A State of Perpetual Inbetweenness:
Black Women Negotiating Liminal Spaces in Contemporary Literature

by

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Abstract

My dissertation underscores how Black women transform space through liminality, a term I use to unpack notions surrounding being Black and woman and living at the intersection of race and gender. More specifically, I define liminality as living in a state of perpetual inbetweenness as Black and woman. Additionally, I contend that this concept emerges as a subversive way for Black women to navigate a discriminatory world and transgress normative boundaries of Black womanhood. As Black women writers seek to create a space for Black women's experiences, I consider how they use the literary realm, in particular, fiction, poetry, and drama to do so. As these writers flesh out these experiences in contemporary literature, my dissertation asks how do their protagonists complicate and trouble space as Black women? In order to explore this question, I discuss how Black women writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, such as Toni Morrison, Suzan-Lori Parks, Natasha Trethewey, Roxane Gay, Tayari Jones, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, use liminality as a trope to explore how Black women can transgress boundaries and establish their subjectivity. My conceptualization of liminality engages the scholarly work of anthropologist Victor Turner and Black feminist thinkers, such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberly Nichele Brown, L.H. Stallings, and Elizabeth Alexander. Ultimately, my dissertation argues that even while these texts foreground the quandary of Black women as intersectional beings, Black women writers illustrate liminality as a survival tactic for Black women to protect the self, assert agency, and map out spaces for themselves.

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Dedication

To Black women, who despite all odds, continue to keep it moving: I stand on your shoulders.

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Introduction

And yet, it is to my mother—and all our mothers who were not famous—that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day.

—Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1983)[1]

As Alice Walker asserts, Black women possess the fortitude to find their power and creativity often in "unlikely places" (239). They tirelessly seek and forge spaces for themselves, creating and continuously thriving. My dissertation seeks to continue this trajectory, particularly regarding how Black women transform space through liminality, a term I use to unpack the notions surrounding being Black and woman and living at the intersection of race and gender. As Black women writers seek to create a space for Black women's experiences, I consider how they use the literary realm as a "safe space" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 111). I find it compelling to consider how Black women occupy space and I am particularly interested in how Black women writers depict these experiences in fiction, poetry, and drama. In my project, I consider how movement informs their works by showing how their protagonists occupy liminal spaces to find wholeness or function with a divided self. Additionally, I consider how they describe their protagonists' experiences of being mobile, liminal, and hybrid. As these protagonists occupy a liminal space, they are fraught and confronted with the dilemma to either maintain cultural values rooted in African Diasporic histories or assert an individual identity not bound by Blackness. This predicament places some characters in a state of ambivalence. As a result, one prominent question arises: how do their protagonists complicate and trouble space as Black women?

[1] Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 238-9.

Liminality as a Concept

In this project, I define liminality as the ability to map out a space in-between and occupy a position on both sides of a boundary or threshold; such a space often becomes a place of transition and uncertainty. More specifically, in considering the traits of liminality and its connection to Black women, I also define liminality as the experience of being Black and woman and living at the intersection of race and gender. This delineation is in comparison to more general notions of liminality as a grey area in which the person is fully engaged in the community, but is trapped between two worlds. The other parts of this concept I wish to explore is how liminality emerges as 1) a subversive way Black women can navigate discriminatory spaces of exclusion; 2) a space of transgression of normative notions of Black womanhood; and 3) a state of ambivalence (for some characters). For this reason, Black women's experience of liminality is significant because in their task to challenge interlocking oppressions, social constructions of race and gender denote such a space. As Black women seek to assert a full humanity that is not merely limited by race and gender, perpetual inbetweenness not only prompts creativity, but also invites them to acquire agency in varied forms. Although Black women may not be able to merge fully into larger society, occupying an in-between space or being in a state of perpetual liminality affords them a sense of possibility and provides alternative ways for establishing their subjectivity as Black women.

I contend that this concept is a more precise way to discuss how Black women find alternative ways to negotiate space, as opposed to terms such as "double consciousness" or "marginality." W.E.B. Du Bois defines the double consciousness as follows:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a

> world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (615)

Here, he suggests that Black folk struggle to reconcile two identities and though his social location allows them to have foreknowledge of both worlds, it does not allow them to develop an authentic self. While liminality may be regarded as a similar concept to W.E. B. Du Bois's concept of the double consciousness, I think its differences make the possibilities and consequences more complex and positive, or at the very least evoke a sense of hope. Moreover, in his delineation of the concept, Du Bois frames his discussion around the plight of Black men:

> The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (615)

While DuBois's concept implies that the dilemma he describes is a Black male crisis and results in a damaged self-image, the concept of liminality affords more possibility by providing a way for Black women to find wholeness and/or function with a divided self than double consciousness allows for.

Similarly, although bell hooks employs a counter-hegemonic strategy to underscore the importance of using the margin as a site of resistance and delineates the margin as "be[ing] part of the whole but outside the whole body," her conceptualization may not allow Black women to escape the negative connotations of the term and define themselves as more than products of the systems of oppression they experience (*Feminist Theory* xvi). Historically, Jim Crow and miscegenation laws enforcing racial segregation in the South and banning intermarriages and interracial relationships, respectively, sought to make hierarchies of racial identities visible and concrete. To that end, in her preface to *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), hooks describes the risk of living in the margin by using the metaphor of the railroad track:

> As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town. (*Feminist Theory* xvi)

Here, hooks illustrates how architecture was one of the ways used to deliberately segregate and marginalize Black Americans from white society as well as maintain sanctioned laws. However, with this visceral metaphor, bell hooks radicalizes the marginal space and asserts that her way of knowing and moving through the world is informed by her marginality as a Black woman. She adds:

> Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.
>
> This sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors—that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity. (*Feminist Theory* xvi)

Since being placed on the periphery is still generally the overarching reality for the marginalized, hooks further uses the metaphor of the railroad track to overturn traditional notions of marginality. In turn, by prescribing marginality as an unconventional form of resistance to hegemonic practice, she delineates a new space, what first emerged as a physical space, imposed by oppressive structures, has now morphed into a metaphysical space, a space of transgression and defiance. Unfortunately, being placed on the periphery is still generally the overarching reality for marginalized people; hence, overturning traditional notions of marginality may not be enough as this very concept still arouses debate and remains politically charged. The term marginality primarily focuses its attention on how systems thwart an individual or group's access to essential sources and does not consider how they can acquire agency despite systemic oppression, diminishing the ways in which these individuals empower themselves. For these

reasons, I argue throughout my project that the term "liminality" is a more useful way of talking about how Black women move through society, push perimeters, assert their identities, and forge a space for themselves.

Oftentimes, social constructs of Blackness and gender complicate space. Hortense J. Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" identifies herself as a "marked woman, recognizing that "not everybody knows her name" to convey that the experiences of Black women remain invalidated by larger society (57). She further explains that Black women's validity is often in question because Black women are often configured through the lens of biased Western ideologies. According to this framework, Black women's movement and negotiations of space are static and "remain grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history…shows movement, as the human subject is 'murdered' over and over again" (Spillers 63). Her main claims that Black women continue to deal with the ramifications of slavery that sought to diminish the sanctity of Black womanhood are touchstones for my project that inform my thoughts regarding the role of liminality in Black women's lives. More specifically, her charge that "it is our task to make a place for [a] different social subject" aligns with the premise of my project, which is to demonstrate how Black women use liminality as a trope to adapt and map out ways to establish themselves as "radically different texts for a female empowerment" (Spillers 85).

The concept of intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, is used as a mechanism to understand how such systems of power such as, racism, sexism, and classism, impact women of color. In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women," Crenshaw examines how women of color experience multiple sites of oppression and considers how systemic oppressions are interconnected and cannot be

examined separately. She establishes that the concept of intersectionality focuses its attention on the "need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins" 1245). Although the term intersectionality is often incorrectly collapsed as simply understanding multiple identities, this concept offers a critical lens on how to view how systems of power impact women of color, particularly in their encounters with legislation. In the same way Crenshaw suggests that Black women share similar narratives of how they experience interlocking systems of oppression, my project reveals parallels of Black women's movement and their negotiation of liminal spaces. As Crenshaw notes, "Black women's experiences are much broader than the general categories that discrimination discourse provides" and "the narratives of gender are based on the experiences of white, middle-class women, and the narratives of race are based on the experience of Black men" ("Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" 217; "Mapping the Margins" 1298). With this awareness, I center Black women's experiences of survival in my project to underscore the many ways Black women establish their subjectivity while living at the intersection of race and gender.

In varied ways, Barbara Christian and Audre Lorde discuss Black women's experience of survival, particularly the race and gender discrimination they face by living at the intersection of multiple oppressions. Though these writers allude to the concept of intersectionality, they primarily focus on how multiple identities impact what Black women write about. Barbara Christian argues that Black women are the "stepsister[s]" to white women and Black men, emerging as the "subjected subject" because although conversations about race and gender have changed, the language of academy to articulate Black women's experiences devalues these experiences (173). For this reason, Audre Lorde suggests while Black women have been

conditioned to live within a Eurocentric framework, their consciousnesses will liberate them because they are not constrained to a Eurocentric context. She asserts, "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free" (Lorde 38). Here, Lorde reveals how Black women use poetry to circumvent being limited by established mores. Rather than focusing on reason as the highest of human emotions, Lorde refutes thinking with "feeling," which has been diminished as "irrational" since the age of Enlightenment. This choice marks a big shift for Black women writing.[2] In all, Barbara Christian and Audre Lorde demonstrate that race, sex, and gender are interconnected factors that inform Black women writers' discourse and my project explores how movement, in particular negotiating liminal spaces, allows Black women to transgress boundaries in unique ways.

More recent discussions about the concept of intersectionality, in an era often regarded as "post-racial" America, debate whether or not the term solely represents Black women's experiences. Brittney Cooper leads such discussions. In her article "Intersectionality," published in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, she provides an extensive discussion of how the term coined by Crenshaw has been used erroneously to look at personal identity. While she points out the limits of this term on Black women, she implies that critics of intersectionality are short-sighted, and suggests universalizing the term, may result in silencing Black women and erasing their experiences (Cooper). Additionally in her essay, Cooper engages in dialogue with scholars Valerie Smith, Averil Clarke, Leslie McCall, and Ange-Marie Hancock who centralize

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[2] Marlene Nourbese Phillip in "Journal Entries Against Reaction: Damned if We Do and Damned If We Don't" also seeks to challenge implications surrounding Black women's writing from "reaction," which she defines as "responding to someone else's agenda… to statement" (100). She says "Woman is not a reaction to Man; she is not a response. She is her own first statement. Black is not a reaction or response to White; it is its own first statement. I am only black and female, if you are white and male. I think therefore I am—black and female" (100). Though Phillip employs an alternative way for Black women to assert their identities as Black and woman, her model still entails not operating in Western contexts.

their discussions in their works on the need to move away from using the concept of intersectionality as "methodology" for examining Black women's experiences (Cooper).[3] In all, what is important to note is the scholarship on this term is not monolithic and I follow the lead of scholars that are most certainly aware of the term and its significance, but consider intersectionality in the foreground. In turn, I agree with Cooper that intersectionality "does not deserve our religious devotion" but can serve as a "paradigm" for, in my case, delving into Black women's experiences of living in perpetual inbetweenness (Cooper).

While my research engages the concept of intersectionality and its focus on systemic oppression, I am most interested in the role of subject positions. With that being said, I explore how Black women use liminality to establish themselves as subjects. For this reason, I examine not only how racism and sexism function, but also how *race* and *gender* function simultaneously in the lives of Black women. More specifically, I consider how Black women's intersecting identities inform their movement and how they negotiate liminal spaces. Though I allude to the concept of intersectionality, my primary focus for my project explores how multiple identities impact what Black women write about, structuring the discourse of Black women writers. In particular, I consider how being in a state of perpetual inbetweenness informs how Black women move through spaces that endorse systemic oppression. Hence, I use the concept of

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[3] For more discussion on how these scholars, in varied ways, approach the concept of intersectionality as a useful paradigm for thinking through how systems of power make the experiences of Black women and other women of color invisible, see *Not Just Race, Not Just Gender: Black Feminist Readings* by Valerie Smith, "When Multiplication Doesn't Equal Quick Addition: Examining Intersectionality as a Research Paradigm," by Ange-Marie Hancock, "Intersectionality and Social Explanation in Social Science Research" by Averil Clarke and Leslie McCall, "Rethinking Intersectionality" by Jennifer Nash, and "I'd Rather Be A Cyborg Than a Goddess: Becoming Intersectional in Assemblage Theory" by Jasbir Puar.

intersectionality as a conduit for understanding how Black women contend with multiple identities in liminal spaces.[4]

Moreover, I follow in the footsteps of other Black feminist thinkers that have considered liminality as a viable concept for understanding how Black women navigate a discriminatory world, despite Black feminist critiques of anthropology as a field that objectifies Black women's experiences of survival. Though these concepts are termed by white men whose research did not focus on Black women's lives, I think the concept of liminality nevertheless has much to offer in understanding Black women's experiences and movement as transitional and not static. The major figures in the study of liminality— anthropologists Arnold van Gennep, who coined the concept, and Victor Turner, who expanded the original concept— grounded their research in ritualistic practices of modern society, particularly the liminal phase in which individuals gain new insights before reentering a community. At a time when anthropology was dominated by particular interests for the "classification of 'customs,'" and the culture in which ritual practices were performed were underappreciated and devalued, van Gennep sought to break out of this mold and consider the particular "origins of the customs" he studied (Myerhoff 116). He concluded that most rites of passage include a "tripartite sequence of phases: separation, transition [liminal], and incorporation" (van Gennep 101). As a result, his research foregrounded "modern interest in symbolic and ritual studies," paving the way for the trajectory of anthropologists who followed, like Victor Turner (Myerhoff 116).

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[4] Some scholars that do this work include Carole Boyce Davies in *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994), Toni Morrison in *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Non-fiction* (2008), L.H. Stallings in *Mutha' is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (2007), and Kimberly Nichele Brown *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women's Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text* (2010).

Turner considered more fully what happens in the liminal phase— when one is “betwixt and between” (*The Forest of Symbols* 97). When one is “betwixt and between,” Turner observes that rules and conventions are suspended in the “communitas”—the neophytes are at equal footing and are not inclined to adhere to societal structures (*The Forest of Symbols* 97; *The Ritual Process 96)*. Further, Turner delineates the “communitas” as a provisional space where liminal beings are “*tabula rasa[s]*, blank slates” (*The Ritual Process* 103). After the provisional phase is over, individuals are expected to merge back into society with new ideas and possibly create change in society. In all, what is meant to come out of this space is renewal, possibility, and new ways of looking at the world. Victor Turner sought to extend the conversation of how liminality occurs in rites of passage to all phases in modern society, considering how, for example, clowns and tricksters are “betwixt and between” and how the beat generation, particularly hippies, opted to stay in a “communitas” as opposed to adhering to structure (*The Ritual Process* 112-113).

I am particularly interested in Turner’s conceptions of what is produced in the liminal phase. His insights launched the main premise for my project, significantly informing my thoughts about how Black women move through society, despite being afforded few opportunities to fully merge into society. Notwithstanding what may be regarded by some as a rather harsh reality, as residents of the periphery, I am intrigued with how Black women still find alternatives to create, initiate change, and find places of renewal in what I argue are liminal spaces.

Kevin Everod Quashie, in his work *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un) becoming the Subject*, expands Turner’s notion of being “betwixt and between” and uses the concept of liminality as a way for Black women to attain selfhood, establish subjectivity and move toward “being enough” (Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* 97; Quashie 78). With this premise

in mind, Quashie, "uses the notion of 'girlfriends'" as a frame for understanding three key concepts of cultural studies: self, memory, and language (13). He states,

> The liminality of girlfriend selfhood is a liminality of otherness, a surrender that embraces what it is to be other, a practice of tension between two essential principles: 'I am (a) me" and 'I am someone's an/other.' This recognition of both an indisputable me and an indisputable us is an invocation of spirituality, an awareness of the fluctuating dimensions of identity. It is a movement toward a self whose limits are self-motivated and which disturbs the imperatives that demand Black women be focused singularly on either race or gender. Those are places of social order, useful in organizing but hardly ever places where people live their lives: the feel of the body is more about hunger and thirst and desire—even as those expressions are inflected by racialized or gendered culture; these impulses, then are what (in)forms and unforms the subject. (78-79)

Here, Quashie provides a different reading of liminality that deviates from Turner's concept. Instead, he delineates the liminal space as an imagined space that is not "materially or dimensionally real" and elucidates that liminality in this form embraces paradigms of race and gender as interlocking systems of oppression (Quashie 79). In recognizing that the subjectivity of Black women is often "limited by body politics," he further suggests that liminality is a way for Black women to "reclaim the viability and integrity of her physical body, as well as the articulating of a Black female selfhood that encompasses nonphysical permutations" and ultimately "find god" in themselves (Quashie 79, 83). In my own account of liminality, I build on Quashie's argument by showing how Black women negotiate liminal

spaces in order to establish their subjectivity and ultimately empower themselves. In each chapter, I demonstrate the various ways in which Black women exact agency within the spaces where they maneuver.

While Quashie explores the concept explicitly, other theorists allude to the term in their discussion of marginality as a way for Black women to resist and empower themselves. Published the same year as Quashie's work in 2004, poet Elizabeth Alexander's concept of "the black interior" is also useful to consider in more recent discussions of liminality, as it focuses on spaces where Black people can look inward and assert a more authentic self that is not limited by stereotypes:

> The black interior is a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be reminded of. It is a space that black people ourselves have policed at various historical moments. Tapping into this black imaginary helps us envision what we are meant to envision: complex black selves, real and enactable power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty. (x)

Here, Alexander elucidates that the inner lives of Black people are more layered and nuanced, and by drawing inward and envisioning themselves as such, they are reminded of their power to forge their own destiny. Further, her work prompts other scholars to consider the significance of studying the interiority of Black people—sites of contradictions where "Black creativity complicates and resists what blackness is supposed to be" (Alexander x). Alexander's unique approach of using conceptions of space to reveal how Black women can establish their subjectivity parallels Quashie's larger argument as well as my own, which entails considering how Black women use liminality as a trope to subvert oppressive

structures and imagine spaces in order to assert themselves as subjects. Just as Quashie and Alexander both consider liminality as a trope and site for Black women to picture themselves as subjects despite their conditions, I argue throughout my project that understanding liminality as simply inbetweenness is not enough. I contend that thinking through how Black women forge liminal spaces to assert unprescribed identities, to create, and to find sanctuary is crucial.

Furthermore, many Black women theorists of the 80s and 90s have alluded to the concept of liminality in distinct ways. As aforementioned, bell hooks emerges as a critic who considers marginality akin to liminality as a compelling form of resistance. In her extensive study of the margin, she argues that in-between spaces can be sustained because knowledge of the margin and center leads to wholeness, a more balanced view: "Understanding marginality as a position and place of resistance is crucial for oppressed, exploited, colonized people" (hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" 157). hooks maintains that such a perspective is useful in revamping feminist theory. Though I prefer the term liminality as opposed to marginality, hooks' extensive research in feminist theory is noteworthy, particularly in thinking through how Black women negotiate the liminal spaces I describe in each chapter. Thus, I engage her work to demonstrate how Black women use their position to empower themselves, acquire agency, and/or create.

Termed as "social spaces where Black women can speak freely," the safe spaces Patricia Hill Collins describes are useful in thinking about the concept of liminality as an alternative way for Black women to create spaces for community (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 100). For Collins, these spaces emerge in Black women's relationship with one another in both the private and public spheres, such as Black women's blues tradition and the work of Black women writers

are used to articulate identity and counter hegemonic practices (*Black Feminist Thought* 112-120). Of interest is Collins's emphasis on the significance of women-centered spaces and her assessment of "concrete experience" as a standard for unpacking how Black women are in relationship with one another (Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought" 192). My project explores two of the spaces aforementioned: Black women's relationship with one another in both private and public spheres and the work of Black women writers. In essence, I posit that in its call to create a space for Black women's experiences, Black women's literature not only seeks to include and recognize Black women's experiences in full, but also investigates the varied movement of Black women by showing how their protagonists find wholeness or function with a divided self in liminal spaces.

Moreover, Farah Jasmine Griffin in "*Who Set You Flowin'?" The African American Migration Narrative*, considers how tropes of the ancestor, the stranger, and safe places evolve during the Great Migration era in genres that include literary texts, painting, photography, and music. What I find significant about her research is how she complicates Patricia Hill Collins' definition of safe spaces (9). More specifically, she considers the "irony" of safe spaces for Black women, for example, the church where gender oppression is present and argues that these spaces are accessible to both men and women in the migration narrative (Griffin 9). In her reference to the complexity of these spaces she states, "At their most progressive, they are spaces of retreat, healing, and resistance; at their most reactionary, they are potentially provincial spaces which do not encourage resistance but instead help create complacent subjects whose only aim is to exist within the confines of power that oppress them" (9). Here, Griffin's focus on the potentiality of the space adds more depth by revealing particularly the inconsistencies of these sites in the migration narrative. Though liminality is a more expansive way to discuss how

Black women move through space, Griffin points out that it has its limits. Thus, her argument is useful for expanding our understanding of liminality as a concept that explores spaces of possibility with limitations. For this reason, my project avoids delineating the liminal spaces Black women occupy as utopias, but instead considers the complicated nature of liminal spaces. For example, in chapter three I describe the hair salon as a communal space, but mention that the space often has convoluted respectability politics.

Furthermore, in providing ways for Black women to sustain themselves, Mae Henderson utilizes the Black church vernacular and coins the phrase "speaking in tongues" as a call and mission for Black women— "to speak in a plurality of voices and multiplicity of discourse" (352).[5] To Henderson, "speaking in tongues" points to Black women's capacity to speak from different locations and discourses as Black women (352-353). To discuss the opposing discourses Black women writers take part in simultaneously, she notes, "[B]lack women writers enter into testimonial discourse with black men as blacks, with white women as women, and with black women as black women. At the same time, they enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women" (Henderson 351). Here, Henderson further suggests that Black women writers' insider/outsider vantage point creates a space for Black women's experiences of survival (352-354). Her argument expands our understanding of liminality in revealing how Black women writers use the literary realm, in varied ways, as a space "to speak to and engage both hegemonic and ambiguously (non)hegemonic discourse" (Henderson 352). Further, Henderson's main proposition impacts my research as she highlights remarkable ways for Black women to occupy liminal spaces and establish their subjectivity. Henderson employs concrete experiences and

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[5] Black church vernacular is part of the larger African American vernacular tradition, which includes aspects such as sermons, gospel music, and spirituals. This tradition also incorporates colloquial expressions articulated in the Black church that may be scripture based, rhetorical, or involve call and response.

borrows language, often present in the Black church, as a medium for Black women to assert themselves in the spaces they occupy. Her approach will be especially useful in my project to discuss how Black women writers, such as Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Tayari Jones in particular, use idioms of the Black church to describe the efficacy of Black female relationships.

In all, the common thread I find compelling from these theorists that is valuable to my project is that despite using distinct methodologies and language, they all conclude that Black women do not desire to leave this liminal space. This finding results from there being no real possibility to merge fully into a society that is racist and sexist; therefore, liminality affords Black women agency and creativity. For example, bell hooks refers to this space as the margin, Patricia Hill Collins identifies this area as a "safe space," and Mae Henderson designates this space as "speaking in tongues" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 111; Henderson 354). Additionally, dwelling in the possibilities that the liminal spaces affords is also a moral choice for Black women as they opt not to be part of a society that systemically oppresses them. Overall, the points of similarity between these scholars are that Black women's relationship to power and discourse can serve as a vantage point for challenging traditional notions of feminism and structuring a framework that does not find the oppressions of others necessary. Also, of resonance is these theorists' focus on questions of access, belonging and self-autonomy, which are key themes in the Black Feminist thought tradition.

More recent discussions of liminality in Black feminist circles, however, seek to move beyond taking the power out of historically charged words (as hooks seeks to do with the term "margin"), interrupt "binary logic" and recognize difference as not deviant by finding spaces to employ varied tropes where Black women can be "radical" (Stallings 2). For example, L.H. Stallings' use of the trickster figure and Kimberly Nichele Brown's use of the diva figure both

serve as ways for these writers to show how Black women can transgress boundaries and fully embrace difference as Black women. Stallings underscores the need for Black women to subvert "the master narrative of otherness" as she observes that, "stereotypes and misrepresentations of Black women occur because of the way we are taught to read differences" (1, 5). Ultimately, she argues that the trickster trope is an alternative way Black women writers can articulate sexual desire and "interrupt social binaries" (Stallings 11). Similarly, Brown employs the revolutionary diva figure as a "vehicle for black feminist agency" and medium to delimit the mobility of Black women (10). She illustrates how this figure "acts as a model for female empowerment" by considering "how women publically invent and reconstruct their identities in the arenas of the academy, politics, and publishing in order to counter racist and sexist depictions of Black women; and the intrinsic connection the revolutionary diva (as a performer/writer) sees between herself and her black audience" (23). As a whole, these theorists' unique approach of revising familiar tropes, in the case of Brown and Stallings, to reveal how Black women can establish their subjectivity is what I foresee my project undertaking—to consider how Black women writers use liminality as a trope and fully recognize difference as not deviant, but as complex and varied in nature. Recognizing difference as the standard expands our understanding of liminality as a trope for Black women to transgress and revise traditional constructs of Black womanhood and construct more nuanced images. Thus, my project elucidates how liminality and the facility to cross boundaries allow Black women to thrive despite systemic discriminatory practices. In considering Black women's voices on this cutting edge discussion, Stallings and Brown are interlocutors particularly for my discussion of how Black women use liminality to move from defining one's self according to Eurocentric frameworks and creating new definitions for defining what Black womanhood involves.

Ultimately, my conceptualization of liminality as a trope primarily engages the work of Black feminist theorists in order to unpack how Black women transform the space they occupy. My project advances Black feminist thought by exploring the concrete experiences of Black women in varied spaces, thinking through Black women's many ways of knowing, and revealing how Black women break out of the European framework to transgress boundaries. More specifically, my dissertation explores the lived experiences of Black women metaphorically in chapters one and two, which focus on abstract concepts like loopholes of retreat and transgressive spaces to show how Black women acquire agency and create new self-definitions, and literally in chapters three and four, which focus on the settings of the hair salon and home, respectively, to show how Black women find community and spaces to create and achieve wholeness. Furthermore, I demonstrate how liminality becomes one of the many ways of knowing for Black women—an epistemology that they can use to resist, survive, and ultimately acquire agency. As Black women seek to assert a full humanity that is not merely limited by race and gender, but still impacted by white supremacy and patriarchy, I argue in my dissertation that perpetual inbetweenness not only prompts creativity, but also grants them license to acquire agency to transgress boundaries prescribed by the larger culture.

Methodology

The heart of my project examines what the writing of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century reveals about the trajectory of Black women and their plight to acquire agency and assert a full identity in various spaces. I am interested in this timeframe to see how Black women writers have evolved from adhering to fixed notions of blackness and womanhood determined by Eurocentric ideas to creating more nuanced definitions of Black womanhood. At the same time, I

am intrigued by the way these writers grapple with similar issues and concerns as nineteenth century writers, such as Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, and Anna Dunbar Nelson, which largely include visibility, validation, and limited self-definitions of Black womanhood. Consequently, I use texts from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century as framing texts for how contemporary writers use liminality as a trope, spanning from the late twentieth century to early twenty-first century.

Additionally, my project utilizes Black feminist thought as a lens to discuss how Black women writers use liminality as a trope. While I am not suggesting that all Black women share the same experiences of being Black and women, I believe that there is certainly often a Black and female ethos present among Black women, or as Carol Boyce Davies suggests of Black women's writing, an "affinity" extant (*Black Women, Writing and Identity* 36). For example, I observe in my project that the Black women writers I research look at Black women's movement in interesting ways and explore familiar traditions among Black women embedded in Black culture. Most writers' focus is on women centered spaces and/or emphasize how Black women create spaces for themselves. They illustrate how Black women, despite their plights and circumstances, find ways to maneuver and transform the spaces they occupy. This distinct type of shared ethos consists of the guiding principles Black women use not only to challenge interlocking oppressions, but also to assert a full humanity that is not merely limited to race and gender, while acquiring agency in varied forms. For this reason, I consider the common ground for Black women (in acquiring liminal spaces) in these texts, as well as consider how the individualistic experiences of Black women (the varied results) are just as important.

My primary focus encompasses Black women's writing in the United States where historical conceptions of race are pervasive, heavily impacting how Black women navigate

society. The history of slavery in this country still informs the present, especially for Black writers. Consequently, the context of slavery for twentieth and twenty-first century writers resonates; however, the perspective may slightly differ for Black women writers, again creating a particular ethos. With these texts, I will consider how displacement informs how Black women navigate different spheres in their writing. Undoubtedly, prolific writer Toni Morrison is present in three of my chapters because her writings are grounded in how Black women across the Diaspora seek to include full representations of Black womanhood and her primary focus is on women-centered spaces.

While most of the literature I engage encompasses Black women's writing in the U.S., three writers from my dissertation are not American born: Edwidge Danticat, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and trey anthony. Danticat, however, identifies as Haitian American as she immigrated to America from Haiti at an early age.[6] Because Adichie divides her time between Nigeria and United States and has also ingeniously become a part of American popular culture as she is featured in singer Beyoncé's hit "Flawless," I believe she is a fascinating writer to consider for my overall project. In fact, in her novel I analyze for this project, *Americanah* (2013), Adichie explores the journey of a female protagonist, Ifemelu, who goes to college in America and seeks to understand U.S. perspectives on race, then goes back to Nigeria and begins to see her homeland through Western eyes. As a result, Ifemelu is labeled an "Americanah," occupying a liminal space between American and Nigerian cultures. Lastly, trey anthony is considered North American because although she was born in London, England, her parents are Jamaican and she was raised in Canada. Currently, anthony is based in Atlanta, Georgia. All in

[6] Of note, Roxane Gay and Paule Marshall, two authors I will include are the children of immigrants. Gay was born to Haitian immigrants, while Marshall is born to Bajan immigrants.

all, the writers I have included in my research provide a range of Black women's experiences and a myriad of ways Black women negotiate space.

The primary texts come from a variety of the genres including poetry, short story collections, drama, and novels. I chose the poetry collections to get a sense of how Rita Dove and Natasha Trethewey illuminate the varied relationships of Black women in a shorter amount of space. Considering the defining themes of history, memory, and place, I examine these poets' particular attention to the absence of Black women and underscore their desire to give them a voice in their writing. Likewise, in the plays by Lorraine Hansberry, trey anthony, and Lynn Nottage, I explore how plays present a story of Black women's movement in the home and hair salon via series of dialogue meant to be performed. This particular genre, I observe, really captures the essence of Black women's movement in interesting ways zoning in on how Black women create and assert themselves. Similarly, in the short story collections by Edwidge Danticat and ZZ Packer, respectively, I consider how self-contained incidents in each story seek to convey a particular message about Black women's perspectives on liminality and Black womanhood. Novels are usually considered a genre that helps us understand the human condition, informing our realities. I chose more novels than any other genre because it is my hope that these novels will aid in my understanding of how Black women may subvert patriarchal structures to claim liminal spaces, developing perspectives that emerge as distinctive and revolutionary.

My chapters are divided thematically based on the types of spaces Black women occupy as follows: 1) Loopholes of Retreat, 2) Transgressive Spaces, 3) The Hair Salon, and 4) The Home. Inspired by Harriet Jacobs' most discussed chapter title of her slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), my first chapter, "Loopholes of Retreat," considers instances

where the protagonists are held captive or against their will and their means of escape is minimal. In this chapter, I explore how Black women writers Edwidge Danticat, Suzan-Lori Parks, Natasha Trethewey, and Roxane Gay use liminality as a form of resistance in *Krik? Krak!* (1995), *Venus* (1997), *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002), and *An Untamed State* (2014), respectively. Ultimately, forging loopholes of retreat as liminal spaces affords Black women a means for survival and protection, offering a site for empowerment and agency. In chapter two, I use *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia Butler as an urtext to explore how writers Toni Morrison, Anna Deavere Smith, Danzy Senna, and ZZ Packer depict how Black women negotiate their identities as Black women in *Tar Baby* (1981), *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), *Caucasia* (1998), and *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (2003), respectively. I argue that within transgressive spaces, Black women recognize their hypervisibility and visibility at the same time and map out ways to redefine what Black womanhood entails apart from societal definitions. In my third chapter, entitled "The Hair Salon as a Communal Space," I use *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) by Paule Marshall as a framing text to explore how the hair salon strikingly manifests itself in different ways, emerging as a liminal space and sanctuary for Black women to create, have communion, and generate catharsis in *Jazz* (1992) by Toni Morrison, *Silver Sparrow* (2011) by Tayari Jones, *`Da Kink in my Hair* (2001) by trey anthony, and *Americanah* (2013) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Lastly, chapter four entitled "The Paradox of Home" considers how writers Rita Dove, Lynn Nottage, Toni Morrison, and Angela Flournoy in *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) *Intimate Apparel* (2004), *Home* (2012), and *The Turner House* (2015), respectively, depict the home, particularly the living room, as a liminal space for Black women to delineate rooms of their own to create and be. I use another 1959 publication, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, as a frame to explore how the aforementioned contemporary writers use the living room concept as a

trope for how Black women achieve wholeness in the home. This particular concept—the living room as a space—extends geographically to spaces where Black people can show another part of themselves, and I want to use this idea metaphorically to consider how these women make room for themselves and acquire creative license in the home.

The need to validate Black female experiences remains at the heart of Black feminist thought. My work seeks to continue this trajectory, particularly in how Black women transform space through liminality. It is my hope that these chapters conceptualize and engage how we think about the role of liminality in Black women's lives.

Chapter One: Loopholes of Retreat

O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! …. I wanted to keep myself pure….The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not be judged by the same standards as others.

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)[7]

As Harriet Jacobs boldly declared to nineteenth-century Northern white women, choices look different for Black women, particularly those in seemingly impossible situations. By imploring her readership, Jacobs justifies why her restricted choices should not be judged, suggesting that although she seeks to be virtuous, the protection allowed to white women is denied to Black women. Nevertheless, although her choices were limited in the institution of slavery, Jacobs resolved never to be conquered. As a result of her "deliberate calculation," early African American writer Harriet Jacobs remains relevant for contemporary Black women who often face the dilemma of choosing two equally difficult alternatives (Jacobs 47).[8] Her transgressive choices to resist the status quo—from her radical choice to select Mr. Sands as her "lover" over Dr. Flint, to her refusal to pay for her freedom—emerge as key historic moments that call attention to the unlikely agency behind Black women making choices under systemic discriminatory practices.[9] And, without fail, this theme of negotiating spaces and adopting subversive principles still resonates in contemporary Black women's

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[7] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2001), 48-49.

[8] Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* (1861) is a representative slave narrative mainly because it provides readers with a woman's perspective of slavery. As a result, this narrative is largely referenced by Black feminist scholars. For a range of discussions, see Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist*, Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, and Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book."

[9] The agency these Black women acquire appears unlikely given the circumstances/location they find themselves in, for example, Harriet Jacobs' station as a slave seemingly does not allow her to determine her destiny.

literature. Hence, Jacobs' dilemma and ability to push against established perimeters as a Black woman continue to serve as a touchstone to understanding Black women's continued depictions of resistance. To that end, in contemporary Black women's literature a critical question that continues to emerge is whether individuals who find themselves in environments designated for them to fail should be judged by the same standards as those who are in environments meant for them to thrive?[10]

By harkening back to Jacobs' predicament, I would like to add to the conversation and frame my chapter around the following question: Can Black women's hard choices be judged by conventional standards of womanhood and morality? Using Jacobs' text as a framing narrative, I will answer the question by engaging four representative texts. *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat (1995), a short story collection; *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks (1997), a play; *Bellocq's Ophelia* by Natasha Trethewey (2002), a poetry collection; and *An Untamed State* by Roxane Gay (2014), a novel, all invite us to consider further how particular constraints prompt Black women to redefine choice and agency. Because *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1863) is foundational and often serves as a metatext for Black women scholars, I close read the narrative throughout the chapter to illustrate how Jacobs' tactics parallel the protagonists' choices in the contemporary texts I have selected. Additionally, in these contemporary texts, I consider how liminality is used as a site of empowerment and form of resistance to captive-like spaces. Although these texts vary in genre, collectively, each writer

[10] By adding a firsthand account of an enslaved woman's experience that Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* (1845) cannot include as an enslaved man, Harriet Jacobs' inclusion in the American literary canon disrupts the master slave narrative that often depicts the enslaved man telling not only his story, but also the enslaved woman's. As part of the canon, Harriet Jacobs ushers in another perspective by telling her own story in her own way with an agenda in mind. Jacobs employs the sentimental tradition to appeal to nineteenth-century Northern white women, and as a result, readers historically and beyond finally hear from the lioness. Notably told in a letter by Wendell Phillips to serve as an authenticating device for Frederick Douglass's slave narrative, this concept is in reference to the fable "The Old Man and the Lion," where the lion complained that he should not be misrepresented when the lions write history. I modified the tale to discuss how the lioness, the woman/subaltern can write her own history.

considers similar notions around the concept of agency and the limitations of choice. Additionally, the writers include marginalized female characters that have agency, despite the fact they do not achieve it by conventional standards. In doing so, each author gives voice to least likely, often silenced, characters and unremittingly, each protagonist bears witness to her experience. Inspired by Harriet Jacobs' most discussed chapter title of *Incidents*, my first chapter, "Loopholes of Retreat," examines instances where the protagonists are held captive and their means of escape are minimal. I find captive spaces compelling because on the surface the spaces afford little to no opportunity for personal freedoms, but individuals confined to these spaces still find ways to transform the spaces, act, and make choices. In all, this chapter will consider how the protagonist of each text forges loopholes of retreat, one type of liminal space, to move and make choices, acquire agency, survive seemingly impossible situations, and empower herself.

In the next section, I will engage key concepts found in Black women's writing and literature that my chapter will examine: liminality, agency, and loophole of retreat.

Liminality

Liminality, a concept that encompasses the main premise for my dissertation at large, in my view, is a more nuanced way to discuss how Black women find alternative ways to negotiate, in this case, captive spaces, than terms such as marginality. This concept, defined as the ability to define a space in-between and occupy a position on both sides of a boundary or threshold, is useful to consider Harriet Jacobs in the foreground because early on the concept of liminality is evoked in her signature narrative. Her light skin, as well as her class affiliation, both allow her to navigate the institution of slavery quite differently from her other

enslaved counterparts.[11] Her ability to choose her freed grandmother's garret as a hideaway is indicative of her liminality as it emerges as an in-between space between slavery and freedom. Moreover, what is often understated in the critical discourse on Jacobs is how her ability to embody liminal spaces may compel us to consider if liminality emerges as a fundamental condition for Black women to harness under moral codes that historically exclude them.

