware of that web and her active rejection of what is “natural” as a woman. “What sort of woman doesn’t want children?” she asks (37). This society considers a woman who is not a wife or mother unnatural. Manon’s reaction is to embrace what is perceived as “unnatural” and reject the “natural” course of wife and mother. The same tropes used in the other books, nature, motherhood, and empathy, connect the female characters and symbolize an alternate route, but Manon’s mediation of the story makes them unnatural.

As Manon becomes more corrupted, she characterizes nature, emotion, and female connection as negative. Each time Manon is part of a circle of women, whether her mother and aunt, Delphine and Rose, or Sarah and her baby, Manon breaks the circle or makes the moment strange. The most horrific example of this occurs when Manon tells Sarah to remove her sleeping baby so that she can take the baby’s milk herself. But she also physically resists groupings with the women. She refuses the comfort of the other women during the slave revolt and avoids sharing any emotional expression with them. In the beginning of the book, Manon describes herself and Sarah weeping at various moments. But emulating her husband, Manon denies emotion after his death. Joel’s emergence as a possible suitor reawakens her “natural” femininity. As she tries to deny her tears, her aunt reminds her, “There is nothing to forgive in natural feeling” (91). Her aunt’s choice of wording emphasizes
Manon’s path toward the unnatural. She embraces tropes she has perceived as unnatural in the first part of the novel, illustrating again the necessity of becoming strange to function in such an aberrant society.

Language serves as a measure of connection and difference between Manon and the other women. Manon emulates Sarah’s method of subversion through language when she interacts with Gaudet. “I looked at him for a few moments blankly, without comment, as if he was speaking a foreign language. This unnerves him. It’s a trick I learned from Sarah” (8). Manon’s ability to slip into this “language” of Sarah’s indicates the possibility of empathy with Sarah’s subjection that Manon actively rejects. Though Sarah is in her room, she longs to “pour out the tale of [my] unhappiness to someone who love[d] me, but there was no such person” (104). She registers distance between them when she sees Sarah looking at her, “her eyebrows knit as if I’d addressed her in a language she didn’t understand” (104). Delphine, Rose, Peek, and Sarah represent the healing and comfort of maternity and communities of women, but she rejects association with them. Manon is likened to a caged songbird or a bruised, unripe fruit, but she resists comfort. When the doctor suggests a child would be a comfort to her, she replies, “I am not in need of comforting” (38). Sarah’s and the other women’s potential as vehicles for connection punctuates Manon’s narrative and reveals Manon’s active self-exclusion from female community.

Various dualities reinforce this tension, particularly white and black, female and male. At the beginning of the novel, Manon associates with whiteness, femininity, the civilized city, the domestic, and interiority of the house and mind. As
her power over Sarah corrupts her, she crosses into the transgressive, symbolized by her experimentation with blackness, patriarchy, the swamp, and Sarah’s body. Just as Gaudet chases runaway slaves in the swamp to confront “blackness” and reinforce his masculinity, Manon nurses from Sarah’s breast and retreats to the swamp. She experiments with blackness and rejects it to strengthen her whiteness and maleness. Her relationship to Sarah emblematizes the dualities and tensions of her transformation from the feminine to masculine. As Manon becomes more estranged, she uses Sarah’s body to define what is natural and unnatural. Uncomfortable with her “unnatural” status in society, as neither a wife nor a mother, she defines Sarah and feminine symbols as “unnatural”. She corrupts the relationship between the feminine and Sarah’s body, maternity, breast milk, domesticity, and nature, translating them into tools of power.

The baby and Sarah’s nursing reinforce Manon’s repressed emotional side and potential for female bonds. In the nursing scene, Manon links hope to Sarah’s breast. Instead of connecting with Sarah either as a friend or lover, she “steals” milk from Nell. After her capture and return to slavery, Sarah tells Manon that Nell has died. That death represents death of any hope or connection with Sarah, and it once again symbolizes her distance from Sarah. She cannot read through Sarah’s speech to guess that Sarah has left Nell in the north to protect her from slavery. Her perspective has become even more narrow so that everything centers on her: “I’m sure they all made you feel very important, very much the poor helpless victim, and no one asked how you got away or whom you left behind” (192).
Seeing Sarah nursing Nell, Manon jars what could be a peaceful, sentimental scene by calling Sarah “a nerveless creature” and “inhuman” (42). Just as sounds of Nell breastfeeding her baby comfort Manon, “mewing a little now and then like a kitten”, Manon wonders “why she [Sarah] is so determined to suckle this one, as it will be passed down to the quarter as soon as it’s weaned and sold away when it is old enough to work. He won’t get much for her. Ugly, dark little girls aren’t easy to sell” (7). Manon translates something “natural” and uniquely female, breastfeeding and the bond between mother and child, into the unnatural terms of the marketplace. Like the mosquitoes buzzing in the room, Manon’s sentiment disrupts any domesticity or kinship between the women.

The slave revolt on the plantation seems to be the climax of the disruption of domesticity, when Manon’s husband is beheaded and she takes refuge in the swamp, embracing the male and animalistic side of herself she has denied. She says, “It was as if I had been in a foreign country, a land where madness was the rule, and returned to find nothing changed but my own understanding” (122). However, the real turning point for Manon and her vision of herself occurs after her mother’s gruesome death. Recalling the theft of Sethe’s milk in Beloved, Manon takes advantage of Sarah’s status as her property to nurse at Sarah’s breast. Her first reaction is that she feels free. Controlling and abusing Sarah’s body differentiates her. She is no longer like Sarah but instead masters her, illustrating the theory that the white subject cannot be free without the black slave to contrast that freedom. Images of white and black reinforce the moment’s significance as a confrontation with blackness to represent transgression. “The drop of milk still clung to the dark flesh of her nipple; it seemed a
wonder to me that it should” (76). In Manon’s description of “wonder”, Sarah is “othered” to further the sense of transgression. Confrontation and then rejection of blackness solidify Manon’s position of whiteness and hierarchy. When her aunt enters the room, she reinforces that whiteness, “Look, you are as white as a sheet” (77).

Manon’s act is a perversion of maternity immediately following the grotesque death of Manon’s mother. Initially, it seems that Manon seeks a mother figure. Just before Manon’s mother dies, Sarah’s maternity comforts her: “She’s found a rocking cradle somewhere which she works with her foot. Even the steady creak of this device does not disturb me; in fact it has a soothing effect, as if I were being rocked to sleep myself” (68). As Manon mourns her mother, she feels a vacuum that Sarah has potential to fill. “There was no one to help me. When Mother was alive, I had some vain hope that she might come to understand what I have had to bear and take my part, but now even that was gone” (74). She is alone, until she notices Sarah. And Sarah’s life-giving potential directly contrasts her mother’s death. As she imagines she can smell “the decay taking place in Mother’s body” in the next room, the image of Sarah’s breast milk and the peacefulness she shares with her baby punctuate Manon’s sadness and alienation (75). “And then, as if to answer me, a white drop formed at her nipple and clung there” (75). Sarah is the answer to her loneliness and offers a chance for maternal comfort.

There is also a suggestion of eroticism. “Sarah was there in the shadows, watching me. Her bodice was open, her breast exposed” (74-5). Sarah and the lamp are equated again, as if she embodies knowledge or enlightenment for Manon. “The flickering light from the lamp bronzed her skin and made her eyes glisten like wet
black stones…Her eyes closed, then she looked back at me steadily” (75). Sarah’s reaction is unclear. She seems unthreatened in Manon’s description of her peacefulness, and Manon’s projects pleasure and unity onto her. “I was aware of a sound, a sigh, but I was not sure if it came from me or from Sarah” (76). But as Manon obsesses about her husband during this act, it becomes clear that this is no consensual or maternal act, but instead a theft and a power play. She describes Sarah’s reaction:

She had lifted her chin as far away from me as she could, her mouth was set in a thin, hard line, and her eyes were focused intently on the arm of the settee. She’s afraid to look at me, I thought. And she’s right to be” (76-7).

Sarah’s status makes it impossible for her to resist, and her helplessness and fear comfort Manon in her position of mastery.

For Manon, this act is pivotal. Prior to this, there are moments of potential for Manon and Sarah to communicate and find solidarity. After this moment, Manon completely objectifies Sarah. She crosses the line from judging her husband’s behavior to emulating it. She foreshadows the symbolism of this act just before, describing Nell’s “lip-smacking” nursing sounds, “like a man savoring his meat” (72). As she sucks milk from Sarah’s breast, she does not think about sex. Instead she thinks of her husband in terms of power he exerts over her and Sarah. “This is what he does, I thought” (76). Realization of her power and the idea that she is wronging her husband exhilarates her. “How wonderful I felt, how entirely free” (76). Thinking in terms of commodity, she recognizes she is taking something her husband considers his property. “…I could see my husband in his office, lifting his head from his books with an uncomfortable suspicion that something important was not adding up. This
vision made me smile” (76). It is not Sarah who causes sexual tingling in her breasts, but rather power she has over Sarah. “‘It was for his own pleasure’, I thought” (75). Her violence towards Sarah as object of that behavior also follows the actions of her husband with the stick. She says, “If she looked at me, I would slap her” (76). Violence and control over Sarah empower her.

To detach this act from the maternal, Manon objectifies Sarah and separates her from motherhood in her descriptions. She is equated to the “faux marble” of her suitor, Mr. Roget. After Sarah’s escape, Mr. Roget and Manon barter over Sarah as if she is one of his creations. The first time she interacts with Sarah after the nursing scene, she furthers the association with marble. “She seemed to stiffen before my eyes, to become stone, even her eyes didn’t blink; it is a trick she has” (82). Manon notes that Sarah has avoided her since the night of the nursing, but she attributes this to grief over Mrs. Gray’s death and avoidance of work. To contrast the white milk, described as “a sharp, warm jet”, now Sarah becomes associated with “black”: “‘Pour me some coffee,’ I said. She picked up the pot and leaned over me, directing the hot black stream into my cup” (76, 82). In Manon’s emphasis on Sarah’s blackness and objectification of her, she obscures her maternity.

Manon’s “unnatural” act separates her from her role of “wife” and from “natural” maternity. Manon imagines that her mother watches and takes Manon’s former position as voyeur. “I could see myself, kneeling there, and beyond me the room where my mother’s body lay, yet it seemed to me that she was not dead, that she bore horrified witness to my action” (76). The act is less about what she is doing than what she is “seen” doing, so she can be viewed in a position of power. Putting
her mother in the voyeur position allows her to leave maternity and femininity behind, her former status markers. Now she is a direct agent in the application of power. She separates from her mother and from her former self. This separation is equated with weaning. Now that Manon has symbolically suckled, she can wean herself from the female world. When she returns to the plantation, her husband is still alive. His presence detracts from the independence and power of her mother’s inheritance. “The sight of him was like a door slamming in my face” (97). In the same paragraph, the difficulty of weaning for Nell reinforces the difficulty of Manon’s change from female sphere to masculine. Describing the corn bread paste, “The creature couldn’t seem to get enough of it…It would find little to be happy about in being weaned” (97). Manon says to “no one”, “I just want to turn around and go back”. But “no one” is Sarah, who is stuffing “a last bit of paste into the baby’s mouth” (98). Nell’s weaning is a metaphor for Manon’s transition.

All that is maternal becomes grotesque in Manon’s narration to cement this split between her female past and male future sphere. Her mother seems at first to be a positive role model for Sarah as a widow who has retained financial power and has created a domestic refuge. She leaves Manon the cottage she bought to be near her own ailing mother, connecting Manon to this chain of women. However, her grotesque death symbolizes Manon’s unnatural connection to motherhood. Immediately following the image of Sarah peacefully nursing her baby, Mrs. Gray dies with black fluid gushing from her mouth, nose, eyes, and ears. This gruesome death immediately follows her disappointment in Manon for not “managing better” as a wife or mother. Her mother was successful exerting her power in the domestic
sphere, but she sees Manon as a failure. In her last words, she articulates Manon’s disconnection with the female world as she sees it: “You neglect your duties and so you have no control in your own house” (69). Although Manon experiences financial and domestic independence with her inheritance from her mother, she rejects her mother as a role model. “And then it struck me that I had actually turned into my mother. My husband was dead, I lived in her house, I was getting fat, and my hope for the future was that soon I would be giving little dinners for people who pitied me” (173). She dreads the path of dependency: “the widowed aunt, sulking about with an embroidery hoop, called up to play the piano when the young people want[ed] to dance” (138). Her mother’s investments allow her to choose the path that most resembles male autonomy, but she still condemns her mother.

Instead, Manon connects to her father. Pointing to her father’s portrait, which looks like her, she tells Mr. Roget, “I have tried to follow his example” (168). Opening his diary, Manon has a visceral reaction, “[A] shiver of pleasure ran along my spine” (86). Her father’s journal lacks emotion and focuses on the transactions of the plantation: bills, weather, crops, sicknesses, provisions, etc. At first, Manon is disappointed, “No mention of Mother or me, as if we didn’t exist” (87). But as she becomes more masculinized, she, too, rejects emotion and embraces the business of ownership. She regrets her childhood self, “so passionate, so terrified, weeping like a fool and calling out” (182). Instead she negotiates over Sarah with Mr. Roget, whom she admires for his “quality of appraisal and assurance, and she becomes his “worthy opponent” in these transactions (166, 169). She trivializes her mother’s criticisms of her father. “What precious little failing was he guilty of that my mother could not find
it in her heart to forgive? Did he fail to consult her wishes in every matter that concerned her comfort?...Did he fail, perhaps, to bring her some present?” (88). Aunt Leila tries to defend her sister against Manon’s criticisms by pointing out Mr. Gray’s weaknesses. At this point, Manon has chosen her father and husband’s life and she refuses to empathize with her mother’s complaints. “I felt perfectly dry-eyed at the thought of Mother weeping to her sister because her husband turned away from her in bed” (176).

Manon’s aunt serves as another mother figure that Manon ultimately rejects in favor of masculinity. Sarah is a gift from her aunt, connecting Manon to a community of women and female life. Both her aunt and her mother want Manon to be a mother: “My childlessness had long been a source of vexation to my aunt; she had joined Mother in urging me to seek medical counsel” (157). Children represent a language of emotion and female connection that Manon cannot access. She tells Manon, “If you had children of your own, you might understand”, and “It has left you with a cold heart” (176). Aunt Leila has a loving and supportive relationship with her sister and thinks of Manon as “her last child” (157). References to an affectionate and positive sex life with her husband suggest Aunt Leila is also confident and connected to her own body. As her marriage deteriorates, Manon no longer recognizes her aunt’s house as a happy retreat or these women as a source of happiness and comfort. Instead, she has come to connect emotion to property. “The furnishings, the paintings, the carpet in my aunt’s drawing room all reminded me of happier times” (85). Happiness is tied to possessions and consumerism: “It seemed that happiness must always be just beyond me and I should always stand gazing in at it as through a
shopwindow where everything glittered and appealed to me, but I had not enough money to enter” (148). Manon separates the emotional, domestic, and feminine sphere from the commercial and masculine sphere.

The church also separates the masculine and feminine worlds. Manon’s mother, aunt, and sister-in-law are Catholic, and images of Mary reinforce the domestic and maternal worlds of these women. Church represents female community. Her aunt suggests church as comfort to her grief, saying, “Everyone will be there” and “I don’t know how you manage without the consolation of religion”. But Manon differentiates herself in her mourning from the other women, replying, “Yet I do” (82). Gaudet assigns prayer as a wifely duty, asking Manon to pray for rain and then pray for it to stop raining. But Manon, like her father, believes “there is no Supreme Being who hears our prayers” (49). She resents those who tell her that her mother’s death is part of a plan as she resists being part of the domestic plan for women. Mr. Gray’s example sets Manon up to use Sarah as a tool: “Religion was for the negroes, he said; it was their solace and consolation, as they were ours” (22). She rejects religion as a solace but uses Sarah as a “consolation”, like a prize she has won from her husband to cement her position. Most importantly, scenes of Sarah nursing her baby call to mind images of the Madonna. Rejecting religion, like the men, reinforces Manon’s differences from Sarah and the naturalized Christianity and motherhood she evokes.

Aside from being a wife and mother, the signifiers of the feminized world Manon gives up are domestic and often connected to Sarah. Manon emphasizes furnishings in all of her descriptions. While Gaudet’s possessions make his office
“like every other planter’s office in the state”, her mother and aunt’s houses and New Orleans are feminine spheres, emblematized by the domesticity of her mother and aunt, their female slaves, and their possessions (8). Initially Manon sews with the women, but after her Mother’s death she is “tired of the sewing” (71). Immediately after the nursing, as she sews her mother’s death shroud with her aunt, Manon is “ripping out as many stitches as [she] put in” (78). After the swamp, Delphine, Rose, and Dr. Landry stitch her wounds. The doctor reinforces her new position: “I’ve seen soldiers who could not hold up as well as you” (123). Like sewing, Manon also connects with her aunt and mother through the act of drinking coffee and tea. So the china teacup connects her and later separates her from other women. As she enjoys a cup of tea with her aunt, “[E]ven the leafy pattern on the saucer in my lap seemed designed especially to please me” (85). The reference foreshadows Sarah’s enjoyment of this female ritual. But Manon’s focus on herself and things that are designed to please her will not allow her to admit or even imagine including Sarah. Sarah uses this domestic act of drinking tea to illustrate the female connection that Manon eschews.

The table serves as a liminal symbol like the spyglass and Sarah’s body. Men eat heartily, drink heavy alcohol, and are served by women. Sarah is primarily linked to nourishment in the novel, but as mistress, Manon often serves her husband and Joel. After Manon has taken her husband’s role, nourished by Sarah’s milk, Joel and other characters serve her. A connection to the china cups and milk further feminizes him. “’Let me serve you,’” he said, getting up. He busied himself with the cups and saucers, pouring the coffee and milk together expertly and talking all the while”
(147). When she is with her husband, Manon drinks coffee, but as she assumes his role, she drinks “strengthening” brandy, while her aunt drinks a “berry cordial” (91). Gaudet, like every other planter, keeps a “cabinet stocked with strong drink” (8). The first time she imagines assuming patriarchal power, she drinks port. She tells Sarah, “Pour me a glass of that port the gentlemen found so edifying” (44). She has heard of a woman who succeeded in divorcing and suing her husband for money. The possibility of crossing into the patriarchal sphere becomes more realistic for her.