In this chapter, I will consider how the concept emerges as a site and source of empowerment, particularly for extremely marginalized characters. More specifically, in considering the traits of liminality and its connection to Black women, I want to extend Kevin Quashie's engagement of liminality with Black women. While my larger definition of liminality is quite similar to Quashie, as being Black and woman and living at the intersection of race and gender, my focus, particularly in this chapter, will also draw parallels to Elizabeth Alexander's concept—the black interior—and engage how liminality emerges as a subversive way for Black women to navigate captive spaces, as well as consider how the concept emerges as a space of transgression of Black womanhood. For this reason, liminality is significant in this chapter because it provides a way for these characters to survive, exist, and sustain themselves. I believe my intervention is necessary to the discourse because this chapter will demonstrate how these women draw upon a specific epistemology as Black women to forge "a way out of no way," empowering themselves.[12] I contend that despite

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[11] Jacobs' vivid accounts of her childhood are akin to whites: "I WAS BORN a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away…. [M]y parents… lived together in a comfortable home; and though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment" (Jacobs 8). In not knowing she is a slave, she acquires a space in-between and establishes her family as a shaping force to her subversive nature. Her apparent relatability to nineteenth century readers affords her the license to claim liminal spaces.

[12] For other recent discussions of liminality in Black feminist circles of the twenty-first century that seek to move beyond taking the power out of historically charged words and recognize difference as not deviant by finding spaces

their limited mobility, the social location of these characters as Black and woman afford them opportunities to maneuver and negotiate liminal spaces, as well as come to voice.

Agency

Agency, another important concept frequently found in Black women's writing and literature, is the capacity to act and make choices in any given environment. Often for overlooked characters, it is about being able to move, make choices and have a semblance of power. Western definitions of power cannot work in such spaces, which is why agency is largely significant.[13] Although they do not "win" by obtaining systemic power of any sort, empowering themselves is a big milestone.[14] So, instead of focusing on how such characters are victims, Black women writers often focus on how they empower themselves. For example, contemporary Black women writers such as Alice Walker, Yaa Gyasi, Nicole Dennis-Benn, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, and Zadie Smith evoke themes of self-empowerment in their works by rewriting the destiny of Black women's struggles as women with voice and agency.[15]

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where Black women can be radical, see L.H Stallings, *Mutha' is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* and Kimberly Nichele Brown, *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women's Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text*.

[13] For example, Hegel suggests that an individual's social position as dominant predetermines his power and influence to create controlling images of marginal groups. Western notions of power delimit Black women's mobility, thus curtailing their efforts to ascend the hierarchy.

[14] I am defining "win" as being victorious and successful by conventional standards; these characters are not essentially triumphant in the captive spaces they occupy.

[15] Alice Walker in *The Color Purple* (1982) demonstrates how Celie and Shug define themselves as independent women, particularly in the pants enterprise they start. Additionally, Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) is a text that portrays women rethinking the male power behind female genital mutilation. Ghanaian-American writer, Yaa Gyasi in her debut novel *Homegoing* (2016) gives voice to the suppressed by focusing on slavery and its aftermath of two half-sisters and their descendants in Ghana and America. In different ways, Nicole Dennis-Benn in *Here Comes the Sun* (2016) casts working-class and queer women who ultimately come to voice and define themselves as independent women. Sonia Sanchez, for example in *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984), portrays Black women as multifaceted who draw from their history to empower themselves. Ntozake Shange, most notably

As the familiar idiom suggests, “Desperate times call for desperate measures.” And so for this reason, choices in seemingly impossible situations look different in an environment meant for individuals to fail and, as Harriet Jacobs maintains in *Incidents*, traditional definitions of choice cannot be assigned to individuals in captive spaces.[16] The choices she is able to make under the laws of slavery allow her to reject stereotypes that regard Black female sexuality as lewd. By using the language and literary forms of her white readership, such as the sentimental tradition, she subverts what is deemed as immoral and “knowing from within” becomes a newly revised virtue of True Womanhood for Jacobs. Hence, the epigraph I included to frame this chapter vividly demonstrates the imminent dangers that arise when an enslaved girl’s childhood abruptly ends upon reaching puberty. Because going through puberty in slavery is horrifying, this dark period also becomes synonymous with recently gained knowledge acquired to exert “control” over her master. Knowledge for Jacobs, however, is necessary for her survival, granting her a form of agency and allowing her to navigate the world differently as a virtuous woman on her own terms. And, consequently, this knowledge allows her to change her somewhat fettered destiny and choose Mr. Sands over Dr. Flint, who becomes the father of her children. In describing her resistance to Dr. Flint’s sexual advances as “deliberate calculation,” Harriet Jacobs’ inability to protect her body from her master becomes the driving force for ultimately attaining freedom for her children and herself (Jacobs 47; Carby 59). Likewise in this chapter, I will argue how the agency to make a

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known for her work, *for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf* (1975), has a range of other works that focus on empowerment, for example, *A daughter’s geography* (1983) intimately seeks to map out the path she declares for her daughter. Zadie Smith in her most recent novel *Swing Time* (2016) uses dance as a reoccurring motif to examine the ways in which the protagonist negotiates multiple identities and ultimately empowers herself.

[16]Extensive discussion of Harriet Jacobs’ limited choices is reviewed by scholars Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist*; Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America;* Hortense J. Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”; and Valerie Smith in “Form and Ideology in Three Slave Narratives.”

choice, despite its limitations, not only empowers these individuals, but also at the same time legitimizes their existence.

However, agency in this form has also been understood as complicity. While David Ikard in *Breaking the Silence: Toward a Black Male Feminist Criticism* identifies Black men as "surrogate oppressors" of Black women, he argues that Black patriarchy is also maintained due to the complicity of Black women's "self sacrifice" (5). He proposes that the Black community should consider how they are "complicit in their own racial/gender oppression" and further suggests that once Blacks mull over their own complicit nature, they have the "power to alter significant aspects of [their] racial and gender realities" (27). Ikard's premise appears to blame victims and raises the question of do we have the power to alter racial and gender oppressions, both systemic in nature? Nonetheless, it becomes clear that this argument is not new; in an early foundational text, Hazel Carby points out that the view of the slave as "victim" and/or "active collaborator" of "institutionalized rape" emerges to the forefront in examining the assumptions and stereotypes of Black women that link them to "illicit sexuality" (Carby 22). For these reasons, "[Black women] had to define a discourse of Black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood but, as a consequence of this exclusion, would also rescue their bodies from a persistent association with illicit sexuality" (Carby 32). In all, this insight invites us to consider how Black women's agency to make a choice and create their own definitions of Black womanhood is significant to dismantling controlling images of Black women as lacking a moral conscious.

Susana M. Morris responds to Ikard's notion of complicity and argues that identifying Black women as "accomplices in the crimes of patriarchy" or "agents" of their oppression is

problematic because their involvement in the system is “not always clear or consensual” (“‘Sisters separated for much too long’”162). In addition, Morris considers an alternative way to engage the question of complicity through the system of kyriarchy, a term coined by feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, as the “sociocultural and religious system of domination constituted by intersection multiplicative structures of oppression (qtd. in *Close Kin and Distant Relatives* 9).[17] According to Morris, this system elucidates, “how women participate in domination, insubordination, support, and a whole host of other interactions within society” and demonstrates an “understanding of power dynamics that is particularly helpful in understanding how women relate to one another in a misogynistic society” (*Close Kin and Distant Relatives* 9). Jacobs’ decision to make a choice under an institution where she is subjected to dominance, dehumanization, and control is noteworthy. Morris notes that “This ambivalence is a generative construct, a set of behaviors used to navigate hostile and confusing political social terrain and not an attempt to opt out of decision making” (*Close Kin and Distant Relatives* 9). For this reason, the term kyriarchy can help to explain the power of choice among Black women even in the most unbearable circumstances.

In this chapter, I too wish to counter Ikard’s notion of complicity and consider the ethics of judging Black women’s hard choices and terming them complicit. Further, I will consider if there is power that is complicit in nature, particularly when each protagonist is caught up in a predicament and confronted with unpalatable choices. However, despite these limitations, I will describe later in my analysis of each text, making a choice not only establish these protagonists as subjects, but also empowers them, granting them agency.

[17] See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*.

Loophole of Retreat

In the introduction to *Black Women Writers at Work*, Claudia Tate notes that there are "restrictions placed on the black heroine's physical movement"; and as a result, "she must conduct her quest within close boundaries … [often making] her journey…an internal one seldom taken on land" (xx-xi). Limited mobility arises primarily in captive spaces described in the four texts I have chosen, raising the question: How do these female protagonists find sanctuary in seemingly impossible situations? For this reason, I will consider the "loophole of retreat" as a type of liminal space where the protagonists' means of escape are minimal, physically or otherwise.

Although the phrase "loophole of retreat" is derived from William Cowper's poem "The Task" (1785), it is famously used by Harriet Jacobs in her narrative to describe her seven years in a 9x7x3 garret.[18] While the speaker's view of the loophole in "The Task" contrasts Jacobs' experience in the garret, her appropriation of the term is fruitful to consider because her years in the garret as invisible, concealed, and simultaneously present are reminiscent of the liminal social space she occupies. Therefore, her use of the term is significant in this chapter as I will engage four texts of protagonists who find themselves in similar predicaments. In his vivid description, Cowper centralizes the loophole of retreat as a place where the speaker can view the world's misfortunes and be ensured protection at the same time, which is in stark contrast to Harriet Jacobs' space.[19] In the garret, Jacobs is not

[18] The terms "loophole" and "retreat" both have dual meanings in which its definitions are set up in binaries. For example "loophole" is a term used by Harriet Jacobs as well as other African Americans to acquire agency and find means of escape and is also a legal term used to deny African Americans of their civil rights. Moreover, the term "retreat" is also used dually in the military sense—to withdraw military forces as a result of defeat and in the nonmilitary sense—to find a safe haven (Gruesser 11).

[19] William Cowper describes the loophole of retreat in the following lines of his poem "The Task" (1785):"Tis pleasant through the loopholes of retreat/ To peep at such a world; to see the stir/ Of the great Babel and not feel the

fully ensured protection as a fugitive slave. Her situation parallels how I will consider the ways Black women negotiate space in adverse circumstances in my chapter. Katherine McKittrick argues that space (geographically) does not consider Black women and investigates how Black women experience the struggles inherent in geography. In her study, she considers the garret years of Jacobs' narrative as a springboard to "examine the ways in which a Black sense of place communicates the terms of captivity," arguing that Jacobs "transforms the garret into a usable and paradoxical space" (McKittrick xxviii). While the garret emerges as that in-between space of slavery and freedom, in this space, "[Jacobs] is not enslaved and her loophole of retreat is a retreat to emancipation" (McKittrick 41). In her narrative, Jacobs says with pleasure:

> The opinion was often expressed that I was in the Free States. Very rarely did any one suggest that I might be in the vicinity. Had the least suspicion rested on my grandmother's house, it would have been burned to the ground. But it was the last place they thought of. Yet there was no place, where slavery existed, that could have afforded me so good a place of concealment. (Jacobs 98)

By suggesting that the garret is the best "place of concealment," Jacobs alludes to her liminality and ability to free herself from bondage even though she still resides in the South (98). Further, McKittrick's close attention to the aforementioned phrase, "the last place they thought of" to describe Jacobs' "loophole of retreat" frames her argument that "geographies of black femininity…are *central to* how we know and understand space and place [and as

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crowd; /To hear the roar she sends through all her gates/ At a safe distance, where the dying sound/ Falls a soft murmur on the uninjured ear" (Cowper 88-93).

result] tell a different geographic story" (62; emphasis in the original).[20] Using her work as a touchstone to discuss how this space affords Black women a way to negotiate space, I am building off of McKittrick's argument and will consider further how Black women protect the self in captive spaces. I will argue in her task to redefine choices, Jacobs and others in her predicament have agency.

As Harriet Jacobs describes her years in captivity as a slave, Suzan-Lori Parks, Natasha Trethewey, Edwidge Danticat, and Roxane Gay appear to use features of the Black women's captivity narrative as their protagonists are in captive spaces in varied ways.[21] For example, Mireille Duval Jameson of Gay's *An Untamed State* (2014) is kidnapped for ransom and held captive for over two weeks. Much of the oppression the captive women of Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* (1995) experience is political in nature. These experiences include authoritarian leaders such as Rafael Trujillo, Papa Doc, or Baby Doc encouraging injustice against Haitians, and as a result, these women endured being held captive in prison, loss, brutality, and immense suffering. While it is apparent how the protagonists of the texts aforementioned are held captive, the title characters of *Venus* (1997) by Suzan-Lori Parks and *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002) by Natasha Trethewey are more ambiguous because they seemingly choose

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[20] Other scholars in the field have used the term in similar ways, underscoring Jacobs' tactfulness. Valerie Smith in "Form and Ideology in Three Slave Narratives" notes that "choosing her own space of concealment" in the garret despite its discomforts, is definitive because her choice grants her agency over her master once again (Smith 226). Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" argues that Jacobs' narrative in full is a story of "garretting" and denotes the garret as well as other silenced spaces as "not quite spaces" (qtd. in McKittrick 61). Moreover, the phrase extends notably to Ellen Driscoll's artwork as her 1990 exhibit is entitled *The Loophole of Retreat* and inspired by Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* (1861).

[21] Colonial captivity narratives primarily are stories of people captured by enemies whom they consider uncivilized or whose beliefs and customs they oppose and, according to Yolanda Pierce, often written by whites to "define a clear white American identity in the New World" (85). However, the Black women's captivity narrative that Suzan-Lori Parks, Natasha Trethewey, Edwidge Danticat, and Roxane Gay engage is distinct from the genre aforementioned. Though these writers partly employ features of colonial captivity narrative by depicting experiences of protagonists who are held in captive spaces, their texts are written from a Black woman's perspective and are not about establishing or defending white supremacy. Therefore, my focus in this chapter is not on their victimhood, but on their selfhood and empowerment.

their plights. Venus is held in a cage as an attraction for British audiences and her cage functions as both the display as well as her living space (restroom and bedroom), while Ophelia, a sex worker and model, is restricted to Storyville, the red light district of New Orleans, and is criminalized as well as violated for leaving the designated area. As a model, she is also contained in a room for portraits. While each writer grounds her plot in a captive-like space, all deviate from this genre as their focus is solely not on the female protagonists' captivity, but also on how they empower themselves and acquire agency. For this reason, the term "loophole of retreat" is best suited, as it engages Black women's experiences in captivity as a place where they find their power.

As my chapter will reveal, this power comes in many forms. Harriet Jacobs' infamous loophole of retreat is evident of the many forms that Black women harness to acquire some form of agency. For example, even later as she sends letters to Dr. Flint (through a liaison) to deceive him into thinking that she is in the North, she is able to acquire the literal and physical space of being in the North and South at the same time. She notes, "It was a great object to keep up this delusion, for it made me and my friends feel less anxious, and it would be very convenient whenever there was a chance to escape. I resolved, therefore, to continue to write letters from the north from time to time" (Jacobs 109). Her ploy to "deflect [Dr. Flint's] attention" with fictionalized letters postmarked from Boston and New York allows her to control her master's comings and goings, and steer him away from her whereabouts in the garret (Smith 228). Her ability to acquire agency within the loophole of retreat she occupies through her invisibility and presence simultaneously is significant to the discourse regarding Black women's limited mobility in captive spaces. Jacobs' subterfuge demonstrates how Black women can act and move, literally or figuratively, under unyielding, adverse

circumstances, undermining notions that they are powerless. As noted in the narrative, the garret, her loophole of retreat, helps us consider Black women's immense capacity to transform space to survive and using this term allows me to focus on the strength of these women and consider how they prevail, survive, and empower themselves in a way that does not diminish what is happening or has happened to them. In the next section, I will consider several bodies of criticism about the contemporary heirs to Jacobs' work. Critical conversations about *Venus*, *Bellocq's Ophelia*, *Krik? Krak!*, and *An Untamed State,* and communicate further my intervention regarding Black women, liminality and the loophole of retreat.

Literature Review

In *Venus*, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks dramatizes the life of Saartjie "Sarah" Baartman, infamously known as the "Hottentot Venus" who, due to her large posterior, was exhibited as a freak show attraction in Europe during the nineteenth century. Within her production, Parks depicts Venus as having agency particularly by indicating that she makes a choice to be an attraction for British audiences and seeks to centralize the voice of an African woman otherwise dismissed in historical conversations. As a result of Parks' adaptation, many critics argue that Parks constructs Venus as complicit in her choice and absolves the Baron Docteur of any wrongdoing.

While many scholars closely examine Suzan-Lori Parks' construction of Baartman, particularly in her use of historical references, her complicit nature, and the ways she acquires agency, most of the critical conversation around *Venus* (1997) is in response to Jean Young's widely discussed article "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartijie

Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus."* Young disagrees with playwright Suzan-Lori Parks' artistic license to construct Venus as having a choice in her own "exploitation…. for material gain" (699). Instead, she argues that Venus is a victim, not an "accomplice of her exploitation" and should be understood accordingly (699). While most scholars have countered, in particular, Young's critique of Parks' version of Baartman in a myriad of ways, none has considered how liminality can be used as a trope to discuss her choices and trajectory. While I will build upon scholarship that critiques how Parks recasts Venus as making a choice, this chapter will also explore how Parks' Venus claims liminal spaces, despite her apparent exploitation and oppression.

Many critics and scholars have assessed critically Parks' bold portrayal of Venus as a revolutionary way to validate her existence. In a compelling pushback against Jean Young's critique, Sarah Warner in "Suzan-Lori Parks's Drama of Disinterment: A Transnational Exploration of *Venus*" suggests Venus' choice—to be on exhibit in life and even in death—re-humanizes her (192). Other scholars in response to Young examine how Parks' construction of Venus compels us to consider more innovative ways to combat racism and sexism or read constructions of race and gender. Piia Mustamäki in "Reading Representations of Race with Masochism: The 1990s and Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*" extends the conversation and argues that "masochistic" is a better word than "complicit" to describe Venus' actions as "her exploitation only directly harms herself, not anyone else" (29). Likewise, Julie Burrell in "The Lower Stratum of History: The Grotesque Comic Stereotypes of Suzan-Lori Parks and Kara Walker" suggests that *Venus* can be used as a paradigm to confront the historical ramifications of racism and sexism.[22]

[22] For other scholars' reactions to Jean Young's argument, see Greg Miller, "The Bottom of Desire in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*" and Johanna Frank, "Embodied Absence and Theatrical Dismemberment."

Furthermore, scholar Jennifer Larson in "'With Deliberate Calculation': Money, Sex, and the Black Playwright in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*" considers how Black women in compromising positions, like Venus, acquire agency in subversive ways (207). By referencing Harriet Jacobs' decision to choose Mr. Sands as her "lover" over Dr. Flint, Larson draws poignant parallels to Venus' decision, suggesting that like Jacobs in *Incidents* (1861) either choice for Venus is unsettling and unacceptable. My intervention builds off Jennifer Larson's discussion of the question and role of complicity in *Venus* and, more specifically, the parallels Larson makes to Harriet Jacobs, another nineteenth-century Black woman. As I engage the discourse regarding how conventional standards of choice cannot apply to Black women, my intervention differs from the previous scholarship, particularly in my ideas of how the choices Venus makes emerge as her very own loophole of retreat.[23] I contend that despite being confined, Venus' immense capacity to transform space allows her to acquire agency and ultimately empower herself.

Similar in overarching theme to Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*, Natasha Trethewey's poetry collection *Bellocq's Ophelia* uses ekphrasis and intertextuality with John Everett Millais' painting, *Ophelia*, to recover one facet of history silenced and gives voice to a sex worker and model of the New Orleans' red light district in the early 1900s.[24] To create this narrative space, Trethewey adeptly divides her work into three sections: the first two sections address others that include Ophelia's inner circle (mother, teacher/friend, madam) and customers, and the last section includes a diary of her innermost thoughts.

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[23] In other interesting conversations, Carol Schaefer in "Staging a New Literary History: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, *In the Blood,* and *Fucking A*" seeks to move away from considering Venus as a victim by considering Venus as both an epic hero and heroine simultaneously.

[24] Trethewey also uses *Hamlet*'s Ophelia as an intertext to capture the still life of one of Bellocq's unnamed models.

Many scholars focus on Trethewey's use of photography as a metanarrative and consider how the act of looking in Ophelia's professions as sex worker and model is a form of subversion. For example, by identifying four distinct layers of looking and examining how these layers are troubled by racial and gender implications, Annette Debo in "Ophelia Speaks: Resurrecting Still Lives in Natasha Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia*" considers how looking back "grants Ophelia agency to look at herself" (207). Likewise Meta DuEwa Jones extends this conversation in "Reframing Exposure: Natasha Trethewey's Forms of Exposure" by suggesting that Ophelia's rejection of Countess P's advice to new girls to not look back is a form of resistance. Continuing the discussion of the power of photography in Trethewey's collection, Kimberly Wallace-Sanders in "'Your Eyes Returning my Own Gaze': Distortion and Photography as Meta-Narrative in Trethewey's Poetry" explains how the author "flips the script" and gives the unlikely subjects "the upper hand over the photographer" who often comes with distorted opinions of African Americans (Wallace-Sanders 185, 187).[25]

What I find most fascinating in this critical conversation about *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002) is how the very logistics of photography (i.e. looking, framing) serve an atypical function for Ophelia. As I build upon the scholarship that unpacks Ophelia's mere act of looking back as subversive, I will consider how Trethewey seeks to show how her titular character's choice to become a sex worker and model emerges as a space for her to transgress boundaries of virtue and Black womanhood. By harkening back to Jacobs' dilemma and capacity to push perimeters as a Black woman, I will add to the conversation about the

[25] One other exceptional part of the critical conversation that stands out is Pearl Amelia McHaney's "Natasha Trethewey's Triptych: The Bodies of History in *Bellocq's Ophelia*, *Native Guard*, and *Thrall*" that seeks to focus on the author's main focus on history. She argues that although these three poetry collections stand alone, McHaney considers these works as a triptych with a familial resonance. Of note, the text *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002) emerges as a liminal text, the product/child of *Native Guard* (2006), a metonym for her Black mother, and *Thrall* (2012), a metonym for her white Canadian father (155).

author's metaphoric use of photography. By using liminality as a site to move and make choices, I contend Ophelia complicates how she asserts her identity and, as a result, she moves through the system subversively. While Ophelia's fair skin allows her to physically embody liminal spaces, I argue that it is her capacity to look back as she is photographed, draw inward, and later emerge as a photographer herself that allows her to forge her very own loophole of retreat.

Unlike Parks and Trethewey who use allusion and intertextuality, respectively, to uncover buried histories of individual reimagined nineteenth century women, Edwidge Danticat in *Krik? Krak!* seeks to rewrite crucial moments of twentieth-century Haitian history by revisiting these events as the "*lieu de mémoire*," centralizing the woman's voice, promoting community and solidarity (qtd. in Ibarrola-Armendáriz 10).[26] The very title of this short story collection, derived from Haitian folklore, points to Danticat's lifework—to establish Haitian women's role in the nation's continued existence.[27] Danticat's title employs call and response, beseeching participation from not only Haitian women especially, but also from the collection's readers.[28]

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[26] This term, coined by Pierre Nora, is defined as a "mental place recurrently revisited, rather than the real landscape" and often evoked in scholarly discussion about the works of Edwidge Danticat (qtd. in Ibarrola-Armendáriz 10). See Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz, "Broken Memories of a Traumatic Past and the Redemptive Power of Narrative in the Fiction of Edwidge Danticat" and Jana Evans Braziel, "Défilée's Diasporic Daughters: Revolutionary Narratives of Ayiti (Haiti), Nanchon (Nation), and Dyaspora (Diaspora) in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!."*

[27] For a range of brief discussion about the Krik Krak structure, see Angelia Poon, "Rewriting the Male Text: Mapping Cultural Spaces in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* and Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*"; Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz, "Broken Memories of a Traumatic Past and the Redemptive Power of Narrative in the Fiction of Edwidge Danticat"; Carmen Nge, "Rising in the Ashes: Reading *Krik? Krak!* As A Response to 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'"; Nick Nesbitt, "Diasporic Politics: Danticat's Short Works"; and Madelaine Hron, *Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture*.

[28] In the first short story of the collection, "Children of the Sea," Danticat writes, "We spent most of yesterday telling stories. Someone says, Krik? You answer Krak! And they say, I have many stories I could tell you, and then they go on and tell these stories to you, but mostly to themselves (14).

Many scholars of Danticat frequently engage Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and the notion of "inherent forgetting" especially is prominent in critical conversations of *Krik? Krak!* (1995) (Caruth 17).[29] Jelena Šesnić employs trauma theory to emphasize that Danticat explores trauma as shared by revisiting historic events from a marginalized female perspective. In doing so, she argues that Danticat seeks to claim ownership of history and "give voice to the wound caused by history" (Šesnić 235). Scholars Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz, Angelia Poon, and Izabella Penier all consider from different angles how Edwidge Danticat employs the power of storytelling to cope with traumatic experiences and decenter master narratives regarding Haitian history.[30] While I build upon this scholarship that engages how Danticat reframes Haitian history by centralizing female voices, this chapter will also consider how the narrative space Danticat uses for Haitian women to retell the story emerges as a liminal space and, more specifically, as loopholes of retreat to cope with traumatic experiences. I contend that the narrative space Danticat uses in the form of storytelling, testimony, and narrative emerge as liminal spaces and more specifically, loopholes of retreat. For example, in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" what is gained is that stories allow Manman to talk about the Parsley Massacre as a survivor, not a victim. In "Between the Pool and Gardenias," continuity is present in reinforcing the power of narrative as the very names of her children that do not survive recur in other stories. Furthermore, the actual space

[29] In her definition of inherent forgetting, Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* suggests that "the historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (17).

[30] Additionally, Madelaine Hron in *Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture* suggests that the use of *vodou* myth offers the characters of Danticat's work an avenue to articulate their experiences and "resist the violence of their oppression" (173). Wilson Chen in "Figures of Flight and Entrapment in Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krak!"* continues the conversation about *vodou* and its relationship with flight in the short story collection and adds that the ability to fly, particularly in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," is criminalized by men because this act exposes their limitations; flying is outside of male's range of abilities (49).

named in the title delineates a liminal space for the throwaways who are dispensable in society, as well as an imaginary world where the protagonist can act as mother of a dead infant. Altogether in each story, Danticat is rewriting narratives to include Haitian women's voices and stories that can be healing for them. In making an affirmative statement that the lioness can write history, she affirms Haitian's women existence as survivors, not victims.[31]

Unlike Edwidge Danticat who centralizes Haitian women voices subjected to trauma and loss, Roxane Gay depicts an uncharacteristic narrative of Haiti in her work *An Untamed State*, in which familiar themes of Haitian poverty are deemphasized to shed light on the business of kidnapping rings. The protagonist, Mireille Duval Jameson, is an affluent Haitian woman, kidnapped and violated for two weeks by her captors. Accordingly, this visceral storyline makes the novel's relevancy palpable.[32] Hence, *An Untamed State* (2014) has emerged as a definitive text people are currently grappling with, as the novel will be adapted into a film, which will star Gugu Mbatha-Raw. The date for production is tentative (McNary).

While there is a dearth of scholarly conversation about Roxane Gay's recently published novel, many reviewers have underscored the author's narrative style and structure, her explicit use of sexual violence, and how she reconceptualizes what survival entails in adverse circumstances. Although many reviewers of Gay's readily admit that the text is unsettling, their frequent interest, for example by Holly Bass and Natalie Mattila, is on how she frames her novel by intertwining features of the fairytale, which is illuminated in the

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[31] See footnote ten regarding this reference.

[32] Issues of sexual violence have overtaken recent news forums following the massive 2010 earthquake that destroyed Haiti's capital city, Port-au-Prince, leaving 1.5 million people homeless: "Meanwhile, desperation for food and water caused the rise of what one women's organization called "survival sex"--women and girls having to sell their bodies for food" (Morrin). Unfortunately, the lack of protection against the specter of sexual violence discourages women and girls to report the attacks to authorities ("''Haiti's Emergency Response Must Include Protection From Widespread Sexual Violence, Says Amnesty International" 518).

novel's first lines.[33] For this reason, other reviewers of this novel have also discussed how Gay exposes the realities of sexual violence in raw fashion and considers how such traumas are irrevocable, raising the question: how does Mireille protect her body in a hopeless context? Furthermore, although most reviewers suggest that the graphic violence is necessary in the text to expose how men wrongfully exploit women's bodies, Ron Charles, a book reviewer from *The Washington Post*, has concerns about the "overrepresentation of sex and violence" in the media and, it appears, literature as well (Charles). However, in her interview with Jim Higgins of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Roxane Gay herself shares her motivations for writing such scenes: "I was very committed to being explicit in the violence, because I think all too often violence is really stylized and we can watch it. I think you should have to look away, or feel compelled to look away" (Higgins). Here, she appears to steer readers from the routine of being a mere voyeur to feeling discomfort. Additionally in "Theses on the Feminist Novel," Gay suggests that in allowing her protagonist to unapologetically "[bear] witness to [her] experience" in full, it is a feminist text (48). I will build upon Roxane Gay's notion of testimony and consider further her raw, honest portrayal of Mireille's experience as a space for readers to consider how the protagonist becomes a victor of her experiences.

Other discussions central in the reviews focus on how Gay redefines what survival entails—by maintaining an untamed state of mind, hence the title (Daley). As noted by Tod Goldberg in his review "Roxane Gay's Debut Novel 'An Untamed State' Rewards Those Willing To Endure It" and other reviewers, because the reader knows early on that Mireille survives the kidnapping and brutal violence, consideration of survival in a new way is needed.

[33] Gay begins the novel: "Once upon a time, in a far-off land, I was kidnapped by a gang of fearless yet terrified young men with so much impossible hope beating inside their bodies it burned their very skin and strengthen their will right through their bones" (3).

I will add to this rather recent conversation about the novel, particularly Gay's definition of survival and consider how Mireille uses liminality as her loophole of retreat to stay alive despite the unremitting violence she endures in captivity. I will extend the argument that she maintains an "untamed state" to survive and contend that Mireille survives torture by abandoning any roles that signify a human relationship. Furthermore, I will engage concepts of trauma theory developed by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) and Elaine Scarry in her critical work, *The Body in Pain* (1985). Using these texts, I will consider how loss of memory becomes the protagonist's strategy she uses to protect the inner self and survive.

"Coming out of Voicelessness": Forging Loopholes of Retreat

Black women, historically and beyond, have contended with the issue of white audiences not seeing value in their speech. In underscoring the importance of Black women "coming out of voicelessness" and "speaking anyhow," Carol Boyce Davies in "Hearing Black Women's Voices: Transgressing Imposed Boundaries," elucidates how Black women's writing and literature can be "transgressive speech," a unique form of resistance (5, 7-8).[34] Contemporary Black women writers Suzan-Lori Parks, Natasha Trethewey, Edwidge Danticat, and Roxane Gay employ transgressive speech in varied ways by forging liminal spaces for characters within captive states in their texts. Thereafter, these Black female characters acquire agency as a result of their tenacity. In their task to bring their protagonists to voice even in the midst of their harsh realities, these authors tackle issues of silence and victimization head on and as Carol Boyce

[34] Carol Boyce Davies suggests that transgressive speech "challenges situations of oppression, challenges power and talks back to authority when necessary, regardless of the consequences" ("Hearing Black Women's Voices: Transgressing Imposed Boundaries" 8). For more on this idea see, bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* .

Davies states, “redefine options for articulation” in myriad forms (“Hearing Black Women’s Voices: Transgressing Imposed Boundaries” 7). Additionally, the geographic implications for Black women are worth discussion as their very being transforms the layout of the spaces they occupy. Returning to our framing narrative, Jacobs understands through her experiences of liminality that she has the power to disrupt space; as a result, she maps out ways to exist, protect, and free herself in the space both literally and metaphorically. Harriet Jacobs’ “different sense of place” and location help us understand how Black women in varied forms of captivity forge a workable space to exist and “explore the possibilities in the existing landscape” (McKittrick 40). In all, these writers show how their protagonists seek to “raise their own voices and locate their own sources of power” by forging loopholes of retreat (“Hearing Black Women’s Voices: Transgressing Imposed Boundaries” 7).

While there is a common thread in all four texts of how these Black female protagonists come to voice, make hard choices, and acquire agency in captive-like spaces, there emerges a specific pattern of liminality and geography between the two texts, *Venus* and *Bellocq’s Ophelia*. Nearly nude Venus resides in a cage as a site for British audiences and sex worker Ophelia is contained in a room to be photographed and restricted to red light district in New Orleans. As both protagonists’ lives are on displays in constrained spaces, they acquire agency within their extenuating circumstances. For this reason, I will draw parallels between these two texts and show how Venus and Ophelia exist and seemingly thrive within oppressive systems. Moreover, in both texts, the protagonists' options mirror Harriet Jacobs’ predicament, challenging notions of whether or not judgment can be assigned given that either choice is undesirable. In both texts, the choices Venus and Ophelia make strongly parallel concubinage during slavery, a practice

enslaved women did not choose.[35] Harriet Jacobs relates her circumstances: "If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery" (48). As Jacobs points out, her options are circumscribed by her station as slave; in a similar way, Venus and Ophelia operate within constraints, given the context, as nineteenth century Black women. They diverge, however, in their outcomes. Although Venus identifies ways she can assert herself and acquire agency, she continues to endure the objectification of her body, even posthumously. Ophelia, at the end, is afforded the opportunity to move westward and pursue work more than likely as a photographer.

Another pattern in *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat and *An Untamed State* by Roxane Gay emerges as the two texts are both set in Haitian contexts and both engage trauma and its aftermath. The experiences of trauma Danticat and Gay unapologetically engage are both rooted out of Haitian history and/or present-day realities of the country and they both exemplify how their protagonists are survivors, not victims. Although Danticat and Gay's primary focus is on how Haitian women experience trauma, their experiences of survival are different and are marked by major class tensions. Danticat centers her short stories around the terror and oppression working class Haitian women experience because they are Haitian. Conversely, Gay reveals that the kidnapping and trauma protagonist Mireille Duval Jameson undergoes is a result of Haitian corruption, but more specifically, connected to her being an affluent Haitian-American. Additionally, the protagonists of these texts find themselves in more vivid, explicit captive spaces that are concrete and rigid. Mireille is kidnapped and held captive for two weeks,

[35] Concubinage refers to sexual slavery where the woman, free or enslaved, is at a disadvantage. Conversely, the man is usually someone of higher social standing and considered the dominant one: However materially beneficial these partnerships may have been for women of color, these associations also involved unequal power relations which left many of them without choice, protection, and social or material benefit" (Fuentes 42).

while the women of *Krik? Krak!* are oppressed in different ways because they are Haitian as the longstanding Haitian-Dominican conflict is vividly portrayed in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” and “Between the Pool and the Gardenias.” Manman in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” is imprisoned and criminalized by Dominican soldiers because she presumably has the capacity to fly. Likewise, readers can presume at the end of “Between the Pool and the Gardenias” that Marie, a country maid, will be held responsible for the death of the baby she had been attending to given that her Dominican co-worker has reported her to the authorities.[36]

Though their experiences appear to contrast Harriet Jacobs’ predicament, the ability to forge a loophole of retreat is still prominent in both *Krik? Krak!* and *An Untamed State*. However, the way each text addresses how their protagonists affirm their existence as trauma survivors varies. Inherent forgetting, a concept integral to Cathy Caruth’s rendering of trauma theory, manifests itself in different ways in both texts. Memory is vital for the women of *Krik? Krak!* to transform captive spaces as the use of narrative allows them to rewrite their history as survivors, not victims. For example in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven,” the notion that Manman is a flying woman emerges as a trope for her and her daughter, particularly when Manman dies, to sustain themselves and reaffirm their existence. In similar fashion, narrative allows Marie in “Between the Pool and the Gardenias” to function as surrogate mother, albeit temporarily, to a dead infant and acquire some semblance of purpose and control of her life. On the other hand, willfully forgetting the self is crucial for Mireille’s survival as well as maintaining an untamed state of mind during her kidnapping.

[36] Heightened racial tensions between Haitians and Dominicans, riven by an unresolved past, are ubiquitous. Thus, the recurrence of Dominican men as violent forces that bring on state-sanctioned violence is pervasive. For more discussion about the ways in in which hyper masculinity and/or machismo manifest itself in Dominican culture, see *Masculinity after Trujillo: The Politics of Gender in Dominican Literature* by Maja Horn.

Moreover, Danticat and Gay center women's experiences to reveal how their respective protagonists come out of voicelessnesss and are deliberate with her choices in order to establish their subjectivity. These writers do not idealize their protagonists' experiences; instead, they focus on the rawness of life. The very fact that these writers speak boldly through writing transgresses the social context that ignores Black women ("Hearing Black Women's Voices: Transgressing Imposed Boundaries" 8). Carol Boyce Davies notes, "[B]lack women's writing occupies the position of transgressive speech because it transgresses the boundaries and locations for Black women within the context of social authorities and norms" ("Hearing Black Women's Voices: Transgressing Imposed Boundaries" 8). Thus, the liminality of these Black women protagonists allows them to adapt to their surroundings and no matter how minimal it is, claim a space for themselves. As they use this trope to survive and resist in the ways they can, these protagonists ultimately empower themselves. While these texts all refute the idea of reducing their protagonists to strictly innocent or helpless victim status, I will show how each author overturns particular notions regarding normative morality in varied forms through liminality.

"I Was Here" Black Women Becoming

Venus, an adaptation of the life of Saartije Bartmann, a Hottentot woman of South Africa who was exhibited around Europe in the nineteenth century, is a play that remains subject to controversy particularly because of Suzan-Lori Parks' portrayal of Venus as a willing spectacle. Parks, in her revisionist history of Bartmann, seeks to add more dimension to her character and consider her many complexities by not truncating her to a mere fragile object or innocent victim, but recasting her as a thinking subject who stands by her choices. Despite this controversy, or perhaps because of it, it is still useful to examine how Parks' Venus comes to voice. My close

reading, in fact, will focus on Suzan-Lori Parks' construction of Venus, which is not a full historical account of her life. On the surface of her trajectory, Venus appears to be voiceless as she is tricked by The Brother to leave her livelihood as a servant in South Africa to come to England to acquire riches as a dancing African princess. Furthermore, she is left with the Mother Showman to serve as a featured attraction in an iron cage, sold to the Baron Docteur for research and concubinage, and imprisoned for indecency. Even posthumously, Venus' objectification persists as the museum displayed her remains until 1974.[37] However, even with the travails she undergoes, she comes to voice through her sexuality in her claims to liminal spaces. Venus not only occupies a liminal space as a Black woman, she is placed on the periphery because of her distinct features. Venus' physical features, more specifically, her large posterior, distinguish her and automatically "other" her. Because Mother-Showman and Baron Docteur, who represent mainstream Eurocentric views, consider her as an exotic other, they insist that she is perpetually silenced. However, Venus does not "accept [this] silencing, she speaks anyhow" (Davies 7). During the show, Venus does not merely act as a spectacle without question; she wants a voice. In conversation with the Mother-Showman, she suggests, "We should spruce up our act. /I could speak for them. Say a little poem or something" (Parks 51). Next, although to no avail, she demands her share of the money: "I should get 50 uh wek. / Plus better food, uh lock on my door and uh new dress now/n then" (53). In turn, Mother Showman disregards her requests; Venus threatens to leave, expressing desire for independence: "I'll set up shop and show myself. /Be my own Boss make my own mint" (55). Although Mother Showman denies her requests, the fact that she makes these demands and speaks for herself is significant, revealing Venus' fortitude.

[37] Almost two centuries later, Saartije Baartman's remains were repatriated and buried in South Africa (Warner 196). See Sarah Warner, "Suzan-Lori Parks' Drama of Disinterment: A Transnational Exploration of Venus" which details the laborious efforts of South Africans to "retrieve [Baartman's remains] from foreign soil" (182).

Furthermore, Stephen Lucasi in "Saartjie's Speech and the Sounds of National Identification" points out that Venus' voice disrupts the binary that others her from the spectators and perpetuates the notion that she is subhuman.

Another subtle way she comes to voice and uses her liminality is by retaining at least a remnant of her cultural values in her refusal to take off the material "scrap… around [her] womans parts" (Parks 29). She says, "It dont come off/it stays. Its custom" (29). Her refusal to disrobe completely for the show reveals how she survives: by maintaining her cultural values, she is, to some extent, in control of her sexuality and mere being. Additionally, Venus' practice briefly described here may also be reminiscent of what she possibly learned from her mother about the threat of sexual violence. Marlene Nourbese Philip, in her creative work "Dis Place—The Space Between," points out that it is the Black mother's "loving will and pleasure" to warn her daughter: "Don't let nobody touch you there" (Phillip 96). However, varying circumstances (e.g. slavery, captivity, and concubinage) thwart Venus and others like her to heed their Black mothers' warnings (Philip 96-97). Nonetheless, Venus' defiance here underscores how she maps out her captive experience and claims a liminal space to attempt to protect the self in the best way possible.

She also comes to voice through strange laughter and utterances that Piia Mustamäki in "Reading Representations of Race with Masochism: The 1990s and Suzan-Lori Parks's Venus" terms as "masochistic behavior" and suggests is understudied in the critical discourse on the play (31-32). This behavior is paradoxical as it is at once compliant, but at the same time resistant (32). For example upon arrival to England, The Girl (later Venus) is asked to "lift up [her] skirt"; her response "I don't," interrupted by The Brother, reveals her hesitancy although she finally complies and laughs: "Hahahaha! I don't think I like it here" (Parks 23). Although her laughter

may imply nervousness or discomfort, this scene illuminates her conflicting position in that she forges a loophole of retreat through laughter, using it as a defense mechanism against exploitation. By uttering sounds, she not only copes with being subjected, Venus also uses laughter as a medium to exist and voice her feelings.

Using John Everett Millais' painting *Ophelia* as a muse, Natasha Trethewey in *Bellocq's Ophelia* bases her poems on the photographs of Ernest Bellocq, who took photographs of women of presumably mixed-race ancestry working in brothels. From the photographs, Trethewey "creates a composite character" to conceive what the life of a sex worker of the early 1900s living in Storyville, the red light district of New Orleans, would have been like, giving such women discounted in larger society a voice (Debo 201). Like Venus, Ophelia initially appears voiceless as a sex worker and model, but to Trethewey the expression Ophelia makes in the painting by Millais points to an act of defiance. She observes the following regarding Ophelia:

> Staring into the camera, she seems to pull
> all movement from her slender limbs
> and hold it in her heavy-lidded eyes.
> Her body limp as dead Ophelia's
> her lips poised to open, to speak. (24-28)[38]

Trethewey's opener sets the tone for the rest of her poetry collection: "This Ophelia has agency... She resists the many imposed frames with her determination to look back, and she opens her mouth to tell her own story, to become a subject rather than an object" (Debo 203). In this work, Trethewey seeks to reframe the story that limits Ophelia to a sex worker due to social and

[38] Ophelia's expressions in Millais' painting greatly contrasts the compliant nature of Ophelia in *Hamlet*. While Trethewey describes Ophelia as lifeless as a point of comparison and reference to *Hamlet's* Ophelia's suicide, she indicates the stark difference between the two subjects by zoning in how "her lips [are] poised…to speak" (28). On the other hand, Ophelia in *Hamlet* is submissive and dependent on men telling her how to behave.

political attitudes. This limitation involves a stigma and characterizes Ophelia as one-dimensional and seemingly invisible in society. As a result, Trethewey's Ophelia too comes to voice through self-expression.

Initially, Ophelia comes to voice through writing via a sequence of letters to her former schoolteacher and friend, Constance, and in her diary, creating her public self and private self, respectively. In these varied forms of writing she is introspective, telling the same story in different ways. In this space, Ophelia creates the illusion she is composed and seeks to maintain that image. Conversely in her diary, her private self emerges as a more expressive intact individual who is vocal about particular silences she does not disclose in her letters—e.g. reasons why she worries about being perceived as uncouth. For example, in her February letter to Constance, she draws a comparison between the girls there and the girls back home: "The girls here are of a country sort, kindly/ and plain for the most part, with simple desires—/not unlike myself or those girls I knew at home," suggesting that she is more refined, but formally simple (Trethewey 1-3). But in her diary marked the same month and year, entitled "Father" she is not as confident. As she fears that her father could potentially be a customer, she expresses her need for her father to hold her in high regard; "I wanted him to like me, think me smart,/ a delicate colored girl—not the wild/ pickaninny roaming the fields, barefoot" (9-11). Her ability to be introspective as a writer points to her liminal status as she does not allow her job to reduce her to a commodity, but also with how she appears to others. Yet her worries about her father reveal a problematic power dynamic in that she "fear[s] the day a man [will] enter [her] room both customer and father" (13-14). Like Jacobs, Ophelia struggles with the double standard regarding her choices in that though she is a sex worker, she does not want to be restricted to this geography. Instead, she wants her father to respect her and see her as a cultured, sophisticated

being. The use of the gaze is overturned as she draws inward and looks at herself publically in epistolary form to her former teacher and privately in her diary. This invites us to consider how Ophelia uses her liminality to expand her geography from being a sex worker to imagining herself as a cosmopolitan lady.

Her introspectiveness transfers to her actual work as she additionally comes to voice by learning to look back. This mode emerges as an act of defiance that counters the advice of the madam, Countess P, who urges the new girls to do the following: "Become what you must. Let [your client] see whatever/ he needs. Train yourself not to look back" (Trethewey 20-21). The madam's instructions for each new girl to no longer be her own person but to embody what each client wants her to be becomes evident as a form of liminality as the strategy allows each girl to protect her intact self. Additionally, forgetting also helps the girls not only satisfy their clients, but meet the needs of the madam by becoming more productive in the sex industry. Nonetheless, Ophelia claims liminal spaces differently:

> [S]he's no longer listening; she's forgotten
> he's there. Instead she must be thinking
> of her childhood. (17-19)

The different methodologies for posing imply that liminality might be or at least should be conceived of in multiple ways. For the Countess, it requires negating the self. Her version of liminality becomes inviable for Black women in that it does not provide an opportunity for them to survive, think, or explore other options. Liminality for Ophelia, however, requires having a rebellious spirit by looking back and remembering what is important, her childhood.[39] Thus,

[39] Ophelia's actions are rebellious primarily because they challenge the training she receives: looking back, from a biblical standpoint has fatal consequences. When Lot's wife disobeyed and looked back, she turned into a pillar of salt. This biblical story is significant because Ophelia's outcome differs from Lot's wife. While Lot's wife

Ophelia not only reflects through writing, but also on the job. In accessing ways to have a sort of out of body experience, she forges a loophole of retreat, a space where she can be her self. Instead of forgetting the self, she puts the client out of mind. This liminal space prompts her to stay aware and maintain a Black consciousness essential for her survival. Though she initially desires a "freedom from memory" that involves forgetting about slavery and sharecropping, she realizes that "[this] white space of forgetting" is implausible, as it promises freedom under false pretenses (Trethewey 39, 41). Therefore, in order to keep herself intact, she must forge a loophole of retreat to remember her history. And reflection—drawing inward—allows her to maintain and protect herself from her work.

Lastly, Ophelia comes to voice through the act of photography. Serving as she describes as "both model and apprentice," Ophelia becomes a "photographer in her own right" (Trethewey 3; Wallace-Sanders 174). Photography exposes her to a new world beyond Storyville and realms introduced by her former schoolteacher and friend Constance: "Constance shows Ophelia her location on the globe and in the country, instilling in Ophelia a hunger to move beyond the constraints of her limited life" (Debo 206). While her basic education from Constance and her somewhat refined background orchestrated by her mother set her apart from the other women in the brothel, photography emerges as the ultimate medium she uses to come to voice. Photography, too, involves looking back as she becomes fascinated by the camera's mode of seeing. With the camera, she

> [begins to] notice…
>
> the way the camera can dissect
>
> the body, render it reflecting light

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suffers as result of her disobedience, Ophelia's act of defiance contributes to her survival as a sex worker and model.

or gathering darkness—surfaces

gray as stone or steel, lifeless, flat.

Still, it can make flesh glow

as if the soul's been caught

shimmering just beneath the skin. (Trethewey 7-14)

Ophelia recognizes the transformative power of the camera. Here, her astute observation reveals how photography becomes a space where she can frame the story and the picture her way. While being photographed, she not only reflects on her childhood, but also "[i]magine[s] [herself]…/ …stepping out/ of the frame, wide-eyed, into her life" (33-35). Ultimately, the camera allows her to dwell in the possibilities of a new livelihood.

As Parks and Trethewey employ revisionist histories to give voice to two silenced individuals, the hard choices each protagonist makes emerge as her specific loophole of retreat. Although termed as complicit in nature by some scholars, Venus chooses to immigrate as an attraction to "make a mint" rather than stay in South Africa as a servant (Parks 17). What is often understudied is what type of attraction she agrees to be: she originally agrees to work as an African Dancing Princess for two years and in return she would get half of what is made, have a house, hired help, and come back home rich (Parks 16-17). If we consider this agreement, her choice is more lucrative than her livelihood as a servant and thus her original reason for immigrating to England—this loophole of retreat seems plausible. However, upon arrival, the terms of agreement drastically shift. Others are profiting off of her as a scantily clad figure from South Africa held in a cage.

In spite of this apparent manipulation, Venus is illustrated as a thinking individual from the start, as she poses the question: "Do I have a choice? I'd like to think on it" (Parks 17). The

Brother's response "What's there to think on?" brings to the fore that the notion of choice and blatant disregard for consent is very present in the play (17). This very question posed by Venus also suggests that she is not really considered in the transaction. Her pending experience in the cage and later her experience as a concubine are both depicted as a "vacation" by the Brother and the Baron Docteur (Parks 17, 87). As she poses the question again when the Baron Docteur asks her to go with him, his response is similar to the Brother—consent. Her response, however, is focused on salary and living arrangements, but again her negotiations are disregarded. [40] While her loophole of retreat does not become a viable source for material gain, in this space she can draw inward to contend with her life exhibited amongst callous spectators. For example, The Negro Resurrectionist's observation that "no one ever noticed that her face was streamed with tears" demonstrates how she draws inward to cope with the life. In her cage, she redefines virtue and Black womanhood in her subversion of what beauty is. While her figure is exoticized in England and Paris, her robust shape is celebrated and considered beautiful in her homeland (Parks 159).[41]

Similarly, the career options for Ophelia are limited at home and beyond. At home, she can either marry, become a domestic, engage in sharecropping, or be a concubine. Conversely, she can move to New Orleans, pass as white, work in an office, or become a sex worker and model and gain financial independence. Her dire situation compels her to seek the latter; and as a result, she complicates the sex exchange by suggesting that being a sex worker is a viable economic option. While the pursuit of economic prosperity dually serves as the motivation

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[40] Parks turns the idea of choice on its head not only in Venus' questioning, but also in the Baron Docteur's questioning. The Grade School Chum's response "sure" is more definitive, suggesting that unlike Venus he is considered (142).

[41] Carol Schaefer in "Staging a New Literary History Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, *In the Blood*, and *Fucking A*," seems to suggest that Western Europeans are envious of Venus: "The Venus possesses an extraordinary beauty that Western European culture prizes, her large butt"(183).

behind both Ophelia's and Venus' choices to use their sexuality for profit, unlike Venus, who remains penniless, Ophelia becomes financially independent and can help her mother. In a letter back to her former teacher, Ophelia, in defense of her new life as a sex worker, points out,

> [W]hat I earn is mine. Now
> my labor is my own.
> Already my purse swells.
> I have bought my mother
> some teeth, paid to have
> her new well dug. (Trethewey 17-22)

Here within the letter, she underscores the benefits of her job, pointing out that her job as sex worker is actually a "good" job in that it pays well and, as a result, she can support her family.

Even so as a sex worker who has gained financial security, Ophelia complicates notions of virtue and Black womanhood as she embodies normative ladylike behavior. Instead of wearing "silk wrappers [and] underclothes during the day" she wears what she terms as "proper clothes and [quietly sips her] tea" (Trethewey 8-10, 12). She wants the other girls of Storyville to dress respectably, but realizes the contradictions of her request. In her diary, she entries:

> Just the other day I was sullen and spoke too quickly
> at them, my tone harsh. *You are what you look like*,
> I said, thinking it might cause some change
> in their manner, that they might see to carry themselves
> as ladies do. I bit down hard on my tongue at the sight
> of their faces—fair as magnolias, pale as wax—

> though all of us bawds in this fancy *colored* house. (Trethewey 18-24; emphasis in the original)

In her use of color imagery like "fair," "pale," and "colored," Ophelia recognizes the irony of her expectations (Trethewey 23). For example, Ophelia references the sex workers' complexion as "fair" and "pale" to point out how they can move under the pretense of being virtuous (23). However, Ophelia is aware that her reality dismantles this social construct when she uses the word "though" to indicate their line of work as sex workers (24). Moreover, Trethewey italicizes the word "colored" to underscore the white/black paradigm of race when she implies that whiteness is associated with chastity and blackness is associated with barbarism (24). Even so, she still seeks to suggest that despite their livelihood, she as well as the other sex workers can be ladies of virtue in the way that they carry themselves via dress and decorum. Her suggestion here, however, is similar to respectability politics, which advises marginalized individuals to mirror the expectations of the majority in order to be respected and treated well.[42] Nonetheless, her emphasis on appearance and etiquette allows her to forge a loophole of retreat. By suggesting that sex workers, too, can be ladies, Ophelia expands the notion of virtue to individuals stigmatized in society, validating their experiences. In blurring the lines of ladyhood, Trethewey includes a humanized portrayal of a sex worker, and in the same way that Jacobs suggests that an enslaved woman can be a lady of virtue, Trethewey's Ophelia suggests a sex worker can be a lady.[43]

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[42] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham introduced the term respectability politics in her scholarly work *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (1994).

[43] Additionally, she transgresses boundaries of virtue and Black womanhood when she emerges as a sister to a sick co-worker: "Just the other day I fancied myself/ a club woman like you,/in my proper street clothes—…so attired, I ventured out/ beyond the confines of *the district* /to do my share of good deeds/[to] visit/a sick *sister*" (Trethewey 1-3, 7-10; emphasis in the original). Here, she describes her clothing, change in location, and charity to demonstrate how she embodies a woman of virtue.

However, contradictions of her apparent womanhood and virtue are extended as she is arrested for occupying a space off limits due to her job as a sex worker:

> …I hesitate to tell –you) I was escorted
>
> to the police station, guilty of being
>
> where I was not allowed to be, a woman
>
> *notoriously abandoned to lewdness*. (27-30; emphasis in the original)

In transgressing boundaries apart from Storyville—occupying a liminal space as a sex worker— Ophelia is criminalized, policed, and possibly raped by a regular customer. Unfortunately, her loophole of retreat—her ability to navigate under the pretense as a virtuous woman— does not guarantee her protection or safety. Though she fits the criteria to become a woman of virtue in her attire and decorum, her job thwarts her chance as she is assigned a punishment for being part of the space.

Her mugshot, however, subverts the notion of photography in different spaces. By referring to herself as a "doppelgänger," Ophelia perceives herself as two people negotiating liminal spaces. As a result, she comes to terms with her liminality, taking in the advantages and disadvantages of being a sex worker:

> There, I posed for another lens, suffered
>
> indecencies I cannot bear to describe.
>
> You will not see those photographs—
>
> paint smeared on my face, my hair
>
> loosed and wild—a doppelgänger
>
> whose face I loathe but must confront.
>
> I know now that if we choose

to keep any part of what is behind us

we must take all of it, hold each moment

up to the light like a photograph— (Trethewey 31-40)

Here, Ophelia recognizes that there is limited mobility in her loophole of retreat—her choices—as she is "valued" in terms of sex exchange and is seemingly protected within the confines of the district, but outside of Storyville, she is subject to rape.[44] These limitations invite us to consider how the loophole of retreat may afford Black women some license to negotiate space and make choices, but this space does not provide full protection from systemic discriminatory practices. The space may not offer Black women a full retreat from the interlocking systems of oppressions they contend with, but it grants them an opportunity to better their situations in limited ways.[45] Ultimately, they designate this space as a mode to endure their plights. Like Parks' Venus, Trethewey makes clear in "Inscriptive Restorations: An Interview with Natasha Trethewey" how she did not want to create Ophelia as merely a "victim of objectification," but also consider her as "participant" (1030). She also suggests in the same interview that this text gives her "a way to investigate that liminal space of appearing to be one thing to people on the outside and having an inside that's different, something that people can't see" (1028). Although her take on liminality here is focused on race, I think her idea parallels my conceptualization of liminality as a subversive way Black women transform captive spaces and transgress boundaries of Black womanhood.

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[44] Similarly for Harriet Jacobs, in choosing a white man, she is protected from Dr. Flint, but still subject to Mr. Sands who is kind to Jacobs, yet still participates in a system that perpetuates the enslavement of Black people and the sexual exploitation of Black women.

[45] For example, Harriet Jacobs suffered health problems as a result of living in a cramped space for seven years. While her ability to forge a loophole of retreat allows her to observe her children's lives from a distance, the peephole does not allow her to assume her full role as mother.

Despite their hardships, the agency these two women acquire allows them to empower themselves in that they find transgressive ways to control parts of their destiny. Although Venus emerges as a subaltern figure as she is often controlled by someone else, she does not disown her subjectivity.[46] In her comparison of Harriet Jacobs and Venus, Jennifer Larson sheds light on the agency that Venus and Jacobs acquire that is often termed complicit in nature because they both chose relationships with white men:

> Complicity implies not only consent, but also in its purest form, cooperation or collaboration in a completely malignant enterprise. Agency, on the other hand, most simply implies embracing the potential for action—with no moral judgment implied—that serves as an instrument to an end, especially a subversive end. So in both Jacobs's and The Venus's case, we cannot definitely call their decisions complicity, for both the morality and the extent of their shares (monetary and otherwise) in the endeavor are questionable. Even if they were equal partners with their oppressors in an endeavor that might be judged evil, accepting this alliance could still be called agency and still be subversive if it brought them some measure of freedom. (205)

This "freedom" Larson observes in agency is best evoked in the pivotal question posed to Venus: "Are you hear of yr own free will or are you under some restraint?" (Larson 205; Parks 75). Although her answer "I'm here to make a mint" is ambiguous, it reassesses the situation, further challenging the notion of complicity in that in her answer, her motive is not "malignant," but

[46] Earlier, as Venus' body is policed and objectified in court, when she is summoned to speak, the chorus of court says, "Bring the body of this female" (Parks 73). Initially when asked a series of questions, she states, "The Venus Hottentot is unavailable for comment" (73). Venus' choice to deny the court access to information is significant in revealing how she reclaims her lot over her space. Hence, her actions are significant for thinking about how Black women forge loopholes of retreat to exact agency and empower themselves.

honest—to attain upward mobility (Larson 205). Like Jacobs who states if the law protected her body, she could have honored the institution of marriage, if Venus was protected under the law and afforded another opportunity to acquire riches that was more acceptable, she would have seized it.

While the court in the play objectifies her by referring strictly to Venus' body in anatomical terms, she establishes her identity, humanizing herself. For example in response to a question concerning her indecency, she answers, "No I am not, I'm just me" (Parks 76). Unlike Ophelia who recognizes that society terms her as indecent, Venus does not consider herself indecent; she is shameless. She further declares, "To hide yr shame is evil. I show mine" (76). In showing her assets, she acquires agency. Venus forges a loophole of retreat, tapping into what Elizabeth Alexander delineates as "the black interior," devoid of "stereotype[s] and limited imagination" (x). In this space, Venus asserts a more authentic self that is not limited by stereotypes and the fetishization of her large posterior. Her challenge of the court suggests that she has not bought into how the white public sees her as an abnormal freak show. Instead, her perception of herself invokes "the black imaginary" Alexander speaks of when she describes the black interior as a "complex black self [with] real enactable power, rampant and unfetishized black beauty" (x). To the court, Venus sees herself as simply "me"—bold with a set of values that reject the white public's notions of morality and ideal standard of beauty (Parks 76). Although her oppressors' and spectators' intent are to exploit and victimize her, her mindset rejects this scope; she does not subscribe to such judgment. By making this declaration, she condemns those who exploit her for material gain as well as the audience who pays to be entertained for self-fulfillment—to play out white desires and fantasies akin to minstrelsy.[47]

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[47] Ralph Ellison in his essay "Change the Joke, Slip the Yoke" and Toni Morrison in her short book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* both make interesting claims about the effects of the minstrel

Schaefer makes clear that "*Venus* is the first of Parks's plays that demands that audiences recognize themselves as voyeurs in the objectification of the African female, and simultaneously it is the first of Parks's plays to provoke audiences to revise their perceptions of the literary canon" (Schafer 187). In calling the audience to task for their part, Parks reassigns the judgment to the spectators and readers alike. This charge invites us to consider how altogether, we must acknowledge our complicity in the oppression of others.

Instead of internalizing shame, Venus assigns shame to going "home penniless" and challenges the notions associated with blackness and Black women, overturning what evil denotes (Parks 75). Consequently while on trial, she entreats the court to let her stay the course so that she can pursue material gain:

> Please. Good good honest people.
>
> If I bear thuh bad mark what better way to cleanse it off?
>
> Showing my sinful person as a caution to you all could,
>
> in the Lords eyes, be a sort of repentance
>
> and I could wash off my dark mark.
>
> I came here black.
>
> Give me a chance to leave here white. (Parks 76)

For Venus, economic prosperity is associated with whiteness; in turn, she uses verbal irony to turn racist, paternalistic thinking on its head. Therefore, what appears to be her plea for redemption is a plea to stay so she can "make a mint" (Parks 75). Venus claims a liminal space in

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tradition on the white imagination. In "Change the Joke Slip the Yoke," Ralph Ellison focuses on the ways in which the development of the minstrel tradition provides whites with the wrong perception of "blackness" and demeans the true image of blacks, creating long term effects on the entire Black race. Similarly, Toni Morrison suggests that blackness, what she terms as "the Africanist presence" is used to contrast whiteness as free, individual, and civilized (6, 33).

her coded language as her plea parallels Phillis Wheatley's final lines of "On Being Brought to Africa to America" (1773), which declare "[r]emember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (7-8; emphasis in the original). Here, Wheatley imperatively suggests to white Christians that Blacks are fully capable of becoming spiritual and educated and are just as worthy of a place in society and heaven as whites, while Venus uses coded language to hide behind the guise of redemption to fulfill her ultimate goal—to go home financially independent. Her strategic use of sarcasm invites us to consider how Black women use liminality with "deliberate calculation" to become economically sufficient and forge their loophole of retreat (Jacobs 47).

Just as some individuals use graffiti, writings/drawings that have been illicitly written in public spaces as a form of self-expression to simply declare "I was here," Venus, too, makes this indirect declaration by making known the mere fact of her existence. The very fact she was here is important because it underscores that Venus and others like her matter. As Kevin Quashie notes, to be remembered is one of fundamental desires of humanity: "To be loved, to be held, to remember: these basic human impulses, sprawling and imprecise, are each metaphors of selfhood; they mark a subject and articulate her function but also imagine and suggest an other who is engaged in the act of be-ing" (1). Venus undoubtedly engages in "the act of be-ing" as she continuously seeks to map out a space—loophole of retreat—that opposes her apparent exploitation (Quashie 1). In spaces of transgression, in the cage and as a concubine, both deemed illicit, she asserts herself as "me" and in part forms a specific self-identity that deviates from how everyone else sees her as spectacle. Yet, Venus does not escape; this point invites us to consider how liminality still can be used as a tool for Black women empowerment and medium for them to establish agency, despite confinement.

By learning the inner workings of photography, Ophelia too acquires agency in her roles as both "model and apprentice"—she frames her own narrative, telling her own story (Trethewey 27). Thus throughout the work, we can see how Trethewey's focus is on Ophelia's individuality that goes beyond her job in the sex industry. In her task to give voice to the anonymous women of Storyville, her work is "provocative in creating a desire to know Ophelia's story…not sexually titillating [because it] focuses attention on Ophelia rather than Storyville" (Debo 207). For example, she finds freedom and independence in how she poses: "I try to pose as I think he would like—shy / at first, then bolder" (Trethewey 11-12). She also explores ways she can resist which include covert "way[s] to obscure a face—paint it / with rouge and powder, shades lighter than skin, / don a black velvet mask" (3-5). Thus, performance plays a pivotal role in how she acquires liminal spaces. Debo argues that Ophelia "emphasizes the performative nature of sex work, how she takes on other identities in order to be looked at and to protect the self, she considers her own" (Debo 208). Although she has knowledge that "the photograph [they] make / will bear the stamp of his name, not [hers]," she recognizes her power as she determines what is shot, ultimately controlling the image (Trethewey 13-14). In her ability to control how her body is photographed, she forges a loophole of retreat and empowers herself.

As Venus reassigns judgment by assigning shame to poverty and not "showing her ass," Ophelia reassigns judgment by "unashamedly stari[ing] back at her audience" (Parks 159 and Debo 210). For example in "Portrait 2," Trethewey's Ophelia advises readers how to "pose nude / [and] not be exposed, though naked / [by] … wear[ing] skin like a garment, seamless[ly]" (1, 8-9). Her instruction here reveals further how Ophelia controls her sexuality. As Debo notes, "[A]lthough exposed, she claims agency and places the audience in the conscious position of the voyeur. She knows that we are looking, and we are forced to recognize that knowledge, giving

her the upper hand in the situation" (Debo 210). Just as Parks calls both the readers and spectators to task for their part in the spectacle, Trethewey strategically employs a similar charge. While Ophelia is aware of her social value as a white-skinned Black woman, she is also cognizant of the reason—that "customers fill our parlors/to see the spectacle: black women/ with white skin, exotic curiosities" (Trethewey 5-7). While Ophelia's fair skin allows her to physically embody liminal spaces, she, like Venus, forges a loophole of retreat by drawing inward to protect the self, akin to what Alexander terms "the black interior." In "Reframing Exposure: Natasha Trethewey's Forms of Enclosure," Meta Duewa Jones alludes to Alexander's concept and quotes the author herself who seemingly makes a point to construct Ophelia from the first poem "Bellocq's Ophelia." Trethewey suggests that Ophelia protects "'the identity of self beyond the confines, the frame of her occupation, beyond the commodification of the goods—breasts and belly and pubis—she displays'" (qtd. in Jones 411). Ophelia's job in the sex industry underscores how people like her are subject to being under the gaze of customers.[48] By "looking away from [her] reflection/ [which appears in a customer's] monocle," she refuses to be circumscribed to merely a commodity of sexual desire; instead she opts to assert a more authentic identity that emphasizes virtue, devotion to education, and a cosmopolitan lifestyle (Trethewey 20, 22). Like Venus draws inward to protect herself from others' perceptions, Ophelia, too, draws inward to contend with her job as spectacle.

[48] *Clotel* (1853) by William Well Brown depicts the titular character on the auction block and his poignant description of her sale resonates with Natasha Trethewey's Ophelia as she is also deemed a commodity by her customers: "'Fifteen hundred dollars,' cried the auctioneer… This was a Southern auction, at which the bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen were sold for five hundred dollars; her moral character for two hundred; her improved intellect for one hundred; her Christianity for three hundred; and her chastity and virtue for four hundred dollars more" (Brown 50).

Likewise as a photographer, Ophelia is “drawn to what shines”—seeing the extraordinary out of the ordinary—and is fascinated with “the camera’s way of capturing/ [such] sparkle” of the mundane (Trethewey 21-22). Her enchantment here further delineates her ability to transform a quotidian space through photography and points to how she forges a loophole of retreat as Ophelia is “most interested in the transformative power available in photography—how [the camera] can transform [her]” (Debo 211). As she moves back and forth as subject and novice photographer, Ophelia recognizes the “half-truths [the camera] tells” (Trethewey 12). For example, she “capture[s]” a cardinal “in flight” and eliminates the repulsive setting it departs from of “garbage, / rats licking the insides of broken eggs” (Trethewey 10, 12, 13-14). As she determines what is seen when she is photographed, as a photographer she distills her own idea and emerges as the determinant of the photograph’s finished product. Nonetheless, assuming photography as a hobby in fact fuels her desire to travel and prompts her to physically abandon her livelihood as a sex worker. With this move, Ophelia can truly set her own terms: “instead of being photographed, she now photographs herself and her world….she has agency over her image (Debo 212). Unlike Venus, she is afforded the opportunity to escape and is able to “step out” of the controlled space: “Ophelia chooses a future, hopefully one in which she determines her position as a subject rather than an image” (Trethewey 34; Debo 212). In all, her liminality not only grants her agency to navigate the world differently as a sex worker and model, but it ultimately allows her to map out a new life to physically move social and geographic locations and empower herself even more.

While Edwidge Danticat and Roxane Gay both convey how women’s bodies are frequently subjugated by men, particularly in warlike contexts, they push back against this reality by demonstrating how their protagonists empower themselves in such abhorrent situations. In

Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* and Gay's *An Untamed State*, the female protagonists resonate with Harriet Jacobs as they too are able to create loopholes of retreat in order to protect the self despite undergoing traumatic experiences. According to Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, "trauma is… a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). Caruth points out that,

> complex ways of knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma [as a wound to the mind is not the same] as a wound to the body because it is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (4)

Thus, the need for survivors of trauma to "bear witness to some forgotten wound" emerges as a crucial way they come to voice (4). While Caruth's focus is on how the mind processes trauma, Elaine Scarry in her critical work *The Body in Pain* focuses on the human body and more specifically argues that physical pain is difficult to articulate and is often ignored or silenced by dominant culture. She points out that "The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice *absent* by destroying it" (49; emphasis in the original). While Caruth insists that testimony is essential for survivors to come to voice, Scarry adds that finding ways to articulate the pain inflicted and recover the body is essential in coming to voice.

Edwidge Danticat's short story collection *Krik? Krak!* revisits the collective trauma of Haitian history from the perspective of women by chronicling the lives of women who seek to establish themselves as subjects who contend with the atrocities of Haitian life and beyond in America. The women of *Krik? Krak!* use narrative to simply bear witness to their

experiences, come to voice, forge loopholes of retreat as survivors, and empower themselves in various ways. For example, in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” stories allow Manman to come to voice about the Parsley Massacre as a survivor, not a victim; and as a result, Manman connects her daughter, Josephine, to a history and memory that focuses on survival and sacrifice, unlikely forms of agency: “My mother had escaped El Generalissimo’s soldiers leaving her own mother behind. From the Haitian side of the river, she could still see the soldiers chopping up *her* mother’s body and throwing it into the river along with many others” (Danticat 40; emphasis in the original).[49] Here as Josephine retells Manman’s remarkable story, Manman has agency in her escape, survival, and power to share her story while her own mother has agency through sacrifice, dying to save two lives: her daughter and unborn granddaughter. Just as the loophole of retreat emerges as a paradoxical site for Jacobs, Manman’s telling narrative reveals further how the loophole of retreat is a contradictory site: for Manman, it is a site of grief, loss, and struggle as well as a site of hope, life, and triumph.

Even so by revisiting this part of history, Aitor Ibarrola-Armendáriz notes readers “are transported to what Pierre Nora has termed a ‘*lieu de memorie,*’ a mental place recurrently revisited, rather than a real landscape (10-11). In “Nineteen Thirty-Seven,” Danticat explores trauma as shared and closely considers the Massacre as a frequent site of memory for Haitians. Using Caruth’s theory, Jelena Šesnić maintains that the need for trauma victims to recall or “revisit sites of violence” is crucial for a people’s survival and existence (243-244). In particular, Danticat’s attention to this event allows her not only to evoke the lioness’s

[49] The Parsley Massacre of 1937, a pivotal and heartbreaking moment of Haitian history, became known as the mass genocide of Haitian migrants ordered by Dominican President Rafael Trujillo who resided on the border of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. By using language as a significant marker of national identity, in this case Dominican or Haitian, Rafael Trujillo ordered the execution of Haitians who could not roll the “r” in “perejil,” the Spanish word for “parsley.”

speech, particularly through Manman's testimonials, but also to push back and destabilize the master's narrative that focuses on Haitians as victims, not survivors (Ibarrola-Armendáriz 16).[50] As Danticat deviates from the master narrative that privileges the political over the personal, she creates more intimacy with the reader and gives voice to the "testimonials… by subaltern subjects of individual experiences of social injustice" (Munro 73). As a result, her narrative style to individualize the political emerges as a "new way" for understanding politics and "address[ing] contemporary dilemmas of social injustice in this period of expanding global imperialism" (73-74). Danticat uses liminality to create a narrative space for Black women to voice their stories, inviting us to consider how this concept allows individuals to establish their agency through storytelling.

Recounting this story also affords Manman and Josephine a space to not only come to voice as survivors, but also to forge a loophole of retreat (however narrow) to rewrite their history as survivors. Storytelling in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" creates meaningful connections not only between mother and daughter, but also members of the community, particularly women. Manman delineates such a space through the river. As daughters of the river who lost loved ones during the Massacre, the retellings of "codes and disciplines" run parallel to the narrative told in the village in a series of questions like "'Who are you?'" and "'Where are you going?'" (Danticat 44). Such questions as well as its responses "'I am a child of that place'…'I come from that long trail of blood'" serve as a way that these women connect and identify with each other, sustaining their existence (Danticat 44). Josephine describes the location and commemoration of the anniversary of the Massacre:

[50] In "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" and in more depth in her historic novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998), Edwidge Danticat recovers the silenced histories of Haitian women's involvement during the Massacre and considers how they have agency in the midst of such tragedy and hopelessness.

> We went to the river many times growing up. Every year my mother would invite a few more women who had also lost mothers there…we went to the river every year on the first of November. The women would all dress in white. My mother would hold my hand tightly as we walked toward the water. We were all daughters of that river, which had taken our mothers from us. Our mothers were the embers and we were the sparks. Our mothers were the flames and we were the blaze. We came from the bottom of that river where the blood never stops flowing, where my mother's dive toward life—her swim among all those bodies slaughtered in flight—gave her those wings of flame. The river was the place where it had all begun. (Danticat 40-41)

Remembering the past by revisiting the very place of pain and strife is essential to how Manman, Josephine, and other women of the community persevere. Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* and Elaine Scarry *in The Body in Pain* both engage the significance of memory; in particular, they argue that recalling experiences is crucial for survivors to move forward. Toni Morrison states in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," "When you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself": in order to survive, the presence of the ancestor must be maintained through narrative (Morrison 64). Like Morrison suggests, Manman decides to survive and uphold her mother's legacy and sacrifice through narrative and tradition of going back to the river. Memory for Manman allows her to not only celebrate Josephine's birth "'[as coming] out at the right moment to take her mother's place,'" but also commemorates her own mother's sacrifice for their lives (Danticat 41). Before Manman is imprisoned, her role is to impart these collective

histories of sacrifice and survival to her daughter.[51] Just as Harriet Jacobs' sense of place in the cramped garret affords her the ability to see her children grow up, Manman's sense of location as Haitian affords her the ability to seek out an alternative way of recounting what transpired in 1937. By recuperating this history, the mother creates a loophole of retreat for not only herself but her daughter as well.

Narrative not only serves as a way she forges a loophole of retreat, flight as a recurrent motif concurrently in her narrative also serves as a way that Manman has agency and exists. Although she is eventually imprisoned for "having wings of flame," flying emerges as a unique mode of survival from the Massacre and point of reference to affirm their existence (Danticat 35). However, Josephine is not quite convinced of her mother's power until she is asked by Jacqueline to join the other female prisoners in witnessing her mother's body being burned. Josephine says, "'I would go'…if I knew the truth, whether a woman can fly'" (Danticat 48). For Josephine, knowing this truth will help her accept that her mother was not a helpless victim and Jacqueline's question, "'[w]hy did you not ever ask your mother….if she knew how to fly'" prompts her to remember the story (48). Josephine asserts:

> Then the story came back to me as my mother had often told it. On that day so long ago, in the year nineteen hundred and thirty-seven, in the Massacre River, my mother did fly. Weighted down by my body inside hers, she leaped from Dominican soil into the water, and out again on the Haitian side of the river.

[51] When Manman is imprisoned for witchcraft, her role is to prepare her daughter, Josephine, for her imminent death and provide her consolation through the Madonna. Although initially the Madonna functions as a fill-in for the mother upon Manman's death, Jacqueline, a daughter of the river, is able to serve as surrogate to Josephine. Also, the Madonna is syncretically connected to the Oshun (also known as the lady in yellow depicted in *Tar Baby*), an orisha of rivers. Additionally according to Haitian folklore, Erzulie is syncretically connected to the Madonna.

> She glowed red when she came out, blood clinging to her skin, which at that moment looked as though it were in flames. (Danticat 49)

This passage elucidates the power of narrative for Josephine. Such stories were instilled in her very being as she is able to recall it when she needs it the most. Additionally, Angelia Poon suggests "Flying … is …transformed by the narrator into an act of freedom that recalls folk belief that once dead, the souls of slaves used to fly back to Africa. In recalling her mother's flight, the narrator thus also memorializes much more" (Poon, par.14). Ending with the well-wish, "'[l]et her flight be joyful'" is an indicator that Josephine finally believes that her mother possesses the supernatural ability to fly (Danticat 49). While her mother's death is considered flight from prison and strife, Josephine's knowledge of her mother's incredible flight is therapeutic and ultimately empowers her, granting her a will to survive and seek out sanctuary through narrative. Knowledge of her mother's supernatural qualities and ability to delineate a space in between enables Josephine to finally forge a loophole of retreat for herself. By discovering her inner strength, she taps into the loophole of retreat her mother exposed her to. This imaginary retreat via narrative is significant because it not only marks Josephine's growth as independent of her mother's care, but it also emerges as a space that urges her to continue on and use the tools her mother bequeathed her to survive through stories. As the baton has been left to her, she fully recognizes her task to preserve the memories of her loved ones as fighters.