As Manon becomes more like Gaudet, Joel serves as her feminized counterpart. Joel is a planter, like Gaudet, but the men “consider him a fop and a dandy” (12). Manon also associates him more with women. “He has a bevy of old ladies who adore him; my mother is one” (25). As a former suitor, Joel represents Manon’s potential for maternal feeling. She thinks, “With Joel, I would have had children” (27), but after the nursing moment, he becomes brotherly. At her first meeting with Joel after the revolt, she tries to assume her former role as a “giddy” girl with a suitor, but she is “sadly changed”. The change refers to her crippled arm and scar, which make her more masculine. Joel asks, “After what you have been through…how could you not be changed?” (146). He and her uncle look at her not “rapaciously” as Gaudet had, but with “fascinated admiration” (146). Initially, Joel reinforces her femininity as a connection to her mother and feminized symbols such as New Orleans. Finally his femininity, like Mr. Roget’s, emphasizes Manon’s budding masculinity. His nails are “neatly trimmed”, and his “features” are “pleasing…the lashes thick for a man” (166). When Joel invites her to dance at his wedding, her femininity and potential maternity are completely behind her.
Symbolized by her crippled arm, which “hung like a dead animal at my side”, Manon has reminders of her feminine self, but that part of her life is essentially dead (181).

Manon also perverts the feminine and domestic symbol, the quilt. Using the feminine motif of the quilt as a metaphor for constructing a story and perspective, Manon recounts the slave revolt: “It was hours before I spun together the threads of various stories and produced a credible fabric” (123). Her habit of using and then discarding femininity for her own comfort appears here. “I hardly cared, but it was a kind of sewing, and I used it, as usual, to keep my mind off my own suffering, which was intense” (123). Manon’s appropriation of the quilt is not positive and connective as in the other novels. Instead, here, it functions as a metaphor for her theft of Sarah’s body and femininity as she resigns her to nothing but “property”. The quilt references Sarah’s connection to her baby because she uses a rag quilt to protect Nell from mosquitoes. The revelation that the quilt belonged to Manon’s mother further connects Sarah and Nell to a female community that Manon is not part of. But the quilt also frames Manon’s deafness and Sarah’s language pushing through that deafness. As Manon sews and thinks of her hatred for her husband, Sarah tears cloth to make a quilt, just as she makes tears in the fabric of Manon’s story. Manon notes, “the repetitive whine of the tearing silk punctuated my musings” (54). Similarly, Sarah’s baby makes noises that remind Manon of the female sphere that Sarah and her body represent and potential for female connection. She wonders about Sarah, “Did she share my timid wish that it might put her master in danger? I could not ask this question, yet I had a desire to hear her speak” (55).
Yet Sarah speaks in a way Manon resists hearing. When discussing Walter’s deafness, which is a mirror for Manon’s deafness, Manon cannot read Sarah’s expression, which is “blank as a death mask”. Further connecting her to the domestic sphere, Sarah uses cloth as a language. “Does that one hear?” I [Manon] asked, gesturing to the baby. For answer, Sarah laid the cloth in her lap, turned towards the creature, and clapped her palms together, making a sharp crack like a shot… ‘Why not just answer me?’ I protested”. Using a language Manon resists allows Sarah some control. Rather than answer Manon in words, Sarah pulls the hem of the skirt “in one long shriek” (55). Manon does not want to hear Sarah, but rather wants Sarah to hear her and reinforce her mastery. After she recaptures Sarah, she chides her for escaping and leaving her behind. “She was listening to me, I thought, which gave me an odd sensation” (192). Manon needs Sarah because she needs an audience, not a friend.

Walter has potential to connect Sarah to Manon. Manon believes they have a common perspective about Walter, Sarah and Gaudet’s son, as she notes that Sarah “didn’t appear to enjoy the sight [of the “beautiful and vicious little wildcat”] much more than I did” (5). Rather than tapping into Sarah’s nurturing possibility, Manon pushes her away and further denaturalizes her maternity by focusing on Walter’s monstrosity. Manon cannot see Walter as a symbol of trauma for Sarah. Instead, she interprets him as a tool used by Sarah to embarrass her. She asks, “Did you send Walter in to get even with me or with him?” (30). As a product of rape, Walter serves as a symbol of what is unnatural in slavery, and his deafness reinforces Manon’s deafness. Manon’s eventual adoption of Walter signals her union with the unnatural and her ‘willed deafness’. Once Manon has crossed into a patriarchal role, she can
embrace Walter. Prior to that, he repulses her. He is the grotesque figure in the book, a reminder of rape and miscegenation like the octoroon women Manon refers to as “grotesque dolls”. Manon is disgusted by the thought of Joel in the house with the octoroon, where he is “the master, yet no guest ever came” (162). In embracing what is unnatural, Manon uses Sarah and Walter to ensure her mastery. Walter becomes her pet, “like a cat, I thought, always seeking comfort or making trouble, immune to all commands” (183). She has assumed Gaudet’s role of indulging his wildness. But Walter also signals the power Gaudet has over the plantation. Not only has he forced sex and a child on Sarah, but he has also forced Manon to live with and condone his behavior. Manon’s adoption of Walter signifies her seizure of Gaudet’s power.

In a semblance of racial crossing, Manon goes into the swamp like Gaudet and takes what she needs of “blackness” to reinforce her position of power. She has had both a fear and a fascination about the “blackness” outside her window. “It was like looking into the inkwell. I could make out the shape of the oak, but only as texture, like black velvet against black silk” (44). From inside the house, she still has a feminine perspective and a “white” perspective: “I thought my white shift, my light hair, made me visible” (44). As she crosses outside and looks back from the swamp as a voyeur, confronting that blackness masculinizes her. Throughout the novel, the swamp and forest are made monstrous as Manon describes, “the lizards, snakes, and every kind of beetle the swamps can disgorge” (20). She says the forest “swallowed up” the runaways. And Walter and his “grotesque babbling and clatter” remind her of the swamp because he plays there. Skewed forms of nature represent her unnatural rebirth as she comes out of the swamp. “The sun broke over the roof of the house,
bathing the scene with a freshness utterly inappropriate to what it exposed” (119).

Referencing her color and gender changing, two chameleons rush by her. One eyes her, “once from each side of its head”. Connecting the chameleon to her new freakish world, she thinks, “A world of idiots and monsters…and I left to tell the tale” (119).

Walter further represents this monstrous world. When Manon hesitates about which path to take, Walter leads. Walking in his tracks, she connects to her new grotesque position as a woman assuming patriarchal power.

When Manon actively rejects the feminine world, giving up her status as a potential wife to Joel, making breast milk unnatural is her metaphor for her “unnatural” assumption of male power. She traces the corruption of slavery to the act of breastfeeding, pointing to the disconnection that begins at birth with the basic function of the mother being given to a wet nurse. “But it wasn’t their mother’s milk, I corrected myself. Perhaps that was how the poison entered us all, for even the quadroons were too vain to suckle their own children and passed their babies on to a servant” (180). Manon’s act of “suckling” at Sarah’s breast makes her poisoned and unnatural. Manon further distances herself from motherhood. “Never, I thought. Not me. Let Alice McKenzie have a houseful of Joel’s screaming babies; better her than me. I would hold fast to my independence as a man clings to a raft in a hurricane. It was all that saved me from drowning in a sea of lies” (180). Manon views the masculine course as the only way to survive.

Manon’s self-imposed exclusion from the community of woman becomes final when Joel, her only hope as a suitor, marries a rich, younger woman. Throwing away romantic notions of Joel and recognizing her misplaced idealization of her
father, Manon actively assumes a male role and focuses all of her attention on controlling Sarah. After the extensive descriptions of the Louisiana heat, the sudden cold weather reinforces Manon’s change. Her separation from the women reflects in her position at her desk. “I could hear the women struggling with the window in Mother’s bedroom” (183). The window will not close because she has “left” her Mother’s bedroom for good. This transition is painful. “My head was bursting. It felt as if an iron collar, such as I have seen used to discipline field women, were fastened around my skull” (182). The masculine role means she has dominion over the “field women” and Sarah, but it also limits and confines her. As she thinks of her husband, she feels as if he is “turning the screw of the hot iron collar tighter and tighter until [my] skull must crack from the pressure” (183). Assuming the role of her husband, she embraces what she has condemned before, with Walter as a symbol of abuse and miscegenation. She makes him her pet, like a dog or cat. Recalling her husband’s voracious appetite for food, sex, and power, Manon begins to eat like Gaudet. Although it hurts her to eat after the swamp, she is “ravenous” (125). The spyglass also reinforces Manon’s change. After her husband’s death, “[T]he spyglass was dismantled and lay in pieces on the carpet” (134). Manon no longer needs the tool of voyeurism, as she is directly involved in the practices of her husband.

What happens to Manon when she resists the body and the community of women? Manon is cut off from and then chooses to be cut off from female community. She cannot witness or give testimony. The book’s opening line, “It never ends”, seeming refers to her husband’s cruelty, but it also prophesizes her role in carrying on his cruelty after his death. Over and over, Manon resists the web of
connection the communities of women offer her. Although Manon has opportunities to interact with Sarah as a woman rather than as a slave, she rejects those opportunities in favor of retaining power. Rather than seeing Sarah and her mother as allies, Manon lumps them with other repressive agents in her life. At the end of the novel, she dreams she is running to escape the revolt, but someone is holding her back. “Sometimes it was my husband, sometimes Sarah, sometimes a man I didn’t know. Once I turned to find Mother clawing at me, her teeth bared like a wild animal” (192). Making her mother and Sarah “unnatural” reflects the changes within Manon as she both projects and pushes away from these women. Because these women cannot communicate or support each other in death and motherhood, the strange status quo of slavery and bodily abuse continues. Both women have potential to form community, support each other, and obey maternal instincts, but slavery causes Manon to reject her natural instincts. Although the ending is pessimistic, Martin makes it clear the system is at fault.

Manon survives by perverting her feminine and maternal tendencies and refusing to listen to feminine influences in her life. In the end, she rejects influences of her mother, her aunt, and Sarah, and chooses the “unnatural” practices of her husband and other male slave-owners to exert power. The corruptive nature of that power separates Manon from female tropes of regeneration and the prospect of change. At the close of the novel, Sarah’s reminiscence of drinking tea with the white Quaker woman presents the possibility of positive cross-racial kinship in a domestic space. But Manon’s mediation of that memory renders it hopeless by making the
everyday act of two women drinking tea together seem strange. The novel ends with Manon’s inability to see what other women see.

I considered this image of Sarah. She was dressed in borrowed clothes, sitting stiffly at a bare wooden table while a colorless Yankee woman, her thin hair pulled into a tight bun, served her tea in a china cup…It struck me as perfectly ridiculous. What on earth did they think they were doing? (192-3).

Fully absorbing the alienation of slavery, Manon refuses a new way of interacting with Sarah. By making typical tropes of femininity and motherhood unnatural, the novel indicts slavery for separating women from their instinctive tendencies and from each other. As in the other novels, association with hope and connection are female. Manon’s exclusion from female tropes is the tool that explains her lack of hope for new modes of connection and therefore her perpetuation of the social order. Martin’s novel may seem to be a continuation of the 20th century model of white female writing on race with a white writer who uses a black character for her own development. However, by subverting Manon’s centrality and illustrating the possibility of hope embodied by Sarah that Manon rejects, Martin moves toward reparation by calling attention to the same racial difference and white “positionality” found in the other 21st-century Reparational Literature.
CHAPTER THREE:  
SUE MONK KIDD’S *THE INVENTION OF WINGS*  
NEW MODES OF RELATING

In *Property*, Martin critiques slaveholding society by fleshing out the story of a stereotypical slave mistress, her intimate relationship with a female slave, and her alienation from the body. With Manon, she does not try to create a new type of character but instead interrogates a well-known archetype, reflecting on the corruptive nature of power. In *The Invention of Wings*, Sue Monk Kidd takes a different perspective, using one of the few slave-owning women who openly challenged the status quo of patriarchal slave society. The chapters alternate between the first-person narrations of her character Sarah Grimké, based on the real life abolitionist and suffragist, and Handful, who is given to Sarah as a personal slave for her 11th birthday. Balancing viewpoints, Kidd attempts a broader examination of mistress-slave dynamics than Martin does in *Property* with Manon’s limited view. Handful’s perspective furthers Sarah’s character development, but Handful’s characterization is equally important. Handful’s reconnection with her family mythology and connection to nature and her own body inspire Sarah to change herself and the world around her. Like Martin, Kidd makes a feminine connection between nature and the body to define empathy and community. The use of art and nature in relation to the female body allows her to frame Sarah and Handful’s very different experiences growing up in slavery. The same tropes bring them together and represent their understanding of one another. Sarah’s access to nature and female
community embodied by Handful allows her to grow and rise above the restrictions of her gender and slavery.

Slavery is repugnant to Sarah at an early age. She receives Handful, whose slave name is “Hetty”, as a birthday gift, but tries to give her back. She says, “Give Hetty back. As if she was mine after all. As if owning people was as natural as breathing. For all my resistance about slavery, I breathed that foul air, too” (16). By interrogating what is considered “natural” in this society, Sarah opens up a space for a new definition of natural. She learns to differentiate Handful’s natural world, connected to the body and outdoors, from her highly constructed background. Sarah illustrates how out of step she is with her background when she asserts the equality of the slaves to her family:

By law, a slave was three-fifths of a person. It came to me that what I’d just suggested would seem paramount to proclaiming vegetables equal to animals, animals equal to humans, women equal to men, men equal to angels. I was upending the order of creation” (145).

Sarah supplements her changing viewpoint with images of Handful that remind her of their common childhood and evoke empathy in her. The images recall Handful’s enslaved position as well as the tools she uses to rise above her status:

…wearing the lavender bow on her neck…learning to read…sipping tea on the roof…taking the lash…[W]rapping the oak with stolen thread. Bathing in the copper tub. Sewing works of pure art. Walking bereaved circles (145).

Identification with Handful leads Sarah to see the negative effects of slavery on the slave and slave-owners in a way the other characters cannot. She realizes, “I saw everything as it was” (145). For Sarah, the feminized tropes associated with Handful, such as her legacy of creativity, ethos of hope, and ties to nature help her define her own position as a white female in the slave South. Throughout their lives, Handful’s
body and associated symbols prompt epiphanies in Sarah that propel her towards a more contemporary paradigm of equality.

Like Manon, Sarah Grimké finds freedom from the limits of a male-dominated, slaveholding society by assuming a patriarchal role. She uses Handful’s slave body to delineate that role. She differs from Manon, though, in that she does not perpetuate the status quo but attempts to change it. Also, from an early age, she has compassion for the slaves, hampered only by her privileged experience. Sarah’s difference from Manon is foreshadowed through the ritual of tea. Manon finds sitting down to tea with her slave a ridiculous notion. Her reaction to this “communion” excludes her from the sensibilities of a modern audience. Sarah Grimké and Handful, however, experience their greatest intimacy as little girls drinking tea together. Recalling the relationship of Dessa and Rufé, they shift the power differential between them by sharing secrets and bonding against threats. Handful invites Sarah into intimacy by asking her to call her by her “basket name”, Handful, rather than by her slave name, Hetty. The name “Handful” more accurately reflects her personality and the relationship with Sarah. Sarah and the other white characters attempt to define or contain her, but they are unable to because of the strength she derives from nature and female community. Parts of her “spill out” or are beyond the control of the slave system. Sarah has to work through the hegemonic lens of her background, but she eventually sees Handful as a friend and sister and she respects that there is a part of Handful she can never fully access.

The path to friendship is complicated though. Remembering the tea party, Sarah realizes the moment was “the closest thing to purity the two of us had ever
found. I tried to hold the picture in my mind, to breathe it back to life, but it
dissolved” (250). The only way Sarah can breathe the life back into the relationship
and restore a sense of equality to Handful is to risk her life to free Handful from
slavery. Although Kidd’s book ends with the two women escaping on the boat,
Manon’s final image of a white woman drinking tea with her slave, Sarah, in
*Property*, could be a postscript for Sarah Grimké and Handful’s story as they return to
the childhood moment of “purity”. Neither Handful nor Sarah can escape their
oppression without the purity of female community. While Mrs. Grimké interprets the
slaves’ laughter in the kitchen as a sign of their happiness, Sarah recognizes that their
“gaiety” and community are necessary to their survival in a repressive society (48).

The tea and the title, *The Invention of Wings*, suggest that collaboration and
empathy between the two women will resolve the plot. Handful connects female
community and her maternal legacy to the bird imagery when she remembers the
story of the bird funeral. Her mother and grandmother witnessed seven crows circling
a dead crow. The birds are “carrying on, not caw caw, but zeep, zeep, a high-pitched
cry like a mourning chant” (236). Handful’s great-grandmother links this to empathy
and legacy, telling Handful’s mother, “See, that’s what birds do, they stop flying and
hunting food and swoop down to tend to their dead. They march round it and cry.
They do this so everything know: once this bird lived and now it’s gone” (236). The
slave women look to nature for examples rather than looking at their masters. Many
of the rituals Handful and Charlotte carry out are to commemorate their ancestors and
themselves in a society that erases evidence of their existence. At Denmark Vesey’s
hanging, Handful is the only witness. She marks his grave with a piece of red thread
on a tree nearby in the same manner she and her mother decorate their spirit tree. Recalling the bird funeral, she says, “I cried my tears and said his name” (261). Just as the birds depend on community and ritual, these women do the same, making sure the names and legacies survive.

Handful introduces the legacy of wings, flight, and freedom in the first passage when she tells the mythological stories of her people’s wings and the stars falling from the sky. The slave women are conflated with symbols of nature, while the slave-owners, supporting such an unnatural system, are distanced from nature. Stars falling from the sky reflect the perversion of nature that slavery promotes. Kidd presents the black body as the means to enlightenment in the first two paragraphs of the novel, suggesting that Handful’s shoulder blades are vestigial wings and that eventually she will regain her wings and be free. Handful finds freedom in the end, and because Sarah has learned to read and value Handful’s body and its language of freedom, Handful and her body are also the means to white Sarah’s freedom. In the fourth paragraph, Kidd lays out Sarah’s place in the sky mythology that Charlotte uses to give her daughter agency. Sarah is likened to the sun, which “looks like a little white button stitched tight to the sky” (3). Handful changes a button from a symbol of repression to a symbol of freedom for Sarah, and Sarah attaches herself to Handful’s body like a button, clinging to the self-awareness and mythology that it represents. Although Sarah evokes the wing imagery to describe the two Grimké sisters, “Nina was one wing, I was the other” (308), it is Handful and Sarah who finally “fly” when they learn how to complement each other. The two women have to work together because it takes two wings to fly, and that is how Handful finally escapes slavery and
Sarah escapes her guilt and the limits of her slave-owning heritage. The word “invention” is key because the two women have to create a language, a mode of interaction that does not exist for a white slave-owner and black slave at this time.