While testimony via narrative allows the characters of "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" to forge loopholes of retreat, narrative as a loophole of retreat takes a different form in "Between the Pool and Gardenias." In this story, Marie undergoes several traumatic pregnancy losses and more than likely suffers from post-traumatic stress as a result, leaving Ville Rose to work

as a maid elsewhere. Yet, she comes to voice when she finds a dead baby whom she thinks is still alive:

> The child was wearing an embroidered little blue dress with the letters R-O-S-E on a butterfly collar. She looked the way that I had imagined all my little girls would look. The ones my body could never hold…. I called out all the names I wanted to give them: Eveline, Josephine, Jacqueline, Hermine, Marie Magdalène, Célianne. I could give her all the clothes that I had sewn for them. All these little dresses that went unused. (Danticat 92)

As noted in the passage above, the continuity within Danticat's collection is present; the names of Marie's unborn children mirror the names of the nine women of *Krik? Krak!*. Jana Evans Braziel notes, "Marie's children, though stillborn, do not remain unnamed; they enter into the ancestral fabric of Marie's own maternal genealogy" (87). Therefore, just as narrative plays an integral role in not only the relationship of mother and daughter in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" but also their ability to forge loopholes of retreat, the power of narrative resonates also in "Between the Pool and Gardenias" as Marie creates a loophole of retreat to imagine an alternate life with a child. Through narrative, Marie also seeks to carry on her legacy through naming as well as recounting stories of her life to the dead baby Rose.

Here between the pool and gardenias, albeit figuratively, Marie is allowed a space, a loophole of retreat, to fulfill the maternal role she desperately wants. In delineating the space named in the story title Marie states:

> I pretended that it was all mine. The terrace with that sight of the private pool and the holiday ships cruising in the distance. The large television system and all those French love songs and *rara* records, with the talking drums and conch

> shell sounds in them. The bright paintings with white winged horses and snakes as long and wide as lakes. The pool that the sweaty Dominican man cleaned three times a week. I pretended that it belonged to us: him, Rose, and me. (Danticat 96)

In this loophole of retreat Marie describes, she acquires agency; she not only delineates a desirable space to be a mother, she also maps out a faux space of a nuclear family where she can serve as wife to a sad, problematic choice for a candidate: a Dominican. Given the context and cultural differences between Marie and the gardener, her use of language to describe their sexual encounter as "making love" suggests that Marie may be deluded about their relationship or lack thereof (96). Yet, she regrets not engaging in any social interactions with him: "I should have asked his name before I offered him my body" (Danticat 100). Her ability to recognize later that there is really no affection between the two of them is apparent. Learning a person's name often indicates a particular familiarity and respect. She appears to imply that had he learned her name and vice versa, he may have displayed more sympathy for her plight. Even so, she ignores his withdrawn behavior and creates her own story, claiming a liminal space. Inevitably, this utopian like space is short-lived for Marie as she is criminalized and accused of infanticide by the Dominican pool man: "We made a pretty picture standing there. Rose, me, and him. Between the pool and the gardenias, waiting for the law" (100). Although Marie is subject to the law at the end, her vivid imagination allows her to escape and claim a liminal space as mother and wife albeit temporarily. Within this setting—her loophole of retreat—she can imagine a different world, cultural differences aside, where Marie and the Dominican worker can be a family and she can raise a living child. While the ability to recall memories is essential for Manman and Josephine in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven"

to forge loopholes of retreat, the power of narrative takes a different form in "Between the Pool and Gardenias." For Marie, the ability to recreate a life, albeit fabricated, allows her to claim a liminal space, fashioning a temporary loophole of retreat. This distinction is important because it shows how this liminal space via narrative can manifest in different ways and may not seemingly change their circumstances, but at the very least offer a means for these women to find respite and have hope though it may be temporary.[52]

Within these two stories, Edwidge Danticat reveals how narrative affords these protagonists a space to cope with traumatic experiences and focus primarily on survival. Memory, the ability to recall through narrative, emerges as the site where these Haitian protagonists can acquire agency and forge loopholes of retreat. For example in "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," Danticat engages Caruth's theory by underscoring Manman's capacity to testify—"to bear witness" and reveal what happened during the Parsley Massacre (Caruth 4). As a survivor of trauma, Manman's testimony is not only crucial for her to empower herself, it is also essential for her daughter's existence as it provides Josephine a means to carry on when her mother dies in prison. Here, the lioness, Manman, speaks and ultimately controls the narrative that is passed down to Josephine, her daughter and later through the generations. Conversely in "Between the Pool and Gardenias," Marie's capacity to imagine and fabricate a life as a mother affords her an opportunity (though transient and under unpleasant circumstances) to assert an identity she desperately wants. Nonetheless, these two texts from the collection demonstrate how liminality via narrative and self-expression allow marginalized women channels to come to voice, find sources of power, create, and empower themselves.

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[52] This notion draws parallels and resonance to the end of *The Bluest Eye*, where Pecola's desire for blue eyes evolves to Pecola figuratively donning blue eyes to make sense of the rape she has endured and cope with the trauma of that violation.

While Edwidge Danticat's short story collection focuses on how Haitian women collectively experience trauma, in *An Untamed State* (2014), Roxane Gay individualizes an experience of trauma through the tenacious character, Mireille Duval Jameson who is targeted and kidnapped for ransom. Framing her novel around a fairy tale structure, Roxane Gay divides the text into two parts: "Happily Ever After" and "Once Upon a Time." However, her novel portrays far from a fairy tale; instead the first section is steeped in unspeakable horrors of what transpired during Mireille's kidnapping and strewn with flashbacks of her childhood and life of bliss with her husband and baby. Part two primarily focuses on the present—post abduction in which Mireille seeks to reorient herself as wife, mother, daughter, and sister.

From the beginning of the novel, the reader gains insight as to how Mireille eventually comes to voice by relying on her personality and upbringing. What is interesting about her character is prior to her kidnapping, Mireille is characterized as outspoken, "the small girl with the big mouth" (Gay 41). As children, her father reminded her and her siblings "[to be] excellen[t] and never forget [they] are Haitian first; [as their] ancestors were free because they took control of their fate" (Gay 34). So much of Mireille's strength is fundamentally about her being Haitian. Therefore, her apparent feistiness as well as her upbringing that encouraged merit and might become crucial to her survival. Moreover, her decorum is one way she comes to voice and wills herself to withstand atrocities committed while in captivity. Referring to her dwelling as the "cage," she utters her father's affirmations "*There is nothing I cannot get through if I try hard enough*" (34; emphasis in the original). By alluding to the rich heritage of Haiti as the first Black republic, Gay asserts the very fiber of Haitian identity, which is

steeped in the nationalist ideology that they derive from the likes of revolutionaries, Toussaint L'Ouverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines.[53]

While held captive Mireille forges a loophole of retreat by recognizing the body's subconscious power and resilience. She notes, "The body holds a certain wisdom the mind does not. I threw my arms in front of my face as he pushed me forward, tried to slam my head into the mirror" (Gay 41). Here in her loophole of retreat, she operates as a body that is automated and void of feeling, emotion, hurt, and pain, "divesting her body of its vulnerability" (Scarry 316). Rooted in her father's teachings of resilience, Mireille continuously thinks of one word, uttering it to herself— "*fight*" (Gay 41, 79, 80; emphasis in the original). In doing so, she unrelentingly fights her captors back physically. Reviewer Margaret Wappler admits, "[during this part] one of the book's most unsettling moments, I couldn't help but occasionally agree with the kidnappers when they tell her she could make it easier on herself by not fighting so much" (Wappler). Despite the reviewer's critique, Roxane Gay is aware of her portrayal of Mireille as a fighter, and not a person who merely succumbs to her circumstances. Wappler continues in her review that textual moments like this "challenges our pre-set notions of what a victim should or should not do" (Wappler). For example, Mireille also avoids crying particularly when it counts as a form of resistance and bold response to her captors. Nonetheless, these examples not only engage Scarry's concept of "disembodiment" as a means for survivors to endure, it also highlights the fact that the loopholes of retreat that survivors like Mireille forge are oftentimes unpleasant yet gives her the ability to survive (316).

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[53] While Gay appears to focus on the male spectrum of Haitian leadership, she illustrates how the female protagonist, indoctrinated by her father, is able to still draw from this heritage. Danticat, on the other hand, seeks to draw her material from the female revolutionary figures, Défilée-la-Folle and Sor Rose (Braziel 77).

In many of her works Gay responds to such critiques concerning her visceral descriptions of sexual violence. For example, Gay in "The Careless Language of Sexual Violence" primarily stresses the need to stop writing about sexual violence carelessly, particularly concerning how rape victims' experiences are portrayed as uniform in media:

> [T]here is something particularly insidious about gang rape, about the idea that a pack of men feed on one another's frenzy and both individually and collectively believe it is their right to violate a woman's body in such an unspeakable manner and watch the others take turns…. We rarely discuss these things, though. Instead we are careless. We delude ourselves that rape can be washed away as neatly as it is on TV and in the movies, where the trajectory of victimhood is neatly defined. (132-133)

Like Edwidge Danticat constructs her characters with the will and the pressing need to survive, Gay reconceptualizes what victimhood looks likes. Aforementioned in the passage, Gay gives voice to a situation generally disregarded by charging the media to be more considerate in their depictions of rape and reveal the magnitude and ramifications of such violence against women's bodies. Hence for Mireille, fighting emerges as a mechanism for her survival as she states, "I began to realize what survival demanded of me. I said, 'I will survive this'" (Gay 81).

In taking control of her fate, Mireille forges a loophole of retreat to come to voice and protect the self. What is crucial for Mireille's coming to voice and creating a loophole of retreat is her ability to maintain an untamed state of mind –a mental state that is both unbroken and uncontrollable. Early in the novel she says, "[My captors] wanted to break me. It was not personal. I was not broken" (3). Again by relying on the philosophy of her upbringing, she is noncompliant at most in ways that she can be. For example, Mireille tells the Commander

following a sexual assault “No more’…‘I’m still breastfeeding” and initially thinks it is “important” to “remind” her captors of her humanity (85). She states, “It was important to remind this man I was not merely meat for him to butcher. I was a woman. I was a mother and a wife and a daughter. I needed him to leave something of my body for those who loved me” (85). However, this mind frame gradually changes as she prepares herself to become far removed from any formative relationships described here. The morning after the first brutal rapes vividly describes this change:

> I whispered my name, my child’s name, my husband’s name, my name. I whispered these names over and over. The door opened and I froze. I tried not to cry out. My muscles tensed. I saw a pair of boots, the Commander’s. He lifted the bed with one arm. I already knew his strength. ‘Come out from under there.’ I slid out slowly then rose to my knees, paused, held on to the mattress and stood, shakily. When he looked at me I did not look away. I did not cower. He would not break me. I could not be broken. These men had kidnapped the daughter of Sebastian Duval. Even as I became less and less that man’s daughter, my ambition to survive was my only emotion. I swallowed everything else, put it far beyond anyone’s reach, even mine. (Gay 104)

Her survival is contingent upon protecting the self, which entails detaching herself from formative relationships and focusing her attention on surviving. Maintaining an untamed state affords her the license to develop an intentional form of amnesia, which results in her survival from the kidnapping and gratuitous torture. As Emma Cueto observes, “Mireille’s ability to survive is stretched to the breaking point” and capacity to detach herself from her roles is where her insurmountable strength lies (Cueto).

Moreover as Mireille forgets the self she was prior to the kidnapping, she forges a loophole of retreat—she detaches herself from any role that signifies a relationship. She takes refuge in amnesia as she has control over it. In doing so, Mireille dispenses her personhood and becomes solely a body, which results in what Elaine Scarry terms as "disembodiment"; by "divesting her body of its vulnerability," she ultimately protects the self (316). The following passage serves as a lead-in of how she delineates such a space. Here, Gay frames and justifies the choices Mireille makes to survive captivity via a well-known anecdote:

> A Jamaican friend, Elsa, once told me of a popular lullaby from her country about a mother with thirteen children. The mother kills one child to feed twelve, and one child to feed eleven, and one child to feed ten until she is left with but one child, whom she also slaughters because she too hungers. Finally, she returns to the middle of a cornfield where she slaughtered her other children, where the bones of their thirteen bodies lay. She slits her own throat because she cannot bear the burden of having done what needed to be done. After telling me the story, Elsa said, "A West Indian woman always faces such choices." (138)

This lullaby underscores the limited options of West Indian women as well as the desperation these women face when they must make hard choices, which involve metaphorical cannibalism to survive. Additionally, the passage implies that the hardship is commonplace for West Indian women, inviting us to consider how women grapple with the morality of their choices, but do what they need to do to carry on. Moreover, the lullaby strongly alludes to the notion surrounding loopholes of retreat.

Following this passage, like Harriet Jacobs, Mireille, in her own version of "deliberate calculation" forges a loophole of retreat (Jacobs 47). She opts to fight differently by "feign[ing] surrender" to the Commander by "becom[ing] someone different, a woman who could satisfy a man with his desires" (139). Here, she begins to fully see herself as not existing:

> I undressed the Commander the way a woman who could want a man like him might. I began to forget everything I had ever known and anyone I had ever loved. I became no one. I became a woman who wanted to live. That was my fight….In what was left of my mind, I screamed. I was alive. I made my choice. There is nothing you cannot do when you are no one. (139-140)

For Mireille, survival mode equates to an untamed state of mind. By reverting to survival mode, she acquires inward knowledge that compels her to make a conscious choice to navigate her new world as "a woman who want[s] to live," and that entails constructing herself as wild and beastial (Gay 140). Like Trethewey's Ophelia, who poses how Bellocq likes, Mireille seeks to satisfy the Commander's sexual desires in a similar fashion. As she retreats, she assumes various roles with her captors, particularly with the Commander and Ti-Pierre: She surrenders to the Commander while she continues to fight Ti-Pierre (147). Nonetheless, performance plays a key role for both Ophelia and Mireille to forge loopholes of retreat and acquire agency. While Mireille takes off identities in order to survive, Ophelia often assumes identities while she is photographed. This observation is significant as it reveals that different circumstances calls for different tactics for survival in particular loopholes of retreat. How Mireille and Ophelia can exist in the space may be different but the very means create the same effect as it emerges as a way for each protagonist to be and

actualize her existence in the same way Harriet Jacobs can emerge as observant of her children's lives and omniscient about "many conversations not intended for [a slave's ears]" while in the garret (Jacobs 98; McKittrick 41-42).

While memory through narrative for the women of Danticat's *Krik? Krak!* sustains them and protects the self, for Mireille, she recognizes early on that memory breaks the body and loss of memory instead sustains her body, emerging as a survival tactic. She notes, "The memory of my life, the weight of it, threatened to break my body more than any man could. I needed to be no one so I might survive" (171). So while in captivity, she occupies a liminal space by "be[coming] two women: the one who remembered everything and the one who remembered nothing" (171). Caruth suggests that reverting to survival mode is an automatic response to trauma. Trauma, such as the one described here by Gay, emerges as the recognition of threat after it has made its mark on the mind. Caruth notes:

> Not having truly known the threat of death in the past, the survivor is forced, continually, to confront it over and over again. For consciousness then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's own life. It is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living. (Caruth 64)

Recalling events while undergoing such trauma is a "threat" to one's survival; however, a survivor must revisit the trauma in order to recover and exist (64). For this reason, Mireille learns in captivity that the negative binaries she creates in her loophole of retreat will protect the self and aid in her survival. This includes the following: "no one" to counter Mireille,

wife, mother, and daughter, no memory to counter the memory of her life before, metaphorically dying to counter living, an untamed state to counter a happy state, and her caged, arid life to counter her previous lush, lavish life (Gay 140). Ironically to survive, death emerges as the metaphor for the roles she detaches herself from. In the final chapter of the novel, she exposes the full truth of her last unspeakable encounter with the Commander and her repetition of the phrase "I died" in between her description of the things she is forced to do drives home how she survives (Gay 363-365).

Consequently, because Mireille teaches herself to be "no one" while in captivity, it becomes difficult for her to revert back to her various roles as wife, mother, and sister (Gay 140). For this reason, she asserts her identity in the past tense as "her abduction and treatment in captivity has irrevocably marked her" (Wernecke). However, her power and agency lies in her very capacity to forge a loophole of retreat and survive as she constantly reminds herself of her existence via affirmations taught by her mother-in-law:

> I reminded myself of everything I knew to be true, … in those moments when I couldn't be sure about when and where I was. My name was Mireille Jameson nèe Duval. I was married to Michael Jameson. I was a lawyer. We had a son, Christophe, and a daughter, Emma, the still points in my turning world. I was loved. I was safe. I was safe. (Gay 352-353)

Although her affirmations reveal uncertainty about her safety, reminding herself that she is "loved" and "safe" is crucial for her to recover her body, which was operating on automatic while she was in captivity (353). Thus, her circumstances invite us to consider that using liminality as a medium to protect the self may not lead to positive outcomes; however her capacity to survive is aligned with her ability to retreat. For this reason in order to move

forward, Mireille must consciously move out of the loophole of retreat that enabled her to protect the self and exact agency over her captor. To that end, this observation is significant to thinking about how Black women localize loopholes of retreat to the captive context as Mireille realizes her loophole of retreat to survive her captivity is futile in a space where she is safe and affirmed.

Even so, she has agency in her capacity to rewrite her fairytale as nuanced and complex. With that in mind, Roxane Gay overturns the notion that fairytales have happy endings. Instead, she surmises that, "A feminist novel, at its best, allows for hope and the possibility of a better world, even if that hope is shrouded in darkness" (48). For example, while Mireille eventually renews her relationship with her husband and has another child through a surrogate she learns to live in her new truth, recognizing with the aid of a therapist that she will "get better, but never be okay" (343). By embracing the value of brokenness as a survivor of rape and torture, she attains some form of normalcy. Nonetheless, these unwavering forms of empowerment elucidate Mireille's "endless attempt to assume [her] survival as [her] own and contends with what Caruth further terms as the "incomprehensibility of one's survival" (64). Surviving the hard choices she is compelled to make while in captivity is no easy feat; therefore, her existence post-traumatic experience emerges as an "endless testimony to the impossibility of living" (Caruth 62). Though she metaphorically dies while in captivity, she claims agency and forges a loophole of retreat in her capacity to stay alive in the same way that the women of *Krik? Krak!* sustain themselves through narrative. This point of convergence invites us to consider that survival is more than merely living and breathing; survival involves the how—how does one sustain themselves in very complicated geographies? Josephine and Marie of *Krik? Krak!* and Mireille of *An*

Untamed State figuratively map out ways to survive in the unbearable spaces provided by transforming it to suit their immediate needs, revealing that how one survives takes many forms.

Throughout this chapter, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl* reveals how historically Black women have possessed the fortitude to make spaces for themselves and find agency in any arena, empowering themselves even in captive spaces. For this reason, Jacobs' striking capacity to make hard decisions grants her agency; and as a result, serves as a classic framework for how *Venus*; *Bellocq's Ophelia*; *Krik? Krak!*; and *An Untamed State* relate to each other in a dialogue surrounding how Black women redefine choice and agency and more specifically, use liminality as a trope to negotiate spaces of exclusion. Within these texts, each author portrays her protagonist as shrewd, particularly in the way she finds freedom in adverse conditions of confinement and captivity, however small or narrow, by claiming a liminal space, a loophole of retreat. By forging loopholes of retreat, these Black women described in each text continue to exist and survive in myriad forms, declaring in special ways that although their mere existence may be deemed ugly and scarred, "we are here!"[54] Unremittingly in such a declaration, these women empower themselves and in their capacity to create loopholes of retreat—claim agency in unpleasant spaces— they also ultimately protect the self. Ultimately, these four texts draw distinctive parallels to Jacobs' *Incidents* and make clear how liminality is a recurrent trope illustrating how Black women adapt in the face of adversity and trauma.

[54] This idiom resonates in a poignant song "I'm Here" of *The Color Purple* musical where Celie affirms her independence and value. Additionally, Edwidge Danticat in her essay "We are Ugly, but We are Here," uses a similar idiom, noted in the aforementioned title and familiar in Haitian culture, to highlight Haitian women's narratives of existence and survival.

Chapter Two: Transgressive Spaces

I'm not sure it's possible for a lone black woman—or even a black man—to be protected in that place.

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979)[1]

Just as Harriet Jacobs reconceptionalizes Black womanhood under the institution of slavery by forging a loophole of retreat, Octavia Butler in *Kindred* (1979) considers further how Black women negotiate conceptions of Black womanhood in trangressive spaces. In the novel, Dana, the protagonist, literally travels through the space-time continuum—from the present day 1970s to the 1800s—ultimately to save herself. Occupying these time frames alters her perspective on slavery and pinpoints how she will work to revise history in the present day action of the novel. The moment in the epigraph follows her first time travel venture back from the antebellum era. Dana responds to her white husband's need to protect her from slavery with overwhelming uncertainty that she cannot protect herself. Although *Kindred* highlights the fact that such movement does not ensure protection or fulfillment for Black women, Butler's Dana shows readers that transgressing boundaries is necessary as her existence and survival depend on her ability to save her ancestor and, therefore, herself. While her time travel to the antebellum era literally transgresses time and space, Dana is generally transgressive in other aspects of her life. For example, her desire to be a writer and her marriage to a white man, two particulars that are not readily accepted by her family and larger society in 1970s America, reflect her subversive nature. Dana's trajectory figuratively mirrors the predicaments of contemporary Black women who often contend with measuring up to societal definitions of Black womanhood that are limited at best and unattainable at worst. Since Black women live in a white patriarchal society, their actions are often transgressive at heart as their existence challenges or defies the status quo and established conventions.

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[1] Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1979), 47.

As the earliest extant published Black female science-fiction writer, Octavia Butler breaks barriers in her own right. Her groundbreaking text invites readers to consider how Black women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first use liminality to be transgressive and overstep imposed boundaries. By using *Kindred* as a framing narrative, I structure my chapter around the following questions: How do social constructions of race and gender dictate how Black women negotiate space? How do Black women use liminality to transgress boundaries and push for new definitions of Black womanhood? I contend that four representative texts, *Tar Baby* (1981) by Toni Morrison, a novel; *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994) by Anna Deavere Smith, a play; *Caucasia* (1998) by Danzy Senna, a novel; and *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (2003) by ZZ Packer, a short story collection, all invite us to consider further the significance of boundary crossings and choice for Black women. Using *Kindred* as a critical paradigm for how Black women are constantly in transit due to their social location, my second chapter, "Transgressive Spaces," will examine cases in which the protagonists' choices complicate how they assert their identity, claim liminal spaces, and transgress boundaries. This chapter considers how the protagonist of each text is often prompted to subscribe to normative definitions of Black womanhood but instead chooses to transgress boundaries and challenge the prevailing mythology regarding Black women. Additionally, I explore how Black women writers use the periphery as a site not only for transgression and defiance, but also to explore what it means to constantly be in a state of limbo as Black women. For some of the protagonists, this includes revising the tragic mulatto trope, for others this include challenging interlocking oppressions, developing essential tools for Black female survival. Ultimately, I argue that Black women protagonists making a choice to exist the way they want are transgressive acts that invite us to consider how Black women transform

spaces of exclusion, in particular spaces where social constructions of race and gender negatively dictate how Black women are supposed to negotiate and maneuver space.

In the next section, I will engage key concepts found in Black women's writing and literature that my chapter will explore: liminality, the tragic mulatto trope, Black womanhood, and transgressive spaces.

Liminality

Liminality, as opposed to marginality or double consciousness, is a more nuanced way to discuss how Black women negotiate being on the periphery of society. I define the "periphery" as being on the outside of society and consider how this social location allows Black women a vantage point to transgress boundaries and maneuver liminal spaces. Although this term is similar to the margin, I contend that the term "periphery" is a more nuanced way to discuss the vantage point of those who live on the intersection as the term underscores a site where innovation and transformation take place. For example, in *Kindred* Dana occupies a liminal space both literally by traveling through space and figuratively as a Black woman. Her free status allows her to maneuver the institution of slavery differently from the enslaved women. However, although she is on the periphery she is not protected from the whip, demonstrating that liminality does not ensure protection. While I engaged the concept of liminality in chapter one as a subversive way to empower and protect the self in captive spaces, in this chapter I consider how liminality can be a space where Black women transgress normative boundaries, revise stereotypes regarding Black women, and unsubscribe to traditional definitions of Black womanhood.

The Tragic Mulatto Trope

Historically, the tragic mulatto trope was a cautionary tale against interracial relationships and suggested that the lives of those who occupy a space between the white and black worlds would eventually end tragically.[2] However, in more recent African Diasporic literature and culture revises this motif. As definitional categories are blurred, the idea of choice emerges to the forefront and the notion that biracial figures' lives may end tragically has become obsolete. Nevertheless, while their choices are no longer depicted as explicitly tragic, some authors contend that not having a clear racial identity leads mixed race individuals to have feelings of ambivalence and/or uncertainty.[3] Therefore, I am not aligning my definition of liminality with more general notions of liminality as a grey area in which the person is fully engaged in the community, but is trapped between two worlds, which parallels the dilemma of the traditional tragic mulatta figure. As an alternative, I define liminality as being Black and woman and living at the intersection of race and gender and explore how liminality emerges as a subversive way Black women can navigate spaces of exclusion and forge a space of transgression of Black womanhood. This distinction moves away from the traditional passing narrative to a more expansive way of examining Black women's experiences of liminality. For some of the protagonists I discuss in this chapter, their fair skin or mixed race identity may allow them

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[2] William Wells Brown in *Clotel; or The President's Daughter* (1853) depicts six mixed race women whose lives end tragically as a result of being torn between black and white worlds. *Our Nig* (1859) by Harriet Wilson details the life of a mixed-race girl who is abandoned and suffers abuse and neglect. For critical discussions regarding the tragic mulatta/o trope, see "Race, Womanhood, and the Tragic Mulatta: An Issue of Ambiguity" by Christine Palumbo-DeSimone and *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction* (2004) by Eve Allegra Raimon.

[3] In *Caucasia* (1998) by Danzy Senna, Birdie expresses feelings of ambivalence throughout the novel. Ralina Joseph in *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial* (2013) identifies Birdie as a "sad self-hating perpetually passing race girl whose mixed-race gloom tortures her internally (67).

opportunities to maneuver liminal spaces; however, how Black women strategically use this mechanism to survive is varied in form and not limited to those with fair skin.[4]

Octavia Butler in *Kindred* revises the tragic mulatto trope through the protagonist Dana as she explores interracial relationships in both the present day characterized as consensual and in the past, depicted as rape. Dana serves as her white ancestor's savior and seeks to change his views of slaves, to no avail. Furthermore, she does not want her white husband to be corrupted or hardened by the crimes committed against Black women's bodies in slavery when he time travels back. Butler troubles the tragic mulatto by underscoring how no one's lineage is pure. Instead, Butler demonstrates that in order for Dana to exist, her lineage has to go through a problematic ancestor, the son of slaveholder. In doing so, Butler revises the trope by challenging the conventional notions of race as fixed and, in some ways, dispels the myth surrounding the tragic mulatto figure by raising questions of how miscegenation, particularly during slavery, is not only a part of Black people's narrative, but also white people's ancestry. Such anxieties present in narratives that focus on miscegenation raise the following questions: Can power be maintained if one's identity is undefined? Can African histories be carried on or maintained when miscegenation occurs? Interests in such texts invite us to consider how familial dispersal impacts our racial identity. Texts that focus on miscegenation question whether or not Black women have complete autonomy over their identities.[5]

Other classic texts that complicate the traditional conventions of the genre by revising the tragic mulatto trope include *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and *Passing* (1929) by twentieth-century writers James Weldon Johnson and Nella Larsen, respectively.

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[4] Black women who negotiate liminal spaces are not always necessarily mixed race but can be.
[5] Historically, Black women determined the race and status (whether slave or free) of their children. Then later, the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision not only upheld racial segregation, but also ruled that "one drop" of black blood became legal determining factor for race. Basically, there was an antebellum rule or hypodescent and a postbellum rule aimed at absolving white men and placing the "burden of ancestry on Black women.

Protagonists in both novels do not particularly feel burdened in their choices to pass. The narrator in Weldon's text feels relieved that he chooses to pass for his children's sake. In *Passing*, though Clare Kendry's choice to pass leads to tragic consequences, she too does not feel tortured by her decision to pass. Akin to their early literary counterparts, Toni Morrison, Anna Deavere Smith, and Danzy Senna continue to offer complicated perspectives of this reoccurring theme in their respective literary works *Tar Baby* (1981), *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), and *Caucasia* (1998) as discussions of identity are grounded in choice and/or lack thereof. Ultimately, the protagonists of the aforementioned texts decide to either remove themselves from the dividing line of Black and white worlds altogether or seek to reconsider ways in which Blackness and whiteness serve as effective categories of representation. Nonetheless, expanding the trope affords more possibility and provides alternative ways to look at how Black women use liminality not only to deal with systems of oppression, but also to establish their subjectivity.

Black Womanhood

Black womanhood, how Black women assert themselves, unfortunately is often informed or un-informed by their movement in society as hypervisible and invisible simultaneously. While Patricia Hill Collins notes that "All women engage an ideology that deems middleclass, heterosexual White femininity as normative," she suggests that "[i]n this context, Black femininity as a subordinated gender identity becomes constructed not just in relation to White women, but also in relation to multiple others, namely, all men, sexual outlaws (prostitutes and lesbians), unmarried women, and girls" (*Black Sexual Politics* 194). In all, Collins concludes that "These benchmarks construct a discourse of a hegemonic (White) femininity that becomes a

normative yardstick for all femininities in which Black women typically are relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy" (194). These "benchmarks" that Collins identifies makes clear how Black women are oftentimes under scrutiny and devalued in society (194). Malcolm X's infamous remarks underscores this reality as he argues that "the most disrespected," the most unprotected," and the most neglected" person in America is the Black woman (Malcolm X). While his comments evoke paternalistic sentiments, he nonetheless also recognizes the plight of Black women.

In fact, Black women who forge transgressive spaces are oftentimes characterized as deviant. For example, E. Franklin Frazier, a Howard University sociology professor, argues that even at the time of emancipation, Negro women were "accustomed to being dominant in family and marriage" (Moynihan). As a result, Daniel Patrick Moynihan capitalizes on these sentiments to institutionalize policy in his report titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," more famously known as The Moynihan Report (qtd. in Moynihan). Hence, the Moynihan Report demonized Black women as emasculating and reinforced, for example, stereotypes, such as the Mammy and Sapphire. And though Moynihan readily admits that the patriarchal system is ineffective, he points out that since this is the system mainstream America is operating in, Black women must adhere to the social codes embedded in the patriarchy in order to succeed in American society. As a result, the Moynihan Report has been significant to both notions within the Black community and to public policy. Patricia Hill Collins observes that "using these arguments to explain African American economic and political disadvantage diverts attention from structural causes for Black social problems and lays the blame on African Americans themselves" and thus emphasizes the need for Black communities to "redefine Black gender ideology" (*Black Sexual Politics* 184, 181).

Hence, the trajectory of Black feminist thought from the 1920s to the present is grounded in the need to create new self-definitions of Black womanhood. For example, Zora Neale Hurston not only pushes conventions of the Harlem Renaissance particularly in her extensive use of Black vernacular in her writing, she also modifies conceptions of Black womanhood in her autobiographical essay "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" (1928). She boldly rejects W.E.B. DuBois' argument that Black people contend with a double consciousness, resulting in a self-damaged image:

> I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it…. No, I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife. (Hurston 1009)

By making references to other Blacks that claim to feel inferior, Hurston emerges as a transgressive figure who rejects the notion that being Black is a burden. Instead, she offers a new take and finds it "thrilling to know that any act …. shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame" (1009). Though she recognizes the systemic injustices Black people face, she is more so "thrilled" by her liminality, her power to disrupt the spaces she occupies, and in turn uses that power to access whatever tools she needs to thrive (1009).

Moreover, Toni Cade Bambara, in her essay "On the Issue of Roles," published in *The Black Woman* (1970) conveys that traditional roles informed by the patriarchy and mainstream culture are unnatural, "den[ying] [Black women] her peoplehood" (125).[6] She suggests that,

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[6] *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), edited by Toni Cade Bambara, is a collection of essays, poems, and stories that features writing by everyday women and emerging writers at that time such as Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni and Paule Marshall. Within this collection, these writers grapple with issues regarding body image, race, sex, and politics.

"Perhaps, we need to let go of all notions of manhood and femininity and concentrate on Blackhood" (125-126). Here, she brings out that the Black community cannot afford to align itself with patriarchal notions that limit the respective roles of men and women. She notes that Black men especially have to be held accountable for chauvinistic behavior and an investment in the patriarchy. For this reason, she concludes that real revolutionaries have to take care of intimate relations as she declares, "If your house ain't in order, you ain't in order" (Bambara 135). In her declaration, Bambara elucidates the need for the Black community to eliminate traditional roles that complicate how Black people assert their identity as Black men or Black women, respectively, and establish a new sense of self and transgress boundaries uninformed by Eurocentric values.

Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist* (1987) argues that nineteenth-century Black women writers defined Black womanhood by first addressing the ways they were excluded from the Cult of True Womanhood and then rejecting stereotypes that regarded Black female sexuality as vulgar. Likewise, scholars of contemporary Black women writers continue to define what it means to be Black and woman apart from mainstream standards.[7] For example, Candice Jenkins in *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (2007) observes that there are particular silences in the Black community around intimacy and thus engages the question of why Black women writers, in particular, are still concerned with issues of respectability and propriety. In similar fashion, Kimberly Nichelle Brown in *Writing the Revolutionary Diva: Women's Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text* (2010) employs the "revolutionary diva figure" to consider how contemporary

[7] The Cult of True Womanhood Hazel Carby is responding to is defined and discussed in great detail by Barbara Welter in her 1966 article "The Cult of True Womanhood." In this essay, she terms purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity as primary tenets central to a nineteenth century woman's identity. Since the main principles of the Cult of True Womanhood were grounded in the private sphere, this system not only excluded enslaved Black women, but also free working Black women.

Black women writers have forged transgressive spaces to transcend W.E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness theory and James Weldon Johnson's dilemma of the Negro artist. In doing so, Brown argues these writers establish Black female subjectivity that attempts to divorce themselves from mainstream culture. In all, by underscoring Black women's experiences of survival, these scholars demonstrate the crucial need for Black women to use liminality to transgress the spaces they occupy that do not recognize their full humanity as Black women.

Many Black feminist critics and scholars, such as sociologist Patricia Hill Collins and literary critics Hortense Spillers and Hazel Carby, have also explored the paradox of Black women as hypervisibile and invisible. They point out how Black women constantly contend with the dilemma of navigating discriminatory spaces that view them as subhuman and align their sexuality with lewd characteristics. Additionally, the social control of Black women's bodies—concerns about how Black women should behave or act in not only the community but also larger society—is another significant feature of Black women's writing. Patricia Hill Collins in her groundbreaking book *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) investigates the controlling images such as the Mammy and the Sapphire mainstream America employs to typecast Black women. She identifies the Mammy figure as undesirable due to her dark skin, asexuality, and loyalty to the white family she serves. In stark contrast to the Mammy image, Collins describes the Sapphire caricature as loud, emasculating, and sassy.[8] Like Collins, Hortense Spillers, in her formative essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," adds that "The nicknames by which African-American women have been called, or regarded, or imagined on the New World scene…demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes

[8] Barbara Christian in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* and bell hooks in *AIN'T I A WOMAN: Black Women and Feminism* make similar arguments about the exploitation of Black women's bodies and explain how such caricatures of Black women are used to socialize mainstream America to regard Black women as deviant.

as its unlawful prerogative" (65). Similarly, Spillers seeks to trouble how Black women move through space by calling attention to several demeaning characterizations of Black women used to invalidate their authentic experiences of survival. What is also significant about her comment is her charge that these images are not only a central part of the New World imagination, but also are stereotypes entrenched in a society where Black women continuously grapple with visibility and validation. As a result of these tensions, liminality emerges as an alternative mode for Black women to transgress and dispel mythologies regarding their identities and ultimately survive in a system not intended for them to flourish. Further, the question of who actually defines Black women remains paramount. Is it the collective Black community or the individual Black woman? How do Black women navigate this terrain where they are made hypervisible and invisible at the same time? The answer to these questions is grounded in how Black women understand their choices and ability to use liminality to transgress boundaries.

Undoubtedly, standards of Black personhood and womanhood are constantly in flux. Black women are transgressive because they are living in a white patriarchal society, so their existence troubles and complicates the spaces they occupy; nevertheless, Black women also have these mores and standards they "have" to adhere to—notions of what Black people do and do not do in their community and beyond that are often reflective of internalized white supremacy and patriarchy. Bambara challenges the community to eradicate these standards and ideologies. My intervention in this chapter builds off Bambara's Black feminist critique and considers further how Black women writers such as Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, Anna Deavere Smith, Danzy Senna, and ZZ Packer use liminality to rebuke fixed notions of blackness and womanhood determined by Eurocentric ideas to create more nuanced definitions of Black womanhood. As I engage the discourse concerning the deeply-rooted ideologies of Black womanhood, my

intervention differs from previous scholarship particularly in my ideas of how Black women use liminality as a concept to negotiate space and map out ways to circumvent limitations set to circumscribe their ability to move through space. Concerns and queries surrounding the notion of choice bring to the forefront the question of whether or not Black women have full agency in existing and defining their identities. In their portrayals of how Black women continuously grapple with visibility and validation, Toni Morrison, Anna Deavere Smith, Danzy Senna, and ZZ Packer pointedly describe feelings of ambivalence for some characters in varied ways. In doing so, they poignantly display the ways Black women negotiate identities projected on them and simultaneously push forward fresh self-definitions of blackness and womanhood. In all, these texts engage how terms of choice and existence are key in transgressing boundaries of race and gender.

Transgressive Spaces

Metaphorical in nature, transgressive spaces are a type of liminal space where Black women can choose how they want to be. Within this space, Black women question and challenge definitional categories from mainstream society, whether they appear in legislation or are used as a basis for social exclusion, discrimination, and stigma. Transgressive spaces consist of making particular choices about how Black women move. Hence, Black women can be radical within this space, transgressing traditional conventions of Black womanhood. Yet, it is important to note that Black women who forge spaces of transgression may not find contentment but instead find ambivalence or even dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, I contend that there is something freeing about Black women choosing how they write their existence by transgressing boundaries. For this reason, the need to revise limited versions of Blackness and womanhood is at the core of

Black women's literature. Ultimately, the texts I examine in this chapter invite us to consider how Black women choose to exist and recognize their power in transgressive spaces.