The priority of symbology as a language for these two to communicate is clear from the beginning. The limits of spoken language in the expression of trauma reflect in Sarah’s stammering after she observes a slave beating as a 4-year-old child. Witnessing the event robs her of speech for a week. Afterwards, she stammers until she finds power in herself through Handful’s example. As a child, Sarah finds solace in reading; she dreams of books in her sleep. Similarly, Charlotte and Handful use the language of quilts and nature for comfort and legacy. As girls, Sarah communicates with Handful by teaching her to read; Handful reciprocates by revealing the symbology of the quilt and nature with Sarah. Early on, the two recognize the importance of symbols. Sarah asks Handful, “Do you know how an object can stand for something entirely different than its purpose?” (59). For Sarah, the button represents her goals and dreams. For Handful, the tree, the quilts, the triangles, and the blackbirds offer escape and hope. The result is that both women “invent” wings through alternate modes of expression to retain a sense of self in a repressive slave society. Sarah’s admittance into the language of Handful and her female line frees her from the problematic language that frames and supports slavery.

The button serves as a personal symbol for Sarah and as a connective symbol to Handful and Charlotte. Charlotte initially sews the dress for Sarah’s birthday and attaches the “large silver button with an engraved fleur de lis” (21). Sarah equates the uncommonly beautiful button to her uncommonly feminine dream of accessing the
patriarchal library and legal profession of her father and brothers. Like the society they live in, this symbol is complex, representing both Sarah’s dreams and her hierarchical status. “The sterling button took on everything that transpired that night—the revulsion of owning Hetty, the relief of signing her manumission, but mostly the bliss of recognizing that innate seed in myself” (21). When her dreams are dashed, she throws the button in the fire, but Handful salvages the button for its utility. As the regenerative forces in Sarah’s life, Charlotte gives her the button and Handful restores Sarah’s “seed” and dream to her so that it can grow. The button is also like the seed that Charlotte planted in Sarah as a girl that she would help free Handful, propelling her toward her calling as an abolitionist.

For Handful, symbology means the black triangles her mother Charlotte uses in her quilts to represent blackbird wings, the spirit tree, and the thimble that her mother stole. For Charlotte and Handful, the symbols on the quilt, the spirit tree, and the stolen thimble represent the ability to resist and subvert and keep their dreams alive. The button represents repression for Sarah when her father and other patriarchal forces dash her dreams. Through the example of the enslaved women, Sarah eventually finds her voice within a community of women and she is able to view her button as a symbol of her irrepressible spirit and dreams as Charlotte and Handful do with their symbols. Handful returns the button to her in a symbolic gesture of admitting her to the female community of subverting oppression.

In addition to her critique of slavery within her own household and city, Sarah protests the hypocrisies and hierarchies of religion in her childhood Anglican Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Quaker church where she trains to be a minister. She
concludes that her opinions come from God “who [was] proving to be more insurrectionary than law-abiding” (145). But the real impetus for her paradigm shift is Handful’s body. She can only “see everything as it is” through “a rush of pictures…all of them Handful” (145). Focusing on Handful’s body as she dresses, picks flowers, sews, and bathes causes moments of self-realization and inspiration in Sarah. In Philadelphia, jealous of Lucretia Mott and the women who have found their “belonging”, Sarah despairs over her own lack of direction. At that moment, Handful’s letter arrives, detailing Charlotte’s return and the many scars she has on her body. The timing of the letter signifies that Handful is Sarah’s “purpose in life” (274). Handful’s letter and the language of scars that it insists upon prompts a childbirth moment in Sarah as she “gives birth” to her calling as an abolitionist. As she focuses on the button Handful returned to her, she describes her seed of hope; like a pregnancy, her “heart is full”. She describes the destiny “inside of me” and says it is like “an oak tree inside an acorn”. She continues, “I’ve been filled with a hunger to grow this seed my whole life”, and she attributes the start of this growing destiny to the day she and Handful first met, when Handful was given to her as a slave (278). When Handful sleeps outside her door that night, Sarah has her first “epiphany”, never having noticed this arrangement before. The seed is planted this day.

I couldn’t have explained then how the oak tree lives inside the acorn or how I suddenly realized that in the same enigmatic way something lived inside of me---the women I would become---but it seemed I knew at once who she was (20).

Handful’s body provides the “seed” for Sarah’s development and break with the repression of slavery. Sarah prays, “Please God, let this seed you planted in me bear fruit” (21). Handful embodies that seed and fruit. Handful and Charlotte’s bodies at
once represent the trauma of slavery that produces guilt and empathy in Sarah and also the inspiration to collaborate and heal.

Each time Sarah takes a step towards her calling as an abolitionist, Handful and Charlotte are the prompts. The day after Charlotte is caught stealing the cloth from Mrs. Grimké, Sarah teaches the slaves the alphabet at Sunday school. She thinks of trauma to Handful’s body as she defies the minister. “The memory of [Hetty] that day when Mother caned her flashed through my mind, and I raised my chin and glared at him, without answering” (42). Sarah uses Handful’s body as a touchstone or polestar, even when she is in the north. After Handful’s beating, Sarah feels her pain. While Nina touches “the crusting scar that flamed across Handful’s skin”, Sarah looks up at the “spreading” tree, and “the leaves feathering on the branches like little ferns” (169). The pain of Handful’s body branches out in Sarah’s body. As she watches Handful walk, “her body listing heavily to the left”, she realizes, “I was listing with her” (169). In the final scene, she symbolically clutches Sarah’s arm while her past and the society she has known recede. “…Sarah put her hand on my arm and left it there while the city heaved away…” (359) Handful’s body prompts Sarah’s transition and becomes her support.

Handful’s body symbolizes nature, fertility, and female collaboration. In tune with the birds and in charge of the eggs and fruit, Handful, like Charlotte, is connected to flight and fecundity. As a girl, she dreams that she is part of nature and the quilts that she and her mother create.

Vines hung around my arms. Scuppernongs fell alongside my face. I was the girl sleeping, but at the same time I could see myself like I was part of the clouds floating by, and then I looked and saw that the arbor wasn’t really an arbor, it was our quilt frame covered in vines and leaves (51).
The quilt frame is their “guarding angel”, while the tree is the repository of their spirits and protection from the sun and prying eyes from the big house (15). The quilts and the tree connect them to their African and maternal legacy. Charlotte’s mother was kidnapped from Africa as a girl. She came from the Fon people and a long line of women who appliquéd animal designs into quilts. The women sewed charms into the quilts for protection. The spirit tree serves a similar protective purpose. Like the Fon, Charlotte and Handful wrap the trunk with thread to protect their spirits, which they have put into the tree for safekeeping. The spirits “live in the tree with the birds, learning to fly”. Her mother instructs her, “If you leave this place, go get your spirit and take it with you” (53).

Both the tree and the quilts become interchangeable with the women’s bodies and stories. The women wear pouches around their necks that are filled with leaves and twigs from the tree. They cut pieces of their hair and put them into the pouches and stitch them into the quilts. While Sarah gives a lock of hair to the inconstant Burke Williams, a would-be suitor, Charlotte and Handful do not “give away” pieces of themselves. They use the power of their own bodies to strengthen themselves. When Handful finally pieces together the quilt squares to make her mother’s “story quilt”, she cuts all of her hair off to make part of her body the stuffing for the quilt. Then she wraps it around her like a “glory quilt” (148). When there is a threat of fire, Charlotte tells Handful, “You save the [quilt] squares cause they pieces of me same like the meat on my bones” (127). Handful misses Charlotte when she escapes, but she finds her in the places they have identified with. “Don’t think she wasn’t in every stitch I worked. She was in the wind and the rain and the creaking from the rocker.
She sat on the wall with the birds and stared at me. When darkness fell, she fell with it” (146). Years after Charlotte escapes, Handful forgets the details of her mother’s face. “…[m]auma came to my mind, and the picture I had of her was washed-out like the red on a quilt after it’s been boiled too many times” (235). To refresh her memory, she goes to the spirit tree. “That’s where I felt mauma the sharpest, in the leaves and the bark and dropping acorns” (235). The tree is so connected to Charlotte that it loses its leaves when she escapes. When Charlotte dies, Handful wraps herself in the story quilt and goes to the spirit tree to retrieve her spirit. Recalling the crow funeral, Handful says, “High in the limbs, the crows cawed. The doves moaned. The wind bent down to lift her to the sky” (304). When Handful’s much younger sister Sky appears towards the end of the book, she fits into this symbology. “She was like the trunk of a tree, like a rock in a field” (269), and she has a gift with making things grow.

The referents that make up this language of empathy and regeneration are all connected to the body. Handful’s shoulder blades connote wings and flight. She shares this symbol of hope with Sarah through her family mythology; Sarah does the same by teaching her to read. She remembers her promise to Charlotte: “Charlotte said I should help Hetty get free any way I could” (57). The women use the quilts to shield and comfort the body and each other as well as tell the story of the body. They use the headscarves to wipe tears and remember each other. And the feathers, twigs, and hair that the women wear in a pouch connect them to each other as they wear pieces of each other’s bodies around their necks. Sarah receives ownership of Handful’s body as a symbol from her transition from girlhood to womanhood.
Supporting the reading of her body as an alternate form of text, Handful received a quilt from her mother to mark the same transition. Both mothers see their gifts as a legacy and means of passing on values. The quilt represents Handful’s body, as it is “matched” to her “length” (15). The tree is also tied to her body: “Some of the branches on it were bigger round than my body” (6). The women put harm to the body in terms of nature to soften it and make sense of it. When Mrs. Grimké beats Handful, she describes the wound as “a lump…the size of a quail egg” (24). The comparison ties her to new life and nourishment. When Charlotte returns, her breasts are “shrunk like the neck pouch”, and her back is fill of “whip scars gnarled like tree roots”. Reading this text in her mother’s body, Handful says, “It took me a minute before I could touch all that aching sadness” (271), and she relates it to the tree to ground it in terms of endurance and regeneration.

Sarah has potential to read the language of the body and nature as a child, and Handful prompts her to develop that language as she struggles with the language her society uses to frame slavery. Sarah describes Hetty’s elbows as “the curves of two fastening pins”, and her eyes float “above her black cheeks like shiny half-moons: (17). When she finds Handful naked in her bathtub, she sees flourishing nature. She describes Handful’s breasts as “two small, purple plums protruding from her chest” (114). The bodies of Handful and the other slaves illustrate the tension between nature and slavery that Sarah must negotiate to find her path. The oak tree that offers beauty to all of the women is the site of the violent beatings and Sarah’s loss of speech. Handful’s childish perspective illustrates the disconnection between the white characters and an understanding of nature. She is punished when she observes,
“...missus didn’t know what end her bacon went in and what end it came out” (6). Rosetta’s beating prompts a visceral reaction in Sarah and begins her direction toward reading the body in terms of nature. The images of that brutality result in Sarah’s stutter, especially when she is with white characters. She seeks images of nature to make sense of the abuse. As she watches Rosetta’s blood, “blooms of red that open like petals”, she “cannot reconcile the savagery of the blows with the mellifluous way she [Rosetta] keens or the beauty of the roses coiling along the trellis of her spine” (10-11). Her reaction to the act separates her from traditional speech, associated with patriarchy, and places her closer to the body, like the slaves. She returns home, “a muss of snot, tears, yard dirt, and harbor filth” (11). Rosetta’s beating has causes a physical reaction in Sarah. There are no words for the trauma of it. Sarah empathizes with muteness. The stammer is the “stutterance” that references this act throughout her life. But gaining some control over the situation, such as attempting to free Handful, becoming an abolitionist, and learning to comfort herself with nature, allows her stutter to subside.

Handful is also the impetus for Sarah’s understanding of the mind/body dichotomy. For the slaves, there is a necessary split between body and mind for survival. She tells Sarah that while her slave body is owned, her mind is free. For her entire life, her mother has given her a mythology and language that helps her free her mind. Yet in spite of this split, the female slave characters connect more to their own bodies. Bodily fluids such as tears, urine, and sweat as well as hair and body odor dominate the passages about them, while Sarah’s descriptions lack physical detail and emphasize interiority. When Mrs. Grimké gives Handful as a present to Sarah on her
eleventh birthday, this act robs Sarah of speech. Meanwhile, Handful wets her pants in the middle of the whole family. Sarah reacts with the mind, while Handful reacts with the body.

Handful tells Sarah that while her white body is free, her mind is not because she does not rise above her oppression as a female. Sarah frees her mind by going north. But she cannot act on her ideas of empathy until she becomes part of a female community, which she eventually finds with Nina and the two women who take her in. But Handful’s words and her naked body are the seminal push for Sarah to enter the patriarchal world. The moment when Sarah finds Handful in her bathtub is sexually transgressive for Sarah and rebellious for Handful. Seeing Handful’s body pushes Sarah into the masculine world. In a semblance of the sexual act, she pushes several times at the doorknob until Handful lets her in. Together the women dump the water from the tub off the porch recalling orgasm. Sarah imagines that she can taste the bath water in her mouth with its “tang of minerals” (115). Thereafter the sound of flowing water is at once calming and empowering to Sarah. Water references frame moments when Sarah assumes power, and Handful and Charlotte stimulate her actions each time.

Recalling the bath event up north, Sarah breaks the taboo of swimming in public. While she floats on her back and thinks of Handful in the bathtub, her father dies. As he has been her barrier to assuming the mantle of patriarchy, his death and her recall of Handful’s body place her in a masculine role. His last words to her acknowledge the repression he represents. He releases her to Sarah’s world of nature,
saying, “You should go outside and refresh your spirit” (182). Handful goes to the tree to retrieve her spirit; Sarah goes to Handful to retrieve hers.

As Sarah begins to look more to Handful as an example, Handful’s story and perspective dominate the book. Handful’s story is the empathetic, natural story, and Sarah’s whiteness and story are “othered” and made unnatural. In her note, Kidd remembers that she knew she wanted to write a book about sisters and then came upon a marker to the Grimkés. The relationship between Nina and Sarah, though, is dominated by the sisterhood/pairing of Handful and Sarah. Nina is an interesting character but Handful intrudes on every scene with Nina. Most of the speculation on their relationship comes from Sarah’s perspective, but both women have trouble characterizing their interaction. Sarah wants their relationship to be defined as friendship, which Handful resists. Handful expresses the complexity of their mistress-slave relationship:

…people say love gets fouled by a difference as big as ours. I didn’t know for sure whether Miss Sarah’s feelings came from love or guilt. I didn’t know whether mine came from love or a need to be safe. She loved me and pitied me. And I loved her and used her (54).

Handful does not see Sarah as a friend but something more complex. She says, “Sarah had jimmed her way into my heart”, but she at the same time, she “hated the eggshell color of her face, the helpless way that she looked at me all the time. She was kind to me and she was part of everything that stole my life” (172). While Sarah sees their situations as similar, Handful has to point out the reality to her. Sarah says, “It seemed to me I did know what it felt to have one’s liberty curtailed, but she [Handful] blazed up at me. ‘So we just the same, me and you? That’s why you the one to shit in
the pot and I’m the one to empty it?” (89). Handful voice is necessary to remind the reader, and Sarah, of the positionality of whiteness.

As the book progresses, though, Handful does open to the possibility of friendship between them. When Sarah moves North, Handful signs her letters to Sarah with “Your Friend, Handful”. And at the very end, she finally focuses on Sarah’s body and thus their relationship. As descriptions of Handful and Charlotte’s bodies have been full of plant and flower imagery, finally Sarah’s body has reached this status. Handful describes, “Her hair was loose, dangling along the sides of her neck like silk vines” (355). And Sarah has been admitted to the lineage of nature and cloth that Handful and Sky have inherited from Charlotte as Handful likens her hair to the “red threads I used to tie round the spirit tree”. She describes the “strange thing between us [sic]” “not love” but “…always there, a roundness in my chest, a pin cushion. It pricked and fastened” (355). Their relationship has become corporeal for both characters as the black women admit Sarah into their mode of expression.

The triangle, which has been so important to Charlotte and Handful, signifies Sarah’s inclusion in their language. Although closer in age, Handful, Sarah, and Nina do not constitute a trinity. Nina and Handful have very little significant interaction, and when they do, Nina is a stand in for Sarah. Neither do Charlotte, Handful, and Sky form a trinity although they are family. Sky does not seem to conform or need the other two; rather she is part of the earth and sky. The trinity, then, is Charlotte or the matrilineal legacy she represents, Handful, and Sarah, as Handful admits Sarah to the mythology of the blackbirds, symbolized by the black triangles Charlotte and Handful sew into their quilts.
The quilt is a metaphor for Charlotte’s body, just as the oak tree is, and serves as a concrete indicator of Sarah’s transition. Charlotte and Handful sleep under the quilt frame, which is like bones, and Charlotte sews her body into the quilts. The red squares represent their blood, the black triangles their spirit, and the thread ties them together. The women further this metaphor by cutting off pieces of hair to pad the quilts. Like their bodies and their scars, the quilts tell their stories. When Mary, or little Missus, sees Charlotte’s story-quilt, she cannot bear to look at it. Just as white characters deny the humanity and body of the slave, she denies the reality of their circumstances. The quilt “shames” her, and her intention to destroy it prompts Handful to plan her escape.

The constant theft of their names, family, and identity leads the slaves to subversive acts. In addition to “harm and wreckage”, which Charlotte accomplishes through stealing and destruction, the quilt allows the slaves to communicate and record their stories. As Handful notes, “Mauma had sewed where she came from, who she was, what she loved, the things she’d suffered, and the things she hoped. She’d found a way to tell it” (154). The quilt becomes an important part of the Denmark Vesey sub-plot. As Handful becomes a part of Vesey’s “army”, she sews a secret pocket into one of her mother’s quilts so that he can hide his precious list of conspirators from the authorities. Sarah’s prioritization of the quilt during their escape signifies her admittance into the subversive sisterhood of Handful and Charlotte. Rather than leave the quilt behind, Sarah leaves her dresses, symbols of a repressive life she can no longer tolerate.
The manmade items that Charlotte and Handful use for expression are the brass thimble, red thread, and pieces of cloth, all of which Charlotte steals. Charlotte tells Handful that she steals because she can. It is a means of expressing agency and subversion. Her other means of agency are mischief-making, such as making holes in bags of flour, sewing buttons on loose, and spitting in food, literally inserting her body as a form of protest. Charlotte’s main protest, though, is escape. She climbs over the wall all the time and falls in love with Denmark Vesey, who is Sky’s father. Although Handful also experiments with stealing, escaping, and mischief making, she excludes Sarah. Just as Sarah tries to help Handful by giving her the freedom of literacy, Handful tells Sarah when she should not eat the food, and she returns the stolen thread and button. But after she is tortured in the sugarhouse, Handful joins Denmark Vesey’s cause, which she knows could bring death to Sarah and her family. Remembering her mother’s theft of the green cloth, she realizes the importance of agency. “Mauma didn’t want that cloth, she just wanted to make some trouble. She couldn’t get free and she couldn’t pop missus on the back of the head with a cane, but she could take her silk. You do your rebellions any way you can” (37).

Literacy is Sarah’s first attempt at giving Handful a means of subversion or “wings”, and it is the first subversive act they commit as a team. Handful approaches it like art and creation. To her, the writing looks like “bits and pieces of black lace laid cross the paper. The marks had a beauty to them” (33). The books that Sarah reads to Handful and that they eventually read together reinforce the images of bonding. Robinson Crusoe and Don Quixote recall two people who must rely on one another to face antagonistic forces but also reference the paternalistic relationships
with Friday and Sancho, who are both more “earthly” than their more educated counterparts. The day that the girls drink tea together and share intimate secrets, they are holed up in Sarah’s room and then on the roof as if they are on an island like Crusoe and Friday.

Sarah and Handful similarly subvert the status quo in their interrogation of religion. Handful is flippant as a girl when she declares, “Jesus wept cause he’s trapped in there with missus, like us” (4). The ocean prompts religiosity in Handful the first time she sees it. “[m]y feet hopped in place and I lifted my hand over my head and danced. That’s when I got true religion. I didn’t know to call it religion back then, didn’t know Amen from what-then, I just knew something came into me that made me feel the water belonged to me. I would say, that’s my water out there” (25). Accessing nature through water and the tree allows the slave women to feel ownership and religion. No one “owns” the tree so the women can keep their spirits in it. During her torture, Charlotte is able to balance and keep from choking only when she “set her eyes on top of the oak tree” (44). Although the Grimkés impose religion on the slaves, they cling to the world of spirits as a way of connecting to their African and maternal heritage. When Charlotte is tortured, Handful sees her moving her lips. “Later on, I asked if her whispers were for God, and she said, ‘They was for your granny-mauma’” (44). Faith in the involvement of her ancestors allows Charlotte to feel kinship and hope of protection and future freedom. As a young girl, Handful still has a Christian and white-based theology. “Missus told us God listened to everybody, even a slave got a piece of God’s ear. I carried a picture of God in my head, a white man, bearing a stick like Missus or going round dodging the slaves the way master
Grimké did, acting like he’d sired a world where they didn’t exist. I couldn’t see him
lifting a finger to help” (44). Her mother’s strength in herself changes Handful’s
view. As she prays for her mother during the “leg-binding”, she ponders God and the
individual’s role:

Mauma didn’t fall again, though, and I reckoned God had lent me an ear, but
maybe that ear wasn’t white, maybe the world had a colored God, too, or else
it was mauma who kept her own self standing, who answered my prayer with
the strength of her limbs and the grip of her heart (44).

Eventually Handful determines that she herself is responsible for her fate, and she
derives strength from nature, her own body, and connection to other women, spirit
and live. Sarah is on her own spiritual journey but eventually takes Handful’s
example.

Like Rufel and Dessa Rose, Sarah is formally included in the circle of slave
women through naming. All of the slaves have the names given to them by their
owners as well as the names they choose for themselves and prefer, called “basket
names”, symbolizing one small emblem of autonomy. Sarah knows Handful as
“Hetty”, but after their symbolic tea party on the roof, Sarah calls her by her real
name. When Handful uses Sarah’s bathtub as a teenager, it is a transgressive and
symbolic act in the power structure they have lived with. Handful cements this shift
by dropping the deferential “Miss” from Sarah’s name. Sarah recognizes this as a
significant moment between them.

She had the look of someone who’d declared herself, and seeing it, my
indignation collapsed and her mutinous bath turned into something else
entirely. She’d immersed herself in forbidden privileges, yes, but mostly in the
belief that she was worthy of those privileges. What she’d done was not a
revolt, it was a baptism (115).
This “baptism” inspires Sarah’s similar change in self-perception when she crosses the patriarchal boundaries. Swimming in the bay while her father is dying, Sarah thinks of Handful and claims a moment for herself. “I was floating free in the ocean, in a solitude I would remember all of my life” (184).

Handful formally symbolizes the admittance of Sarah into a triangle with Charlotte by giving Sarah the first quilt she ever made, a red quilt symbolizing the blood spilled by and uniting the women, and covered with black triangles to represent flight and freedom. Handful thinks she must leave the quilt behind because there is no space, but Sarah offers to leave her clothes behind in favor of the quilt, saying that the dresses are “not worth much”. Through her clothing, Sarah rejects the restrictive codes that have governed them in gender and race, and she assumes the quilt that is made out of and represents the female black body. Handful acknowledges that Sarah is worthy of this and has changed, saying “This ain’t the same Sarah who left here” and that she has been “boiled down to a good strong broth” (355). In helping Handful escape, Sarah becomes the essence of her best self without all of the constructed trappings that have limited her in the past. After Handful gives Sarah the quilt, admitting her into the language and legacy, she receives approbation from Charlotte. She sees an image of Charlotte “in the upstairs window looking down, waiting to throw me a taffy” (355). In the same sentence, she sees Charlotte’s punishment and her pain, and her sewing the quilts that are her legacy. All of these things, her approval, her pain, and her sewing are Charlotte’s legacy that Handful shares with Sarah.
Like the red thread that ties Charlotte, Handful, Sky, and eventually Sarah together, the button represents Sarah’s connectivity to the enslaved women. Handful describes the complicated relationship between the two women as “roundness in her chest”. The circular shape fits more with the female relationship and suggests continuation and flexibility more than a binary. Sarah recognizes the importance of flexibility arguing with her father and brother as a child that God ordains it as opposed to inflexibility. The button gets passed between the two women symbolically. Representing her dream to be a jurist, the button symbolizes Sarah’s self-awareness. When her father and brothers dash her dreams and restrict her from learning, she throws the button in the fire. She says her hope to be a jurist is “laid in the Graveyard of Failed Hopes, an all-female establishment” (88). Just as Handful gives Sarah body awareness and self-awareness, she gives her back the button. Supplementing the button’s symbolism of female connectivity and hope, Handful presents the button to Sarah on the tea saucer, recalling their moment of feeling equal and collaborating. The button appears at times when Sarah makes self-discoveries, representing Handful when she is not physically with Sarah and linking Sarah to a more humane understanding of the world.

The treadmill emphasizes the slave characters’ connection to each other and to humanity. The woman with the baby cannot raise the milk to nurse; so another slave woman takes her and nurses her. They all try to calm the baby. On the treadmill, the overseer whips the mother and kills the baby strapped to her back. Handful keeps up well on the treadmill, but when she witnesses the baby’s murder, she falls. Her crippled foot is the gravestone to the murdered baby. Nina and Sarah literally “read”
Handful’s body after this trauma. “Can I touch your foot?” Nina asks and Sarah and Handful both understand that Nina needs to confront her own horror over the workhouse. The scar joins the many symbols that make up the language to express the trauma of slavery. As Nina traces the scar, Sarah looks at the oak tree and “the leaves feathering on the branches like little ferns” (169). Sarah recognizes that “the scar [is] much deeper than her disfigured foot”. Just as she eventually learns to “speak” in the language of Handful’s body and other symbols, her body “lists” in the direction of Handful’s body as she watches her limp to the house.

Handful also cannot achieve healing when on her own. Only when Sky and Charlotte return, she can heal from her leg. The congregation of women is significant. When Charlotte escapes, she trades headscarves with Susan. Handful recognizes the red scarf on Susan’s head by the “edges sewed with a perfect chain stitch” (186). Susan gives it to Handful as a connection to her mother, and this further connects Handful to the maternal “chain” that goes back to Africa. Charlotte remembers that her grandmother brought nothing from Africa but a small piece of fabric that gets passed down to Charlotte and then Handful. The moment foreshadows the eventual inclusion of Sarah in this female chain because Handful tells her the story and then later gives her a quilt made by Charlotte.

As in the other novels, the kitchen is the center of the female community and empathy. As Minrose Gwin writes, “the kitchen is the place where anything is possible. “new recipes are being formulated’ life and death decisions are being made’ a kind of fermentation is taking place which is transformative, radical and profoundly
woman-centered. As an outsider, Sarah watches the slaves in the kitchen house.

“The kitchen house was their sanctum”, she says. “Here, they told stories and
gossiped and carried on their secret life” (48). The kitchen house, because of the
women, is also the source of healing. The women provide the nourishment to heal
sickness and injury, but it is also the location of healing herbs and ointments, or
“curatives”. When Sarah wants to help someone, she goes to the kitchen to get tea,
liniment, oil, laudanum, etc. Her mother, who represents the cruelty and repression of
slave ownership, tries to stifle Sarah’s efforts to help Charlotte after her beating and
leg-binding. In her attempt to cure Charlotte, she defies her mother and cures herself
of her stammer. “I’m going to see about Charlotte’, I said. The words slid effortlessly
over my lips like a cascade of water” (50). Water comes to symbolize moments when
Sarah assumes power previously denied to her. These moments are prompted and
inspired by Handful and Charlotte.

Charlotte resists telling her story through words. She uses the quilt, the tree,
and her own body and scars to tell her story. Conscious of the power of words, she
refuses the names given to her daughters, “Hetty” and “Jenny” and instead empowers
them with their “basket names”, “Handful” and “Sky”, to signify their ability to retain
power over their own circumstances. Handful recognizes “If you got a basket name,
you at least had something from your mauma” (4). When Handful finds the book that
details her monetary worth, Charlotte insists that she reject being defined by words in
a book. Instead, she retells the story of the quilt, particularly the blackbirds. At her
death, Handful wants to pay homage to the hard work that Charlotte has done her

Monteith, 119.
whole life, but Charlotte resists. “Don’t you remember I’m a slave and work hard” she says. “When you think of me, you say, she never did belong to those people. She never belong to nobody but herself” (304). All of the symbols that Charlotte passes down to Handful are about maintaining her spirit and control of herself by connecting to nature. This, then, is what Handful shares with Sarah and allows her to do.

The final scene reiterates the disconnection between whiteness and the natural/body and whiteness and emotion. Handful has painted her face white with flour to escape on the steamboat. The whiteness is punctuated by her body and by emotion. A tear falls from her eye as she thinks of the suffering and her slave life, and “a white drop [fell] from my chin, flour plopping on my skirt” (358). In the end, with Handful whitening her face with powder, the two women are more alike. Standing together on the bow of the boat together with the water that has symbolized their sexual union, the two women are finally joined. As they leave slavery behind, Sarah leaves her hand on Handful’s arm, which Handful deems “the last square on the quilt” (359). The story ends with Sarah’s admittance to the quilt and therefore the matrilineal symbology that allows for hope, renewal, and new types of relationships. Although their relationship was forced through slavery, the two women forge or “invent” a different kind of relationship.
CHAPTER FOUR:  
TARA CONKLIN’S THE HOUSE GIRL  
TRANSFORMING BODILY PAIN INTO HOPE AND CONNECTION

Set in the slave past, the first two novels function as historical fiction that distances the reader from slavery because it locates racism in the past. The final two books, *The House Girl* and *So Far Back*, deliberately avoid that safety net, promoting the immediacy of racism and the continuing repercussions of slavery by intermingling the plantation south with the present. As in *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, the blurring of past and present drives the protagonists to face their own complicated relationships and the legacy of slavery before they gain self-awareness and move forward. These women reach a place of greater understanding and connection through the text of the female slave body and the associated tropes of nature and art. “Reading” the embodied violence, pain, and self-healing of Josephine and Diana in slavery, contemporary white protagonists Lina Sparrow and Louisa Marion absorb their pain, connect to female community and symbolism, and take steps towards racial unity. In both novels, the white female protagonists access the matrilineal legacy of black women through the pain and regeneration of the body and supporting symbolism.

Crossing time and race becomes possible through the quilt-like postmodern structure of the novels and tropes that transcend different times and races. Although these two books do not use the quilt as a specific object, the patterning of repetition and varied forms prompts readers to assemble and stitch each story as if it were a quilt. In addition to third-person narration, *The House Girl* uses letters, journals, art reviews, and flashbacks. Tropes of nature and unconventional forms of expression
repeat the regenerative themes as the story jumps between Josephine in 1852 and Lina in 2004. Throughout, the descriptions of the women’s eyes and hair connect to the landscape in images of fractured and patterned colors reflecting quilt fabrics. When Lina abruptly turns direction from her legal world to Josephine’s home, now a retreat for female artists, the landscape becomes a quilt. “…[t]he clear Virginian sky and the wide verdant fields bordering the road seemed to twist and meld together, a disjointed landscape of vivid blues and grays and greens” (274). The quilt structure of the narration and imagery allows the various women, Josephine, Lottie, Dorothea, Grace, and Lina to meld together in a pattern of nature and maternity in spite of time differences.

Similarly, So Far Back presents the repeating themes of each generation through a pastiche of traditional perspectives: flashbacks, diaries, photo albums, and letters. But various non-traditional media interrupt third-person narration to subvert the “truth” of any one perspective or medium. In an early chapter heading, “A story” is the last in a list of unexpected modes of expression: “Dance Cards, Watercolors, Birding Lists” (36) and in the next chapter “Daybooks, Household Inventories, Voices, Familiar and Mysterious, Sketches of Disaster, Wind” (58) The story begins and ends with metafictional segments from a historical tour, emphasizing story details within as a carefully scripted presentation designed for audience effect rather than an account of “truth”. A conflation of sewing and story-telling reinforces the constructed nature of history and the benefit to the storyteller rather than to the subjects. As her mother repeats the story of Mamie and the bridge as a comfort and an escape, Louisa sews and weaves her story to self soothe and find some way to leave a legacy. “When
line is added to line, stitch to stitch, it becomes routine and soon the outline of an image appears, and something has been created: an image of a story that can carry us out over the water, away from present” (Gretlund 65). In both novels, quilted patterns of time, perspective, and race represent the fragmentation and interconnectedness of the women and the stories.

_The House Girl_ breaks the story into two separate time periods, but more importantly splits the mind and the body, reason and emotion. Reason dominates the legal, medical, and patriarchal plantation worlds, where Mister, Dan, Caleb and other male characters alienate women through the “language” of hegemony, both denying emotion and abusing the body. Emotion, represented by art, nature, creativity, and the female body, come together in Josephine. Through the pain and endurance of her body, Josephine connects Missus Lu, Caleb, and Lina to their own bodies and female community, thus bringing out their more emotional sides. Her ability to heal herself allows Caleb and Lina to experience empathy and find redemption, forgiveness, and “grace”. Coming to terms with the slave past and restoring a legacy to someone denied humanity, Lina changes from a fragmented individual to a whole and happy woman who finds beauty in her painful past to move forward with her life.

Slavery reparations, maternity, and legacy frame this story. In the end, the lawyers realize America is not “ready” for their reparations case, but Lina restores the stolen legacy of the slave artist, Josephine Bell, to her. Before her death, Lu Anne Bell claims Josephine’s paintings, obscuring the fruit of Josephine’s creative mind as she obscures evidence of Josephine’s rape and baby. In Lina’s search for evidence of
Josephine’s existence, she discovers that the Bell plantation ignores the presence of slave bodies altogether. Instead, using the passive voice, the signs read “Clothing was laundered. Cheese was made. Meat was smoked” (257). Uncovering the evidence of Josephine’s body to restore her legacy and free Lina from the past serves as a model for the country’s need to acknowledge the contributions and legacy of slaves to move forward.

Like the white characters in previous white-authored fiction, Lina finds herself through empathy with the suffering of a black female body. The novel differs in that the perspective of Josephine, the slave, dominates the novel. Lina legitimizes Josephine’s journey by memorializing her and learning from her as opposed to the traditional pattern in white writing where Josephine would serve as a “witness” to Lina’s awakening. Differing from a conversion novel’s unchanged social fabric, this novel presents possibilities of future societal racial kinship. Lina’s relationship with Josephine’s mixed-race descendant, Jasper, promotes individual relationships between races rather than legal or economic methods as the most effective solution to mending racial discord. Their modern union transcends race in a way that Josephine and Lu could not in their society.

The power dynamic of slavery shapes the complicated relationship of Missus Lu and Josephine. Like other mistresses and slaves, the women share proximity and intimacy, especially of the body. They deliver each other’s babies, mourn their deaths, and even collaborate artistically on the babies’ portraits, but Lu’s consciousness of Josephine as her possession mars their chance to have a sisterly or maternal relationship. Lu teaches Josephine to read and paint like she might a
daughter. With any external threat, though, she reverts to her role as Josephine’s owner, treating her as a plaything like the glass figurines that Josephine polishes in the parlor. Josephine finds the female comfort she needs in nature and eventually passes this connection to Lina. But Josephine also carries the complicated legacy of daughter and possession from Missus Lu; the knife Lu uses to self-mutilate and attack Josephine represents the violent and perverted maternal love Lu feels for Josephine. Just as Lina finally acknowledges the various and complicated maternal influences that have shaped her, Josephine comes to terms with the good and the bad that Lu has given her and translates all of it into beauty. She passes on this mixed legacy of beauty and pain to Caleb and Lina, allowing them to reconcile the fragments and pain of their pasts.

Art, animal imagery, and elements of nature transcend time and connect the women of the novel as they use various tropes as escape, artistic outlets, and language for expressing pain and hope. Both of Lina’s parents are artists, so she learns early that there are modes of expression beyond spoken language. She remembers her mother not in words but in sounds and smells. After her mother’s death/desertion, she becomes increasingly estranged from artistic and feminized forms of expression and instead adopts the patriarchal and alienating language of the masculinized legal world. In her office, Lina experiences disembodiment and isolation. Imagery such as the fragmented window cleaners and alienating architecture support her disconnection from her body and nature. In her search for Josephine, she relearns the language of art, nature, and animals associated with her mother[s] and female community, reconnecting her to her own body.
Lina’s experience of “reading” her parents’ art for clues allows her to recognize messages from Josephine that others have missed. The slave characters “speak” through alternate forms of language because the Bells control their spoken voices. Josephine paints, Hap plays the fiddle, and Lottie plants gardens. These non-lingual means of expression allow them an escape, a way to communicate with other slaves, and a chance to leave a legacy. In all of their forms, these alternative “languages” express the trauma of and regenerative power of the black female body. The tropes that connote this pain and hope appear in conjunction with and in place of body images. Lottie appears with quilt-like images of bright-colored flowers and ripe plants. Both she and Josephine use animal imagery to make sense of the threatening world around them, especially bird imagery representing freedom from slavery and freedom of mind. The physical descriptions of the women’s bodies evoke the earth, sky, and sea. They appear with vivid colors, Lottie with blue and Josephine with silver, particularly a feminized moon that guides her and “reveals” her (145). References to moss and dew and images of dawn connect Lottie, Josephine, and Grace. Initially black, white, and mechanical images depict Lina, but gradually brighter colors, plants, and flowers appear in her life, particularly after her visit to Bell Creek and connection with Nora. In the final chapter of the novel, Lina “speaks” in Josephine’s language, finding beauty in her every day surroundings. Walking towards Jasper, she notices a vivid yellow Frisbee, images of bright paintings, and a “smell like moss” (366). Experiencing the pain and hope that define Josephine, Lina opens up to emotion and the colors of the landscape.
Josephine’s body as the central expressive trope appears in the first sentence of the novel as the master beats Josephine for no apparent reason. Using her body as initial image signals its important transcendent symbolism at the same time her body is a “throw away” commodity in the plantation world. Conklin writes, “Mister hit Josephine with the palm of his hand across her left cheek and it was then she knew she would run” (3). The novel links bodily pain and hope in one simple sentence, setting the tone for the entire story. The moment also signifies Josephine’s subversive power in spite of her lack of control over her own body. As she returns again and again to that one small moment, the depth of pain and her innate power to hope and heal grow richer and more complex. The artwork is her tangible legacy, but her paintings represent connection to her body and her ability to translate pain into a lasting beauty.