Among the Black feminist scholars who explore this idea of finding spaces where Black women can operate outside the conventions and not be considered deviant are Kimberly Nichele Brown and L.H. Stallings. Brown *in Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women's Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text* challenges Catherine Clément's assertion that liminal figures like the diva cannot transgress social boundaries and instead argues that the revolutionary diva can be a "metaphor of black feminist empowerment when removed" from parameters of traditional opera (masculine sphere) in four subversive ways: through "her voice… her transgressive co-option of public space usually designated for men… her style as survival strategy, performance and subjectivity… [and] her familial connection to her audience" (17). For example, she demonstrates how activist Angela Davis is a revolutionary diva due to her "public persona" and positions poet Jayne Cortez as a revolutionary diva because she makes "blackness a central concern" in her poetry (22-23).[9] By using the diva figure as a trope, Brown overturns caveats for Black women not to take up too much space on its head. In transforming the paradigms associated with the diva figure as negative, Brown finds an alternative way for Black women to forge transgressive spaces. Similarly, L.H. Stallings in *Mutha' is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (2007) interrogates how "we read wild sexual women" in literature and popular culture, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, Ann Allen Shockley, and Meshell Ndegeocello. (3). Furthermore, she seeks to move from Black female subjectivities that are aligned with respectability and

[9] Angela Davis emerges as an iconic transgressive figure; more specifically, her Afro-centric image "in 1969 …. could be coded by the dominant society as an act of militancy [and identified] as a radical being…set upon rejecting European images of beauty that had been historically imposed on the black body" (Brown 113). Similarly, Jayne Cortez uses poetry as a medium to "vocalize the unspeakable as it pertains to the oppression of blacks and women of color …[by] offer[ing] her audience a way to free itself from the confines of racist and sexist domination" (183).

binary logics to radical Black female subjectivities in which desire emerges as context for rebellion, "destroying systems of gender and sexuality that make stereotypes possible" (2-3). She argues that the trickster trope is an alternative way Black women writers can articulate sexual desire and transgress boundaries of difference (11). In all, these scholars invite us to consider how movement allows Black women space to transgress traditional conventions of Black womanhood. The point of convergence between these two scholars and my work is their use of tropes to situate Black women apart from mainstream standards of womanhood. Thus, I will use the figure of the diva and trickster in my analysis to further my argument of how Black women alternatively use liminality as a trope to push for new definitions of Black womanhood.

Literature Review

Tar Baby (1981) by Toni Morrison explores issues of identity, displacement, and community, primarily in the fraught relationship of Jadine and Son. Of Morrison's prolific early catalogue, *Tar Baby* is discussed the least by scholars.[10] Nonetheless, the scholars who examine this work mostly concentrate on Morrison's use of intertextuality with the tar baby folktale and the fall of man in the garden of Eden motif, the treatment of Jadine as a cultural orphan, and questions regarding what it means for Jadine, a Black woman to achieve individualism, which greatly contrasts notions surrounding asserting a Black collective identity.

Most conversations about *Tar Baby* focus on how Morrison revises the tar baby tale, leaving readers to ponder on who the trickster figure(s) are: Jadine or Son, or both Jadine and Son. For example, Madelyn Jablon in "The Art of Influence in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" examines how Morrison adroitly uses the folk tale to explore the conflicted lives of Son and

[10] Lina Hsu in "Social and Cultural Alienation in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" argues that the reason this novel is liked the least is "two folded" as the text deviates from her canon and does not solely center Black people's experiences or have a definitive conclusion.

Jadine, resulting in different versions of the tale itself. Rachel Lister brings out how Morrison revises white appropriations" of the [tar baby story], in which the tar baby is seen as an instrument of entrapment" (45). For Morrison, tar denotes "the black woman who could hold everything together," suggesting that the misfortune is in the fact that Jadine cannot exist as the Black woman aforementioned, not that she is the tar baby (qtd. in Lister 45). Other discussions of intertextuality focus on the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden motif to explore the trajectory in which her characters lose their innocence. Terry Otten in *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* demonstrates how all the main characters of this work "bear the consequences of self-knowledge" (79).

Other scholars discuss the different ways Jadine is indeed a cultural orphan.[11] Lucille P. Fultz in her study of mother-daughter relationships in twentieth-century literature suggests that the scenario in which Jadine "misconstrues" her aunt Ondine's concerns demonstrates to readers how she is detached from her culture and further reveals how "Morrison's novels open up maternal silences by allowing mothers to speak out of their experiences and to confront their daughters head to head and conversely for daughters to interrogate their mother's choices" (238, 241). Andrea O' Reilly, too, observes that the literal death of Jadine's mother and her boarding school experiences emerge as the primary reasons Jadine rejects not only normative notions of African rootedness, but also the responsibilities of motherhood (98-99). Further, Cynthia Callahan suggests that considering what it means for Jadine to be an orphan and adoptee transforms how we interrogate Jadine's choices to reject her culture as her social location affords her the autonomy to cross boundaries of race and class (93).

[11] This term is used to characterize Jadine frequently by scholars, for example in the work of Lucille P. Fultz and Marilyn Mobley.

Though "critics have often suggested that the novel condemns Jadine's choice" to remain detached from her culture, Morrison rejects this reading and "asserts that the novel dramatizes the possibility of being a daughter and a 'contemporary' woman" (Lister 43). Interestingly enough, John N. Duvall's reading of *Tar Baby* implies that Toni Morrison's trajectory as a writer parallels Jadine's. Duvall notes, "Reading this fiction as a form of authorial self-fashioning allows one to see that *Tar Baby* …confirms Morrison's refusal to endorse an African American identity that would allow black men—in acknowledged complicity with white patriarchy—to assume property rights in black women" (117). While most critics imply that Morison hates Jadine because she is detached from her community, I contend that her perspective is much more complicated, as Duvall suggests. My reading suggests that in the novel, particularly in her depiction of Jadine, Morrison interrogates the conversation around integration and what it does to Black people.

Nonetheless, how Jadine deviates from traditional definitions of Black womanhood despite different individuals and even specters prompting her otherwise emerges as another prominent theme interrogated by scholars of *Tar Baby*. Doreatha Drummond Mbalia in *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness* elucidates that Morrison's fourth novel prompts individuals across the African Diaspora to ask themselves, "Do I identify with my oppressor or my people?" (87). Drummond concludes that Morrison thematically structures this novel to "propose a solution to the African's nation-class oppression: African solidarity" (87). Even still, Jadine totally rejects this proposal as Rebecca Ferguson observes that Jadine views the choices she has as a Black woman as limiting and confining (126). Likewise, Elliot Butler Evans argues that Jadine embodies the socially unaccepted figure of the Black community—a figure that has "previously been 'unpresentable,' the individual Black woman who deconstructs the notion of

'the Black woman [construct]" (162). I, too, will explore Jadine's choices and consider what it means for Jadine to go against the grain and transgress not only boundaries of race, but also class, and seek an individual identity when Black feminist thought primarily emphasizes a collective identity. What does it mean for Jadine to escape African histories? Jadine's choice to divorce herself from her racial heritage invites us to consider the disparate ways Black women can use liminality to transgress social boundaries that challenge Black feminist thought regarding community, and in turn, lead to alienation.

In part of a larger project and series by Anna Deavere Smith entitled *On the Road: A Search for American Character*, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994) seeks to address how issues of power, race, and class are less of a black/white binary and more of a continuum that includes other voices from Latino and Asian communities, further suggesting that racial tensions are far more complex and diverse than what has been previously portrayed.[12] By drawing her text from approximately 200 conducted interviews surrounding the 1992 Los Angeles uprising and its aftermath and including approximately thirty-seven subjects on stage, Smith seeks to include different points of views regarding police brutality and the subsequent events that led to the L.A. insurrection.

Since its opening in 1993, critics and scholars have engaged the question of whether or not Smith's new methodology in theatre termed as "documentary theater" is plausible for addressing racial tensions. Critics wonder if her objective to reveal similarities in our differences are harmful?[13] Cherise Smith asserts the dangers of Anna Deavere Smith's ability to enact her

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[12] Other plays in the series include *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, & Other Identities* (1993), which explores tensions following the aftermath of 1991 Crown Heights riots in New York; *House Arrest* (2004), which engages the U.S. presidency and figures linked to controversies in the White House; and *Let Me Down Easy* (2014), which engages testimonies regarding the human body and health care.

[13] This theme also resonates in *Notes of a White Black Woman Race, Color, Community* by Judy Trent-Scales. In this text, she uses teaching as a platform to strive for continuity not discontinuity and encourages students to enter a

subjects' testimonies and observes that while Smith's "simultaneous performance as self and 'other'…promises a liberal humanist utopian world without discrimination, the prominence of her own identity mobility threatens to undermine the humanist utopia [the play] imagines" (136-137). However, she recognizes in her conclusion that *Twilight* "succeeds in extending sympathy for particular characters with a radical empathy, by giving viewers a way to project themselves into another physical and psychological position, [Smith's] privilege as author-editor, mediator, enactor….threatens the difference and shared authority that Smith's project endeavors to achieve" (187). Further, Cherise Smith concludes that Anna Deavere Smith's "production espouses the rhetoric of the democratic 'melting pot' where in the universalist notion of humanity is valued and difference is white-washed" (138). Alternatively, Debby Thompson suggests that Smith's approach can be useful in today's context. By exploring how race is a trope in the play, Thompson argues that when Smith approaches racial identity as "performative," she demonstrates that race is multifaceted and can be both an experienced identity and social construct (127). Overall, Thompson suggests that theatre should follow Smith's lead and "capture racial and other identities [as] simultaneously both anchored and mobile, both fact and act, both trap and trope" (137). For Thompson, exploring the different layers of race allows Smith [as well as other playwrights to] question the fact of race without discounting racism's very real effects" (137). Similarly, Kamran Afary approves Smith's model for addressing social concerns and suggests that her methodology distinguishes her because she "present[s] those rare

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world they see as different and work at the crossroads. She argues that it is valuable to teach about difference only if we teach about sameness at the same time.

moments of commonalities and shared experiences of people of different racial backgrounds" (166).[14]

While some critics and scholars have praised Anna Deavere Smith's "uncanny ability" to enact other people's experiences, using the words of her subjects and pushing the boundary of genre, others have been critical, considering the cultural work she engages as appropriation (Weatherson 189). For example, scholars like Tania Modleski emphasizes the dangers of Black women in America functioning as a "vessel" for multiple voices because, historically, they have had to "bear the greatest burden as mediums of exchange, their bodies frequently becoming the site for the playing out of racial and sexual tension"; and as result, her performances fail to "bring justice to her subjects" (62, 58). She has accused Smith of being too harsh to some groups in her portrayals over others. For example, she observes that Smith is particularly unforgiving in her portrayal of white women, as her inclusion of this demographic consists of upper class white women who are complicit and unaware of others' plights (Modleski 70-71).[15] Rosemary Weatherson also points out that Smith has been regarded as too neutral for not articulating her opinion about the events surrounding the L.A. uprising (193). In reference to the criticism, Smith asserts: "I don't think my job is to give the conclusion because the complexity of our culture, the damage that's been done is because people did come to conclusions. For all those years we had

[14] Undoubtedly, this play has become noted as a compelling text to initiate dialogue about race, class, gender, and social justice, other discussions include ways to incorporate *Twilight* in their curriculum. For example, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley in "Teaching the Politics of Identity in a Post-Identity Age: Anna Deavere Smith's Twilight" regards the play as a useful text to engage in class discussion and suggests that the work seeks to undermine current notions that America is a post racial society (195).

[15] For more discussion regarding the minimal representations of white women, see Hillary Harris, "Failing 'White Woman': Interrogating the Performance of Respectability."

one conclusion—the white man's conclusion. And now we finally have a series of conclusion" (qtd. in Westgate 153).[16]

While some scholars consider how the performances objectify Smith's body, other scholarly conversation have focused on the significance of her bodily presence to convey the subject's words and initiate meaningful change in communities where individuals' humanity has been disregarded. Iris Smith notes that, "[Anna Deavere] Smith makes herself a cipher in order to let the voices of the event speak" (139). Scholar Harvey Young considers how her position as a light-skinned African American woman may potentially lead to her success in performance. Further, Young also acknowledges that Smith's social location as a Black woman allows her to enact a range of subjects and "speak convincingly about social justice and 'racial grief'" (194). Similarly, Jennifer Griffiths inserts an epigraph by Anna Deavere Smith— "the body has a memory just as a mind does"—to demonstrate how the playwright serves as a mediator whose main task is to give the marginalized body back its voice (153). Jennifer Drake extends this conversation and suggests that Smith's performance diplomatically charges her audience to look at themselves and critique the shortcomings of America's democracy. By citing bell hooks' essay "Narratives of Struggle," Drake argues that the subjects' speech performed in Smith's play prompts the audience to truly take notice of what is being said and consider others' experiences.

While her task to embody multiple voices on stage may present its challenges, my analysis counters claims that these performances objectify Smith's Black body and adds to particularly Griffiths and Drake' conversations. Instead, I contend that by positioning herself in uncomfortable junctures as a Black woman, Anna Deavere Smith not only prompts her audience

[16] In *Twilight*, for example, Smith includes subjects like Paul Parker who is unapologetic and unyielding regarding his part in the insurrection, and concurrently includes subjects that contrast these sentiments, for example Twilight Bey, a former gang leader who is open to reconciliation and suggests that people have to move forward.

to know Los Angeles intimately and conceptually, but also transgresses boundaries otherwise off limits spatially via gang affiliations, racially, and socially via class and gender. Through language, she acquires agency to unsilence Black women's bodies and, as a result, dismantles traditional power structures by complicating race and gender associations. Though Anna Deavere Smith comes from a place of privilege as a Stanford professor and respected playwright and actor, I posit that her location as a Black woman affords her the license to reach her audience and prompt them to understand others' experiences that contrasts their own. More specifically, I will consider how the Black women Smith includes are transgressive in their testimonies and consider what it means for Smith to include varied perspectives of eight Black women.

Writer Danzy Senna's debut novel *Caucasia* (1998) centers around Birdie Lee, born of a white mother and black father, who forges identities based on others' expectations. Central to conversations about the text include the ways in which Senna revives the passing narrative. She, like other biracial authors, such as, for example, Rebecca Walker, seek to change the narrative and add more depth to the twenty-first century biracial figure beyond the tragic mulatto.[17] As a result, most scholars demonstrate how Senna is a part of a new trend and charge in millennial novels that unpack the concept of racial passing—to transform the idea of racial passing as an act of treachery, and alternatively reconsider passing as a medium for delineating race as a construct and performance.[18] However, scholarly conclusions slightly differ as to what this new trend does for the discourse. For example, in "Passing into Post-ethnicity: A Study of Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*" Daniel Grassian suggests that Senna's capacity to demonstrate how race is a

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[17] In her memoir, *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001), Rebecca Walker chronicles her life as a biracial girl of author Alice Walker and lawyer Mel Leventhal.

[18] Michelle Elam in "Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Philip Roth, and Colson Whitehead" suggests that Senna employs the passing narrative to underscore "the ongoing relevance of race" in a "post racial" era (764). Likewise, in "Fading to White, Fading Away: Biracial Bodies in Michelle Cliff's "Abeng" and Danzy Senna's 'Caucasia,'" Sika Alaine Dagbovie argues that the protagonist Birdie Lee is "frustrated [by] other people's expectations [as] she wants to be perceived as a woman of color (96).

performance that is not "race specific" moves beyond the rigid black/white binary towards a post-ethnicity identity, an identity void of racial categories (323). Similarly, Sika Alaine Dagbovie and Michelle Elam suggest that Danzy Senna is a part of the trend among mixed race authors to advocate embracing a multiracial identity.

Yet, these scholars point out in this move that Senna as well as other authors do not want to suggest that by embracing multiple identities, they are eradicating blackness. For example, Elam and Dagbovie explicitly both point out that Danzy Senna like other authors, for example, Michelle Cliff in *Abeng* (1984), reject the idea that biracial figures are representative of the end of blackness, the fusion of various cultures and ethnicities, and ultimately the end of the discussion of racism. Instead Dagbovie notes that Senna, like Cliff, explore ways characters can "remain historically grounded in blackness without being imprisoning" (108). While most discussions focus on how Senna uses the concept of passing as a medium to interrogate conceptualizations of race, Melissa Dennihy in "Talking the Talk: Linguistic Passing in Danzy Senna's Caucasia" demonstrates how passing is not always contingent upon skin complexion, but considers how language and linguistics plays a role. Her focus on linguistic passing in the novel adds to the conversation as she argues that Senna continues to expand what passing entails. In all, most scholars agree that Senna's debut novel considers what it means for a biracial figure to navigate a post-racial world. I, too, want to extend this discussion of how Danzy Senna subverts the traditional passing narrative and particularly focus on Birdie's capacity to perform race by interrogating what it means for Birdie to feel uncomfortable and vulnerable in both worlds. I will also unpack how Birdie negotiates spaces of uncertainty to transgress imposed boundaries of race, class and gender, inviting us to consider how liminality can be medium for Black women to unsubscribe from conventional norms.

ZZ Packer in her debut short story collection *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* portrays individuals placed on the periphery who contend with asserting an identity that may contrasts what society dictates. Within the eight stories, Packer shows how these protagonists tackle the rigidity of religion and the subjects of race and class in significantly unique ways. Despite a dearth of critical scholarship on ZZ Packer's *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* more than fifteen years after its publication, this collection initially received positive critical reviews. Many reviewers have underscored the author's style and, more specifically, the ways she addresses subjects of race, identity, and religion. Foremost, what reviewers have regarded about her style is its candor, particularly in each story's ending. Julie Myerson in *The Guardian* observes that Packer does not prompt her readers to "draw a conclusion" (Myerson).[19] Similarly, Jean Thompson of *The New York Times* suggests that she marries the old and the new techniques of creative writing exceptionally well by regarding her work as "the old-time religion of storytelling … [with] plenty of edge and energy from contemporary fiction" (Thompson). By avoiding neatly packaged endings, many reviewers are pleased with Packer's ability to reflect real life and leave the reader to speculate what happens next to each protagonist.

Other discussions central in reviews primarily focuses on how Packer discusses primarily race and identity, as well as class and religion. What remains fascinating about this collection is Packer's ingenuity to depict the Black experience and highlight its many complications regarding identity tensions. For example, in "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere," the most extensively discussed story in reviews, Thompson notes that Dina shares a similar dilemma with "several of ZZ Packer's characters [the] struggle for the self to make its presence felt in the world. She continues, "When that self is black and female there are layers of stereotypes and expectations

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[19] Myerson observes that the only time a conclusion is party reached is in "Brownies" when the narrator realizes at the end of the story that she "suddenly knew there was something mean in the word that [she] could not stop" (Packer 28).

(well-meaning and otherwise) to negotiate" (Thompson). To add to this discussion, reviewer Elaine Chiew suggests that feelings of "impotence" propel Packer's protagonists to act in the way they do and employs this line from "Brownies" to illuminate her point: "When you've been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it to others" (Chiew; Packer 27). Moreover, Myerson observes that the commonality among protagonists is that they are mostly black women who are "grafting away on the edge, struggling to fit in, to decide or define for themselves who or what they are." In all, these protagonists are pushing for newly revised self-definitions of Black womanhood.

In my analysis, I will engage what happens when Black women unsubscribe to aforementioned communal norms and consider how Packer's protagonists, particularly in her stories "Brownies" and "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" redefine Black womanhood and interrogate choices forced on them in transgressive liminal spaces. I contend that by including options for her protagonists to reject these feelings of "impotence" Elaine Chiew describes in her review, Packer not only illuminates what it means for these protagonists to cross boundaries as Black women, she also normalizes how Black women negotiate being on the periphery of society (Chiew).

"When and Where I Enter": Black Women Having Their Say in Transgressive Spaces

In underscoring Black women's value, often disregarded by larger society, early Black feminist Anna Julia Cooper in *A Voice from the South* (1892) states, "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*'" (31; emphasis in original). Here, Cooper indicates Black women hold unique

perspectives and possess the fortitude to make spaces for themselves at tables not intended for them. As she notes, Black women decide how they will contend with interlocking oppressions of white supremacy and patriarchy. This distinct type of ethos consists of the guiding principles Black women use to not only challenge interlocking oppressions, but also to assert a full humanity that is not merely limited to race and gender, while exuding strength and acquiring agency in varied forms. For this reason, oftentimes, the collective identities of Black women are prioritized. Writers Toni Morrison, Danzy Senna, Anna Deavere Smith, too, consider what Black female identity entails and demonstrates how standards of Black personhood and womanhood are in flux. Dana in *Kindred* makes a similar claim about a Black woman near death that Dana, the protagonist helps revive. At this instance Dana recognizes herself in this enslaved woman and sees her as a map to survive: "From what I could see of her, she seemed to be about my age, slender like her child, like me, in fact. And like me. She was fine-boned, probably not as strong as she needed to be to survive in this era. But she was surviving, however painfully. Maybe she would help me learn how" (38). Here, Butler explores how Black women transgress spaces to survive with tools—passed down or bequeathed epistemology— made available for enslaved women and Black women to maneuver space. But what happens when Black women push back and center their individualistic experiences, suggesting individual experiences trump or even erase the group (collective Black woman) experience? In all, *Tar Baby*, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, *Caucasia*, and *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* reveal how Black women find the means to map out a space unlimited or even less limited by societal definitions.

The Burden of Choice

While there is a commonality with how the Black female protagonists push for new definitions of Black womanhood across the four texts studied in this chapter, Toni Morrison in *Tar Baby* and Danzy Senna in *Caucasia* both consider how Black women understand themselves in the context of post-civil rights America. Through each protagonist's apparent feelings of ambivalence, these authors consider what is lost and what is gained as a result of integration and demonstrate how more choices allow for their protagonists to defy aligning with the collective experiences of Black women and forge transgressive spaces where they reject external stories of Black womanhood. While the orphaned Jadine chooses to pursue individualism that does not include a racial identity or any formative familial relationship, Birdie's choice appears to be contingent on visibility and decided on by her parents. These protagonists demonstrate parenting and/or lack of guidance inform their present state of ambivalence as they reject external stories of Black womanhood. In all, these writers reveal that while the post-civil rights era often provides Black women more choices to transgress boundaries, this agency can instill a state of ambivalence for its protagonists. This point invites us to consider what is lost as a result of integration in that though Black women can be transgressive, they may not achieve fulfillment.

Morrison and Senna portray how their characters contend with the burden of choice in similar ways, leading them to feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty. Jadine emerges as an unlikeable character as she is introduced to readers as privileged, entitled, and disrespectful when she, like the white characters, treats her aunt and uncle like servants. For example, Jadine not only minimizes her aunt's line of work as a domestic, she also is inconsiderate that her aunt is aging and complains often of aching feet. Yet, she still transgresses the space by making demands that her aunt serve her by bringing her chocolate and whipped cream when she could have gotten it herself (38-40). Morrison implies throughout the novel that Jadine's rearing could

possibly be the reason for her complacency. Cynthia Callahan suggests that this text "reflects ambivalence about what role should play in defining the self, particularly as African Americans gained more access to previously exclusive white professional institutions" (103). For Jadine, education allows her to delineate and transgress the social, class, and racial dynamics that would otherwise be rigid and forge an identity in white spaces that contrasts the ways in which her aunt and uncle negotiate their identities in white spaces. Jadine's use of liminality to exist the way she wants in white spaces prompts her to treat her aunt and uncle as inferior, while acting like she is superior.

Often identified as "cultural orphan" by scholars, Jadine opts for an identity rooted in Eurocentric cosmopolitan ideals, not her cultural heritage (Fultz 239). She seizes the choice not to be pinned down and attempts to expand unwritten boundaries by detaching herself from her "ancient properties" (Morrison in dedication).[20] In the supermarket, Jadine is struck by the confidence and presence of a dark-skinned woman in yellow and questions why she is intrigued by a woman who defies conventional standards of beauty. Jadine's dreamlike experience in the supermarket takes an unexpected turn when the Black woman in a yellow dress spits on her for not asserting an authentic Black identity. Seeing the woman in the yellow dress makes her uncomfortable and uncertain about her life choices prompting her to go visit her closest kin—her aunt and uncle. The narrator notes, "The woman [in yellow] had made her feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic. Perhaps she was overreacting. The woman appeared simply at a time when she had a major decision to make….and she had to come to see her aunt and uncle to see what they would feel, think, say" (48). Her sentiment here reveals the consequence and confirms

[20] "Ancient properties" refers to being rooted in cultural heritage.

Gay Wilentz's point that Jadine cannot fully exist by forgetting or negating her heritage.[21] It is interesting to note that Jadine partly wants to be nurtured by her culture as she wants to know her aunt and uncle's thoughts about her marrying Ryk, a European suitor.[22]

In her description of the woman in yellow, Morrison draws attention to Jadine's disconnect and difference even though she is "transfixed" by her beauty and presence (45). Morrison reveals the complications present when Jadine does not choose to identify herself as Black:

> I guess the person I want to marry is him, but I wonder if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl? And if it isn't me he wants, but any black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out that I hate ear hoops, that I don't straighten my hair, that Mingus puts me to sleep, that sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside—not American—not black—just me? (48)

For Jadine, this expression implies that she wants to detach herself from any traits associated with Black womanhood and even Americanness. However, this passage also poignantly portrays how her capacity to map a space in-between leads to her ambivalence. Hence, Jadine seeks to negotiate such spaces of uncertainty and questions whether or not a person of color can achieve individualism in the same way that white people can. Adopting a Eurocentric lifestyle has

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[21] Many scholars have noted that the woman in yellow represents Oshun, the Yoruban Orisha as she is typically associated with fertility, traditionally wears the color yellow and her symbols includes eggs, rivers, and peacocks. Jadine's encounter with the woman in yellow is a marker of a detachment from her cultural heritage. Her sentiments here demonstrate that though she can transgress boundaries and assert an identity apart from her cultural heritage, she remains ambivalent about her choices. For more discussion on how the woman in yellow is representative African heritage, see *Toni Morrison and the Idea of Africa* by La Vinia Delois Jennings, "Contested Visions/Double Visions in *Tar Baby*" by Judylyn S. Ryan, and "The Woman in Yellow in Toni Morrison's Tar Baby" by Angela Shaw-Thornburg.

[22] This particular relationship becomes the catalyst behind her trip home because she recognizes the fetishism present in their relationship: "she wonders if the person he wants to marry is me or a black girl" (Morrison 48). She realizes that her choices may complicate her relationship with Ryk.

compelled her to negate connections to Black cultural practice. For example, she does not like jazz music or the Black art that inspired the European art she values. She also does not want to be exoticized as she is afraid Ryk is marrying her because she is Black. Her version of cosmopolitanism rejects normative notions of racial solidarity as she places value on Eurocentric culture and devalues African American cultural expressions, such as jazz. Here her acts of transgression invite us to consider how she is alienated from her community. Though liminality affords Black women a space to make radical choices, they may still remain discontent and lose sense of community as a result.

Nevertheless, though she values Eurocentric culture, in her confrontation with Son, Jadine does not want to be identified as a white girl who “always think somebody’s trying to rape [her]” just as she does not want to be told “what a black woman is or ought to be” (121). While she threatens to tell Valerian about Son’s conduct she cannot bear the embarrassment of “telling on a black man to a white man,” revealing that Jadine, even in her desire to be an individual woman, still subscribes to particular mores of Black womanhood as her choices constantly leave her in a state of awkwardness about her identity. It is also interesting to note that while Jadine “volunteer[s] nigger,” to refer to Son, the intruder, she does not like Margaret’s comparison to Son as a “gorilla” (Morrison 129). Her response again demonstrates her ambivalence, as she is comfortable with giving Margaret permission to use the word “nigger” to describe Son, but does not prefer to associate blackness with animalistic behavior to further dehumanize him for his actions. By pointing out to Margaret that that “we were all scared… if he’d been white we would still have been scared,” she uses liminality to transgress the space in her choice not to solely associate Black manhood with fear and thus challenges the prevailing mythology regarding Black male sexuality (129).

Another familiar charge of the African Diasporic community is to respect one's elders; this reverence includes physically taking care of them when they become aged and unable to fend for themselves. Ondine invites Jadine to become a part of this tradition as a Black woman: "Jadine, a girl has to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she can't learn how to be a daughter she can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man—good enough for other women" (Morrison 281). Lucille Fultz notes, "When Jadine misunderstands her aunt's maternal discourse of angst and desire, Ondine becomes the outraged mother impelled to give her niece/daughter a lesson on daughterhood and womanist responsibility—not duty or obligation" (238). Here Ondine yearns for Jadine to establish her Black female subjectivity by assuming the role of daughter, but Jadine rejects it. As she values the European context over "her natal culture," she not only uses liminality to transgress normative notions of Black womanhood, she also abandons her responsibility as a daughter (Fultz 239). In fact, Jadine is clear about her boundaries and does not want to be involved in the enterprise of taking care of her aunt and uncle because "her behavioral patterns, dress, language, associations, and ideology are all those of the ruling class and, as such, demonstrate her hatred of Africa and all that is associated with it" (Mbalia 74). In response to Ondine's lessons of becoming a Black woman, Jadine says "There other ways of becoming a woman …Your way is one….but it's not my way" (Morrison 281-282). Here, her choices invite us to consider how the way some Black women use liminality to negotiate spaces of uncertainty may not always create an affirmative environment for the collective Black community. Though her mode of liminality complicates her relationship with her aunt, her choice to disregard traditional conventions of Black womanhood and assert her identity "[her] way are affirmative for her (283).

Moreover, Birdie's choices are informed by her parents and appear to be contingent on visibility. Birdie is visibly white, and her sister Cole is visibly black. Her parents favor Cole over her, and as a result, Birdie always inhabits liminal spaces of visibility and invisibility. And technically, her parents never legitimize her existence as they cannot decide on a name for her, leaving her with no legal name. Initially, his sister's reflection "proved [her] own existence" (5). She and her sister designated their own space of transgression, Elemeno, in which they spoke their own language and were not limited by black/white binary: "[T]hey were a shifting people, constantly changing their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility" (7). Early on, Birdie questions the pursuit of Elemenos and does not see "the point of surviving if you [have] to disappear?" Her critical question in some ways informs her trajectory as "just a body without a name or a history" (1). Throughout the novel, Birdie exists as a nebulous body, not as a person who is consciously aware. As a body, her choices are perfunctory, and she loses her consciousness and ability to assert an identity with conviction.

When her parents decide to go underground because they suspect that the FBI is investigating their political involvement, each parent escapes with the child whom they visibly self-identify with. Birdie goes to upstate New York and New Hampshire with her white mother and Cole goes to Brazil with her Black father. What is important to note is though Birdie's mother gives her daughter the license to be "a blank slate," she ultimately decides Birdie's ethnicity is Jewish and renames her Jesse Goldman (Senna 110). Thus, Danzy Senna revises traditional notions of the tragic mulatta by bringing out that the consequences of either choice are unsatisfying. By identifying as Black according to Birdie, Cole "survives" race relations, but is estranged from her mother and sister (Senna 349). By not choosing steadfastly and identifying as Jewish, Birdie believes she is not "surviving" race relations and as a result, she has "no voice, no

color, and no conviction" (349). Within this scenario, this text suggests that Birdie faces the most real consequence of not feeling grounded in any identity as a result of not making a clear choice as Senna suggests not choosing a racial identity results in being silenced. Although both sisters share varied experiences of liminality, they recognize the constraints of either choice. In a conversation with her sister, Birdie states, "They say you don't have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don't" (Senna 349). Cole's response "there are consequences if you do" further demonstrates how burden of choice is apparent for biracial figures who identify as Black or white (349). This invites us to consider the role of liminality as a space for, in this case, biracial figures to unsubscribe to tragic mulatto conventions that says they have to make a choice.

Just as the woman in the yellow dress prompts Jadine to become anxious about her choices, Birdie views her biracial classmate Samantha as "hold[ing] the clues to her disappearance" (Senna 191). Her encounter with Samantha compels her to flee New Hampshire in search of her sister and father. When Samantha says, "I'm black. Like you," she prompts Birdie to look in the mirror in the same way the woman in the yellow dress compels Jadine to confront herself (242). However, later like Jadine, Birdie rejects this comparison, but for different reasons: "Those words had made something clearer. Made it clear that I didn't want to be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like somebody else" (274). While her desire here implies that her capacity to maneuver space as a white black girl results in more options, they still do not offer the consolation Birdie looks for— "surviving" is not enough (349). Because Birdie's existence is taken from her, she is uncomfortable in Black and white spaces and appears to question a world that makes one choose. As a result, she does not believe "surviving" allows one to exist (349). Thus, Birdie transgresses boundaries by

rejecting the notion of choosing steadfastly, in particular, the choices of identity prescribed by both her mother and father. Reflecting on her ambivalence, she says, “[T]hen I thought of me, the silent me that was Jesse Goldman, the one who hadn’t uttered a word, the one who had removed even her Star of David. It had come so easily to me (Senna 349). Here, Birdie reveals that the identities imposed on her are alien to her and as a result, her apparent lack of a “static, seamless identity…from which to survey the world around her” invites us to consider how her experiences of liminality and acts of transgression are unfulfilling because her choice is predetermined by others (Elam 102-103). Ultimately, both Morrison’s Jadine and Senna’s Birdie reveal that forging transgressive spaces may result in alienation and/or complacency as both protagonists continue to search fulfillment.

Boundary Crossings as a Means for Social Change

While Jadine and Birdie’s question of choice leads to feelings of ambivalence and/or uncertainty in transgressive spaces, ZZ Packer and Anna Deavere Smith not only underscore the outsider’s perspective in their respective works, they also consider the definitive choices their protagonists or subjects make to negotiate space and transgress boundaries as Black women. By placing valuing on the outsider’s perspective, these writers invite us to abandon binary thinking and recognize the value and complexity of gaining insight of multiple experiences of Black womanhood. Though the genre conventions of *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* greatly contrast, the point of convergence lies in the writers’ focus as they are both deeply concerned with the same questions regarding how Black women transgress boundaries in particular ways. Anna Deavere Smith in her one-woman show explores boundary crossings via

language, while ZZ Packer engages boundary crossings of race and sexuality in the self-contained incidents of her short stories.[23]

Tasked with the charge to create a one woman show about the 1992 civil unrest in Los Angeles, widely acclaimed playwright and actress, Anna Deavere Smith, extends and modifies the tradition of drama by creating a unique form of "documentary theater" that employs the actual words of real people. In *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, she uses this particular genre to reflect contemporary reality and bear witness to the citizens of Los Angeles experiences, however varied and complex (Smith xvii). By drawing her text from approximately 200 conducted interviews surrounding the Los Angeles uprising and its aftermath and including approximately thirty-seven subjects on stage, she seeks to include different points of views regarding police brutality and subsequent events that led to the L.A. uprising. Though Smith has been criticized for including flat portrayals of white female subjects as privileged and complacent, what is most poignant about this text is her inclusion of eight Black female subjects from diverse backgrounds and locations. As Smith embodies these eight subjects, she underscores how they are transgressive in unique ways, revealing how Black women's movement and negotiation of spaces is significant to thinking about the role of liminality in transgressive spaces. In fact, Smith makes this suggestion when she states, "Largely because of my race and gender, I am political without opening my mouth. My presence is political. The way I negotiate my presence becomes political. If I tried to deny my politicalness, I would be even *more* political" ("Not So Special Vehicles" 80; emphasis in the original). Here, she reiterates how Black women's movement and negotiation of spaces is significant to thinking about the role of liminality in transgressive spaces as the particular choices they makes within any space is

[23] Packer primarily focuses on racial tensions in "Brownies" and engages boundary crossings of race and sexuality in "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere." She also explores other intersectional identities, for example, religion, in other works in her collection.

oftentimes termed political and disturbing for the status quo.[24] Like Smith, hooks also observes that "[Black women's very presence is a disruption" and suggests that it is imperative for Black women to "create spaces within that culture of domination if [they] are to survive whole, [their] souls intact" ("Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" 155-156). Overall, the Black female subjects in *Twilight* demonstrate this need to forge transgressive spaces, underscoring how Black women use their liminality as a way to transgress social norms and limiting definitions.

Throughout her play, Smith invites conversation between different subjects who share similar plights and subjects who would readily not cross paths. For example, Angela King and Theresa Allison are dynamic women to put in conversation with each other, particularly on how they advocate for their "sons."[25] Additionally, Congresswoman Maxine Waters, opera singer Jessye Norman, and former Black Panther Elaine Brown advocate for Black folk on a more conceptual level. Interestingly enough, Theresa Alison, Angela King, Maxine Waters, Jessye Norman, and Elaine Brown all are transgressive particularly in how they provide context to the civil unrest in varied ways, by either underscoring the personal or historical.

More specifically, Theresa Allison and Angela King are transgressive in their ability to take control of the narrative about their loved ones. Theresa Alison, organizer of Mothers Reclaiming Our Children (Mothers ROC) and mother of Dewayne Holmes, who was instrumental in planning the historic gang truce, uses liminality to take control of the narrative

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[24] For example, a simple fist bump between Michelle Obama and Barack Obama to celebrate his Democratic nomination for President generated concerns that the gesture was an act of terrorism. What is interesting to note is how a congratulatory gesture between a Black woman and Black man translate as a violent and subversive.

[25] I use "sons" loosely here to discuss how these women speak on behalf of black men in the community, as Angela King speaks on behalf of her nephew and Theresa Alison speaks on behalf of both her nephew and son.

about particularly inner-city youth of L.A and gang activity. [26] In her refusal to objectify those involved in gangs, she recognizes her son's work in engineering a truce between the Bloods and Crips:

> After the death of my nephew, my son
>
> Dewayne
>
> thought about a peace among,
>
> you know, the, the guys in the project—
>
> I don't want to say gangs—the young men. (32)

By referring to what larger society deems as merely a problem that needs to be eradicated by any means necessary, Allison uses liminality to take note of their dignity and recognize their value. By renaming the "gangs" (object), "the young men," (subject) she uses liminality to establish their subjectivity and acknowledge their worth (32). This act of transgression invites us to consider how Black women's experiences of liminality can be transformative for those around them. Like Allison, Angela King is transgressive in her depiction of her nephew and seeks to add nuance to his character, taking control of the narrative about particularly Black males as criminal and deserving of violence committed by police officers. By reflecting on Rodney King as a typical child who liked fishing, she uses liminality to show her nephew's trajectory beyond his stints with the law. In her portrayal, she seeks to transgress notions of King as a criminal (object) as opposed to an impressionable kid (subject). These two subjects invite us to consider how voicing the full stories of their loved ones and establishing a familiarity to their audience is crucial to understanding how Black women use liminality in transgressive spaces. In particular,

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[26] Theresa Allison's monologue parallels so many mothers' stories at present whose sons are gunned down or harassed by police. In fact, her foundation, Mothers ROC serves as a haven for mothers to find ways to tackle pervasive issues of incarceration and gun violence. In more recent years, other organizations have formed to perform similar charges. For example, Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin formed Circle of Mothers as an organization to empower mothers who have lost children particularly to gun violence.

these subjects' apt use of voice parallels Kimberly Nichele Brown's revolutionary diva as a model of "black feminist empowerment" and a "decolonizing gesture [in which one] transform[s] from object to subject" (17). By identifying their loved ones as subjects, Theresa Allison and Angela King both take control of the narrative by challenging systems that perpetuate the subjugation and exploitation of Black bodies. Moreover, bell hooks states that "only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others" (hooks, *Talking Back* 12). Using their voices as vehicles, King and Allison transgress boundaries to assert their experiences of liminality and establish their subjectivity as Black women.

As Allison continues in her recount of her nephew's brutal murder by police, she calls out the LAPD corruption. She suggests that the LAPD in some respects create even deeper rifts between the gangs by for example gunning down black men and pinning it on the rival gangs or

> dropping [kids] off into another gang
> zone and leav[ing] 'em there
> and let those guys kill'em
> and then say it's a gang-related thing. (Smith 38)

Here, Allison's experience of liminality grants her an inside perspective of corruption, which disrupts the master narrative about L.A. gang activity and exposes the LAPD's appalling part in the pervasive gang violence, revealing that this system is more complicated than most general audiences think. Within her monologue, she also challenges the notion that the LAPD are "the best police officers in the world" by further demonstrating how the LAPD employed scare tactics to stop her and her son's initiatives for unity (38). She notes, "[T]hey don't want the peace, /they don't want us comin' together. /…They wanted Dewayne more" (Smith 35). In response to the

unlawful arrest of her son, she and others use liminality to resist against the police by surrounding the police car and threatening to turn it over:

> So they had him in a car.
>
> …We surrounded the police car,
>
> we gonna turn it over.
>
> I laid at the front part of the bumper, …—
>
> …If they rolled, they would have hit somebody. (36)

Here again, Theresa Allison is trangressive in her resiliency to advocate for her son literally by laying down her life and enlisting others to do the same.

> I said, 'Look I'm not gonna move,
>
> You not gonna kill my son liked you killed my nephew.'
>
> So the police happened to pull the car up a little bit and hit
>
> my leg
>
> …They were not gonna kill my son.
>
> And that was their intention, to kill my son,
>
> they still wanna kill my son. (37)

Again, she is unyielding in protecting her son from the police even if it means her life is in danger. By using her body, she asserts her voice and negotiates liminal spaces. Moreover, Allison "transgresses …public space usually designated for men" (Brown 17). When she aggressively advocates for her son, she uses liminality to embody characteristics generally prescribed for men. As his protector and defender, Allison not only becomes his voice, but also his savior, more specifically, a human shield By repeating the phrase "kill my son," she defamiliarizes how Black men are perceived as thugs, and by recognizing his humanity she

unsilences her story, inserts herself in the narrative, and ultimately, “transforms [her self as well as her son] from object to subject” (Brown 17).

Similarly, the title of Angela King’s monologue “Here’s a Nobody” captures how stunned Rodney King’s aunt is by the fact that the moral outrage, injustice, and cruelty seem to be contingent upon the prominence of the victim. As Allison speaks on behalf of her son, Angela King vows to do the same. She boldly states, “[M]y brother’s son out there was lookin’ like hell…and I was gonna fight for every bit of/our justice/and fairness” (57). [27] Like Theresa Allison, Angela King recognizes that every person, including her nephew, is worthy of respect as she states, “I cared about Glen [in the same] way they cared [about the President]” (57).[28] She continues,

> You see how everybody rave when something happens with
>
> The
>
> President of the United States?
>
> Okay, here's a nobody,
>
> but the way they beat him, this is the way I felt towards him. (57)

In drawing this comparison between the President and her nephew, she implies that the expressions of moral outrage should be extended to the “nobodies,” the marginalized communities (Smith 57). By establishing that her nephew should be extended the same level of compassion as the President would, she transgresses boundaries and is shrewd in her language to emphasize her point in that she speaks not only from Black women’s experiences of liminality,

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[27] Angela King implies in her monologue that Rodney King’s mother refuses to speak out and engage in the politics regarding her son’s arrest for religious reasons because she is a Jehovah’s Witness (Smith 56).

[28] Rodney King’s family called him Glen.

but the shared experiences of the Black community, particularly underscoring the sad reality that oftentimes African American life categorized as insignificant.

While the police admit they made a mistake and reluctantly apologize, Theresa Allison's brave actions are not enough. The police eventually apprehend her son while she is away:

> Then they took my child
>
> I was tired.
>
> I have heart problems
>
> I went away
>
> and they took him while I was gone. (40).

King also briefly alludes to police corruption and recognizes that the LAPD would abuse their power and seek revenge against King by putting a tracker on his vehicle to "discredit" him and tapping her phone (59-60). However, King finds ways to circumvent and outwit the bug by using profanity in her conversations (60). Ending the narrative in this way reveals to readers that that though these women take control of the narrative and are transgressive there still may be no happy endings in this space. Fighting the system does not always yield positive results. While Allison is away, "they" take her son (40). Likewise, Angela King does not have sanctuary in her home as she cannot talk with ease on the phone and Rodney King's "encounter[s] with the law" are frequent (59). Even still, forging transgressive spaces allows these women to center their experiences, inviting us to consider how liminality allows Black women an opportunity to establish their subjectivity.

More broadly, Allison speaks on behalf of all mothers by questioning the police's treatment of Black youth in her queries: "Why you got to do Black kids like that? / Why couldn't

you handcuff ‘em and take ‘em to jail?” (39). She continues by reminding readers that police officers are no different from anyone else:

> These police officers are just like you and I.
>
> Take that damn uniform off of ‘em
>
> they the same as you and I.
>
> Why do you have so much power?
>
> Why does the system work for them?
>
> Where can we go
>
> To get justice that they have?
>
> …Where? (39).

By demonstrating that the “uniform” gives some police officers a false sense of superiority and power as the aggressor, she identifies corruption in the police department, challenges the system, and advocates against police brutality, demanding civil rights and police accountability. In turn, she uses liminality to defy the status quo and established conventions that allow police officers to abuse their power. Likewise, Angela King underscores a similar sentiment and questions why the police officer would brutally beat a “nobody.” Her astute observations framed in the title as well as her familial ties to Rodney King as his aunt compels the audience to perhaps question the LAPD’s actions or at the very least sympathize with Rodney’s plight as not just a criminal, but somebody’s child. Nonetheless, Smith’s enactment of these women invites us to consider how occupying spaces of transgression and defiance may not be incredibly gratifying for Black women. What is significant about this terrain, however, is the liberating effect it has on Black women as they are making the choice to not only write their existence but also rewrite the narrative of their loved ones. Even so, Smith demonstrates that these women’s actions are still

transformative as they find clever ways to transgress boundaries of systemic oppression and serve as advocates against police brutality via personal accounts of their loved ones as people, not merely delinquents.

While Theresa Allison and Angela King are transgressive in conveying their personal connections to the civil unrest, opera singer Jessye Norman and Congresswoman Maxine Waters are transgressive in their abilities to defend and contextualize the actions of the youth "rioting" upon hearing the verdict.[29] They use liminality to speak from a space of power and "avoid internalizing the rhetoric of victimization that blames the victim for her or his oppression" (Brown 64). Instead, they relate to the youth's experiences of rage during the civil unrest. Former Black Panther Elaine Brown functions as a counter to Norman's and Waters's perspectives as she calls the youth's actions counterproductive and urges them to consider other ways to be heard. She, still, however, recognizes their experiences, yet uses liminality to discuss alternative ways the youth can come to voice by making a "serious commitment" to social activism (Smith 146). Nonetheless, their interventions are significant in demonstrating how intergenerational relationships are not always thwarted by conflict and in understanding how liminality and acts of transgression manifest in different ways. Here, these women are able to provide context by sadly revealing that not much has changed twenty years after the Kerner Commission Report published its warning. Moreover, they also emerge as a voice for the voiceless due to their clout in the community. In turn, their acts of transgression "challenge assertions that black women have no place in struggles for liberation" (Brown 17).

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[29] Jessye P. Norman is a Black opera singer from Augusta, Georgia. Maxine Waters has served as United States Representative for California since 1991. She currently serves California's 43rd district and previously served the 35th and 29th districts. Most recently, she has been reborn into the hearts of millennials as "Auntie Maxine" due to her outspokenness and no-nonsense attitude regarding Donald Trump's presidency.

In her monologue, “Roar,” opera singer Jessye Norman uses liminality to eloquently reveal how subjective language translates into music. Interestingly enough, since music serves as a medium primarily to express feelings, she makes the case for why this form of expression is essential in Black culture— “[to] deal with…/…being transported /from one’s homeland/and being made a slave we had to sing ourselves through that!” (100). For Norman, music becomes a medium for Black folk to voice their pain and contend with living at the intersection of multiple oppressions. In fact, her profession directly parallels the diva construct Kimberly Nichele Brown discusses in *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women’s Subjectivity and the Decolonizing Text*. In particular, Norman’s use of style as “performance [and] subjectivity” is characteristic to how she transgresses space (Brown 17). However, as a professional singer in this context, she feels useless because she recognizes that the community is not in the frame of mind to receive her gift. She points out,

> [If I were] Twenty or something,
>
> And I felt I were being *heard* for the first time
>
> it would not be singing as we know it
>
> It would be a *roar.* (100; emphasis in the original)

In bringing to the forefront that singing is integral to the Black experience, she conveys that the intenseness of the uprising cannot be characterized through spirituals sung during the Civil Rights Movement, but only through a roar, revealing again how subjectivity is intricately linked to calling attention to social injustices, in this case surrounding police brutality.[30] In all, she uses liminality to make space for the youth as well as establish them as subjects where their emotions

[30] The sentiment that often creates a rift between the older and younger Black community Norman is referring to also is most recently prevalent in millennial movements, such as Black Lives Matter that get a bad reputation for not employing tactics of nonviolent protest like the Civil Rights Movement. However, this sentiment is a misperception; Black Lives Matter does not organize violent protests.

are read with compassion, inviting us to consider how this concept provides range for varied emotions and moves away from binary systems. Although Anna Deavere Smith captures the grandiosity of this subject in her portrayal, Norman's genuine concerns for the youth are transgressive because she uses liminality to "disrupt class [and intergenerational] distinctions" (Brown 19). Brown further notes, "In carving spaces for black women …where none had existed before, the diva becomes revolutionary not only because she embodies struggle and survival, but because her desire for uplift extends beyond herself to making a positive difference in the world" (Brown 19). For example, Norman transgresses boundaries as an older Black woman by relating to the youth and seeking to "uplift" the next generation, not dismiss their behavior as deviant (19).

While Norman's monologue is useful in terms of thinking about the sentiment of young people and how the subaltern can speak through music, Maxine Waters makes clear in her address to FAME church how rioting, although "unfortunate," is another medium for the "unheard" to speak (162). She states, "The fact of the matter is, /whether we like it or not, /riot/ is the voice of the unheard" (162). Here, Maxine Waters evokes the message of Civil Rights pioneers before her that have warn America what will happen as a result of unconstrained white supremacy and systemic oppression.[31] Further, by contextualizing this uprising back to Watts, Waters replaces the onus on the government's lack of response to heed to recommendations made in the Kerner Commission Report twenty years earlier.[32] Maxine Waters uses liminality to

[31] Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Langston Hughes in his poems "Harlem" (1951) and "Warning" (1967) have made similar comments about what race riots ultimately convey. While "Harlem" is more implicit, his later poem "Warning" more explicitly issues a caution of what will eventually happen as a result of enduring systemic racism and oppression: "Negroes,/Sweet and docile,/Meek, humble and kind:/Beware the day/They change their mind!" (1-5).

[32] The 1965 Watts riot led President Lyndon Johnson to commission the Kerner Report in 1968. The commission concluded that "white racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture …accumulating in … cities since the end of World War II" and suggested that major cities worked to integrate by creating jobs and providing better

be transgressive not only in her speech, but also in her actions when she invites herself to a Presidential meeting called by George H.W. Bush to address urban problems as a result of the civil unrest. In her recount of the meeting at the White House, she defends the citizens of L.A and disagrees with larger society that the folk in L.A. are hoodlums and thugs. She says,

> 'These young people
> …are not in nobody's statistics
> …They've been dropped off of everybody's agenda…'
> 'We now got young people
> who are twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two years old
> who have never worked a day of their lives.'
> 'These are the young people in our streets
> And they angry
> And they are frustrated.' (167-168)

She, like Norman, recognizes that the individuals who have resorted to rioting feel like they have no other recourse and are merely seeking mediums to be heard and state their case. Like Norman, Waters uses liminality to forge a space for the silenced; and "by prioritizing the African American [community]" in white spaces, she transgresses boundaries (Brown 19). In doing so, she dramatically changes the tone of the conversation and issues a new reality to constituents that conceives the people rioting as young people who have been disregarded and afforded minimal

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living conditions (Meranto 10). In all, the commission issued a caveat that if major cities did not work toward this goal, the racial divide would continue to grow. Despite the warning, President Johnson rejected the recommendations. Twenty years later Maxine Waters alludes to this report in her address to FAME church and points out that we are now reaping the consequences of ignoring the social problems the Kerner Commission Report cited (Smith 160).

opportunities to thrive. This insight invites us to consider how liminality can be used as a vehicle to negotiate exclusionary spaces and voice the concerns of people of color.

Unlike Jessye Norman and Maxine Waters, Elaine Brown appears to be informed by her experiences as part of the Black Panther Party and questions Black folk's tactic for dealing with police brutality and systemic oppression. As a former Black Panther, she uses her own experiences of liminality to address misguided youth who are exposed to mainstream images of the Black Panther Party as violent and intimidating with no context of their core principles. For example, she alludes to her life as a Black Panther. While her principles are still radical, Brown offers a caveat to the youth and contextualizes this rioting a different way by suggesting that staying alive is more important than dying as martyrs when she poses the question "[H]ow are you going to push the revolutionary/ struggle from your grave?" (145). She continues to encourage the youth that it should be less about the optics and more about executing a plausible plan for justice, charging Black people to make a "lifetime commitment" (147). She declares,

> [T]he longer you live/the more you can do!
>
> So don't get hung up on your own ego,
>
> and your own image,
>
> and pumping your muscles/and putting on a black beret…. think in terms of what
>
> are you going to do
>
> for black people.
>
> …. the long haul. (147)

Here, Brown urges the youth to be constructive in their protest and instead pattern some of the lesser-known or emphasized values of the Black Panther Party, which involves making a serious

commitment out of love for Black people. In doing so, she demonstrates to the youth how to forge transgressive spaces effectively, which entails a serious commitment to serving as advocates against police brutality.[33] Moreover, she uses her experience of liminality by calling to task those that solely associate violence with the Black Panther Party and underscoring the fact that this Party had an undying love for its people and are seriously committed to serving as advocates against police brutality. In all, as daughters of the Civil Rights Movement, Jessye Norman, Maxine Waters, and Elaine Brown are able to take control of the narrative that dehumanizes Black youth and ultimately forge transgressive spaces for them to be heard. While Norman and Waters offer perspectives to understand the young people's motivations for rioting, Brown seeks to redirect the youth misguided by media portrayals of the Black Panther Party. In all, Smith's enactment of women instrumental active since the Civil Rights Movement invite us to consider how liminality allows a space for the voiceless to take control of the narrative and demonstrate their humanity.

By primarily centralizing varied Black female experiences, ZZ Packer's short story collection *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* (2003) fully engages the intricate ways her protagonists dwell on the periphery and seek to redefine themselves as Black women and girls. In "Brownies," the all Black Girl Scout troop are part an insular community that share limited experiences of whiteness. Their ideas are turned on its head when they encounter Troop 909, an all-white troop comprised of delayed learners. Ultimately, Laurel, the protagonist, is prompted not to subscribe to communal norms as a result of her conversation with Daphne, the most marginalized girl of the Black Girl Scout troop. Tensions surrounding being one's self

[33] The Black Panther Party for Self Defense created a Ten Point Program that was divided into two sections: "What We Want," and "What We Believe." The "What We Want" section of the plan includes basic demands (e.g. decent housing, education that emphasized Black history, and an end to police brutality). "The What We Believe" section involves the organization's principles, such as self-determination, antiracism, and anti-imperialism.

particularly resonates from the beginning of "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" when Dina, the protagonist, is alienated from her freshmen counterparts during orientation after she states that "if [she] was an object, [she would be] a revolver…to wipe out all of mankind" (Packer 106-107). As the story continues, Dina develops an unlikely love for Heidi, a white Canadian girl who exists on the periphery as queer, but Dina cannot come to terms with Heidi's sexuality or her own. Dina pushes Heidi away by minimizing her feelings about her mother's terminal illness.

Just as Birdie's choices are informed by her parents, the all Black Brownie troop's choices to self-identify are informed by the southern suburbs of Atlanta, an insular environment with limited interaction with whites. As a result, their perceptions of whites derive from the media and adult conversations. Laurel points out "We had all been taught that adulthood was full of sorrow and pain, taxes and bills, dreaded work and dealings with whites, sickness and death" (Packer 17). These "dealings with whites" are steeped in an epistemology that if someone calls them a nigger, the automatic response is to defend their honor. Most importantly, their beliefs are also grounded in not brooking disrespect from whites especially in post-civil rights America (17). Laurel, the narrator also known as Snot notes, "BY OUR SECOND DAY at Camp Crescendo, the girls in my Brownie troop had decided to kick the asses of each and every girl in Brownie Troop 909. Troop 909 was doomed from the first day of camp; they were white girls, their complexions a blend of ice cream: strawberry, vanilla" (Packer 1; emphasis in original). In the first two sentences, ZZ Packer sets up the context for disorder and continues to reveal the danger of fixed race relations. Additionally, in this passage, Packer uses color imagery to pointedly discuss race and illustrate how whiteness is conceived in Black children's imagination. Thus, the Black troop's experiences of liminality are narrow as they are circumscribed by a rigid binary system that reinforces preconceived notions of whiteness as superior to blackness. How

the Black troop exists in the world on the periphery is contingent upon what they feel they lack as Black girls. The effects of such a system creates resentment that is passed on to the children. Arneta's comment that the white troop "smell[ed] like…Wet Chihuahuas…though [they] had passed them by yards" demonstrates further how the troop has unconsciously been taught to dislike those who are different (2). Not only are their experiences informed by adults, their experiences at their school also reinforce stereotypes. At their school, the narrator points out that her classmates used the word "Caucasian" to discuss something off kilter, weird, and alien.[34] This familiar sentiment explains why the all Black troop labels and judges Troop 909 by its members' skin color, in particular, Arneta emphatically refers to Troop 909 as "invaders" (5). These insights invite us to consider how environment may impact how Black women define the self and use liminality to transgress boundaries as Arneta's reference to Troop 909 as "invaders" implies that they view whites as the aggressors or victimizers and themselves as victims (5).

Because their encounter with Troop 909 would not have happened in their day-to-day lives as Black girls, the generative space of Camp Crescendo allows the all Black Brownie troop to transgress rigid boundaries of race. Camp creates an opportunity for both groups who have grown up in a binary system to come to terms with the larger community, which they learn is more complicated than they previously imagined. In fact, Troop 909 subverts the all Black troop's idea of whiteness so much that the ringleaders of the plan for revenge, Arneta and Octavia want to renege. As Anna Deavere Smith portrays subjects who take control of the narrative, ZZ Packer strategically leads readers to buy into the master narrative that the all Black troop is justified in wanting to seek revenge and then turns this all familiar narrative on its head when the audience along with the Brownies realize that Troop 909 are girls with special needs.

[34] Note the leader of Troop 909's implies that her troop seldom encounters people from other races either as she points out the girls' parents are not "the most progressive" (23).

However as one of the most marginalized characters in the story, Daphne transgresses social boundaries early on as her character is quiet and reflective. Though she is the presumed victim of the racial slur, she does not adhere to communal norms and chooses to stay in the cabin and not engage in the troop's plans for revenge against Troop 909. Though Laurel questions Arneta's plans for revenge, she in some ways is forced to participate in the victimization of Troop 909. Nonetheless, Laurel and Daphne both occupy the periphery as the unpopular girls who are both morally conscious with an acute awareness of the world around them. Consequently, Daphne becomes Laurel's moral compass and serves as the catalyst for Laurel to transgress social boundaries of Black communal norms, particularly of the patriarchy and racial dynamics more generally. When Laurel recounts the time her father asked the Mennonites to come paint their porch because "it was the only time he'd have a white man on his knees doing something for a black man for free," she not only recognizes the cyclical impact of racism, but also critically judges and questions her father's actions (Packer 27). Upon Laurel's realization, she says, "I now understood what he meant, and why he did it, though I didn't like it. When you've been made to feel bad for so long, you jump at the chance to do it to other" (27). Further, Daphne's question, "did he thank them?" and Laurel's response "No" leads her to dislike her father's motives for putting the Mennonites to work (27-28). While Laurel's father serves as the foundation for her initial understanding of racial dynamics, sharing the incident with Daphne leads her to the self-actualization that there was "something mean in the world that [she] could not stop" (28). Within the story, there is a position of respect given to fathers regardless of their actions. Laurel points out that, "No one would call anyone's father a liar—then they'd have to fight the person" (26-27). By questioning Laurel's father's motives, Laurel and Daphne transgress boundaries as Black girls, and as a result, Packer's collection becomes a "decolonizing

text" in which she removes prevailing ideologies that Black girls see themselves as opposite to the Eurocentric framework (Brown 63). As the bearer of culture, Laurel learns from Daphne a new way to forge her existence and negotiate space as a Black girl and "removes whiteness from a centralized position within the psyche [by considering alternative notions regarding racial interactions], but also the phallus [by challenging her father's viewpoint on race relations]" (Brown 63).

While their experiences at Camp Crescendo brings forth a realization for Laurel, Arneta's reaction: "If I asked them to take off their long skirts and bonnets and put on some jeans, would they do it?" reveals that the rest of the girls are left unchanged from the experience and acutely unaware of others' difference, demonstrating that perhaps the space was not transgressive at all for some of the troop's members. (Packer 28). In her query, Arneta mocks the kind gesture of the Mennonites as she has been taught to be suspicious of white people. However, Daphne's response to Arneta. However, Daphne's response to Arneta "Maybe they would. Just to be nice" leaves us to ponder ironies regarding how victims can become victimizers: the girls do not hesitate to call the white girls "retarded," but are outraged upon hearing accusation that the white girls called them a "nigger" (21, 5). Laurel and Daphne are left to ponder this reality as they potentially figure out ways to map out transgressive spaces unlimited by communal norms about race. They use liminality to not only question the mores of their community, but also transgress social boundaries. At the end of the story, though the level of self-actualization is left open-ended, Laurel appears to want to stop this meanness she realizes is present in her community. She appears to want to exist as a person that does not adhere to communal norms regarding white people.

Just as the all Black Brownie troop's choices to self-identify are informed by their social environment and upbringing, in "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" the way the protagonist Dina asserts her identity is primarily informed by her Baltimore upbringing set up by fixed binaries of how white people act and how Black people act. Upon arrival at Yale, Dina "suffers" what Zora Neale Hurston observes as a "sea change" and recognizes her human existence is in question as a Black woman when she adamantly refuses to play a game of Trust with her male white counterparts (Hurston 1008). Her freshman counselor appears to understand her unwillingness to play and says, "As a person of color, you shouldn't have to fit into any white, patriarchal system" (Packer 106). Dina's response "It's a bit too late for that" reveals to the reader early on her awareness of categories as a Black woman in larger society.

When Dina becomes a freshman at Yale, she, however, uses liminality to push the limits of self-conception and makes choices outside of the box that deviate from her upbringing after first identifying herself as a revolver in an icebreaker activity:

> Until that moment I'd been good in all the ways that were meant to matter. I was an honor roll student—though I'd learned long ago not to mention it in the part of Baltimore where I lived. Suddenly I was hard-bitten and recalcitrant, the kind of kid who took pleasure in sticking pins into cats; the kind who chased down smart kids to spray them with Mace. (106)

Here, Packer demonstrates how Dina contends with issues of identity as she straddles two worlds—academia and her community. For example, she identifies herself as "good…honor roll student," yet conceals that part of her identity in her neighborhood. Her defiance, however, illustrated in the passage above, pointedly demonstrates her inability to reconcile her feelings of difference in white spaces. Punishment is assigned by Yale society for her transgression, as she

is alienated from her peers, provided a single dorm room, and forced to attend weekly counseling sessions. Though she defies norms as an exceptional Black college student, it becomes clear her dilemma becomes making the choice to remain aligned and rooted with the Black cultural values of Baltimore. This dilemma complicates how she asserts her identity and makes her claim to liminal spaces transient.

Dina not only defies expectations as a Black college student at Yale, her budding affiliation with Heidi, a white Canadian woman, transgresses boundaries and alters her capacity to self-identify as a Black woman of her upbringing. Like Laurel and Daphne of "Brownies," Dina and Heidi occupy the periphery for different reasons. Not only is Dina alienated from the larger Yale society, she does not relate to other Black students who regard her as a race traitor. As fellow outcasts, Heidi, too, is ostracized by Yale society, as she is alienated by peers due to rumors of her promiscuity. Moreover, they both are identified by their peers as queer when they are invited to a seemingly queer party. Packer invites us to consider the notions surrounding identity—what it means and how it can change. Race and sexuality are key determinants of identity in "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere." Dina subconsciously makes decisions around her indoctrination as a Black girl. Her relationship with Heidi disrupts those teachings and how she conceives her self and sexuality. For Dina, race—how she exists as a Black woman-- informs her conceptions of her sexuality.

Just as the camp space becomes the transgressive space for Laurel and Daphne in "Brownies" to change their perceptions of racial dynamics, the dish room and bedroom become the spaces of transgression for Dina to exist as her true self and foster an unadulterated relationship with Heidi. Initially, the dish room emerges as the site where Dina and Heidi transgress boundaries. By taking a bath in front of each other and seeing each other's nakedness,

they remove all pretenses in this space. When Dina convinces Heidi to disrobe despite her reservations, full exposure results in true acceptance of each other. Dina challenges Heidi to love her body, stating "large black women [wear] their fat like mink coats" (Packer 123). Here ironically, Dina is able to use the teachings of her upbringing to affirm Heidi in this space and use liminality to transgress boundaries of upbringing as a Black woman by professing her love for Heidi at the same time. In fact, bell hooks states that "love allows…us to establish communities where no one is excluded or discriminated against. It enables us to value one another rightly, to appreciate our preferences, and to let love guide us to the place where we are made one body in love" (*Salvation* 208). This point of observation invites us to consider how transgressive spaces allow for Black women to use liminality to embrace and retain particular teachings of acceptance and love and discard teachings that limit and constrict. Even so, Dina's capacity to do both does not translate into the real world.

While the site of transgression begins in the dish room, they cultivate their budding relationship for each other in Dina's bedroom, which allows Dina to control the space. Just as the all Black brownie troop's limited conceptions of whiteness are informed by indoctrinations of their insular community, Dina exists as a Black woman whose identity is fixed by specific criteria of what Black folks do not do. What she defines as being Black and woman informs her views of her self and sexuality. Though she begins to question her sexuality just as Laurel questions her father's motivations for requesting that the Mennonites paint their porch, Dina is reluctant to identify with Heidi's sexuality because she, unlike Laurel, cannot "shut" out her mother's caveat about interactions with white people: "things get weird" (Packer 124). Thus, Dina distances herself from Heidi upon hearing her announce her liking for girls on "Coming Out Day" on campus. Dina readily admits that she feels even more connected to Heidi: "She

could not have seen me. I was across the street, three stories up. And yet, when everyone clapped for her, she seemed to be looking straight at me" (126). Dina may sense that Heidi will support her to come out as well: to transgress boundaries beyond the bedroom space. But Heidi cannot convince Dina to break out of social codes as Dina convinced Heidi to in the dish room. This dilemma invites us to consider how liminality as a trope to transgress boundaries may have its limitations if one is unwilling to revise stereotypes.

In addition to distancing herself from her one true friend, Dina pushes her away and makes light of knowledge that Heidi's mother is terminally ill. She responds to Heidi's concerns about her mother as "not a big deal" yet yearns to relate to Heidi's experiences (127). While Dina readily admits to the counselor that she meant to say the opposite and empathize with her friend, her fixed identity subscriptions won't allow her to break out of the mores she's been operating under. Dina cannot break free from the traditional norms of her community. In other words, her sentiments are an internalized homophobia that Dina finds synonymous with Blackness.[35] While her counselor suspects she engages in the act of pretending to maneuver a "white world" as a Black person, it becomes apparent to Dina that she started pretending to contend with her mother's death: "I remembered the morning of my mother's funeral. I'd been given milk to settle my stomach; I'd pretended it was coffee. I imagined I was drinking coffee elsewhere. Some Arabic-speaking country where the thick coffee served in little cups was so strong it could keep you awake for days" (Packer 128). Through her imagination, Dina claims liminal spaces to escape her life crises, particularly

[35] While Cheryl Clarke in "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community" recognizes that homophobia is "largely reflective of the homophobic culture in which we live," she also observes that homophobia is so tied to respectability in the Black community and oftentimes gays and lesbians feel compelled to "pass" as heterosexuals (190, 200). Clarke further notes, "when public denunciations are made by other black people, we remain silent in the face of their hostility and ignorance" (200). For more scholarly discussion regarding homophobia in Black communities, see *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson.*

socioeconomic conditions and her mother's death (128). By imagining herself in a foreign country, Dina not only practices the art of escapism, she forges transgressive spaces by imagining herself in an Arabic country where homosexuality is not sanctioned and is punishable by death according to Sharia law. Though Packer's inclusion of the titular phrase for not only the short story, but also the entire collection of works reveals how Black women can find alternative ways to transgress spaces that deviate what they know through their imagination, it also shows its limits, as some protagonists' acts of transgression in liminal spaces are transient. For example, Dina only feels comfortable transgressing boundaries regarding her sexuality in the imaginary realm or private space of the bedroom.

In this story, Packer demonstrates how these two unlikely characters are more alike than they are different, but Dina's indoctrination on how to move as a Black woman thwarts her chances of happiness. Dina feels impotent because she cannot unsubscribe from communal expectations and be her self. Though both texts end with the protagonists coming to some sort of terms about their identity, the ending of "Drinking Coffee Elsewhere" differs from "Brownies." Unlike Laurel who considers unsubscribing from communal norms of race, Dina comes to terms with her sexuality, but cannot fully assert this identity because she assumes Blackness and queerness cannot coexist. Interestingly enough, the story ends where Dina imagines the bedroom, the very space of transgression where she is her most authentic self: "There are no psychiatrists or deans, no boys with nice shoes or flip cashiers. Just me in my single room" (131). While Laurel appears to want to deviate from her father's teachings, Dina's rootedness in Baltimore culture and need to uphold her mother's values will not allow her to openly transgress social boundaries. This insight demonstrates that rootedness—the need to belong may thwart Black women's capacity to overtly forge transgressive space. However, the imagined greeting of

Heidi saying "open up" could imply that Dina may eventually make her self available. Until then, pretending for Dina becomes essential for her survival in white spaces and beyond (131).

Though memory is crucial in allowing Black women to revisit and reclaim histories lost, sustaining culture, the texts explored at length also challenge this notion. In fact, Gay Wilentz argues that Black women cannot exist without memory as they are the culture bearers of history and while there is a desire to forget, it is not plausible because this is the sure way that Black women can reclaim and revisit histories, forging a space for themselves (385-386). However, in my analyses above, most of the characters resist this generalization about Black womanhood, externally or internally, and seek to establish their subjectivity in transgressive spaces, spaces that underscores the individual experiences of Black women, not the collective experience. In doing so, these protagonists dwell in transgressive spaces as they challenge the notion that remembering is key for Black women to establish their subjectivity.

Throughout this chapter, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* sets the course for how Black women break the mold particularly in transgressive spaces. Accordingly, in their respective texts, Toni Morrison, Anna Deavere Smith, Danzy Senna, and ZZ Packer consciously explore how Black women are subversive in their ability to maneuver liminal spaces, particularly in their choices. Toni Morrison and Danzy Senna reveal that sometimes the choices regarding how Black women exist may lead to ambivalence, complicating how they assert their identity. For example, though Jadine chooses to pursue individualism and negate her "ancient properties," she still remains fraught and, in some ways, self-conscious about her choices (Morrison in dedication). Conversely, Birdie's lack of choices to self-identify as a Black woman leaves her in a state of limbo at the end. Anna Deavere Smith and ZZ Packer illuminate the significance of boundary crossing and making choices that challenge notions of Black womanhood. Smith, particularly in

her enactment of eight Black female subjects, demonstrates how Black women use liminality to forge transgressive spaces and legitimize their voices as well as others' voices. Packer, too, centralizes the outsider's perspective and reveals varied ways Black women use liminality to transgress the spaces they occupy. In the two texts aforementioned by Packer, the outcomes are different. Dina cannot reify the transgressive space because she remains constricted by notions indoctrinated by her mother regarding sexuality and race. Laurel, on the other hand, appears to willingly defy communal norms regarding race relations and act more compassionately. Ultimately, these texts invite us to consider that forging transgressive spaces, imagined or otherwise, may not lead to institutional changes. Nonetheless, by canceling particular subscriptions of Black womanhood, these protagonists demonstrate how Black women map out ways to work around limitations set to circumscribe their ability to move through space. Their protagonists make the choices to exist the way they see fit, a radical move within itself. Thus, *Tar Baby*, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, *Caucasia*, and *Drinking Coffee Elsewhere* invite us to consider the need for more complex, nuanced definitions of Black womanhood—ones that recognize Black women's resiliency and that acknowledge their humanity and individualism.

Chapter Three: The Hair Salon as a Communal Space

'I beat up Ina again.' [Selina] stood, a penitent, in the narrow smoke-hung booth, which was itself like a confessional, while Miss Thompson, with her penetrating eyes and bruised face, with her attenuated form raised high on the stool, might have been her confessor.

Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959)[1]

In a world where Black women are often devalued, the hair salon is more than a place to style hair. It has emerged as a liminal space for much needed armchair psychology, communion, and refuge. For Black women, this site becomes the ultimate de-stressor, a place to find community, be understood, and depart with renewed strength to conquer life's challenges. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), Paule Marshall foregrounds the significance of the hair salon, inviting us to consider its importance for Black women. Marshall focuses her plot on the lives of Barbadian immigrants who moved to Brooklyn, New York after the Great Depression. More specifically, the novel explores the strained mother-daughter relationships between mother Silla and daughters, Selina and Ina. Silla provides clear-cut instructions for achieving her version of the American Dream for her daughters, which include joining a Barbadian church, getting good grades, becoming a doctor, meeting and marrying an acceptable (i.e. light skinned) Barbadian man, and, of course, buying a brownstone. However, Selina is more fond of her father Deighton, who prefers get-rich-quick schemes and has plans to go back to Barbados to build a home. As a result, she is conflicted by the opposing values of both her mother and father. Ultimately, she deviates from her mother's instructions, and rejects her mother's plans.[2] In all, Selina seeks to forge her own identity, sexuality, and sense of values in a new country and to reconcile Bajan tradition with her own individual potential. In the midst of the main conflict in the novel, Selina

[1] Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. 1959 (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2009), 77.

[2] By the end of the novel Selina is in school, but she dances rather than studies medicine; she has a queer sexual encounter with Beryl and her first sustained sexual relationship with Clive, who is Barbadian, but deemed unsuitable by mother's standards because he is a shiftless veteran artist. Lastly, she decides to map out her own way alone to work possibly on a cruise ship.

is also exposed to other teachers who eventually influence her to rewrite the boundaries of her community, such as Miss Mary, Suggie, and Miss Thompson.[3] Though Miss Thompson is a relatively minor character, her influence is great and integral to thinking about community and safe spaces. Within the space of the beauty parlor, Miss Thompson uses her experiences of liminality as a tool not only to serve as hairdresser, but also to assume the role of surrogate mother to Selina, as she advises her on seeking to understand her sister and mother, her sexuality, and racism.

Therefore, in the epigraph at this particular juncture, the reader sees early on how the hair salon serves as a safe space and site of counsel for Selina. Following the fight she has with her sister, Selina runs to Miss Thompson's beauty parlor for comfort. While Miss Thompson scolds her for resorting to violence, she listens to Selina intently and then offers her another perspective about her sister. Miss Thompson points out, "Maybe she didn't feel like talking. Ina's a young lady, honey, and she's got her own troubles" (Marshall 76). In making this suggestion, Miss Thompson offers another perspective to justify why Ina might have ignored Selina, as well as another perspective regarding the actions of Selina's father and mother. Although Miss Thompson is initially humored by Selina's concerns that her mother will sell her father's land without his consent, Miss Thompson promptly shows compassion for Selina once she sees her in tears about the ordeal: "Quickly she drew Selina between her thin legs; her long worn hands closed in benediction over her head" (78). The use of the word "benediction" here illustrates further how this space offers sanctuary akin to the Black church. Selina's desperate need to go to the hair salon to share her worries is a testament to how the space serves more capacities beyond getting her hair done. In her depiction of a close-knit Black community, twentieth-century writer

[3] Miss Mary and Miss Suggie are both tenants of the brownstone Selina live in. Like Miss Thompson, these women emerge as Selina's trusted confidants.

Paule Marshall employs familiar sites of the Black neighborhood in her depiction of Fulton Street in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Most importantly, her inclusion of the beauty parlor in the foreground invites readers to consider how it serves as a metaphor for advocating self-love, care, catharsis, and comfort. Following the African adage "it takes a village to raise a child," many Black communities include various safe harbors to protect its children from larger society, as well as to nurture and foster their growth. The Black hair salon is one site for Black women to let their hair down, both literally and figuratively. The role of hairdresser, Miss Thompson, to impart wisdom and advice to Selina as her othermother and confidante underscores not only the significance of the hairdresser in the Black community, but also the space itself. Black women's literature continues to explore settings, like the hair salon, to show how Black women "transform" space by creating "informal community centers" to serve their spiritual needs (Pearce 313).

However, the same Black community that affirms, nurtures, and instills values in its inhabitants is also insular and often circumscribed by respectability politics; hence, the Black hair salon is not without its pitfalls. Though the hair salon is a space where Black women can have community, its setting oftentimes reinforces Western ideals of beauty by promoting specific hair styling techniques, such as hair straightening, relaxers, and weaves.[4] Likewise while rich conversations within the hair salon space between Miss Thompson and Selina in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* prompt epiphanic moments for Selina, Miss Thompson is also a staunch teacher of respectability politics, which is a set of beliefs that support the notion that if Black folk conform

[4] Note that natural hair salons are readily becoming more popular and accepted; in fact, Novelette of `*Da Kink in my Hair* (2001) does a client's dreadlocks in the play.

to traditional mores and decorum, they will be readily accepted and respected by larger society.[5] As Selina's hairdresser, Miss Thompson initiates Selina into adulthood by styling her hair in curls instead of braids. When Selina questions Miss Thompson for styling curls in her hair to mark her transition from girlhood to womanhood instead of braiding her hair, she appears to challenge the notion that braids should only be a part of girlhood. However, Miss Thompson's suggestion, "what girl getting her developments goes around with braids" reinforces respectability politics by suggesting that she wear her hair in a more suitable style appropriate to white standards, marking the end of Selina's childhood and transition into becoming a woman (Marshall 80).