Josephine’s body does not bear physical scars prior to her escape. Instead, her eyes convey her pain and the fragmentation that results from trauma. Her eyes are a “shifting color, a shadow of blue here, green there, hazel and brown and gray, the colors fractured together and split” (34). Eye color connects the various characters to Josephine’s legacy of suffering and fragmentation, maternal healing, and nature. Like Grace, Lina is “moss-eyed”, but she has Oscar’s eyes, too, through the language of art and emotion. “Oscar’s eyes were her eyes…different in color, but identical…in the way they fractured the light, the way they inadvertently showed emotion” (320). Eyes depict the feminine, maternal, and artistic sides in certain male characters, differentiating them from men like Dan and Mister. Joseph has his mother’s eyes, and Caleb inherits the stone that reflects the brilliant colors of Josephine’s eyes. He leaves
Josephine’s son with his brother, Jack, who has “eyes the color of the rich earth” (308). Jasper’s “honey-colored” eyes and his life of art and emotion supplant the world of reason represented by the clock and billable hours of the law firm. Embracing the uncertainty of where fate will take her, she focuses on his left eye “which gleamed as gold as the rim of the clock above their heads” (365). Lina can move from the world of reason to the world of emotion because she learns to focus on the individual, eye to eye.

Josephine’s eyes are the site of her wounds and scars, pain and healing. After Josephine’s escape, the damage to her eye draws Caleb to her. Her “one-eyed gaze” prompts the first real emotion in him since his involvement in Dorothea’s death. Although he has aided the slave-catchers, Josephine makes him wonder “as a man of faith who had lost himself” why this brutality exists, and he decides to free her. As her eye heals, he sees nature in her eyes: “a reflection of the sea and sky together” (335). Her wounded eye represents the damaging influence that slavery has had on Josephine’s artistic vision and on her spirit. But her eye heals, and her artistic “eye” endures through the generations. Josephine’s power to heal and transcend pain through art and nature close the novel. Re-visioning the moon from a marker of her rape to a feminine figure of beauty, she views herself and her wounded eye as transformative. “[S]he is an artist with the untethered eye of an artist and everywhere beauty lies down at her feet” (368).

Josephine’s eyes also express her mixed-race heritage. Josephine never knows her father’s name, but Lottie tells her he must have been white because of her “tawny skin” and the “blue threads in her eyes” (86). Her eyes tell of the trauma and healing
from Mister’s abuse. But her light-skinned blackness also makes her body a referent for miscegenation. She is the embodiment of rape, but that crime is neither acknowledged nor referenced. She cannot heal the systematic rape inherent in slavery, but she forgives Mister and Missus as individuals in the end. Reconciling her white heritage from Missus Lu with nature tropes associated with her black heritage brings the two sides of her family together. Resolving black and white, she resolves the split between mind and body, reason and emotion within her.

Josephine’s pain and power to heal and the role of motherhood come together in the imagery of nature, which communicates the emotional and matrilineal connection between the women. Nature is mother to Josephine and thus eventually to Lina. In the contours of the hills, Josephine sees the shape of a woman and she imagines her mother “as monumental, her body carved from the mountaintops and valley, her hair the clouds, her skin the smoothness of a young green leaf” (66). Like her relationship with Lu, the connection to the earth is complicated and sometimes violent. She imagines roots that had “long ago forged themselves beneath her, securing her forever to this small piece of earth” and only at her death would the roots be severed (108). She comes to appreciate what Missus Lu has given her in spite of the pain. Remembering Missus Lu in the final scene of the novel she can leave the shadows and walk in the moonlight “with purpose” (367). She can process memories of Lu and her rape within the same tropes that connote the positive maternal influences of Lottie and nature.

As in the other novels, flowering plants merge with Josephine’s blood to further emphasize her body’s regenerative power. The end of the first paragraph
reads, “The air tasted sweet, the honeysuckle crawling up the porch railings thick now with flower, and the sweetness mixed with the blood in her mouth” (3). Josephine passes this legacy of connection to the earth from her adoptive mother, Lottie, to Lina, and through this trope Lina accesses female community and empathy. When Josephine leaves Bell Creek, the willows “whisper[ed] to her their good-byes” (252). On the next page, when Lina arrives at Bell Creek for the first time, the flowers, twitter of birds, and row of willows greet her. Bird imagery furthers this connection. Foreshadowing her eventual connection and legacy to white Lina Sparrow and her freedom, Josephine watches a sparrow flit from branch to branch. “Over and over, the sparrow’s underwing flashed white, its head pointed like an arrow” (66). This opens up the possibility of a white character accessing the legacy of a black female slave, as the headscarves do in previous novels. The sparrow is Josephine’s symbol of freedom from slavery and the pain of the body just as it signals Lina’s freedom from the suffocating world of the law firm.

Josephine’s symbiosis with the landscape gives her power to transcend the pain of her rape and every day existence: “She knew the twists and turns of the bank, the mossy bits and where a large stone angled to peak out of the water and underneath spread dark and wide” (6). Like the stone, Josephine’s inner life is “dark and wide”. Her imagination, creativity, and ability to express herself through tropes the Bells cannot understand make her a far more dynamic character than typical white-authored slave characters. These passages do not exoticize Josephine, but her power to “read” nature gives her a mythic status as her body becomes one with the plants: “She knew the fields in all the seasons, brown and fallow, greening and ripe, and the grown
tobacco plants rising nearly to her shoulders, the leaves as wide as her arm outstretched” (6). As the leaves become her arms, the tobacco becomes her body. Violating her is a violation of the land and therefore nature. When Mister rapes Josephine, the tobacco ceases growing.

“Unnatural” symbols disrupt the pairing of the black slave women with nature and flowering to emphasize the white violation of slaves and earth. Just after Josephine and the warbling bird with its “sweet sweet sweet” appear in the same sentence, Mister’s physical description appears in the same paragraph recounting recent disasters on the farm. Mister and nature have gone awry because of slavery. While Josephine and Lottie exude color, fertility, and hope, the white characters and their enterprises are sterile and poisoned. The cow has stopped giving milk; Missus Lu suffers from infertility, epilepsy, and a monstrous tumor on her neck. The violence and inhumanity of the farm reflects in the burning barn and dying horses, “their screams too terrible to hear” (5). Just as Mister’s physical abuse of Josephine punctuates the romantic description of the plantation house and landscape with the initial slap, terrible images jump out in this landscape: the violence of the burning horses, the hobbling/cutting of Nate’s ankles, and the grotesque image of Hap dying from the bee sting. The grotesque becomes what Yaeger calls “semiotic switchboard” for expressing “a world of grief and pain” (26).

The contrast of fertility and sterility, embodiment and disembodiment, divides Josephine’s world at Bell Creek. The plants associated with the women are ripe and flowering. This overflowing regenerative symbolism contrasts with the house description. Rather than the name “Mrs. Bell”, the first mistress of the house appears
as “Henry’s barren wife”. The images of moldy paint, splintered sills, and decayed books further distance the slave-owners and the house from nature. Josephine tries to make sense of the house by likening it to a body: the porch juts out “like a bottom lip from a face”, and the windows are eyes watching her. The gardens become “frivolous, fancy skirts” rather than the comforting smells and colors they offer when she is within them (151). But the house connotes the threats that Mister and Lu present to Josephine’s body, distancing her from nature and her own body. “Josephine slept on a thin pallet on the floor…the summer nights so hot she’d lie spread-eagle, no two parts of her body touching, her own two legs like strangers in a bed” (6).

When her first escape fails, the plants try to prevent her return to the barren house; the wet grasses and weeds lash her ankles, and the burrs and thorns tear her feet.

Returning to the house returns Josephine to disembodiment: her bare feet are “numb to the ankles, bloated and strange and disconnected from her body” (153).

Lottie and the outdoors return Josephine to her body. Following the feeling of disembodiment, she “rounded the corner of the house” and slowed at the sight of Lottie weeding the flowers. Like the flowers and unlike the house and white world, Lottie remains vibrant and nurturing in spite of her unnatural slave status. She bears the mark of violence: “A single horizontal line of worry creased her forehead as if a hatchet had been laid there long ago” (7). But the description of the flowers reveals Lottie’s ability to resist her slave status: “Whatever design had once attached to the beds had been lost with time and inattention, but the plants seemed none the worse for it” (7). In fact, Josephine and Lottie brim with life, like the flowers, and their creative energy spills into the landscape and plantation in spite of white effort to control it.
“They flourished, encroaching onto the lawn, spreading their pollen down even to the road, where rogue roses bloomed every spring beside the trodden dirt path and latched front gate” (7). Lottie and Josephine’s connection to the natural allows them to translate the brutality of the slave-owners into something beautiful that they can understand and control.

Lottie is both an earth mother and the site of memory and legacy for Josephine and eventually Lina. Aside from the maternal influence of nature that Josephine creates, Lottie is the only positive mother figure Josephine has known. Lottie is the most nurturing character in the novel, but she evades the “mammy” stereotype with a deep inner life separate from her role as a slave. Recalling Charlotte and Handful’s stealing simply to prove that they have some power, Lottie challenges the system on a day-to-day basis. “Lottie took small things here and there, bacon ends from the smokehouse, eggs from the hens, a sewing needle, a sweet”. Josephine emphasizes her persistence, “…she never faltered and was never caught” (7). Lottie resists the theft of memory and kinship with her stories. Josephine cannot remember her mother, but Lottie repeats the stories again and again until they become Josephine’s. Lottie sees the spirits of the dead and unmemorialized slaves in the trees. In her way, like Josephine, she can only understand senseless death by linking the dead and abused and broken bodies to nature. In contrast to the flowering symbols associated with the black body, Lottie links the dead and disembodied to the white body. Josephine introduces Missus Lu as “an apparition” at the window, and Lottie sees the spirits “among the branches that trailed like a white woman’s hair into the water” (11, 7). Josephine represents disembodiment in her paintings and imagines a menace in the
white spirits. When she remembers her own baby, she assumes he is dead because
“the air [is] not ripe enough to sustain new life, or perhaps the spirit others would not
tolerate one wet and screaming and so they took it for their own” (65). She finds
peace with the spirits in the final chapter when she imagines all of them, masters and
slaves, lying together under the trees.

Negative images of nature and Josephine illustrate her “throw-away” status as
a commodity, but she resists this designation. Master hits Josephine for no reason.
Mimicking his action, she sweeps a snail off the porch. The snail represents
Josephine’s treatment but also signals the power she has to leave some kind of legacy
on the Bell plantation. Although she discards the snail just as the Bells discard her son
Joseph, evidence of its existence is there for those who look for it: “[i]t had marked a
trail across the dew-wet wood of the porch floor and rested its brown shell between
the two porch rockers” (3). Josephine’s determination to leave some mark of herself
drives her to escape. At times, she resists this kinship and positive message she finds
in the animals. In the “soft low murmurs” of the chickens she hears comfort, as if “all
the chickens sought to make on of their number see that this is a good life, the sun,
the dirt, the cool dark of the coop; do not grieve for the way things are” (154). But the
memory of her rape causes her to scatter the chickens. She wants to tell them to leave
her alone, but “the words nearly did not come from her throat, which felt thick, closed
tight” (154). Gradually she believes she has some power in shaping her world and
shedding her commodification. By the end of the novel, she has found the ability to
leave her mark and prove her existence by sharing her story with Caleb and saving
Joseph. She differs from Lottie in that Lottie believes redemption will come through Christianity. Josephine believes she is responsible for saving herself.

She does so by escaping but also by translating images of pain into hope and beauty. As Mister rapes her, she charts the path of the moon passing by her window. Spoken language is not an option for her to express her pain. “Who was she to tell? There was no one to tell, no use in the telling” (40). Nature is her comfort and her escape. “She gave it no more thought than she did a bee that stung her hard and then fell down dead to the earth, its stinger still embedded in her arm” (40). The “stinger” emerges later when she empathizes with Missus Lu’s pain. When Josephine delivers her baby, assuming he dies, she weeps, “until her body seem[ed] dry and hard as a stone in the sun” (66). Josephine turns these tropes into symbols of hope. The stone changes from a memory of death to a symbol of her eyes and the many colors and depths they represent. Caleb keeps the stone to memorialize her. The moon eventually reminds her not of her rape, but of her power. In the final sentence of the novel, she links the silver of moonlight to beauty and to her power as an artist, and Caleb and Lina tap into this legacy through their own comfort from the moon.

From the beginning of the novel to the end, Josephine uses art and landscape to survive the pain of her body. In the initial scene of the novel, as Josephine’s head swings around from the brutality of Mister’s slap, her fine detailing of the landscape and animals creates a disjointed sense of time. The action to her body is quick and sharp, but her mind wanders and registers several paragraphs of detail and memory. This disembodiment creates a sense of slow motion extenuating the contrast of violence and art. But the disembodiment also reinforces separation of body and mind.
and her ability to survive her circumstances. Her mind controls the details of the slap even though Mister controls her body. She retains control over the incident by turning it into a memory of beauty: “the sun pink and resplendent in the sky…the curve of its (the snail’s) shell, and the hot colors of the dawn” (4).

The slap illustrates the difference Mister’s conventional form of expression and Josephine’s unconventional expression. Mister speaks to her, giving her orders, but “He said something she could not make out. It was not a question, there was no uplift in tone, nor was it said in anger” (4). Her inability to understand him accentuates Josephine’s use of art, flowers, and her own body to “speak”, and she cannot understand his language of slavery. Rather as she is “of the body”, she can only “read” Master’s body. “She saw his right arm bend, and his lips part just slightly, not to open but just the barest hint of dark space between them. And then his palm, the force of it against her cheek” (4). Like Manon and Sarah in the final paragraph of Property, Josephine and Master’s status as slave and master prevents communication and understanding.

The hit is a crucial moment for Josephine precipitating her change from a fragmented passive commodity to an agent: “Something shifted in Josephine then, a gathering of disparate desires that before had been scattered. She could not name them all, there were so many, but most were simple things” (4). The “truth” of her body brings her mind and body back together as she acknowledges her hunger, and she reiterates that the many parts of her are “distilled now, perfectly” (4). Josephine continues to return to this moment. The hit is insignificant in comparison to the other horrible things that happen to Josephine that day, the memories of her rape, the truth
about what Lu did to her baby, her escape, and her capture. But as she says, “this moment marked the course of things to come…What came later---Dr. Vickers, what Missus Lu had done---did not change what Josephine decided then with Mister on the porch” (4). Josephine distills the horror of the slave experience into this one instant of trauma to her body. “Even if that day had held nothing more, she told Caleb, still she would have run” (4). All that Josephine has thought about and discovered about herself and changed has happened in the slap’s instant.

Her newfound power after the slap reflects in her body, which along with the landscape, “speaks” the change in her. “There was a lightness in her, a giddiness almost. She walked down the slight slope, the grass cool under her feet, the sun a little higher now, the low mist burning off”. Her body translates the word into corporeality. “Run. The word echoed thunderous in her ear and filled her had like a physical, liquid thing” (5). But she cannot fully leave behind the traces of what slavery has done to her. The abuse has affected her body and has almost robbed her of speech. Just as her body is her form of expression, Mister uses violence: “She thought her voice would be steady but it cracked toward the end, the echo of Mister’s blow still in her” (7). Once again, Josephine cannot make sense of his form of expression. But Lottie translates the blow into something she and Josephine can speak to and have some control with forms of language they use, that of the nurturing female body and nature: “Taking Josephine’s face in her hands, she turned it and laid one long finger on the tender spot”. The chamomile and “the chill of Lottie’s hand, wet with dew” calm her (8). Reminiscing on her childhood, Josephine realizes that Lottie has always used her body to empathize and subvert the abuse of slavery. As a child, “all
the day’s sadness would fall from Josephine and into Lottie’s yielding places: the flesh at her waist, the shoulder’s curved hollow, an ample muscled calf”. These women have long spoken through their bodies and without words: “Then, as now, Lottie’s body seemed sturdy and soft enough to contain all of Josephine’s hurts” (8). The physical complement of the two women’s bodies reflects later in Lina and Nora’s hug, when their bodies fit together in all the soft and tough places. The women’s empathy empowers them.

The incompatibility of language and emotion occurs throughout the novel. At some point, each of the main characters expresses an inability to understand or find words. The subversion of language continues in Missus Lu’s illness. In addition to epileptic fits, she forgets words for common objects, apple for comb, door for fire, rag for spoon. Josephine cannot understand Missus Lu’s words, or her experience, any more than she can understand Mister’s. “Josephine tried to interpret Missus’ requests, find a pattern in her new language, but none seemed to fit” (35). Rather, she communicates her mixed emotions for Missus Lu through the touch of her body. After the doctor tells Lu the bad news, she grasps Josephine’s wrists and begs her to stay with her. Josephine agrees and places “a hand on Missus’ shoulder and gently squeeze[d] the thin muscle” (65). But after Lu reveals the truth about what she did to Josephine’s baby, fully severing any possible female connection between then, Josephine refuses Lu the comfort and communication of her body.

While Josephine’s body expresses endurance and hope, Missus Lu’s body and paintings reflect slavery’s perversion. During her fits, her body jerks, and her eyes roll back in her head. Lina remembers learning in school that Lu Anne Bell as an
artist is credited with portraying “the humanity of the slaves her husband owned, a tacit challenge to the southern plantation society into which she had been born” (94). But Lu denies Josephine’s humanity again and again. The tilted perspective of Lu’s paintings, and of their relationship, provokes “a mild nausea” in Josephine. While Lu paints constructed still lifes of fruit “grouped without symmetry or grace”, Josephine paints the colorful landscape and portraits of slaves on the farm (187). The difference in their approaches reflects Lu’s inability to see the slaves around her as anything more than part of the landscape versus Josephine’s appreciation of Lottie, Hap, Winston and the others as individuals. When Lu attempts to repair this relationship on her deathbed by confessing to Josephine, she is too late in spite of the many opportunities she had to access Josephine’s language and world.