Marshall's vivid depiction of the Black community as complex, vis-à-vis the hair salon invites us to consider the benefits and drawbacks of this liminal space for Black women. By examining the hair salon as a communal space in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* I frame my chapter around the following questions: How do Black women delineate the hair salon as the "communitas," what Victor Turner speaks of as a space of renewal, possibility, and new ways for looking at the world? What are the limits of the hair salon space as liminal space or "communitas"? What is the hairdresser's role in creating such a space? I contend that four representative texts, three novels and a play, illustrate the hair salon setting as a liminal space and sanctuary for Black women: *Jazz*, *`Da Kink in my Hair*, *Silver Sparrow*, and *Americanah*. As noted, most of the texts I will engage are novels, a genre in which setting often drives the plot. While the setting in a novel largely determines the plot's actions, in the sole play I examine, I argue setting has even more bearing on the characters' actions. Even so, collectively in all of the

[5] Scholars who engage this term include the works of Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (1993), Susana Morris in *Close Kin and Distant Relatives: The Paradox of Respectability in Black Women's Literature* (2014), and Brittney Cooper in *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (2017).

texts, each author depicts the hair salon as a woman-centered site and demonstrates in some ways how characters within the hair salon have moments of clarity, catharsis, and/or comfort. Using *Brown Girl, Brownstones* as a framing narrative, my third chapter, entitled "The Hair Salon as a Communal Space" examines moments in the hair salon where the protagonists achieve epiphanies as a result of the hairdresser's prodding, listening ear. Additionally, I explore how the community emerges as a safe space and consider how Black women writers use the community as a site for respite, renewal, and release. Ultimately, I will argue that an inside look at the hair salon as a liminal space is significant because these texts maintain that its function is more than a service, but is multiple, complex, and ultimately serves as a space for Black women to create and build community with one another.

Liminality

The premise of my dissertation particularly engages how the concept of liminality emerges as a more meaningful way to discuss how Black women find alternative ways to create, in this case of this chapter, communal spaces as a way to find wholeness. More specifically, I define liminality as living in a state of perpetual inbetweenness as Black and woman. Additionally, I contend that this concept emerges as a subversive way Black women can navigate a discriminatory world and transgress boundaries of Black womanhood. In her critical essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker suggests that Black women embody a "vibrant, creative spirit … that pops out in wild and unlikely places" (239). Walker not only reveals that Black women possess the ingenuity to find their power and creativity, the phrase "in unlikely places" reflects how they tirelessly seek and forge spaces for themselves, creating and continuously thriving despite patriarchy and white supremacy. By particularly singling out poet

Phillis Wheatley and her own mother as classic examples of Black women being creative, Walker reveals her fascination with Black women's capacity, in spite of their subjection, to create masterpieces out of scraps. Likewise, the hair salon emerges as a space to show how Black women continue to use liminality as a concept to take creative licenses, pursue dreams, and establish their subjectivity, despite systemic oppression.

While I engaged the concept of liminality in Chapter Two as an alternative way Black women can transgress normative notions of Black womanhood, in this chapter, I consider how liminality can be a space where Black women can feel a sense of community. Victor Turner observes that in this transitional phase, rules and conventions are suspended in what he terms the "communitas," a space where liminal beings are blank slates (96). After the provisional phase is over, individuals are expected to merge back into society with new ideas and possibly create change in society. In all, what is meant to come out of this space is renewal, possibility, and new ways of looking at the world. I contend that the hair salon space strikingly parallels the "communitas" Turner describes and is thus a liminal space for Black women to leave feeling renewed. This concept, described as a provisional space where "undifferentiated …community" exists, is useful to consider the hair salon setting as a replica of this phase, as the sharing and intimacy that develops in this space is noteworthy (Turner 96). Though the space for Turner is temporary, I observe that the hair salon space is perpetual, as women regularly return to relish this site of healing. Liminality, in terms of rites of passage in which the normal rules are suspended and then returned, is also particularly useful in exploring how Black women seek out sanctuary not only to create, but also to find sites of renewal and build community, particularly in the hair salon space.

For example, in several instances of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Selina finds sanctuary from her familial issues in the beauty parlor. Feeling alienated from all of her family members, Selina is able to find solace and community with Miss Thompson. Selina frantically questions why people [her family], mostly do not listen and Miss Thompson is described as "tenderly flick[ing] the tears from [Selina's] face and frankly responds with "Don't nobody listen to nobody much…Peoples ain't got time, I guess. Or they's just plain wrapped up in themselves" (Marshall 78). Miss Thompson resolves to convince Selina to "stop worrying about big people's problems" and although Selina does not listen, the space offers her sanctuary to muse. The narrator notes, "Selina wasn't listening. She settled into the chair and closed her eyes, suddenly calm. The futile search for help that afternoon, the corrosive fear of months was ended by her sudden plan. 'All right,' she said 'I'll stop worrying'" (Marshall 79). Here it is clear in this passage how the hair salon setting can provide its clients a space to reflect. In all, as a liminal space, the hair salon offers sanctuary for Black women to create, have communion, generate catharsis, take a break from world, and then go back to everyday realities refreshed.

With this premise in mind, Patricia Hill Collins in her scholarly work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* states that one viable way for Black feminist epistemology to challenge those dominant ideologies is to use "dialogue" to connect and interact with communities (279). This dialogue is integral to the hair salon space. As Collins states, "people become more human and empowered primarily in the context of a community" and "the power of the word, generally, and dialogues specifically, allows this to happen" (279). Here, Collins proves that in order for Black feminist epistemology to challenge the dominant epistemology of elite white men, such perspectives must use dialogue to connect, interact, and communicate with other Black women. Thus, I argue that the hairdresser's ability to

initiate dialogue allows for liminal space in the hair salon setting**.** Within this realm, Black women can use liminality to "freely examine issues that concern them" (Collins 121). For this reason, liminality is significant in this chapter because it provides a way for these characters to have a safe space for community, respite, and release. I believe my intervention is necessary to the discourse because this chapter demonstrates how these women draw upon a specific epistemology as Black women to find community with one another in the hair salon to sustain themselves.

Moreover, my reflection of how these Black women writers aforementioned designate the hair salon space is particularly useful for considering alternative ways Black women navigate spaces of exclusion. More specifically, thinking of the hair salon as one of the safe spaces Patricia Hill Collins describes as a site "where Black women can speak freely," also affords them a space to fortify relationships with other Black women, finding their voice as well as refashioning "independent self-definitions" of themselves (95). Nonetheless, as Black women seek to assert a full humanity that is not merely limited by race and gender, perpetual inbetweenness not only prompts creativity, but also grants them license to acquire agency in varied forms. I contend that visiting the hair salon is akin to liminal space, particularly the unstructured nature of community. More specifically, regularly occupying an in-between space affords Black women a sense of possibility and provides alternative ways for not only dealing with systems of oppression, but also aids in establishing their subjectivity as Black women.

The Black Community

While the Black community known for perpetuating sentiments that embrace Eurocentrism and respectability politics, it is bound together by unifying intimate social and

cultural ties.[6] Its people share a similar heritage and culture, denoting a sense of fellowship and belonging. This connectedness transfers to other sectors, particularly politics. Often it is imperative for politicians to make appeals to the Black community to garner votes. I argue that the commonalities present among Black folk in the community create a particular connectedness and allows most in the space to feel a sense of place. More specifically, my intervention will focus on how Black women network within this larger community. I will observe that a communal space for Black women provides support and a safe space. What Susana Morris terms as "the ethic of community support and accountability" delineates such a space: "[a safe space void of respectability politics], emphasiz[ing] mutually observed affection, affirmation, loyalty and respect" (10-11). Though the politics of respectability are present in the hair salon space, I still essentially see the whole effect of this space as a genuine site of community, as there is a mutual understanding present among Black women. I contend that the hair salon is, for the most part, a safe space for Black women as its setting provides them moments of vulnerability, rich dialogue, and catharsis.

Black Hair

Despite the fact that Black women's hair journeys have always been tangled in politics and fraught by the need to maintain their kinky hair textures in the face of Eurocentric beauty ideals, how Black women use their hair as a medium to assert themselves in various spaces remains multifaceted. Just as the Black church reflects the ethos described in 1 Corinthians 11:15, that a woman's hair is her "crowning glory," Black hair continues to represent Black

[6] Colorism in the community is a harsh reality for some where focus on skin tone and hair texture create futile divides in not only the community, but also even in families. Other factors that may create divides in the Black community include sexuality, religion, or even political affiliation. What being Black entails oftentimes is regarded as monolithic as so many layers of Black identity go unaddressed. As a result, if a person who identifies as Black deviates from traditional labels, they may be charged with not being "Black" enough.

women's identity, and aspirations.[7] Black hair is also a mode of self-expression, as it can be styled in a plethora of forms, natural in braids or twist styles or straight in a wrap or updo.
As a significant symbol of the hair salon space, Black hair has been termed as "political" in its very nature and has not been accepted by larger society as professional enough and/or beautiful. For some, opting to straighten hair has more to do with achieving upward mobility and social acceptance. Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden in *Shifting the Double Lives of Black Women in America* point out this dilemma among Black women:

> For many Black women, hair more than anything else, is a symbol of how they must shift to be accepted. Hair makes a powerful statement—how it is worn is often taken as an indicator of the woman's specific identity, stance or station in life. Thus for Black women, decisions about whether to cut their hair, straighten it, braid it, or knot it are choices heavy with import because they know that the beholder decide upon a meaning of his or her own. (187)

The choices aforementioned can oftentimes weigh heavily on Black women, as the way they wear their hair is more than a personal choice, but may also be controversial and political. As Black women make decisions about hairstyle choices, they constantly contend with the never ending pressure within the community and beyond to straighten their hair or wear it in its natural state.[8] Either decision is controversial and political, as motives for wearing hair straight or natural are questioned.

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[7]Additionally, *Queens: Portraits of Black Women and their Fabulous Hair* by Michael Cunningham and George Alexander offers sociological approaches to Black hair and the hair salon space itself through vivid photographs of hair styles and narratives by respective Black women to show the different ways they express themselves with their hair from simple, everyday hairstyles to more intricate, sophisticated hairstyles.
[8] Black women also opt to wear wigs and/or weaves as a protective style and for its versatility.

Contemporary singers India.Arie and Solange have responded in different ways to particular biases about Black women's hair and created odes for Black girls and women to celebrate their Black hair. Released in 2006, "I am Not My Hair" by India.Arie responds to the politics of Black hair and colorism and negates labels entrenched in the community: "I am not my hair/ I am not this skin/I am not your expectations." The song became an anthem for Black women to feel empowered to look beyond the scope of their hair journeys and look within as the end of her refrain boldly states, "I am the soul that lives within."[9] While taboos regarding hair touching are commonly understood in the Black community, unwanted hair touching across races is an all familiar racial microagression mainstream. [10] Hair touching in this form is akin to petting an animal and denies Black women access to their bodies. Singer-songwriter Solange Knowles, in "Don't Touch My Hair," issues a command and emphasizes the need for self-preservation. In the first stanza, Solange sings,

> Don't touch my hair
> When it's the feelings I wear
> Don't touch my soul
> When it's the rhythm I know

to declare that Black women's crowns are an assertion of their identities as Black women and establish boundaries that the majority culture often violates.

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[9] Although this song was directed to Black girls and women, it is interesting to note that in the remix to "I Am Not My Hair," rapper Akon includes a verse of a Black man's hair journey which has similarities to Black women's experiences with hair in mainstream America. The 1990s sitcom *Living Single*, a show that followed the lives of four African American women in New York, also aired an episode in which the character Kyle is up for a promotion and he finds out that the one thing that may be holding him back was his natural hairstyle. This parallel reveals that fraught Black hair journeys also extend to Black men as their hair is "policed" in disparate ways and like Black women, Black men oftentimes feel pressure to straighten or relax their hair in order to appear more "professional."

[10] Expressions that identify hair touching as intimate include: "don't let everyone touch your hair" and "don't use any and everyone's comb." Ayanna Byrd and Lori L. Tharps in their book *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* provide an extensive list of other Black hair superstitions which include burning hair from brush, not allowing more than one person to do your hair at a time, not cutting a boy's hair before he can talk (28).

The writers analyzed in this chapter, too, consider hair as a metaphor to characterize Black womanhood. Tayari Jones and Toni Morrison take similar approaches, while trey anthony and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's metaphoric use of hair in their texts contrasts. Jones, in *Silver Sparrow*, and Toni Morrison, in *Jazz*, both describe different characters' hair type highlight their natural beauty. trey anthony, in *`Da Kink in my Hair*, employs hair as a metaphor for the life experiences of Black women, suggesting that their hair harbors their pain and can help them heal. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Americanah* metaphorically uses hair as a medium to discuss race in America.

Black Hair Salon as a Site to "Lay It All Down"

Community building remains a fundamental characteristic of Black culture. Creating spaces for Black folk to have communion with one another is essential to maintaining identities attacked by mainstream society. Within these spaces, people are affirmed and validated, propelling them to continue on despite the hardships and hostility they have to endure. These sites serve spiritual needs and provide the "rootedness" Toni Morrison speaks of in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" as a sense of place and belonging. Morrison states, "There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of community. A small remnant of that you can see sometimes in Black churches where people shout. It is a very personal grief and a personal statement done among people you trust. Done within the context of community, therefore safe" (56). Here, Morrison appears to suggest that opportunities to build safe communities are minimal because the community's focus is not on maintaining legacies.[11] However, she observes that there are still traces of such a community

[11] After the Civil Rights Movement and integration some institutions in the Black community were weakened (e.g. black owned businesses).

found in the Black church. While this safe haven communal space is most frequently depicted in the Black church, there are other viable sites, particularly gender specific spaces that serve the specific needs of Black men and women, respectively. I contend that the context Morrison describes is also evident in the hair salon setting where Black women can vent, strategize, and regroup. The hair salon, for most Black women, is one of the most prominent communal spaces; and Black women writers, trey anthony, Tayari Jones, Toni Morrison, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, demonstrate this space's significance in significant ways. These writers' inside look at the hair salon as a liminal space is significant because these texts maintain that its function is more than a service, but is multiple, complex and ultimately serves as a space for Black women to create and build community with one another.

Although the cultural resonance of the hair salon space and the art of hairdressing itself is present in all four texts, the hair salon setting is particularly at the forefront in *`Da Kink in my Hair,* by trey anthony, and *Silver Sparrow*, by Tayari Jones, in particular. Additionally, there emerges a specific pattern of how the hairdresser creates the space in these texts. While both hairdressers perform services to their clients, they set the foundation for the communal space through their intimate interactions. The hairdresser's role in creating the liminal space in the hair salon is grounded in her character, personality, and mere presence. Their character and personality allow for a space of refuge for their clientele to "lay it all down"—to bear one's soul, submit, and release.[12] While her unique personality builds a particular trust with the client, the hairdresser's reassuring presence allows clients to access tools to approach their own problems. As shown in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* through the relationship between Miss Thompson and

[12] Lay it all down is a colloquial phrase often articulated in the Black church, which implies that one releases all their worries, concerns, and frustrations at the altar during prayer. As noted above, the hair salon emerges as one site where Black people can find a space for catharsis; other sites of sanctuary include the barber shop, the kitchen table, and Black social gatherings.

Selina, the trust and camaraderie between hairdresser and client is also unparalleled in these texts, which results in a space where women can build community with one another as they occupy the space. Both Novelette of *`Da Kink in my Hair* and Laverne of *Silver Sparrow* play a crucial role in creating a liminal space in their hair salon by serving as confidants, counselors, and sister girls to their clients. Ultimately, I will demonstrate how both Novelette and Laverne's clients leave feeling renewed with new insights to go forth and tackle their problems head on as a result of occupying this liminal space.

While the essence of the hair salon space as a communal space is still present, the settings of *Jazz* by Toni Morrison and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are more or less untraditional; these texts highlight the limits of the hair salon as a liminal space. As a result, there emerges a specific pattern of how each author reveals the complications of the hair salon as a communal yet contentious space. The protagonists' (of each novel) relationship to the space vastly differ: Violet Trace of *Jazz* is an unlicensed beautician who does her clients' hair in her kitchen or sets up shop in other people's homes, while Ifemelu of *Americanah* is merely a first-time client who visits the hair braiding salon before journeying back home to Nigeria; the fact that she is not a regular customer matters because she is not invested in the communitas of this liminal space. Within these texts, the role reversal of hairdresser/client relationship is overturned, as the clients are the ones who offer solace and comfort. In return, the space allows for opportunities to eliminate social barriers. Despite the differences present in both settings, I will nonetheless consider how the hair salon settings in both texts not only emerge as spaces to build community with other Black women, but also emerge as spaces of reflection, creation, and healing.

Collectively, by employing the hair salon setting, although varied in form, Tayari Jones, trey anthony, Toni Morrison, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie emphasize in their respective texts why the hair salon space is significant for Black women, as it is designated as a space where Black women can be their emotional selves. In a world where Black women are expected to be strong and resilient (oftentimes these characteristics are essential for their survival), being able to "lay it all down" in a safe space is vital for Black women's well-being. I will demonstrate that these writers are cognizant of this fact and illustrate how the hair salon setting emerges as a communal space that Black women know they can return to for respite, release, and restoration by pairing *Silver Sparrow* with *`Da Kink in my Hair* and *Jazz* with *Americanah*.

Literature Review

Set in a West Indian hair salon in Toronto, Canada, *`Da Kink in my Hair*, by award-winning playwright trey anthony, centralizes the experiences of Novelette's clientele through stories.[13] Not just a hairdresser, Novelette becomes a confidante for her clients, helping them clean out their closets as they share their experiences steeped of triumphs and losses.

While most of the conversation surrounding this text is by reviewers who have seen the play performed, there is some scholarly conversation grounded in drama education. Kathleen Gallagher and Dominique Rivière discuss anthony's work to call attention to the drawbacks of using drama praxis to "engage with issues of social justice and citizenship" (320). They further note that while *`Da Kink in my Hair* was chosen as the student performance play to "turn the gaze upon the 'Other' as subject, rather than object," its performance created the opposite effect (Gallagher and Rivière 320). Instead, negative reactions to the student performance objectified multicultural students, unfortunately illuminating how white privilege is still at work even at a

[13] West Indians are those of Caribbean descent, usually referring to those with ancestry from Anglophone nations.

diverse school. In all, these scholars bring to the forefront and conclude that within the grasp and potency of societal norms, there are "'limits to representational tolerance'" before pushback from viewers arises.[14]

Most of the reviewers' focus is on the audience's reactions to anthony's characters as either typecast or complex, Black women's experiences as varied, and the hair salon setting. Central to most reviews is Novelette's function in the play. Bert Osborne in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* asserts that though the play is centered around Novelette's intuitiveness as a hairdresser to understand customers' experiences, she is "placed on the periphery."[15] Overall, these sentiments regarding Novelette's function duly point to the significance of the hairdresser for Black women. While trey anthony is relatively celebrated for her characterization of the women—Novelette and her clientele— the question of whether her characterization of Black women's experiences is typecast or complex comes to the forefront in many reviews of her work. While Bert Osborne maintains that the customers' experiences, recounted to Novelette, are typecast and rather "cliché," Patrick Langston disagrees with such sentiments (Osborne). Instead, he argues that because anthony handles these stories with "sensitivity and veracity," they are far from being "cliché" (Langston).[16]

Moreover, trey anthony's rhetorical choice to develop her storyline around the hair salon is also discussed at length as most reviewers recognize this setting as a communal space for

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[14] This play was also adapted into a Canadian television series in 2007 and aired for two seasons, generating popular appeal to Canadian audiences.

[15] While Osborne appears to suggest that anthony's placement of the hairdresser is a wrong move, Patrick Langston of the *Ottawa Citizen* pushes back against this notion. He suggests, "Novelette's job is not to talk about herself, but to offer a safe place where her clients …can open up about their entangled inner lives" (Langston). Conversely, Brian Carroll of *Apt613* offers a different perspective about Novelette's function and observes that our perceptions of the character are determined by our positions either in the audience or as Novelette, the hairdresser.

[16] Greg Guevera, too, suggests that trey anthony's attention to character is "amazing and heartfelt;" however, in thinking more globally, he claims the play left him unfulfilled due to lack of plot development. Conversely, Louis Hobson makes no mention of an underdeveloped plot and suggests that trey anthony's crafted use of monologue captures "eight distinct voices" well.

women. While Langston suggests that Novelette serves as a "no-sense proprietor," he observes that her salon is "the great equalizer," a no judgment zone for clientele to vent about their lives with no condemnation. He further notes, "[Here at Letty's Salon,] [a]ll stories are valued, and while overbearing clients must sometimes be put in their place, all women are welcome" (Langston). While pointing out the nuances and contentions of this space, his observation ultimately underscores the fact that everyone ultimately feels a sense of community in the hair salon. Customers are not coming for just a new hairdo but for a place to belong and be affirmed. This communal sense can also garner a space that invites vulnerability and grants people the option to release their pain. The setting itself builds community for its audience. In another review with the *Calgary Sun*, Louis Hobson points out that the play encapsulates a place trey anthony readily knows, as her aunt owned a hair salon. In a celebratory tone, trey anthony states, "Women of colour go to a hair salon not just to get their hair done but to talk about everything from politics and relationships to where to find the best price for chicken legs in town. Your hairdresser becomes your therapist or your confidant because the old cliché is true. In a hair salon, you're letting your hair down and no topic is off limits" (qtd. in Hobson). Here, the playwright recognizes the many capacities of the hairdresser while underscoring the function the hair salon serves for Black women.

I would like to extend this conversation about the hair salon as a communal space and employ Victor Turner's concept of the "communitas" to engage the setting in *`Da Kink in my Hair*. As I focus on how each of the eight voices views the hair salon as a liminal space, I also will engage Novelette's role as the hairdresser and consider how she creates such a space for these women. Lastly, I will consider the importance of the hair salon setting as not only a communal space, but also a sanctuary and place for Black women to lay it all down and do as

Toni Morrison suggests communities allow individuals to do –"enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community, that is safe" ("Rootedness" 56).

Silver Sparrow, by Tayari Jones, chronicles the lives of two sisters entangled in a web of their bigamist father's deception. The novel is told from the point of view of both daughters, Dana Yarboro and Chaurisse Witherspoon. Dana, the secret daughter, knows about her sister, while Chaurisse does not. Fascinated with her sister, Dana forms a friendship with her, despite the fact that Chaurisse remains ignorant of their familial relationship. However, once their familial ties are exposed, family drama and turmoil ensue for all involved.

While there is very little scholarly conversation about *Silver Sparrow*, the few scholarly treatments have focused on Jones' characterization, the ways she challenges the notion of illegitimacy, and the metaphoric use of hair to symbolize beauty. Most of the discussion of Jones' characterization is focused on the father, James, who we learn in the opening line is a bigamist.[17] Moreover, reviewers have also discussed Jones' characterization of the two sisters whose lives are in stark contrast to each other. Naomi Huffman points out that by hearing from both girls, the reader acquires both sides of the story, leaving them no choice but to empathize with both girls. Anita Shreve, in *The Washington Post*, extends the conversation regarding the proverbial blame game, and argues that its roots can be cyclical and complex. By identifying other key characters to blame, Shreve points to the intricacies present in such a family, suggesting that this situation is not as simple as one may think. Likewise, Huffman suggests that the scenarios Jones introduces through, particularly the secret sister, leave the reader grappling with these thought provoking questions: "Is our future determined more by choices made for us,

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[17] Reviewer Susan Straight points out that the complexity of this knowledge drives the plot as the reader learns that despite the fact that bigamy is a crime, James truly loves both of his wives and daughters. Michelle Norris points out that the way the father knows his daughter is different. For this reason, Julie Cantrell motions that "the novel explores how a man's treatment of family can define a girl's worth."

or the ones we make ourselves? Is there really beauty in ignorance, or only in truth? And what is worse: to live a lie, or be one?" (Huffman).

Additionally, other discussions are centered on the ways Jones reconceptualizes ideas about illegitimacy and ultimately refutes the notion.[18] Often cited by several reviewers, Jones explains the significance of the title twofold: "Silver" directly refers to how Chaurisse perceives of Dana, as "'a 'silver girl' as a girl who is better than she is…lovely and popular and smart, all the things that your adolescent self feels that you are not… "Sparrow' comes from the hymn 'His Eye Is On The Sparrow' — being the sparrow is the least among us. Because I think that's what Dana is, she's a silver sparrow'" (qtd. in Norris). In the very title, Robin Vidimos observes that Tayari Jones offers a more nuanced language for children born out of wedlock, providing a platform for those shamed as a result of the perception of their parents' choices.

Also of prominence in discussions about the novel is the use of hair as a trope for beauty. Robin Vidimos points out that the 1980s context informs particular conceptions of beauty, duly noted by Dana and Chaurisse in the novel. Jones suggests this move was intentional as the 80s marked the beginning of a weave era in which "everyone [could] have long hair," leveling the beauty playing field.[19] This era allows every woman to don their "crowning glory" and achieve the volume, color, and length they desire.

Yet, Dana and her mother are "set apart"; they naturally have long hair, while Chaurisse's natural hair does not stand out until her mother gives her a weave (qtd. in Vidimos). Susan

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[18] Jones' nephew calls out the ambiguity of Jones' label of his mother as her half-sister: "There are no half-people. My mother's your sister; she's not your half-sister" (qtd. in Norris). Her nephew's sentiments about the label transformed how Jones considers legitimacy as she asserts, "Every person is legitimate. We all know someone who is a silver sparrow, whether you know it or not, because these people live in shame. This is a real cultural taboo, something that people don't talk about. As a culture, we need to revise our position on these kids" (qtd. in Vidimos).

[19] Hair weaves are hair extensions that are interweaved with the client's hair, adding length and/or fullness.

Straight also observes that the connotations associated with Black hair and self-image are present and points out that in the sisters' first meeting, they judge one another by their hair.

Although reviewers of *Silver Sparrow* extensively examine the use of hair as a motif, most do not consider the very space where most hair transformations take place—the hair salon. For this reason, my intervention is significant as I will address this lacuna and consider the role of the hair salon in the novel as both a communal and contentious space. In the novel, the space serves as a sanctuary place for Black women to lay it all down, as well as the place where Laverne Witherspoon, Chaurisse's mother, finds out that her husband has a secret family. As I engage the rhetoric and counter-narratives Tayari Jones uses in her novel about traditional Black hair salons, I will examine the hair salon as a liminal space and how Black women find sanctuary, despite it also being a contentious space.

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie begins *en media res* and is told mostly from Ifemelu's point of view in a series of flashbacks as she sits in a chair of New Jersey hair salon getting her hair braided. These flashbacks engage the contrasting experiences of two lovers, Ifemelu and Obinze, who have traveled abroad from Nigeria to the West not out of desperation, but because the two are "conditioned from birth to look toward somewhere else" (Adichie 341). This impulse to dwell "somewhere else" is a direct result of imperialism, which resulted in colonialism, exploitation of resources, and an increase in trade.[20] Ifemelu migrates to America to pursue studies at Princeton and is forced to contend with what is termed as an essential part of her identity in America but not in Nigeria—race. Conversely, Obinze's hopes to join Ifemelu later are thwarted as he ends up in Great Britain as an undocumented immigrant who is forced to take menial, repulsive jobs in order to survive.

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[20] W.E.B. Du Bois discusses the impact of colonization in one chapter entitled "The Rape of Africa" of his work *The World and Africa* (1947).

Although there is limited scholarship about this very recent text, a few scholars have focused on Adiche's use of Afropolitianism, her incorporation of technology mediums, and her candid conversations about race in the novel. While Afropolitanism is derived from the words "Afro" and "cosmopolitan," this term is more specific to region as the term focuses on a new generation of Africans who are urban and culturally savvy with a global outlook.[21] The inclusion of a blog as an essential part of the novel has also been subject to scrutiny. What is poignant about this medium in the novel is Ifemelu's newfound upward mobility only emerges as a result of these blog posts.[22] Moreover, Anna-Leena Toivanen investigates how new technologies communicate mobility and can help maintain community. Nonetheless, she suggests that these mediums mostly expose gaps, for example, when Ifemelu and Obinze "lose touch" while abroad even though they have access to email and other technologies to communicate with (143).

Moreover, the rhetorical choices Adichie uses to unpack ideas about race in America is also central to scholarly conversations about *Americanah*.[23] Caroline Levine contends that community building and real relationships bud when we abandon "habitual falsehoods"

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[21] Miriam Pahl suggests that Afropolitianism is a useful concept to "analyze [Adichie's] presence in the online and the real world (75). Additionally, Katherine Hallemeier points out that Afropolitanism grants writers the power to transform Western ideologies about Africa as impoverished and uncivilized, as for example Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's protagonists are privileged and live middle class lives (234). Another scholar Yogita Goyal not only suggests *Americanah* flirts with the notion of Afropolitanism, she also reveals the contradictions Adichie employs of this new trend. Though Ifemelu serves as participant of the lifestyle, she ridicules those immersed in "an identity based in style, attitude, and consumption rather than (for example) the political consciousness of Pan-Africanism" (XV).

[22] Goyal points to the dual function of the blog as "didactic" and "humorous" to unpack conventional implications of race constructions (XIII). For this reason, Pahl emphasizes the fact that the Internet is a free space which can be useful and harmful at the same time: Ifemelu can openly express her sentiments about race; however, the recipients also have a space to spew "insults without restraint or censorship" (78). Anna-Leena Toivanen, on the other hand, offers a different perspective about the new technologies present in the novel. Though she primarily focuses on the personal communication between Ifemelu and Obinze, she does make mention that no inclusion of the reader's comments "undermines the dialogic nature of the blog medium" (144).

[23] While Yemis Ogbe criticizes Adichie's representations of Nigerians as cliché and suggests she reduces Africa to a country of "'famine, Bono, or Barack Obama,'" Katherine Hallemeier responds to Ogbe's critique and maintains that *Americanah* turns these ideas on its head. Instead, she concludes that *Americanah* "envisions a global capitalist system in which race does not exhaustively and exhaustingly delimit the affective bonds that enable financial success" (243).

regarding race and social class (593). Goyal singles out two moments in the novel that depict both Ifemelu's and Obinze's experiences abroad. Ifemelu stops "pretending" when she makes the decision no longer to fake an American accent and begins to let her hair grow in its natural state instead of opting for relaxers and weaves. Likewise, Obinze is "troubled by [not only] the lies Nigerians tell British," but also how particularly his friend Emenike "tells stories about race relations [a certain way] to make his white listeners [more] comfortable" (593-594). Goyal, too, singles out a gripping moment in the novel, Ifemelu's conversation with a white woman in the hair salon about the difference between Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* (1979), to bring out how white Americans normalize race through their interpretations.[24] While scholars reference Adichie's use of hair as a motif and suggest Ifemelu's visit to the hair salon from Princeton to Trenton subtly addresses conversations about race in America, they do not discuss these ideas at length. I will consider more extensively how Ifemelu's visit to the hair salon not only serves as a framing device for the novel's plot, but also demonstrates how the hair salon can be a selective communal space. Because the protagonist is Nigerian, she is accepted in a way that the African American and white clients are not in the African hair braiding salon. In addition to revealing ways in which the hair salon can be a selective liminal space, I also will explore how the hair salon emerges as a reflective space as Ifemelu's visit to the hair salon results in a moment of clarity, prompting her to see the world differently.

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[24] The white woman's response "I see why you would read it like that" and Ifemelu's reply "And I see why *you* would read it like you did" "unmask[s] the woman's claim to her own neutral, universal, unmarked status,…reveal[ing] to American readers their obsession with blindness to race and its pervasive presence in all interactions between people" (Adichie 234; emphasis in the original; Goyal XII). Adichie's emphasis on "you" creates two meanings that does not suggest the collective but pushes back against the ideologies of race as normal and distinguishes Ifemelu from the white woman as Black (Afrocentric).

Jazz, by Toni Morrison, considers the overarching effects the murder of a teenage girl has on not only her loved ones, Alice Manfred and Felice, but also her lover Joe Trace, as well as his wife Violet Trace. Many scholars have written a vast amount of criticism on Toni Morrison's works, and *Jazz* is no different. Central to such conversations include discussions about the use of the jazz aesthetic as a metaphor, the novel's adept use of narration, and the complex recasting of the Harlem Renaissance and the Great Migration.

Other conversations focus on the narrative structure of *Jazz* as raced and gendered. In fact, the opening sentence "Sth, I know that woman" is central to the conversation in determining the narrator's identity as Black and woman (Morrison 3). Abádi-Nagy Zoltán suggests the line "establishes the narrator as a communal voice" and the "gossipy tone identifies her as a woman" (29). In examining what a narrator who is African American and woman brings to the story, he suggests she emerges as not only a storyteller, but also a relater of the experience. As a participant of the culture, she can provide insightful commentary in which she judges the characters' motives and choices and relates her experiences to the plot (28). For example, she shares her reservation about Golden Gray and scolds herself for condemning what she thinks is his type in the novel (Morrison 160).[25] Initially the way the narrator identifies with Golden Gray is as Michael Nowlin notes, "rooted in racialized discourse…she assumes obligations to her characters and to her world that are inextricable from the 'black' position with which the complex history of American race relations has endowed her" (161, 164). Using Mikhail Bakhtin as a lens, Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert adds to the discussion of how race complicates narrative strategies pointing out how "the text shifts from conventional narrator to heteroglossia," the reader hears from diverse points of view (57). In all, she suggests breaking traditional narrative form "endows the black characters of the novel with subjectivity" (Heinert 72).

[25] Many scholars also read the narrator as the book itself, especially based on the last line.

Although scholars have produced a plethora of publications on *Jazz*, very few talk about the hair salon at length as a communal space. While Natalie Stillman-Webb, in "'Be What You Want': Clothing and Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's Jazz," examines the role of consumer culture in African American culture and analyzes the style of the Black characters, she references beauty salons but mostly considers clothing to reveal limits of African American subjectivity. Richard Pearce, however, in "Toni Morrison's Jazz: Negotiations of the African American Beauty Culture" refers to the hair salon as an "informal community center," and asserts that African American beauty culture is more intricate than fueling the desire to embody Eurocentric ideals of beauty, as its focus is grounded in "negotiations with both the dominant culture and various classes of the African American community," which consists of owning "beauty parlors, manufacturing companies, and distributorships,…thus expanding the possibilities for African American women's identity" (312). *Jazz's* Violet Trace is an example of such expansion, but as a mobile hairdresser, following the incident that frames the story, only "night women" (i.e sex workers) are keen to use her services. I want to consider how the armchair psychology between the hairdresser and client is reversed as Violet's clientele offers her a liminal space in their home by becoming her comfort and prompting her to consider other perspectives about women and men. Moreover, I want to consider how Alice's house is akin to the hair salon, although she does not do Alice's hair, as it emerges as an integral liminal space for both Violet and Alice to heal and find solace in each other.

The Hairdresser's Many Roles

In `*Da Kink in my Hair*, playwright trey anthony uses the hair salon setting to address prevailing issues of gun violence, colorism, sexual abuse, and homophobia in Black

communities. When anthony introduces Novelette in the opening scene, the stage direction indicates that the light is directed on her. In introducing the hairdresser in this fashion, anthony makes clear her pivotal role in creating the liminal space, colored by clients from various walks of life, is grounded in her spirited personality, sound character, and capacity to build genuine community with, primarily, other Black women. The space is liminal because Novelette's role is crucial in her customers' development as she inspires them to be better; most come as blank slates, who are looking for counsel and direction (Hobson). The hair salon space is also liminal because it is a transitory space that women enter and leave. The playwright herself adds, "Women come to Novelette for her tough love and the human touch and contact she offers when she is doing their hair and listening to them" (qtd. in Hobson). Just as Selina runs to Miss Thompson's beauty parlor for comfort and counsel, anthony demonstrates in her play how the hair salon setting is a liminal space where customers come not only for a service, but also for a place to belong and be affirmed.

First in her monologue, Novelette introduces her explicit role as hairdresser. Novelette's entrepreneurial spirit runs deep as she comes from a long line of descendants whose profession was hairdresser. She describes her profession as "busy," pointing out that "the work never stops" as the clientele's demands for different styles can be too much, particularly when clients expect nearly impossible hair transformations (anthony 3). She states, "[W]omen rush in here, looking like they got run over by a Mac truck, then expect me to make them look like Janet Jackson…. lady I'm a hairdresser not a magician" (anthony 4). By reiterating her role as hairdresser, and not magician, she makes clear that though the hair salon is a space of transformation (both literally and metaphorically), clients have to be realistic in their requests. Metaphorically, clients achieve an emotional transformation when they acknowledge a "shared recognition…[and] value of

Black womanhood" among them (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 97). In all, the client has to bring something for the hairdresser to work with.

At Letty's Hair Salon, Novelette's clients have to yield to her idiosyncrasies, as she is not timely and makes her own rules. This insight is significant to our understanding of the salon as a liminal space because traditional rules and conventions are suspended. In a world where Black women do not have many dwellings where they are not policed or devalued, the hair salon affords Novelette a space to set her own rules—to create and own a space that are not constrained by societal norms but underscores specifically the communal needs of Black women. When one of her clients, Milly, complains about being in the salon for four hours, Novelette's reply demonstrates her brazen personality: "I said come for seven-thirty I did not state anywhere or at anytime I would start you at seven-thirty because, you booked an appointment you never book a guarantee. Now sit down and when I'm ready for you I'll let you know" (anthony 4). Another instance in the play that demonstrates her boldness is when she ejects Marcia from her chair to "work in" Enid, an elderly woman, who expresses her need in a more playful, yet respectful tone, but will not make the same provisions for Sherelle, a well-educated, yet entitled woman, who rudely demands Novelette's services immediately.

Varied expressions from these clients directly reflect Novelette's attitude and rationale for special preference. Treating Enid and Sherelle differently not only suggests that Novelette is firm and will not be bossed around in the very liminal space she has created, this behavior also points to Novelette's emphasis on the hair salon as a communal space, rather than merely a transactional space to get services done. For this reason, Sherelle's lack of decorum automatically excludes her from the space, as she is disinterested in being part of the community and only wants the hair services from Novelette. Sherelle rejects the communal space present in

the hair salon and the notion of becoming a blank slate to merge back into society renewed, but instead wants the service to mask her pain and create the semblance of a well put together woman, as she says, "Novelette, I need to be in your chair and out of here in an hour! I got a lunch date at twelve and I got dinner at six and I'm meeting my sister at nine and somewhere in between all that I got to take a power nap. So, let's do this!" (anthony 26). Here, Sherelle embodies the ideology of the "strong Black woman," as she is described as educated with a successful career, yet depressed and unhappy.[26] She camouflages her depression through her busyness to support everyone's needs and as a result, neglects to take care of her own needs. Nonetheless, Sherelle's disinterest in the communal space does not serve her as it is implied that she commits suicide during the play. Before her demise, she says,

> I was tired! I
> couldn't do this! I couldn't be everything! I couldn't—and
> it's not really that I wanted to die, I just wanted to take a
> rest. A long needed rest. But nobody would let me. They
> wouldn't let me! (*two beats*) I wouldn't let me… (anthony 29)

While Sherelle elucidates here in her monologue her need for respite, her fear of being seen as fallible publicly thwarts her chances of having community in the hair salon. With this example, trey anthony shows spectators that the hairdresser can only build a community for those who want to become blank slates— to demonstrate their full humanity and take part in sharing their innermost thoughts and dreams by abandoning all pretenses. While the hair salon emerges as a space for Black women to seek out community and be their vulnerable selves, it does not fill the void for every Black woman. However, by shedding light on suicide among Black women,

[26] A strong Black woman is a stereotype that Black women often feel the need to embody that they are innately strong and can bear all things.

anthony inserts a crucial caveat to Black women to seek out community with other Black women and suggests that it is necessary to fully thrive or even survive.