Melly’s visit reinforces the potential that Lu has to share kinship with Josephine and “speak” Josephine’s language. Lu defends Josephine from Melly’s criticism, telling her that Josephine knows her better than she knows herself. But as Melly continues in her criticism, Lu denies Josephine. “Missus stood and turned to Josephine and looked beyond her as though she were another polished table, silent, sturdy, ready for use” (103). She further denies Josephine’s humanity and resists the opportunity for kinship when she claims Josephine’s artwork as her own to Melly. The watercolor reflects a blue sky and flowers “awash in color”, all tropes associated with Josephine. After this betrayal, Melly and Missus link arms, “Missus leaning comfortably against Melly, the two of them fast friends now” (104). Excluded from this female grouping, Josephine loses faith in herself, feeling “diminished as a shadow or ghost”, but the memory of the knife reconnects her to Lu one more time.
When Melly asks about the missing knife, for a moment Josephine and Lu pause, “both guilty in the shared secret of Missus Lu’s madness, the cut face, the intended gift from the mistress to the slave. How to explain such a thing?” (105). They speak to Melly in a language they have tried to create between the two of them. This union is temporary, though. When Melly leaves, rather than joining Josephine, Lu remains on the porch alone, resisting intimacy with Josephine. Josephine turns her thoughts away from Lu and instead looks towards Philadelphia, where she hopes to “find a beloved face, and in that face find her home” (111).

The bird imagery indicates additional potential for Lu to empathize with Josephine and “speak” her language: “Josephine became aware of Missus’ voice, a faint repetitive calling, almost like a bird but with a sharp insistence” (82). Further likening her to Josephine, she sits in the same sunlight and window where Josephine sat earlier looking at the garden. Following the doctor’s news of her imminent death, Lu takes a knife and slashes her own cheek. The self-mutilation places her in the company of the raped and abused Josephine. Lu has access to the tropes through which Josephine expresses pain, but she tries to understand and utilize them too late. Rather she expects Josephine to comfort her in the soothing language she has used before that made Lu feel like they were a community: “She had smoothed Missus’ hair and held her hand and rubbed her back, like a sister or a mother or a daughter would” (83).

But the slap and Josephine’s altered state have changed everything, and she cannot play that role or communicate any longer in language Lu desires. "...[t]oday Josephine’s mouth could not say the words. She felt herself separate from the room,
from Missus Lu, from the sun on the floorboards, from the bloody residue still sticky on her fingers” (84). Josephine can think only of flight, her new language. She can no longer speak the way she did before the climactic slap. “[T]he simple tasks she did every day, the things she touched, the words that came from her mouth…all bound her to this place, and she wanted to shed them all, shake them from her as a dog shakes water from its coat” (84). Foreshadowing again the direction her legacy takes towards Lina Sparrow, she imagines, “As the sparrow did, Josephine would point her head like an arrow and fly there” (84).

Her contrasting feelings for Lu are “sour and sweet” with both gratitude and distrust. In bodily terms, she feels “a flash of tenderness so sharp” that she wants to “slap her across the face, or dig her nails into the softness of Missus’ arm, the skin pink beneath a screen of fine dark hairs” (86). She wants to communicate her feelings to Lu in the mode of expression most familiar to her, that of the body. Her love for Lu’s castoff dress, like her love for Lu herself, causes her to deny her own body at times. Wanting the prettiness of Lu’s world and a relationship with Lu, she forces herself into the dress, inhaling deeply and pressing her breasts and stomach down to flatten them until she cannot breathe. She recognizes that “Missus was not her protector, not her confidante, not her friend” (86). However, they are connected by history and isolation, so Josephine cannot completely turn her back on Lu. When she has the opportunity to smother Lu, “the scabbed gash” from the cut, Lu’s misguided legacy to Josephine, stops her. In spite of their differences, she envisions “the two of them…prostrate together before the same cruel God…not so different after all” (190).
The knife incident reveals Lu’s misguided and vain love of Josephine. After she cuts herself, she tries to cut Josephine’s face, too, saying, “That’s all I have to give you, Josephine. There’s nothing more” (85). Lu recognizes that the body is the vehicle to kinship with Josephine. But because Josephine has not given Lu access to this language or admitted her into the circle of kinship, Lu cannot use it properly. She calls her attempt to cut Josephine a “gift”. Josephine recognizes what she is trying to say, but a lifetime of abuse prevents her from allowing this relationship with Lu. Josephine rejects the perverted legacy Lu offers, throwing the knife out the window and into the garden. “She watched it for a moment, until a breeze stirred, the landscape shifted, and the handle disappeared into the green” (85). Josephine translates Lu’s language into a form she can recognize, by making it part of nature. Making sense of it on her own terms allows her to return to caring for Lu physically but still avert the relationship that Lu seeks only because she is dying. She offers the care and comfort of her body even though Lu cannot use that properly to understand Josephine. Although Lu has just attempted to cut Josephine’s face, Josephine carefully holds Lu’s face, cleaning the blood away from her cheek “until it shone wet and new” (85).

The knife is the manifestation of Josephine’s rape and Lu’s complicated involvement. Mister inflicted the injury, but Lu’s silence and denial about the rape and Josephine’s baby have caused a disconnection between body and mind in Josephine. Josephine has locked away the memories of the rape. She imagines packing each painful memory in the drawer of a dresser. Lu’s similar denial of her own body forces a catharsis in Josephine. As Lu becomes aware of the threatening
tumor, Josephine’s repressed memories threaten to emerge. The secret is like Lu’s tumor, “the skin stretched tight into a rounded point like someone inside was trying to elbow out. The tip was small, the size of a currant, but the lump widened at the base, spreading out and underneath the skin” (45). Lu’s ignorance of this “sickness growing on her” forces a corporeal and thus emotional reaction in Josephine. When the doctor prods the tumor, Josephine’s memories rush out of her like a birth. “Memories rushed through her with the speed and force of a locomotive, she could not stop their forward thrust” (65). The pain of Lu’s body connects to emotion through the body. Josephine reconcile with her own body’s pain as she remembers the rape, birth, and lost child. Lu literally “cuts” the memory out of her own body and forces it out of Josephine as well. The complications of their relationship prevent Josephine from fully granting her forgiveness, but her innate life-affirming spirit will not allow her to kill Lu when given the chance. After Lu’s death, Josephine forgives her, symbolized by the many times she “wipes clean” the knife.

Josephine’s forgiveness of Lu opens the possibility of a white character gaining admittance to a slave’s legacy. At first glance, Lina seems an unlikely choice for facing the legacy of slavery. Raised in Manhattan by hippie artist parents, she has no overt racist tendencies and no Southern connections. Her status as an educated, liberal American distances her from previous prejudiced protagonists of the South. But this actually makes her a more effective example. When faced with the reparations case, Lina realizes she has never really considered slavery. Out of the blue, Dan asks her what her thoughts on slavery are. She is uncharacteristically speechless. Her inability to speak about slavery joins her to Josephine and Lottie who
also do not have the language to address slavery. But her silence also represents contemporary silence on slavery. As she ponders slaves, she wonders, “Why hadn’t she studied their histories?” (60). She represents the modern generation who think slavery and racism have nothing to do with them. The message is that every American must think about slavery and racism.

The first link between Lina and Josephine is setting. Although Lina’s world of her office is sterile and modern in comparison to the decaying plantation house and Lottie’s luscious gardens, the office exerts the same feeling of forcing control on basic human nature and artistic endeavors that the plantation system does. While Josephine has learned to use feminized forms of art and nature as a tool of escape and salvation, Lina suppresses her artistic inclinations and femininity. On the last page of Josephine’s introduction, Josephine’s footsteps and the image of “2” have made an artsy, unconventional use of a number. But the first paragraph of Lina’s story presents seven numbers in the first few sentences, creating a frenzied atmosphere as she writes her brief: “85 pages, 124 perfect citations, the product of 92 frenetic hours billed over five ridiculous days” (12). The disordered but vital landscape of Lottie and Josephine’s world seems far away from her fluorescent and beige surroundings. Lina’s body, though, in a nod to Josephine’s bare feet on the previous page, foreshadows her legacy from Josephine and her eventual journey out of the lifeless masculinized legal world into the feminine, embodied, artistic world of Josephine and her mother[s]: “Lina’s shoes were off---she always wrote barefoot” (13). Like Josephine, she struggles to leave some legacy of herself, in spite of her commodified status. Her personal items in the office represent “a unique stamp on the
exchangeable, impersonal nature of this space: *I am here*, the snow globe said. *This is mine*” (14).

As she pores over her brief in this disembodied space, she craves connection to her own body, but she is paralyzed. The unnatural atmosphere creates a sense of abuse and threat to her body: ‘Lina felt a rush like skiing, or eating sugar straight, or that icy morning a truck had careened toward her as she’d…watched helpless, immobile” (14). Lottie and Josephine’s creative endeavors are measured by sun, dawn and dusk, while Lina works at an “unnatural” time of day, midnight, in the fluorescence of her office. In daylight, the morning light is “oily” and the sun hangs “like a curtain of heat and glare and unheard noise” (47). At this point, the language of the office, the hum of climate-controlled room drowns out the “noise” of the sun that guides Lottie and Josephine. Influenced by this world, Lina places more value on the billable hours and partner-track of the reparations case than on the horror of slavery. Nature, Lina’s body and values, and time have all been perverted in her alienation from maternal influence. Connecting to the matrilineal legacy of Lottie and Josephine restores Lina’s connection to nature, time, and her own body and morals.

Like Mister and Missus Lu, Dan speaks a different form of language than Lina. Instead of expressions of violence and the hegemony of the plantation, Dan speaks in cold office terms and legality. “Marooned behind the island of his desk, his face flowing bluely from the computer screen”, Dan is what he terms her “mentor partner” (15). Although he has pictures of children and a wife “tan, wan smile, one-piece”, he represents a lack of human connection and a lack of empathy. The office promotes isolation and distrust just as slavery does, and Dan discourages any form of
emotion. Supporting this alienation, the architecture makes her feel “like a gnat on an SUV windshield”, and the secretaries must suspend “all independent thought, all personal convictions” (51-2).

When faced with similar treatment by Mister, Josephine’s fragmented self comes together. Although Lina’s encounter with Dan is a similar representation of an alienating masculine presence, Lina responds by fragmenting herself from her femininity and her creativity. Her body has internalized the patriarchal values of the law firm for too long. She feels that “the clock existed inside her, all day, every day, the ticking away of minutes embedded in her brain, pulsing through her bloodstream” (18). But her potential for discarding this lifestyle appears in Josephine’s reading about a watch and the sea. The contrast of the two reflects the struggle in Lina and her eventually embracing her artistic side. “…Unlike a watch, there existed always an element of wild, the great unpredictable passions of the sea that might rise up to foil the learned predictions” (44). Lina sees images of the sea Josephine references in her painting, and Josephine’s artwork brings out the elements of the sea in Lina.

Although Lina goes along with the case, her body registers her disconnection from Dan’s world. She sees her image in the glass and imagines it “truncated” and her head, “hovering, disconnected from any solid ground” (18). “A coolness ran through Lina, starting at her eyebrows and ending at her toes, as though something warm and alive were departing her body” (16). He drains her life force, and she regains it by connecting with Josephine. When she enters the room of men, she reads their body language before she understands what they are saying. Only when Dresser makes the reparations case personal to his maternal connection, wondering what became of his
great-grandmother when she was sold away from her children, does Lina connect to her body and true self. The men cannot empathize and look away. “Only Lina kept her eyes on Dresser. She felt a flush of possible understanding” (58). Thinking about Dresser’s great-grandmother, she faces the lost history and legacy of slaves for the first time. “Why didn’t Lina know their names? Why hadn’t she studied their histories? Where was the monument? Where was the museum? What had they wished for and worked for and loved?” (60). She seeks individual connection, specifically emotional connection.

When Lina tries to befriend the other female lawyers and secretaries, they rebuff and betray her. She craves female community, imagining “a conversation, a shared meal, and afterward their relationship would blossom” (54). As Lina gets closer to the “truth” of Josephine’s story she connects to women more, and she understands her father less. She tells him, “You say you want the pictures to show me something but I don’t understand them, Dad. I don’t know what you’re trying to say” (282). In contrast, Lina’s reaction when she first sees Josephine’s drawings of the child is visceral. “…The picture hit Lina with a force she wasn’t expecting, in a way her father’s paintings never had” (116). The painting brings the two women together across time just as it brought Lu and Josephine together across race and station. Later, Lina does have the same visceral reaction to Oscar’s paintings of her mother, Grace, reinforcing the interchangeability of Grace and Josephine as mother figures to Lina and her resolution of Oscar’s maternal side.

Eventually Lina finds female community, albeit across time with Josephine, but Josephine leads her to the letters of the sisters, Dorothea and Kate Rounds. Their
letters cause a flowering of emotion and female connection to Lina’s world. Even reading their letters in the masculine domain of her office, she begins to feel closer to Grace than she ever has and she imagines Dorothea is with her in her office, “layered in skirts and petticoats” (243). Separating the male, legal world into reason and the female world of Dorothea and Josephine into emotion, she realizes that “words written 150 years ago by a young woman she would never meet seemed truer than anything she’d read in her textbooks, anything she’d been told by her law professors or by Dan” (243).

In contrast to the office, the house where Lina grew up with her mother is more like Josephine’s world of nature. It is messy and whimsical, the house of artists. Although they are in the middle of New York, nature flourishes in spite of the unnatural concrete and towering buildings. There is a red oak and “nestled within a square of concrete, grew a linden” (20). Solidifying her legacy from the natural world of Josephine and her eventual return to the maternal, Lina imagines “the trees’ roots intermingling beneath the floor of their house holding herself and Oscar aloft in a living webbed cradle” (20). The trees are a stand in for Grace, whom Lina remembers with “a warmth that wrapped Lina, swaddled her limbs, covered her toes” (193). Unlike the masculinized and alienating house of Bell Creek and the law firm, the Sparrow house is a feminine space. “This was where her mother had once slept, cooked, painted, breathed, and Lina’s memories of her seemed tethered to the physical space” (21).

The first time Lina feels a maternal connection outside of her home occurs when she sees the landscape of Bell Creek. The same mountains that serve as an
image of Josephine’s mother evoke familiarity in her. She feels **cocooned** by the Blue Ridge Mountains. Like Josephine, she recognizes a maternal connection to nature.

“They did not feel enclosing but rather protective and somehow feminine, a landscape of many limbs folded, arm over arm, soft curves and rounded tips” (256). Her friendship with Nora is a contemporary manifestation of her newfound connection to female community and her own body. “Lina stood and hugged her [Nora], their two bodies roughly the same height, each yielding and touch in opposite spots” (276).

Nora is part of the chain between Josephine and Lina in her role as librarian. She provides the documents that prove Josephine’s legacy of art. Animal and nature imagery reveals Nora’s role in Josephine’s story. At their first meeting, when Lina approaches her as a lawyer and representative of a threatening masculine world, Nora’s braid “fell over one braid like a pet python” (258). But the tropes of birds and art allow them to “speak” to each other as women as Nora recognizes Lina’s connection to Oscar Sparrow. Nora joins Lina to the letters that “show” her Josephine’s body. Later as friends and conspirators against the Stanhope Foundation, Nora’s hair evokes Lottie and her ghosts as well as Josephine and her moon, colors, and silver imagery. “Lina saw that her hair was unbraided, beautiful, flowing across her shoulders in silvery cascades of gray streaked a yellowish white, the effect almost ghostly. A colorful embroidered cloth bag was slung across Nora’s body” (275).

When Lina reconnects with female community and her own femininity, she realizes she is ready to leave the cocoon of her childhood home. “The house encircled her, comfortable, known and knowable, burdened with memories and wishes, but it was just plaster and bricks” (283). Instead she creates a new “cradle” with Jasper,
Josephine’s legacy to her. Even in the middle of Grand Central Station, surrounded by people, Lina feels herself and Jasper “suddenly cocooned by the shuffling feet and knobby knees of passengers in transit” (366). Although different from the silver moonlight that lifts Josephine and the crickets that are “singing to her for comfort, for joy”, feminine imagery also gives Lina comfort. In her cocoon with Jasper, she “heard snatches of conversation, caught a whiff of floral perfume that followed a woman with a pink suitcase” (366). Just as Lottie and Josephine brim with regenerative imagery, the last image of Lina foreshadows motherhood, carrying on the bloodline and legacy of Josephine. Holding hands with Jasper, she feels “a little heart pulsing there in her palm where her skin met his” (366).

Jasper does not know his specific connection to Josephine, but he is the contemporary manifestation of her as her embodied legacy to Lina. He bears the same initials, “J.B.”, her artistic inclinations, three of her paintings, and similar startling eyes. The nature trope connects him to Josephine, and he draws Lina to this legacy with his eyes “the color of honey in a jar” and ears “curved with the delicacy of a seashell” (168). The piercings in his ears recall the legacy that Lu hoped to leave by piercing Josephine’s cheek. The tattoo on his wrist is a bird; he is part of Lina’s freedom. His lack of living relatives and disconnection from his grandparents makes his connection to Josephine seem closer and more direct.

His artistry makes him an appropriate partner for Lina as she negotiates her femininity and her reconnection to her body. His music and Josephine’s paintings evoke the same response in her, reconnecting to her artistic side but also to her own body. She feels the drums “deep in the center of her chest like a mechanical heart” as
the crowd “surges to life” (286). Jasper’s music takes her outside of herself as she thinks of nothing but “Jasper’s bass...a deep vibration, and the trembling began at the bottom of her stomach” (286). Although the scene connotes sex with Jasper, the scene references the connection to Josephine as she notices for the first time, “His lips have a fullness to them...that was almost feminine” (287). Wearing his clothes, the gender differences between them lessen, almost as if Lina and Jasper/Josephine are becoming one and forging a new cross-racial legacy.

Blending the lines between gender and time reinforces the blending of racial lines that ends the book. His racial ambiguity becomes an ethical measuring stick for past prejudice and the future. For Dresser and the other lawyers, Jasper is not “black” enough in looks to be their lead plaintiff in the reparations case. Lina believes the country has moved beyond color. “Did the color of his skin matter? No, Lina decided, wouldn’t his racial ambiguity be a strength? Wasn’t this a history from which they had all emerged, every American, black and white and every shade in between?” (171). Jasper’s racial ambiguity embodies the direction that Lina wants the country to go. As Josephine’s descendent, his body is a text or map for the future.

Thus from beginning to end of the story, Josephine’s body is the central text. Christ-like, her suffering body is the vehicle for other characters to seek or find redemption. Because Lu was complicit in the abuse to Josephine’s body, she cannot use it to save herself in spite of her efforts. Caleb, however, treats Josephine’s body with tenderness and reverence and finds redemption. When Caleb first meets Josephine, he reduces her to corporeal terms. “I saw only limbs, a head, a body requiring repair and I the one charged to do it” (305). Their two forms of expression
collide: “I examined her in the methodical way I’d been taught…working from head to toe and left to right. She seemed to notice me no more than you would a bird passing overhead or a beetle crawling beside your toe” (304-5). He cannot resolve his relationship with his brother because he lacks the language of emotion: “I knew not the words to use” (308). As she brings emotion and art into his life through her healing, her body becomes a thing of beauty that opens him to the language of art and nature and emotion. He sees the sun “shine forth from her face” (336), and her conversation is like a deep oil reserve, “emerging first as a trickle and then a moment comes up with a great and sudden rush and there is not stopping it” (337). He sees in her “hope for myself, that in saving her I might too save myself” (339). And finally in her transcendent suicide, he holds her fingers “gently as through they were the greatest of treasures” (347) With emotion rather than with reason, and he is able to restore a relationship with his brother with Josephine’s son as the bridge.

Caleb’s primary role is to provide immediacy to Josephine’s body to Lina through the letters so that she can mimic what he learns from Josephine. Although he wrote the letters for Joseph, Lina is the first to read them. Like Oscar with Grace’s body and the paintings, Caleb and Jasper mediate Lina’s access to the female body. The use of male characters as a vehicle to Lina’s realizations about the women in her life is problematic. In the other novels, the women gain access to female community and strength through direct contact with women and their bodies. Feminine tropes emerge in conjunction with these men to fit them into this maternal legacy. Through Josephine, Caleb adopts emotion, art, and nature. Writing of his life before her, he describes “a long cloud” that “has drifted across the moon and tempers its rays”
(305), but with the effect Josephine has on him, he reconnects emotionally with his family, and he needs no candle. He writes, “for it is a full moon, a harvest moon my father would have called it, beaming down brighter almost than a midday sun” (300).

With Oscar, Lina assumes a paternal role, overseeing household finances and practical matters, while Oscar paints and cooks, making her birthday cakes and decorated hats. Porter feminizes Oscar’s portraits as “a feminist examination of a lost woman” (279). Finally, Jasper’s femininity emerges through his art, emotion, physical descriptions, and clothing. The tropes join the men to Josephine’s feminine world to justify their involvement in connecting Lina to Josephine’s body.

Nonetheless, these sympathetic male characters objectify the female body. In the beginning of the novel, Lina remembers her discomfort in front of a camera, “her father on the other side of the lens, clicking the shutter open and closed, freezing the moment in time” (33). Lina clings to a photograph of Oscar and Grace as a young couple, but she knows nothing of the story behind it except what Oscar has created. Oscar’s vision of the women in his life defines Lina’s sense of self. His portraits of Grace’s reassembled body parts focus on “bodies, or one body, examined” (29). Lina plans to look at the portraits “with calm reason, with dignified reserve” (192). The naked portrait, though, disturbs her. When Oscar interrupts Lina’s reading of Caleb’s letters, he carries *Women in Love* by D. H. Lawrence, evoking sexualized images of women and further disturbing Lina. Just as Josephine has to come to terms with the complicated legacy inherited from Missus Lu, Lina must negotiate the mother/father role Oscar has played in her life and learn to dictate her own vision of herself while breaking away from his. In their final interaction, he both objectifies her and
facilitates her embodiment as she reconnects to Grace. He and Caleb represent two of the many fracturing influences in the women’s lives.

Similarly, Caleb’s role as the “author” of Josephine’s story complicates her as male object and transcendent body. Caleb’s graphic description of Josephine’s dead body in a letter to her young son seems out of place: “The red of her blood colored the water a dark crimson close to her arms and across her chest but flowed into a lighter red and then pink as it traveled down her legs and feet and into the open end of the bath” (347). His authorship recalls the role whites played in commandeering and objectifying the experiences of slave narrative authors. Josephine’s story evolves through her paintings, Dorothea’s letters, and the plantation ledgers in addition to Caleb’s narration, but Lina uses Caleb’s letters to legitimize the third person narrative told through Josephine’s perspective. The women must resolve how much of the male vision to claim and how much to resist. Josephine does this by taking what she needs from Caleb and authorizing him to carry her legacy with her suicide note. Lina similarly acknowledges that Oscar has been both mother and father to her, but she is ready to move out. She forgives Oscar for the conflicting stories and images he has given her. “I’m okay, Dad. We’re okay”, she says. “It would be so easy to blame Oscar for where she was now, alone and unsure about so many things, but it wasn’t his fault” (321).

Both women retain their own sense of themselves in spite of male perspectives. Josephine’s power in her body becomes her creed. Lottie tries to convert her to Christianity, but she never feels “an ecstasy” or hears “a call”. Rather,

[her] body was hers alone, not belonging to Mister or Missus Lu or the Lord above. And it was only with this true belief that she could tolerate putting one
foot before the other, the drawing of another breath and another and another (71).

The power she derives from her own body gives her agency. Although Mister always told her that nature designs the trees, she believes somebody planted them, “some human hand made that division, for nothing in nature is ever so straight and clear” (368). With the belief that she has had a hand in her own fate, she can “walk steadily, with purpose” (368).

Her example gives Caleb and Lina purpose. Caleb writes to Joseph: “The love I felt her found its purpose in you” (348). Similarly Lina finds her purpose in Josephine’s story and quits the law firm. When Oscar releases Lina from the constructed story of Grace’s death, Lina feels “empty and clean, like a stretch of damp new sand left by a retreating sea” (320). Oscar hugs her as though “the disparate pieces that fit together as Lina were not at risk of clattering broken to the floor”, but she resists this reading of her. Instead she takes charge of herself, “Her life was her own, and a life could be a good one” (321). She changes the title of Porter’s book from categorizing and limiting Josephine, *The Forgotten Slave or Genius Denied*, to a title that recognizes her agency, *The Artist: Josephine Bell* (361-2). Instead of being defined by Jasper, she defines him: “the librarian rock-star, the white-black man, the near-stranger who was not a stranger to her” (365). Through Josephine, she finds a way to make language her own. In her last conversation with Dan, her words fly “across Dan’s expansive carpet and land[ed] on the polished surface of his desk, weightier than any brief, truer than any law” (358). Embracing the tropes Josephine used to transcend pain allows Lina to find her own language and self-definition.
The novel closes with hopeful feminine imagery as Josephine thinks of her son and all of the mother figures in her life, including her mistress, Lu. Imagining them all buried together under the trees, her legacy to Lina is to acknowledge what has happened in the past to ensure a peaceful future. Emerging from the threatening shadows of the forest into a powerful series of moonlight images, she sees in the flowering wheat “a pure shining silver that glows heavenly in the moonlight”. Linking the landscape, her maternity, and her innate artistic view, she is powerful in her own body. “…[s]he knows it is silver she sees, for she is an artist with the untethered eye of an artist and everywhere beauty lies down at her feet” (368).

Reflecting this legacy of hope from Josephine, Lina looks up at the “celestial ceiling” of the train station, thinks of her mother figures, and determines that she does not want “to live a life ruled by reason” (365). Instead, in the art on the ceiling, in the “dance of fate and luck and science”, she reads the possibility of new constellations and “the opening of humanity” (364). Josephine leads Lina from the masculinized, disembodied, unnatural world of “reason” back to the feminized, embodied, and natural world of “emotion” where individuals have the power to create new types of racial interaction.
CHAPTER FIVE:
PAM DURBAN’S SO FAR BACK
MOVING FORWARD

Like *The House Girl, So Far Back* by Pam Durban focuses on a slave’s stolen legacy and present reparations. As Louisa Hilliard Marion reflects on her life, and eventually on Mamie, her family’s black housekeeper, she comes to terms with her family’s role as slave-owners, racists, and manipulators of history. The family mythology whitewashes the relationship between many generations of Louisa’s family and Mamie’s family as a way of perpetuating racial hierarchy. But as self-appointed family historian and the last of her family line, Louisa uncovers “the truth” about black and white maternal influences in her life as she faces her mortality. She accepts her aging body, her “old maid” status, and her lack of children, but the repercussions of slavery and racism discolor her ability to face death peacefully.

[S]he was finished with curiosity, the way she was finished with so many things. Something in her had closed; she’d felt it shut…But now there was the Mamie question, and under it, a prickling restlessness and curiosity. (10).

The Hilliards and Marions have denied and commodified the bodies of Mamie and her ancestors, and the ramifications of these crimes manifest in Louisa. “The Mamie question”, or racial guilt, inhabits Louisa’s body. “There was something uncomfortable about this curiosity; it was like an itch under the skin, down in the nerve endings, too deep to scratch, or a foot that’s gone to sleep coming back to life, bristling with pins and needles” (10). Like Lizzie in *Stigmata*, she must acknowledge the suffering of the slave past to heal her body. As the woman who raised her, Mamie is a part of Louisa’s body that she has not tended. But the phrase “coming back to
life” indicates that through emotion and empathy, she can bring back an important part of herself by acknowledging and repairing the pain. Bringing Mamie and her family’s story back to life ensures regeneration.

Louisa reads through the lines in her ancestor’s diary of the pain and suffering of Diana, the slave. Empathizing with her pain, Louisa resuscitates her story for her descendents. Louisa and her family have celebrated Eliza Hilliard as a gifted seamstress and “kind” slave-owner, but Louisa learns of her cruelty and of her false claim to the Christening dress created by Diana. Louisa has always believed in finality and “closed doors”, but as her story merges with Eliza’s, the present and the past become interchangeable. She changes her present by reconstructing the story of the two families’ intertwined pasts. She believes that because the mustard seed she has planted never blooms, there is one truth: “The seed went into the ground and nothing came up. That was the whole story” (57). But her reconstruction of the story plants the seeds to change the cross-racial interaction of the women. The “seed’s promise” supports the many tropes of renewal, forgiveness, and regeneration.

Sewing is a generational bind among these black and white women and functions as a metaphor for the crafting of the story. The Christening dress represents the Hilliard history and their relationship to the black women in their lives. Like the dress, the story is passed on in different forms depending on the storyteller and individual recall of the story. Louisa notes the inconsistency of perspective:

She could look at [the dress] every day and notice something new about it; it was dense as a tapestry with needlework. One time, it would be the French knots that dotted the bodice and sprinkled down the skirt and hem that she noticed; the next time she saw it, the openwork around the hem would draw her eye; another time, it would be the vines or the leaves with their smooth
tight edges. Or she would stand back and take it all in, the way the designs poured down the dress and swirled around the hem (91).

The dress embodies labor, art, legacy, and oppression, and changing perspectives.

Like the racial line between the two families, the dress is a liminal site, a projection of differing and changing viewpoints: “…lit from below, the gown appeared to fly: one sleeve raised in a gesture of greeting or good-bye, the rest spread out behind, as if an invisible wearer were running or flying” (230). It has a mythic status, a connection to birds, flight, and the earth, giving it and the slaves who created it life.

Yellowed and stained, it was still alive with flowing forms: the smocked bodice and the gown that fell away from the bodice running with leaves, flowers, vines, an airy scribbling of thread; featherstitches and backstitches punctuated with French knots, all flowing down the cloth to the hem, which was held to the gown by a fine web of openwork stitches and strewn with leaf shapes stiffened with a precise and exquisite whip stitch (230).

Because of the descriptions of movement in the dress, it is not a stationary object but a symbol of freedom and potential for change. Like the story, which is never static in this novel, the dress or the perception of the dress can change. The gown’s purpose for Baptism makes it and its representative story a symbol of renewal and potential for redemption.

Initially, both the dress and story reflect white women’s control of the capital. Although black women create and tend to the dress, the white family members wear it, own it, and take credit for it. The dress connects the women in that they create it together, but it divides them when Eliza steals the dress and the praise. Mamie’s relationship to the dress also separates the black and white women. The Hilliards view the dress as a connection because they assume Mamie loves it as they do. But for Evelyn, the memory of Mamie’s work on the dress, ironing in the hot kitchen
while the Hilliards enjoy parties, symbolizes all that is wrong in the power dynamic of the relationship. As with the dress, Louisa’s family members assume ownership of the stories of Mamie and her ancestors. The stories are property just like the dress, furniture, and slave bodies.

All of the tropes either stand for or connect to the slave body. Initially the trauma to Diana’s body separates the races. Diana’s missing teeth and scars serve as a constant reminder of her status. Eliza continues to abuse her but is also haunted by her violent capabilities. Eventually Diana’s disembodiment, in the form of her ghost, creates female community. Learning about Diana’s pain, Louisa gains more perspective about the maternal influences, black and white, that have shaped her. The pain of Diana’s body reconnects Louisa to Evelyn. And all that Diana represents changes the story, with Ann as the vehicle who connects the stories of the dress, sewing, furniture, and slaves. Louisa starts the re-sewing or re-crafting of the story. Her goddaughter Ann will finish it.

Louisa’s sewing and knitting foreshadow her desire to find the “truth” of her family and restructure the meta-narrative as her last chance to undo wrong and leave a legacy that she shares with Mamie’s family.

Sometimes, if she got distracted and dropped a stitch or lost count, the square came out lopsided and she had to unravel it and start over. That was satisfying, too, in its own way; as though by knitting, then unraveling a square, she was making visible some hidden truth about the world, giving it shape and form (56).

She must also restructure the story of Mamie, or what the white characters have created as Mamie’s story to comfort themselves. She understands her mother’s stories about Mamie are self-serving: “It was comfort that her mother had been looking for,
telling that story, she sought, comfort and consolation, and certainty. And she hoped that the memory of Mamie and her biscuits had carried her out and set her down easy, wherever she’d landed” (33). But as she discovers her ancestor Eliza’s brutality to Diana, she can no longer ignore the stories she has perpetuated. Admitting her family got the stories wrong, she knows “[T]here is more to find here, more to tell, and she is the one who can tell it” (174). As the stories continue, she also recognizes her own complicity. Eliza’s exclusion of Diana from the story prompts a visceral reaction in Louisa as she remembers Mamie ironing the dress: “She must have water. The words have begun to stick to the roof of her mouth and peel away when she speaks” (128). The guilt complicates the words she has used to shape Mamie’s labor into a happy memory.

Louisa must find new words to resolve her own guilt and connect to Evelyn, but she acknowledges the inadequacy of the words:

What do they change? Nothing, of course but because we walk upright and have souls and brains within whose laps and folds hope constantly seeds itself and grows, we join words together to name what can be known, and for what cannot be known, we also find words and house things there until they come to sound like the truths we need in order to go on living the lives we’ve built around them (189).

The novel’s message is that while the path is complicated and words inadequately capture the slavery’s trauma, we must find new words and new tropes to repair the damage. Louisa cannot undo the theft of Diana’s body, but returning the dress and story to her descendents restores the evidence of Diana’s stolen body. With this, her disembodied spirit can rest, and the symbols indicate creation of a fresh narrative.

This novel upends all assumptions, subverting anything considered stable or “true” to stress the constructedness and fluidity of the story and perceptions of race.
The story itself is an object used by the white characters to their benefit and not to reflect truth. However, it also stands for Diana’s abused and appropriated body. She comes for the dress and to force Louisa to read the diary because she can no longer stand for the denial of her interchangeable body, legacy, and story. At first, the ghost is a playful poltergeist, moving Louisa’s precious objects and eating sugar from the sugar bowl. But sugar takes on a sinister meaning. Maum Harriette’s WPA interview reveals that the Workhouse was called “the sugarhouse”. She remembers, “Somebody get sent there us call it ‘giving him sugar’” (100). The ghost changes from playful to violent when Louisa tries to read her mythologized accounts of slavery that ignore this brutality. The words in her speech infuriate the ghost: “we must never think that the planters were an idle or an indolent people, living off the labor of others” (94).

Fruit, labor, and theft appear together throughout to reinforce the theft of the dress, but ultimately the theft of the slave body. In his fever, Eliza’s brother eschews her famous fig preserves, crying out “that I had deceived him, for these were not my own preserves, but the fruit of another’s tree” (175). As with the dress and all of the tropes that represent or stem from the slave body, Eliza has taken credit for the slave cook’s creation. Eliza resents Diana’s love of “luxury” (i.e. stealing sugar, wearing bright clothing, and having fun), so she sends her to the workhouse/sugarhouse to have her front teeth pulled. At this point in the diary, Louisa attends a Palm Sunday service, recognizes her potential for violence, and acknowledges her own theft of “fruit” and labor. When Ann finds the lynching picture at the end of the book, it is abrupt and without precedent except for this theme of “unnatural” fruit and abuse, precipitating the hanging black bodies or “strange fruit” that compounds all the
crimes of theft and cruelty in the long history of these two families. With each generation, it is harder for the white women to justify the theft of “fruit” and labor. Ann vows she will find a way to include the “strange fruit” picture with the other stories.

Like the fruit, Charlotte and Hetty’s sewing, and Josephine’s paintings, the story itself is a stolen product and a legacy to be restored to undo the theft and suppression of the body. The dress is a metaphor for Diana’s individual story and legacy. When Diana “comes for her things”, Louisa eventually concludes she wants the dress. But what she really wants is for her perspective and suffering to be acknowledged and shared. In trying to restore the “products” of the slave women, Louisa rewrites the story in a way that ties in the black women, restores credit to them, and creates empathy and community. It weaves the women together and signifies legacy and the admittance of white women to the legacy of black slave women. First though, Louisa has to change her relationship to the symbols of her family’s values.

The Hilliards’ generational focus on commodities reinforces the trauma of the slave trade. Ships function as a symbol of escape, mostly for Eliza, but also as a symbol of the triangular trade. The Hilliard house is “like a ship under full sail” (186) and during hurricanes, it “creaks like a ship” while water pools in the first floor (62). A Middle Passage reference in the first few pages reminds the reader that all of the material goods and slaves in Charleston have a price and came from across the sea. The house is a “ship” because slaves built it, but the white family enjoys it while the
Jones family live in a one-room kitchen house. Again, the commodities and house reinforce the way the slave body is used by the slave-owners.

One of the most important possessions of the Hilliards is the “Trade Winds” silver pitcher. Made in “Santo Domingo”, it references the triangle trade and the Haitian slave revolt. Their ancestor, “sea captain, merchant, and planter” brought it 200 years before. The pitcher always appears in interaction between the white mistress/Hillard and a black slave/maid. In her dementia, Louisa’s mother wants it on her dresser just as she wants Mamie. “Looking at it [the pitcher] made her mother smile. Now it was Mamie she wanted” (7). Louisa assumes Diana’s ghost has come for the valuable silver pitcher, but the ghost throws the pitcher and damages other possessions until Louisa reads about Diana in the diary. The Hilliards value their possessions over the slaves and their descendants.

In her dementia, Louisa’s mother illustrates the Hilliard/Marion prioritization of material items over the black women in their lives. She knows the whereabouts of every piece of china and silver that they own, but to her every black face she sees is Mamie. Mrs. Marion’s vision of Mamie comforts her; like a lighthouse beam, Louisa thinks, “Whenever her mother sailed out of sight of land, she swung toward its light and traveled home” (6). But Louisa understands that her mother’s story about Mamie is not Mamie. “No one in Louisa’s lifetime and, as far as she could remember, no one in her mother’s lifetime, either, had ever been curious about Mamie. Curiosity was not a family trait, and the important facts were settled” (7). To them, she is not an individual but simply labor. Her work and its outcomes define her:

She was the girl with the quick broom and she was the sound of pots and pans in the kitchen early in the morning, the hymns that rose above the vacuum
cleaner’s roar’ she was the smell of cinnamon rolls…the faint crackle of a starched and ironed blouse (8).

Mamie represents the novel’s experimentation with symbols and signifiers and their instability as well as the white commodification of the black body:

She was also the sum of her useful parts. For close to eighty years, one Hilliard or another had totaled her. “A good pair of black hands,” Louisa’s mother had called her. “The laundress and housekeeper and cook.” Finally, when the useful part of her life was done, she became “the family retainer,” who lived out her days on their property. How old was Mamie? No one knew. No white person anyway. “They destroyed my dates,” was all Mamie would say… (9).

“They” implies the family that denies her inner life and sees her as body parts or what she produces: “the speed of her crab picking, the gleam of her wood polishing, her chicken salad as “the wonder of many luncheons” (91). She is not a person but a commodity. But as Louisa and Evelyn add to Mamie’s story, Mamie takes control of the signifiers. At her death Louisa reads the Bible, Tennyson, and Robert Frost to her, and she sees Mamie “drawing in the words, melting them there” (102). The ghosts of Mamie and Diana come to reclaim the words and make them part of their bodies because the words and bodies have been stolen.

But the dead were hungry, so Mamie had always said. Homesick and hungry for life and its stories. They gobbled it up wherever they could find it, stuffed it in their mouths like sugar. So it was words that Mamie had come for. Louisa thought, and she had more of those to give (103).

The ghosts take back the words as a way of restoring the theft of their bodies.

At first the instability of language creates chaos, but gradually the instability indicates the potential for positive change. On the first page of the novel, stability and instability are in tension in a society that attempts to repress, control, and deny the black body. The novel opens with the reader as the audience for a tour of the
Fireproof Building in Charleston, S.C., focusing on the balance, order, and harmony of the building. The use of architecture as a text in the first section signals the books use of alternative means of expression. Elements of architecture convey meaning just as words in a language. This neo-classical architecture of the building connotes Western hegemonic society. But the structure of the narration calls attention to the editing and the audience, subverting the accounts that follow, and reiterating the constructedness of the tour and laws, but also history, memory, and self. The audience/reader must participate in this construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the story.

The instability of slavery and the denial of the black body constantly threaten the order that this building represents, and that the Hilliards and other slave-owners seek to impose. Primarily the suggestion of fire poses a risk to the symmetry or “repose” of the Fireproof Building, but as the chapter continues, the threats become more imminent.

Imagine paper and straw, drunken sailors, the careless and unruly poor, the campfires of plantation Negroes who traveled here on authorized and unauthorized errands. Imagine braziers in the market, cotton on the wharves, torches and strong winds from the Atlantic to fan the flames (2).

Intended for “[B]eauty, permanence, and safety”, the building models the carefully constructed slave system that governs this society and the tension between stability and instability that exists. Suddenly the slaves are the threat as the tour guide refers to the slave revolts and the difficulty of enforcing these rules.

How to keep them all safely confined to their masters’ houses and yards? How to know their whereabouts, their activities?” And suddenly the image is of the entire city burning, and all perish, “both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass” (3).
Immediately followed by a paragraph on manners, the strict codes governing racial and gender interaction in the South are represented in the tour guide’s insistence that “Control is the key to preservation, always” (4).

That control is exerted on the story of the two families. Louisa Marion says, “[a]s I can tell you, people will go to any lengths, to any lengths at all, to believe what it comforts them to believe. But I am after something other than comfort here” (191). She realizes that the preservation described in the tour and the preservation of the story are unstable foundations. The instability of signifiers and truth that seems threatening at the start of the novel gradually becomes a positive thing. All of the negative things that Louisa and her family represent shift and fall apart, and without the control and constructed dividers, there is room for emotion and empathy. The tropes that have divided the women change meaning and connect them. Primarily, the dress connects Louisa and Evelyn as Louisa “gives” Evelyn control of the story.

When Louisa acknowledges her complicity in denying Diana’s role, she tries to merge the two story threads. She says,

…what I have not actually lived, I can imagine, having lived in this city my entire life and also having lived a life longer than my own through the stories of others who lived before me, and having at last found an ending that lies a short distance beyond the place where the old stories usually end, I offer this scene (209).

Here, the novel switches from the entries in Eliza’s diary to Louisa’s paraphrasing of the diary. Just as her mother made her tear out the crooked stitches, Louisa attempts to “resew” the story to get it right. Louisa says,

Now it is my turn to trace the design, to tell the story and see where it ends, my turn to gather what I know, to take what I’ve read, what I’ve heard, what I’ve breathed in: to breathe it out, to go on with the story and leave a record for those that come after (187).
Louisa embodies the story, processing the story through her body, breathing it in. The story is her child and her legacy. When she reveals the truth to Evelyn, the story switches from Louisa’s perspective to Evelyn’s. The dress and the story become Evelyn’s.

When it is time for Louisa to tell the truth about the dress, though, it is not easy to relinquish her habits and position. She feels the tug of “blind greed” and “pull of the familiar story---our Eliza’s famous handiwork”. She worries that “[T]o tell another story might spoil the past, and if you spoiled the past, you’d spoil the present, too, because the past led to the present and made it true” (231). But her discoveries of the actual creation of the gown have changed the comforting element of the story.

…the story of the christening gown had become too complicated to bring the consolation of comfort. She felt another kind of will begin, a promise that in what was left of her life, she would not hand the story on unchanged. It was little enough, she thought, but it was something (231).

Her revelation evokes mixed emotions in Evelyn. Evelyn is thankful that things do change. “She didn’t have to go to the trouble of taking me there and telling me that…She could have kept it to herself all the rest of her born days. Her mother wouldn’t have bothered, believe you me. Things do change…” (233). But she is also furious that Mamie was denied the knowledge that the dress she labored over was her legacy, too. Suddenly the dress connects Evelyn to her maternal legacy and to the story.

She felt a longing that she hadn’t felt in years: to find the woman who had sewn that cloth, and tell her how it is to go motherless through this world. Never to feel the touch of the hands that had made such beauty, or to see yourself reflected in the eyes of the one who’d dreamed it up before her needle ever pierced cloth. Most of all, never to know that the story she was
telling in those knots and running vines was the story of how much she loved you” (233-4).

Connecting Evelyn to the dress and her matrilineal legacy and story helps on an interpersonal level.

Unfortunately Louisa’s efforts to change the story, or the master narrative, are too late to make a significant difference in the social order. The museum refuses to change the story of the dress. Evelyn forgives Louisa, but like Missus Lu in The House Girl, Louisa dies before she receives that forgiveness. As a representative of such a discordant past, Louisa dies for the new generation to make changes. Her associations with Palm Sunday and the Paschal Lamb foreshadow her sacrificial role. At her death, her goddaughter Ann carries on Louisa’s legacy and has the potential to restore accuracies in the story that Louisa cannot. Although Ann has been a minor character, she takes over the story and ties in white complicity in Jim Crow. She realizes that the black and white stories must be woven together to find “truth”, that this undertaking will not be easy, and that the only thing to do to make reparations is start altering the story on an individual basis.

The story that Ann must change and the Christening dress are metaphors for the theft of individuality that slavery represents. The slave-owners steal the slaves’ creations, bodies, children, and identities. Eliza justifies this theft through the belief that white people are superior and better qualified to manage the “fruits” of the slave’s labor and body. “To wit, we who bear the burden for caring for those in our service are the rightful owners of the fruits of their labor. She may, in future, receive some return for her labors, when we see fit to reward her” (131). Louisa continues Eliza’s belief in superiority through her charity work. Like her father with “the
peppermints he carried in his pockets to give to pretty secretaries and old Negroes”, Louisa believes she is kind and generous because she greets black acquaintances warmly or gives Evelyn’s children a trinket, but she does not recognize her complicity in perpetuating oppression (249). Louisa does expect praise for sharing Diana’s involvement with her descendents, Evelyn. But Evelyn sees a “hidden stinger” in every kindness from Louisa, the way it didn’t come across to you, ever, friend to friend, the way it always seemed to come down somehow, like a favor. How they could be good to you and still let you know that this was their money, their time, their sympathy, and in order for you to have it, they had to decide that you deserved it and give it to you (226).

Evelyn sees Louisa’s revelation about the dress as giving her something that already belonged to her and expecting thanks for it.

Both Eliza and Louisa have some guilt about what they have taken and attempt to redeem themselves. Eliza guiltily throws the coins she has received from Diana’s sewing into the ocean. Louisa projects her own guilt on Eliza, imagining that she “did not wish to recover it [the money], but, rather, to have it count as payment against some debt” (205). Like Louisa’s attempt to change the museum’s account of the Christening dress, this small gesture of throwing away the coins does not change anything or help Diana and her family. Eliza’s heart feels “no lighter for this unburdening” (179). Similarly, Louisa cannot rid herself of guilt with her small charities. Her self-satisfaction after feeding a homeless boy infuriates Diana’s ghost so much that Louisa and her cat die soon after. Addie’s version of the story of Louisa’s death always begins with “the ragged boy with the empty eyes who’d come to the door begging food the week before” (248).
Palm Sunday suggests renewal and the possibility that Louisa can attain forgiveness. The morning of her final Palm Sunday, Louisa notices, “the city looked washed, as if a film had been stripped away; the light was clean and sharp, a pure spring light that seems to shine out of the new green grass and make the pastel houses glow” (183). She has the chance to start fresh. But what really prompts the change in her is not the model of Jesus but the recognition of her own complicity. In acting out the pageant when the crowd yells out to crucify Jesus, Louisa understands the cruelty that lies within her in spite of her lifelong attempt to be charitable: “I knew that it was in me, this urge to kill and harm; it had been there all along” (186). And she realizes she must acknowledge her guilt and change the story to make reparations. “To tell that story and tell it again until you come to the part where you’re innocent and then to renounce that claim and find yourself humbler once you know what you’re capable of” (187). Evelyn recognizes this change in Louisa and forgives her.

Evelyn’s chapter ends with the moment of her Baptism and the satisfaction that her family line has continued.

...[s]he remembered the morning her own sins had been washed away and how the first thing she’d seen when she’d wiped the water from her eyes had been Albert, standing at the font of the crowd on the bank, a satisfied look on his face, holding Son in his arms” (241).

The implication is that Evelyn believes sins can be “washed away” and that she forgives Louisa. The Hilliard family legacy has been broken. Louisa has no children. Diana, Maum Harriette, Mamie and Evelyn’s legacy will live on in Son, whose name signals forgiveness and a new beginning. And Louisa’s attempts to change her legacy will start fresh with her goddaughter Ann, who closes the novel with hope for a new narrative.
At first, Ann sticks to the familiar narrative because it comforts and entertains the audience. But now she recognizes that the story is false and omits essential elements. “It’s getting harder and harder to keep them apart, the black story and the white one; they pull toward each other, merge, and tangle” (254). The photograph of the lynching in the final pages of the book is jarring and has no outward connection to the rest of the story other than the theme of fruit, but Ann knows she must find a way to include it and the story. She has been a minor character, but her role of carrying forward Louisa’s legacy and mixed-race story is crucial. The photo appears between photos of Ann in her ball gown and with her young children. Disturbingly, the picture has “a decorative paper frame” and “an air of commemoration about it” (257). But what disturbs Ann most is the involvement. She and Louisa have tried to deny any cruelty or violence in their families, separating their ancestors as “kind slave owners” and themselves as sympathetic to Civil Rights. The worst thing about the picture is in the bottom corner:

[a] white hand held the ankle of one of the black men’s bodies (though men wasn’t exactly right for who they were; the one being held was not much older than her son), as though steadying it for the long moment when the shutter opened and the light rushed in (257).

She tries to close the door on discovering whether her grandfather was there, whether it was his hand that held the boy’s ankle. But like Louisa’s story of the dress, her stories of her grandfather and childhood are now too complicated and hollow to comfort her.

Before Ann, the connections between the black and white have been tenuous, almost like two languages. Recalling Can’t Quit You Baby and Property, Louisa thinks, “Do I not speak plainly?...Why do they never understand what we say? Do we
speak different languages?” (228). But Ann embodies the hope and potential for communication. Thinking of her children, she knows she must pass on a different legacy and story to them, with more perspective.

She thinks that if she could tell them the story of the dolphins in the moonlit river and the story of their own great-grandfather at the lynching and make them into one story in which every part touched and influenced every other part, she would have given her children something that they might use to save their lives from blindness and repetition (258-9).

Picking up the theme of sewing, Ann wonders, “But where was the thread that tied the stories together and made them necessary to one another? How would she find it? Where did it start?” (259). The threads are the tropes Durban has used throughout the book. The dress, as collaboration between the women, can be a unifier if Ann changes the museum’s presentation. And Evelyn and Louisa, with their belief that anyone can wash away their sins, suggest that redemption and healing are possible with community. Ann will pick up and finish the “sewing” that Louisa started, and like the women before who have collaborated and resewn the dress, she will “resew” the story using the threads of all of women.

Like *The House Girl*, *So Far Back* presents a hopeful conclusion, while recognizing the complexity of the relationships. The novel ends with Ann’s words: “There was nothing to do now but to begin” (259). The conclusion is that racial changes must be made woman-to-woman, small step by small step. Evelyn changes the story from one about race to one about individuals and empathy: “It was easy to talk about the white people this, the white people that until one of them you’d known for a long time was crying on your shoulder…It wasn’t so easy or so simple then, to walk away, when it was another human being, not an idea” (237). Louisa and Evelyn
find a common thread when they are “two old ladies talking about church and the weather and how the hurricane had beaten them down” (237). But the important part of Evelyn’s account is that “…they were coming upright again. That was how their city was, and the people who lived in it” (237). Just as Josephine imagines everyone, white and black, buried together under the oaks, Ann ends this book with the idea of the stories pieced and woven together and common ownership. New words finally connect the women to the past and to each other. But the subversion of these images, words, and stories illustrates the necessity of the reader to create and construct change rather than wait for it.
CONCLUSION

Morrison’s dedication to “Sixty Million and more” in Beloved honors the sacrifices of slaves and calls attention to the country’s neglect of their stories. She attempts to tell the whole story of slavery, not from one viewpoint but as a collective narrative. Through the character Amy Denver and her inclusive narrative style, Morrison opens the door for a white perspective in the slave story. In this dissertation, I argue that contemporary white writers want to add their voices to the neo-narrative tradition of honoring and memorializing slaves. Like the singing women in Beloved who drive away the ghost, they join their voices with those of Morrison and other black writers who recognize the suffering and individuality of slaves, confront the “ghosts” that still haunt us as racism, and ensure that slave stories are passed on. If America wants to move beyond its conflicting history of freedom and slavery, the sixty million must be remembered in a widespread fashion by many different voices. Neo-slave narrative writers have filled in the stories and perspectives that have been overlooked in American literature. But to undo the many hundreds of years of ignoring the damage of slavery and the perspective of enslaved individuals, white authors need to join in this endeavor.

The four authors in this dissertation, Valerie Martin, Sue Monk Kidd, Tara Conklin, and Pam Durban, focus on the female enslaved body as a touchstone for adding their voices to this reevaluation. Drawing on and redefining the traditional distancing symbolism associated with the black body, they create enslaved female
characters who become the ideal or standard the white women must emulate to reach a more contemporary approach to equality and therefore become more sympathetic to the reader. The history of conflating blackness with nature and the body to exoticize or “other” is turned into an ideology of what is more “natural”. The black women are more connected to the earth, their own bodies, creation, and motherhood, and they have agency over these definitions. The novels present their knowledge and self-awareness as a form of purity that the white women have been estranged from due to the negative influences of slaveholding. In order to reconnect with nature, their own femininity, and empathy, they learn the symbolic language of the body, which is supported by tropes that connect the enslaved women to symbols of origin.

In Property, the symbol is the basic union of mother and child that supports Sarah’s role as the “authentic” female. Sarah does not recognize potential for commonality or empathy in Manon and therefore shields what she knows from Manon. Unable to connect biologically or emotionally, Manon, therefore, remains unsympathetic to the reader. In The Invention of Wings, Kidd uses the archetypical tree as well as creation through sewing and quilting to associate the women with life. Charlotte and Handful share the knowledge of the cloth, so crucial to women throughout the world, to admit Sarah into their circle and connect her to her “true” self, vitality, and compassion. In The House Girl, painting serves the same purpose. Josephine’s creativity opens Lina up to the natural world, maternity and self-awareness. Similarly, in So Far Back, Durban presents sewing as the means of taking the women outside of the influence of
slavery to a more communal relationship. Louisa’s efforts towards returning to the source of the family history and weaving the black and white histories together prompts Evelyn to forgive her and include her in her family.

All of the novels use the regenerative symbolism of nature, flowers, trees, animals, and water to distance or connect the women to ideas of hope and unity. The characters’ relationships with these tropes mark them as empathetic and communal or unfeeling and influenced by the constructive ideology of slavery. The white women who learn this “natural” and creative language of the body become more connected to themselves and each other. The black female body, supported by these tropes, serves as a bridge between races.

None of these novels suggests that remembering and recovering from slavery is a simple process. The stories are complex, and the characters represent a small number of the types of experiences slaves and slaveowners might have had. However, reparational literature is one of many important steps in the revisioning of white subject/black object tradition in an effort to broaden the master narrative of slavery and acknowledge white complicity. The writers in this dissertation do so by giving the slave characters agency in the relationships and by focusing on connectivity and empathy they present as essentially feminine but available for any character to read through the text of the body. Although artists cannot ensure legal or economic reparation, their work calls attention to the need. These four writers are at the forefront of symbolic slavery reparation, which may some day lead to other forms of reparation.


BIOGRAPHY

Anne Hanahan Blessing was a Jefferson Scholar at the University of Virginia and graduated in 1994 with a B.A. in History and Art History and a minor in Architectural History. After teaching English and Latin to elementary and middle school students for seven years, she received an M.A. in English from Tulane University in 2002. In 2004, she received the Richard P. and Jean A. Adams Award for outstanding graduate teaching at Tulane. She lives with her husband and three children in Charleston, SC and has taught as an adjunct and Visiting Instructor at the College of Charleston.