Like Novelette, Laverne of *Silver Sparrow* has a similar story of forging her own path as an entrepreneur in that she and her mother both, at different times, did hair at rented booths.[27] The narrator notes, “The Pink Fox, with its two pump chairs, shampoo bowl, and three hooded dryers represented a generation’s worth of progress (207). Laverne’s The Pink Fox salon is representative of upward mobility, as she succeeds her mother by owning her salon. While hairdressing allows Laverne freedom from her mundane life as a wife, it is also a profession she was forced to settle for as a teenage wife and mother. Despite her personal hang-ups, however, she embodies the character and personality of a hairdresser and creates communitas, a liminal space where her clients can become blank slates and leave renewed with the privilege to come back. As sole proprietor of the space, she invites vulnerability and grants her clients the option to lay it down—to release their pains. Laverne, unlike Novelette however, is more reserved. She exhibits a certain formality not only to satisfy the customers, but also because she identifies herself as an outsider and lacks confidence.[28]

Although Laverne, like Novelette, gives preferential treatment, particularly to her “longtime customers,” her unwritten rules for running her business greatly differ from Novelette (Jones 182). Laverne only accepts walk-ins occasionally, knows the value of traditional customer service, and especially seeks to be agreeable. Her essential mantra for establishing a relationship

[27] It is important to note that the reader’s perspective of Laverne’s narrative and interactions with her clients derives from the daughter’s point of view, Chaurisse Witherspoon. As she observes her mother’s interactions, readers see up close how the hair salon can be an uncontrived environment as well as the profound impact the setting has on both mother and daughter’s individual growth. As observer, Chaurisse becomes not only a single witness of her mother’s interactions in the hair salon, she also functions as a participant of the communitas.

[28] Laverne has felt like an outsider since the age of fourteen when she got pregnant and was forced to marry the father of her child and move with her mother-in-law: “She hadn’t known that the events of an afternoon could get her kicked out of school and thrown out of her mother’s house” (Jones 178).

with her client is “to understand the way people are wired” (189). She suggests the key way to demonstrate this understanding is to be neutral. For example, Laverne proposes that, “‘I wouldn’t put anything past anybody’ [is the] perfect response to a woman getting her hair done complaining about [her] husband for when she reconciled with him the woman would still feel comfortable getting her hair done [at the Pink Fox]” (189). Also, she accommodates her clients’ schedules: “She opened the shop at seven thirty, having taken care of the old ladies who get up at five, and she closed down at eight thirty, having taken care of the women who worked in offices” (194). Though her actions readily suggest that Laverne’s priority is to satisfy her customers, her specific temperament creates a space where her clients have consistency and calm where she can build a particular trust and familiarity with her clients.

By portraying the hair salon as a very intimate zone, the novel shows how awareness of the hair salon as a confessional space can be overturned, particularly in Dana’s actions and motives for going to the hair salon. Unlike Letty’s Hair Salon, which is a brick-and-mortar storefront, The Pink Fox is a home- based business. As Paule Marshall terms Miss Thompson’s rented booth as a confessional space, Chaurisse likewise identifies the hair salon as a confessional space, a space where just like the priest sits to hear the confessions of the penitent, women expose their lives to each other. Yet, there is no judgment from Laverne, unlike the priest. She also points out that because her mother’s hair salon is an extension of the home, it can be “even more intimate than your average salon because it is a business that is also a part of our home. If a client needs to go to the toilet, she uses the same bathroom where I take my shower in the morning” (207). This novel chronicles the separate lives of two half-sisters, Dana and Chaurisse. As the illegitimate daughter, Dana knows her half-sister exists, but Chaurisse is unaware of their kinship. For this reason, Dana is able to venture into the hair salon undetected to

inquire about the family logistics of her half-sister's household, for example, where the father sits at the dinner table and what college Chaurisse plans to attend. In another example when she asks if she can come the following day for a hair appointment, Laverne says she has dinner plans with her husband. Here again, we can see how the hair salon is a space where people readily give information without a thought about how this information can be used. However, Chaurisse observes that this information saddens Dana, her erstwhile half-sister: "She was like a different person now. At first I thought she was trying not to laugh, but now it seemed like she was trying not to cry" (Jones 217). The more information Dana attains about how the Witherspoons live, the more alienated she feels by the fact that her sister, Chaurisse, is openly validated by their father. As a result, each time she learns more about her sister's family, Dana realizes that being the secret daughter is not as great as her mother suggests. This realization reveals unique ways the hair salon setting function as a liminal space; within this space, she is incidentally offered a new way of looking at her world as isolating and limiting, which challenges the world her mother created for her.

Because the hair salon is an extension of their home, the narrator Chaurisse is not only aware of her mother's tendencies, but she is also schooled about life in the hair salon, which include Black women's varied experiences of survival. Early on, Chaurisse learns about the many nuances of marriage from her "mother's favorite refrain: 'Marriage is complicated'" (183). With this knowledge, she becomes part of the community and exposed to the plight of Black women beyond her years, revealing their experiences of liminality are rooted in certain vernacular and blurred boundaries. For example, Chaurisse demonstrates how her relationship with her mother is closely tied to the context of the salon—the mother-daughter relationship replicates the hairdresser-client relationship. As rules and conventions associated with mother

and daughter are suspended, a sense of comfort is attached to the vernacular expressions, "Miss Lady" to refer to Chaurisse and "Girl" to refer to Laverne, as they signify a particular camaraderie among not only the customers and the hairdresser to openly share thoughts with no judgment, but it also includes Chaurisse (182). More specifically, the reference to Chaurisse as "Miss Lady" suggests she is part of the woman-centered community. For this reason, Laverne's relationship with her daughter is blurred and within itself liminal as she is her confidant, sister-girl, and daughter simultaneously.

Similarly, when Novelette of *`Da Kink in my Hair* introduces her most explicit role as hairdresser, she emphasizes her most important function that extends beyond hair salon services. She notes, "[A]s a hairdresser you get to know everybody's business…Not that I'm nosy or anything. But if they don't tell you the hair will" (4). Her genuineness and discernment are what create the communal space for these characters. Further, Novelette suggests that Black women's hair exposes their innermost thoughts, reveals their life experiences, and articulates the angst of Black women. She states, "If you want to know about a woman, a black woman that is. Touch her hair. Cause our hair hopes, all our dreams, our hurt, our disappointments they're all in our hair" (5). Here, anthony sets the scene for the rest of the play— by highlighting Novelette's simple, yet necessary, action of touching each client's hair, not only to perform the service of hairdressing, but also to detect each client's troubles she depicts the hairdresser as clairvoyant. anthony appears to suggest that the client's hair betrays what she may be trying to mask and the laying on of hands gesture brings each client's story to life.[29] For example, Novelette tells Shawnette, "Your hair is a mess. What is going on?" and the stage directions relate Novelette's movement as "*touching [Shawnette's] hair with concern* (8-9). Shawnette's unkempt locks expose her depressed state after her boyfriend left her for a seemingly more suitable partner to fit

[29] Laying on of hands is a religious ritual, performed in the Black church, during prayer to promote healing.

his new career Shawnette helped him attain. Likewise, Novelette knows one of her clients, Patsy, is pregnant by the fact that "[her] hair is growing nice and thick" (22). As noted in these few examples the hair can reveal one's story in more ways than one. Most importantly, the physical touching of hair in the hair salon is significant as it documents one of the few spaces Black women can not only relax and retreat, but also receive caring, non-sexual touch, satisfying their need to feel loved and connected.[30]

To further highlight Novelette's relationship with each client, trey anthony places special emphasis on the hairdresser's role as advisor. The hairdresser's silent presence allows clients to access tools to approach their own problems. Although criticized by several reviewers for placing Novelette in the foreground for most the play, anthony's adroit use of monologue to capture the burdens, pains, and joys of Novelette's clients underscores the importance of listening in this space as it invites these Black women to "affirm one another's humanity, specialness and right to exist" (Collins 113). Through listening, Novelette acknowledges that her clients matter. For example, Stacey-Anne's monologue validates the experiences of child rape victims and calls attention to a pervasive problem that goes undetected, or worse, disbelieved by adults. Stacey-Anne harbors conflicted feelings about sharing this information with loved ones because the rapist, her stepfather Mr. Brown, sends money back to her grandmother in Jamaica. Sadly, as the poem included in the monologue suggests, "The moon becomes [her] witness" (52). But to contest this reality, Stacey-Anne states, "All women all little girls should be believed" (53). Though she is not given explicit advice by Novelette, sharing her story within the space

[30] *Silver Sparrow* also demonstrates that there is a particular intimacy embedded in touching someone's hair. A vivid example is seen in the burgeoning friendship of Dana and Ronalda (Note that Dana is Chaurisse's sister and Ronalda is a friend of Dana). When Ronalda initially asks Dana about her mother, she sticks to a general script. However, once she starts brushing Dana's hair, Dana blurts out her secret. The narrator notes, "It was as though she had pulled the truth out of my head. I'm illegitimate" (75). Although this scene does not occur in the hair salon, hair care for Black women often begins in the home. The intimacy associated with hair touching, whether in the home or hair salon, creates an instant connection where people feel comfortable sharing their innermost thoughts.

provides her with the tools to take action. As she charges the audience to believe little girls who report such incidents to their loved ones, her last comment "Touch mi again you better run fi your life" is directed to Mr. Brown that she will become victor of her circumstances (53).

Moreover, Nia's monologue emerges as another instance of the hair salon functioning as a liminal space where Black women can not only be affirmed, but also receive healing. Though she is provided no explicit instructions to resolve her dilemma, Nia's monologue, the final one of the play, serves as a charge for all Black women to embrace their various dimensions of blackness.[31] Nia is preparing for her mother's funeral and coming to terms with the fact that she cannot grieve her passing because her mother never affirmed her due to her dark skin tone. Preparing for the funeral evokes unnerving, sad memories of her mother making a difference between Nia and her light skinned sister. She admits, "And I know I'm suppose to feel something, And for God sake you're my mother and your dead! And I want to feel something and I can't. I want to cry and I can't" (56). Her frantic plea to her mother to "look" at her in all black attire suggests that Nia wants her mother's validation, but realizes she will never have it both due to her passing and, most importantly, because her mother refused to see past her daughter's skin color. Nia's revelatory statement "I've been wearing black all my life" challenges the notion of acceptance: the color black is accepted attire for funerals, but the color is often disparaged as a skin tone. Here, as a result of coming to terms with the consequences of colorism, she arrives at her own conclusion that embracing her blackness is essential to becoming fulfilled. In all, Nia's monologue invites us to consider how the hair salon is a site

[31] Although the phrase, "Black is Beautiful" became a catch phrase of Black Power Movement to raise Black consciousness during the 60s, I use the possessive pronoun "their" to refer to the slogan "My Black is Beautiful," popularized by P&G to encourage Black girls and women to define their own standards of beauty.

where Black women emerges as a liminal space where she can find acceptance and achieve inner peace that will ultimately help them to evolve.

To that end, the closing scene also calls forth the communitas in the hair salon.[32] More explicitly, the final stage directions evoke sense of community:

> *All the women enter individually and state proudly "I've been wearing black all my life." NIA looks at them. This sends them into a healing song, in which they rock together. They perform a healing ceremony which goes through various emotions of discovery, anger, self-healing and love. The dance also offers NIA pride, self-identity, comfort, love, and joy of being a black woman. The women dance a celebratory dance. This is a celebration. A celebration of life. They then close the coil from the opening scene. NOVELETTE enters the dance at the end… Inhales and exhales and smiles at them proudly and proudly states.*
>
> I've been wearing black all my life. Blessings. (57)

The ending culminates the significance of the hair salon as a liminal space, and more specifically, a sanctuary for Black women to lay it all down. The healing ceremony underscores ways the hair salon is more than just a place to get services done and demonstrates how the camaraderie found in the hair salon goes beyond the hairdresser/client relationship as the other clients are portrayed repeating the mantra "*I've been wearing black all my life*" as "*NIA looks at them*" (57; emphasis in the original). This gesture not only shows Nia that she is not alone in her plight to embrace her blackness, but also underscores the significance of her name, meaning purpose. Nia is purposed to rewrite her existence, particularly in her relationship with other

[32] This ending directly parallels the ending of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* by Ntozake Shange (1975) where the women gather for a laying on of hands. This intertextuality is important in thinking about how evoking the laying on of hands within a communal space calls Black women to act and be reborn.

Black women. Indeed, she is tasked to "affirm [their] humanity, their specialness, and right to exist (Collins 97). In all, this ending emphasizes that though Novelette's clients may come weary and burdened, they leave renewed, affirmed as Black women, and ready to conquer life challenges. It is interesting to note that the final line of the play ends with Novelette, the ultimate builder of the liminal space. By reiterating the statement Nia coins and adding blessings, she extends spiritual favor and protection to her clients as well as the audience as they venture back into the real world.

Similarly, in *Silver Sparrow*, a comparable theme resonates— Black women are afforded a space to lay it all down. The most poignant example of how the hair salon serves as a space for Black women to bear their souls is found in chapter eighteen, "Love and Happiness." Here, Tayari Jones employs a familiar story in the Black community regarding soul singer Al Green in which his lover throws hot grits on him.[33] However, Jones focuses on the female assailant prior to incident rather than recounting the salacious details of the affair. What is gained by her version is that we hear from Mary, his lover, and she emerges as a sympathetic character. By recasting Mary from villain to victim, Tayari Jones "speaks in tongues" and establishes Mary as a subject rather than an object of gossip and ridicule (Henderson 353). By speaking in tongues, Jones "enters into testimonial discourse with [B]lack women as [Bl]ack women" and bears witness to Mary's experience; she affirms Mary's voice by offering readers another vantage point (352). In doing so, Jones provides a frame of mutual understanding for reading Mary not as a scorned, crazed woman, but as simply a woman in love. Jones's revision via the use of church vernacular creates the atmosphere for Mary to fully seek sanctuary in the hair salon.

[33] Allegedly in 1974, Mary Woodson, an ex-girlfriend, attacks soul singer Al Green by throwing hot grits on him while he is in the bathtub. Shortly after, Woodson commits suicide. Following the grits incident and other troubles, Green focuses his career on preaching and singing gospel music rather than secular music; most speculate that this incident prompted his religious conversion.

Above all, Mary tells her story in The Pink Fox, Laverne's hair salon, which definitively becomes a sanctuary place for Black women to lay it all down. Here Mary can do as Morrison points out, "enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. …that is safe" (Morrison 56). Just as Paule Marshall in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* employs church idioms to describe Selina's experience in the beauty parlor, in this chapter, what happens in the hair salon setting bears some semblance to traditional Black church vernacular. For example, though Laverne is still recovering from gall bladder surgery, she agrees to do Mary's hair because Mary "put [her] in the mind of Christmas…and felt God would want her to take this stranger in" (Jones 245). Here, Laverne feels a calling to do Mary's hair; as hairdresser she serves as confidant and nurturer of her soul. Mary's question, "'Can I talk to you?'" and Laverne's response, "'Of course'… 'Nobody in here but us,'" becomes Mary's entry into the liminal space and sanctuary of the salon. (242). Here, Laverne is aware that Mary needs to be offered a space where there is no judgment and her response to Mary "'Nobody in here but us'" not only initiates the communitas, but it also builds trust and camaraderie (242). Within this confessional-like space, Laverne creates an opportunity for Mary to confess and vent about her present life with no condemnation.

Like Novelette, Laverne lends a listening ear to Mary, who mentions plans to leave her husband because they are not "equally yoked" (Jones 245).[34] We learn Mary is drawn to another man who is not her husband (singer Al Green) and feels a nudge from God to pursue him. Her hasty decision parallels Matthew 16:24, "Take up your cross, and follow me." As Christ suggests in this verse that true discipleship demands sacrifice, Mary is blinded by her faith as she

[34] "Equally yoked," a phrase derived from 2 Corinthians 6:14, means to be equally faithful in God. In this verse aforementioned, Paul commands the Corinthians to yoke with someone that is a believer and issues a caveat that a nonbeliever will hinder one's advancement to the kingdom. For this reason, Paul maintains that it is vital for both people in a marriage to be believers in order to advance the kingdom of God.

is willing to leave her family behind to follow Al Green, whom she believes is favored by God. Chaurisse observes her mother's silence: "Mama didn't say anything one way or another. She just combed through Mary's half-nappy hair, sectioning it off and plaiting it up to dry" (245). This description of Laverne's actions while Mary talks underscores not only the art of hairdressing, but also her agreeable personality once again.[35]

Nonetheless, here the hair salon emerges as a space where one-way conversations are also welcome. Though Laverne does not add much to the conversation, her question "'You have children?'" could possibly be a tactful way she seeks to ask Mary to think through her plans of leaving her husband for the sake of her children, just as Novelette gives Shawnette advice in the form of a thoughtful compliment. However, just as Selina's mind is made up to tell her mother about her father's plans in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Mary's mind is made up in following this new man to start a ministry. As the last customer, Mary, like Nia in `*Da Kink in my Hair* occupies a space that is unadulterated with opinions and judgment from other women. Even so, Mary still wants the hairdresser's approval of her actions when she argues, "'It's not just lust when we're together,' Mary twisted in the chair and searched my mother's face" (248). Laverne's response "'I know'" further demonstrates how Laverne exhibits agape love and does not condemn Mary as she can genuinely relate to Mary's experiences and truly understand Mary's vivid encounter with this "anointed" preacher (Jones 247). Both Laverne and Mary "married young" and are mothers, and Laverne also met a girl preacher of similar nature who consoled and comforted her after her infant son died (Jones 245). This point of comparison indicates that Laverne understands what being "anointed" means as she has

[35] One of Laverne's unwritten rules is to remain neutral when a client makes a comment, particularly about marital problems so that the customer feels comfortable coming back once she and the husband have reconciled. Her rules underscore her capacity to create a communitas, a site for women to talk candidly and a regressive space her clients feel comfortable returning to.

shared a similar spiritual encounter.Because the hair salon space is deemed a safe space, such a setting erases barriers that would otherwise be present in another space. This encounter is significant to our understanding of the hair salon as a liminal space, as social mores are suspended; and again, like Novelette, Laverne is able to fully cater to the communal needs of her client and truly be a confidante. Though the hairdresser-client relationship is seemingly one-sided, the deep trust and connectedness present is genuine. Laverne and Novelette demonstrate that they see themselves as more than hairdressers, but rendering services to their community, which Patricia Hill Collins denotes as a key principle of Black Feminist Thought as "the ethic of caring" (*Black Feminist Thought* 215). Characteristic of the hairdressers, Novelette and Laverne, this framework focuses its attention on the individual, considers her feelings in dialogue, and develops empathy (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 215-217).

For example, Laverne employs "the ethic of caring" by regarding Mary with an unreasoning reverence in the same way Christians are encouraged to regard God (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 215). Laverne not only seeks to protect Mary's soul while she is present in the salon, but she also continues to serve as Mary's protector even after her suicide. Chaurisse points out, "All you had to do was say 'Al Green' and 'grits' in the same conversation and the titter of laughing started, but my mama cut it off with a quiet 'That's not funny.' You couldn't hear it in her voice, but if you looked at her face, at the way she closed her eyes and tucked her head down like she was in prayer, you knew that she was serious" (242). She appears to be praying for her soul, even years later. Here, as Mary's last hairdresser and final confessor, Laverne charges herself with guarding Mary's soul and controlling how she is remembered. Moreover, by characterizing Laverne as keeper of Mary's soul, Tayari Jones, in some ways, charges the Black

community to alter how we mythologize Mary as the butt of jokes about domestic disputes.[36] Laverne's full regard for Mary underscores the significance of the hair salon space as a communitas, a refuge where Black women's experiences, stories, and humanity are protected. If she lays it all down and bears her soul, it is not used against her; instead, she is able to use the space as a site of reflection to make her own decisions and move forward. The fact that Mary does not heed to Laverne's advice, however, invites us to consider how the concept of liminality does not restrict or confine Black women to act or move in the way they desire as it is still a choice.

Laverne also affirms her life beyond the scope of the hair salon as she only shares Mary's story to warn other women of the immense dangers of loving a man too much. In doing so, the salon becomes a space of restoration and healing. The narrator states,

> This is not a story my mama tells often. To her, it's not just gossip, it's something closer to gospel. One late night Mama was fixing up a girl who was half bald on the left side from snatching at her own head. She opened her mouth to show Mama where she clamped her jaw so tight that she busted one of her molars. While Mama rubbed Magical Grow in the bald places until her naked scalp shone like it was wet she shared the story of Mary.
>
> 'You listening baby?' Mama said. 'When you love a man that much, it's time to let him go.' (251)

By referring to Mary's story as the "gospel," Laverne sees Mary as a vessel for not only other women scorned by their male companions, but she also serves as revelation for her marriage later. While Chaurisse wants her mother's reaction to her father's secret life to be "more black,"

[36] Mary is often negatively regarded by men. For example, comic James Witherspoon has a famous routine that depicts her as "wild" and "crazy" and is deemed notorious by women who laud her for her actions (Jones 250-251).

she says to her mother, "'I want you to see you fight back. If there was ever a time to boil up some grits, it's now'" (314). However, Laverne knows there is more to Mary's story than her actions suggest: "'Don't talk about what you don't know about. It wasn't the grits that made him get right with God. It was her blood" (314). Again, Laverne does not use Mary's story as a way to condemn or valorize her actions; instead she focuses on the story's didactic importance. She shares her story within the communitas to offer new perspectives and caveats about love with the hope that they will leave not only renewed, but also muster the courage to leave. However, Laverne stays upon hearing that her husband James is a bigamist and leads another life. Perhaps, her choice to stay is grounded in the fact that James extended her kindness when he married her, whereas in the salon she discourages clients for staying in abusive relationships. In justifying her reasons for staying to her daughter, Laverne says "Your daddy married me because I was having his baby, and even when I didn't have no baby to show for myself, he allowed me to stay and be part of his family. That's history. That's solid, and there is no changing that. No matter how mad I am, how hurt, no matter what may be going on in your head, there's no undoing that kindness" (Jones 334). As Laverne notes, their marriage is centered around the power of compassion, which is a key facet of her hair salon, particularly when she shows compassion for Mary. Nonetheless, by sharing Mary's story to warn clients to get out of abusive relationships, Laverne's hair salon becomes a healing space where Laverne not only gives back to her community, but also aids in the process of reviving and rescuing her clients' spirits.

While both Novelette and Laverne affirm their clients by listening, they also serve as their advocates and encouragers. As a result, each client, except Sherelle, leaves renewed.[37] For example, Novelette questions Shawnette's reason for not keeping her hair up. She asks, "Too

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[37] Sherelle appears disinterested in the other function of the hair salon as communitas and only sees Novelette in her most explicit role as hairdresser—to do the service so she can get on with what life demands.

busy to have time for yourself? ... No time? Shawney, it's ok sometime to put yourself first" (anthony 9). Here she serves as Shawnette's advocate, promoting self-care. Once she finishes retwisting her locks, Novelette demonstrates how the hair salon is akin to Turner's communitas: "So there you go Shawney. Twisted so nice you can feel the breeze through your locks now. A fresh breeze is good. It helps you think. Makes you see things clear" (anthony 12).[38] Novelette's use of "breeze" as a metaphor for a fresh start considers the importance of Shawnette's experience in the hair salon. While occupying the space, Shawnette becomes a blank slate who can merge back into the outside world with the push from Novelette to start anew. Her farewell to Shawnette, "And don't you dare come back in here again looking like Donald Trump," is a charge to her client not to let herself go (anthony 12).

In another compelling example, Novelette encourages Patsy in a humorous way that she is very capable of fulfilling role of mother again. Patsy's first-born son, Romey, was a victim of gun violence; years later, she finds herself pregnant again. As a result of this tragedy, she expresses her feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a mother to protect her children and has concerns that she is too old to parent. Novelette, in turn, challenges these sentiments:

> Patsy can you put your foot on your husband shoulder? Come on Patsy talk to me! Patsy can you put your ankle around his neck and let him kiss it? Patsy, I know you can do it. Because if you can do all of that, Patsy you're not too old! And I'm no Christian or anything, but I believe God knew you had a lot more love to give so he decided to give you another chance. I knew Romey and that boy was a good kid. Well mannered, well-spoken beautiful young man. And who could forget that

[38] It is interesting to note that Novelette is more versatile in the styles she does as the setting is more contemporary. Although she still does more traditional hairstyles, the fact that she styles dreadlocks suggests that natural hairstyles are readily becoming more accepted now. The setting of *Silver Sparrow*, however, is grounded in the 80s culture which marked the beginning of weaves and continued the trend for the most part of straightening and perms.

> smile. And good kids don't raise themselves Patsy. So you were a good mother. And you know now your going to be the best baby mother around. You know there is a reggae song, called (singing) Claudette give me a beat' you are de best best best, baby mother' (anthony 23).

By recognizing the love Patsy has for God, her husband, and deceased son, Novelette reassures Patsy that her previous experiences as mother will make her "the best" (23). Like the caveat Novelette gives to Shawnette, her words of encouragement here not only affirm her client but also pushes her to celebrate the new birth—to embrace the second chance of being a mother and assume the role unafraid. It is also important to note that Novelette affirms Patsy as a sexual being. Even though Patsy is quite conservative and adheres to respectability politics, Novelette rebukes this set of rules and affirms her as young, vibrant, and sensual. The stage direction where "*she attempts to pay NOVELETTE but [she] waves her away*" underscores further how Novelette seeks to serve as Patsy's cheerleader. This gesture is a final way Novelette celebrates the new birth (anthony 23).

A final way Novelette assumes the role of encourager is with Sharmaine. In her monologues, Sharmaine shares her inner struggles with contending with her mother's rejection and response to her budding relationship with Jasmine. In reference to her dilemma, Sharmaine states, "I can fight everyone! ... But you didn't teach me how to fight you" (46). While Sharmaine's mother taught her how to fight for what she believes in, she does not think she is equipped to "fight" against her mother's disapproval of her partner. As a result, Sharmaine's question to Novelette, "[W]hat do you think'" is loaded as it is geared toward not only how her hair looks but her sexuality. However, Novelette's answer, "I think whatever, makes you happy makes you beautiful" is the response Sharmaine desperately needs as the stage direction points

out "*Sharmaine looks up and realises that NOVELETTE 'knows'*" (anthony 46). Here, Novelette functions as an othermother, doing what Sharmaine's mother refuses to do—fully accept her choices.

This particular instance in the salon also signals Black women's liminal space as queer-affirming and not simply cis-heteronormative, as the affirmation Sharmaine needs to openly embrace her sexuality despite her family's rejection prompts her to ask Marcia if she can bring a guest to her party. Before leaving the space, she puts the advice Novelette gives her into practice by alluding to her love life: "Great I'll let her know. You'll love her as much as I do" (47). Her response makes clear that Sharmaine is ready to fully fight for what she believes in, despite her family's disapproval of her sexuality. As an openly lesbian Black playwright, trey anthony recognizes the need to unpack specific truths about sexuality. Further, she includes stories not always readily accepted in the Black community and uses familiar settings such as the hair salon to demonstrate how Black women's experiences are varied and complex. She states, "One of my calls really was to bring a face to queerness…especially to queers of color" (anthony). For anthony, it is crucial that Black women see more dimensions of themselves on stage and be able to relate to these portrayals. Via theatre, anthony ensures that more diverse portrayals of Black women be cast, and it is her hope that access to nuanced representations will positively impact Black women as they will finally see themselves on stage not as caricatures, but as authentic.

Meanwhile, in *Silver Sparrow* the role of encourager is sometimes reversed to the client. Mrs. Grant functions as her hairdresser's encourager and insists that Laverne try on her dress for the upcoming anniversary party, despite Laverne's concerns about her weight:

> We know you are a work in progress. We can use our imagination. Am I right ladies?' She clapped her hands, nodding at the women sitting in chair no.1 and

> chair no. 2, asking for their support. They waited a moment and then started clapping, too. Mama looked at me. 'What do you think, Chaurisse?' Go for it I said.'
>
> The women in the shop were a well-behaved audience. Mrs. Grant, who seemed to enjoy clapping her hands, led them in applause as my mother entered through the back door. They marveled over the detailing at the sleeves, the embroidered bodice, the tiny seed pearls, obviously attached by hand. My mother waved off the praise, apologizing for her bulging waist. She explained that she was going to wear Grandma Bunny's 1950s girdle. 'That will be my something old,' she said…no one pointed out to her that this was just a party, not a wedding. (Jones 297-298)

This example demonstrates how the hair salon creates a space where social structures of class and image are briefly dismantled as even Mrs. Grant, characterized as pompous outside the salon takes off her airs to celebrate her hairdresser.[39] Like the ending of *`Da Kink in my Hair*, here in this novel, a sisterhood is present in the hair salon as the least likely person calls forth the rest of Laverne's clients to celebrate her. Laverne's clientele does not undermine or draw attention to her insecurities; instead they rally round her, affirming her. Tayari Jones shows readers in this example the hair salon as a significant location for fostering Black women's relationship with one another. Collins observes that Black women's relationship with one another "in the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor…affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (97). Additionally, Jones invites us to consider how the communitas affords Black women opportunities for self-love and space to affirm and celebrate

[39] Noted earlier in the passage, Laverne needs reassurance from her daughter to try on her party dress because she is hesitant about Mrs. Grant's intentions as she is usually snobbish in other settings (Jones 298).

each other as Black women, which is similar to trey anthony's healing ceremony in her final stage directions.

However, the most striking difference between *Da Kink* and *Silver Sparrow* is how Tayari Jones transforms the confessional space into a contentious space where Laverne learns about her husband's other wife, Gwendolyn, and daughter, Dana. Gwen disrupts the communal space by exposing her secret marriage to James Witherspoon in the hair salon. "[While] the customers" [are described] as uneasy in their seats [,] Mrs. Grant offer[s] to leave even though [her hair is] still wet" (Jones 301). The customers' uneasiness indicates not only concern for their hairdresser, but also marks the shift from the hair salon as a safe haven to a danger zone. Mrs. Grant's gesture to leave especially suggests she wants to shield her hairdresser from embarrassment, as she appears aware that these unexpected visitors are here to discuss a private matter. For this reason, Mrs. Grant attempts to protect her hairdresser's honor and asks Gwendolyn and Dana to go. She says, "'Just go… Take whatever you have and just go. It's not right, you coming. This is her *home*. You cannot come to her *home*'" (Jones 305; emphasis in the original). Mrs. Grant insists that these visitors at the very least should respect Laverne's space, which is not just the hair salon but also her home. Her emphasis on "home" particularly illustrates how Gwendolyn and Dana have transgressed unwritten rules about coming into someone's home as they shamelessly violate a space of comfort, safety, and sense of community. Additionally, Mrs. Grant's interjection about decency elucidates what principles are rejected in the liminal space, illustrating that social rules and conventions are suspended only to build community, not to tear it down. Mrs. Grant continues to protect Laverne and Chaurisse by asking for their family name to highlight the second family's illegitimacy. Mrs. Grant's actions, during the fiasco, reveal how the hairdresser-client relationship is overturned as she seeks to protect

Laverne's dignity in the same way Laverne protects Mary's spirit. While *Silver Sparrow* brings out how the characteristics embedded in the hair salon can be overturned and become a contentious space, the coming together is at the forefront of *`Da Kink in my Hair*. All in all, these two texts discuss ways in which the hair salon setting offers sanctuary to Black women.

The Hair Salon as a Contentious Space

While *`Da Kink in my Hair* and *Silver Sparrow* highlight more traditional hair salon spaces that are thriving, *Jazz* and *Americanah* underscore the limits of the liminal space and portray the hair salon as a contentious space where judgment can ensue on both sides. In *Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie introduces a very specific hair salon—the African hair braiding salon—to mark her protagonist's, Ifemelu's, journey home to Nigeria and end of schooling in America. While in the hair salon, Ifemelu reminisces about her tenure in America, from her former relationships to crucial lessons learned, detailed in her blog, about race and blackness in America.[40] In contrast to the two hair salons described in *`Da Kink in my Hair* and *Silver Sparrow*, the hair braiding salon is a selective communal space in which there is a particular kinship present among particularly the Africans braiders and clients. Alafaka Opuiyo observes in his article "Hair Salons offer same services, different services" the lack of interaction between the client and hair braider:

> When you walk into an African hair braiding shop …you are greeted by a sea of women braiding and twisting. Conversing in their dialect, the braiders talk amongst themselves and you wonder 'are they talking about me?'" These shops are usually not upscale establishments. Appointments are not necessarily needed; walk-ins are welcomed. For

[40] Although the hair salon space functions as the frame of the story, Adichie only depicts this setting in four chapters, which include 1, 9, 18, and 41.

your entertainment, African movies and/or African music play in the background. (B4)

Here, Opuiyo appears to imply that due to cultural and language barriers “the customer is [just] a head” and the hair braider does not “make a concerted effort to create an experience" for her clients and engages them in conversation” (B4). For these reasons in *Americanah*, most of the clients are unnamed, which is telling of the type of hair salon it is. Braids last longer, so customers do not come as regularly, or they can go to another shop for the same style. Also, the clients do not necessarily choose to establish relationships with their hair braiders, suggesting that most clients only come for a service.[41]

The hair braider’s interactions with American clients also explain to some extent why this salon is a selective communal space for Africans, as most of the other clients who are not Africans consider themselves superior to the hair braiders. The four reasons Benjamin Aigbe Okonofua provides for the divide between African Americans and African immigrants correspond to “the clash of social categorization systems and meanings” of what it means to be Black (3). For example, in the novel, a girl who requests a specific style talks down to Mariama, the hair braider, by “overenunciating” her words; the client’s actions group all African immigrants as not being able to comprehend English (Adichie 229). As a result, the hair braider cannot build community with a client who is ignorant of the hair braider’s culture and language. This interaction invites us to consider how intraracial conflict and liminality cannot coexist. In the communitas, the space must consist of complete equality, as no real trust can be established if the individuals within the space feel threatened. Thus, within this contentious space judgment ensues on both sides. Even the client that is the most sincere and described as having a

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[41] For more discussion on the aesthetic of the hair braiding salon, see *Resistance and Empowerment in Black Women's Hair Styling* by Elizabeth Johnson and “Migration and Cultural Change: Money, "Caste," Gender, and Social Status among Senegalese Female Hair Braiders in the United States” by Cheikh Anta Babou.

“pleasant” disposition is excluded. The hair braiders, Mariama and Halima, are unwilling to include her in their community not only because she is not African, but also because of her choices—she is a young single mother with two kids (125). The gossip following her departure suggests these sisters equally share the notion that American girls are promiscuous, inviting us to consider how sisterhood in the Diaspora is often complicated by cultural differences. Mariama says, “Very small girl and already she has two children’” (Adichie 126). Halima adds, “‘Oh oh oh, these people …When a girl is thirteen already she knows all the positions. Never in Afrique!’” (126). Like their clients, they too feel a sense of superiority toward Americans, making it impossible to build a communitas, reiterating the fact that no hierarchy can exist in a liminal space.

The most troubling interaction with a client in this space occurs with the young white woman, Kelsey, who wants cornrows like Bo Derek.[42] Kelsey is characterized as “aggressively friendly,” as she is forward and off-putting (232). When asked if she wants hair extensions, she makes a comment that she thought, “African American women with braided hair had such full hair!” (Adichie 234). Her comment appears to perpetuate the notion that Black women cannot grow their own long hair. Moreover, she is very ignorant about Africa’s infrastructure and harbors an ethnocentric view of the world and thinks Mariama should be appreciative she had the opportunity to flourish in America. She says to Mariama: “But you couldn’t have this business back in your country right? Isn’t it wonderful that you get to come to the U.S. and your kids can have a better life? Are women allowed to vote in your country?” (Adichie 232). She, like Bo Derek, views cornrows as just an exotic hairstyle. She shows interest in African culture, not to be

[42] Bo Derek is a white actress who famously wore cornrows in the movie *10*. When asked years later, after the Kylie Jenner controversy which ensued as a result of Jenner posting a picture of her wearing cornrows, whether she considered her cornrows a form of cultural appropriation, she dismissed the debate that cornrows are a part of Black culture with the statement “it’s just a hairstyle” and suggested that the public should focus on more serious matters regarding race.

culturally enlightened, but so she can engage in her fascination with the "other" on her own terms. She thinks she can verse herself in African culture by reading a few books prior to visiting three countries. For this reason, she views African culture as just a trend, and wants to immerse herself only in the parts of the culture that support her ideologies of the continent as monolithic and not multifaceted. Kelsey's ideologies are "destructive" to the hair salon framework as a site for Black women to resist, in this case, Western ideologies of Africa as the "dark continent" (Collins 95).[43]

Additionally, this example reveals that the hair salon setting is a selective communal space, in this case, because it is clear that Kelsey represents the white folk who seek to appropriate Black culture. Though Mariama is annoyed by Kelsey's ignorance and audacity to think she knows Mariama's plight prior to coming to America, her treatment of this client underscores how she has to mask her African self in America as she is described as smiling and compliant when answering Kelsey's intrusive questions. While Mariama's interactions with her African American client demonstrates that due to intraracial conflicts present on both sides, she cannot build a cohesive community, her interaction with Kelsey points to the fact that liminal spaces are Black-women only-spaces, not ones that white women usurp. Here, Adichie demonstrates how the Black hair salon is regarded as a site where Black women can be outside the dominion of whites, underscoring what Collins designates as "a prime location for resisting objectification as the Other" (95). For this reason, Kelsey's ideologies of African culture are unwelcome in the space.

Yet as a Nigerian, Ifemelu is a part of an African sisterhood, even though she too acts superior and, just like her American counterparts, has come for solely a service. Nevertheless,

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[43] Patricia Hill Collins observes safe spaces as sites where Black women can assert themselves "freely;" though her work focuses primarily on the African American community, I think her idea that these sites are meant to resist "dominant ideology" transfers to this context (95).

she is accepted in a way that the American clients, white or black, are not. The narrator discusses this automatic warmth Ifemelu is granted because of her ethnicity: "Halima smiled at Ifemelu, a smile that, in its warm knowingness said welcome to a fellow African, she would not smile at an American in the same way" (13). Though Ifemelu knows she is among people who would not make African jokes that because of her background she cannot complain about climate, she is not initially accepting of the established sistership between Africans in the salon. (13). For example, when they judge the young woman with kids aforementioned, their actions suggest they want to include Ifemelu in the discussion as Africans. The narrator observes:

> They looked at Ifemelu for her agreement, her approval. They expected it, in this shared space of their Africanness, but Ifemelu said nothing and turned a page of her novel. They would, she was sure, talk about her after she left. That Nigerian girl, she feels very important because of Princeton. Look at her food bar, she does not eat real food anymore. They would laugh with derision, but only mild derision, because she was still their African sister, even if she had briefly lost her way. (126)

This passage invites us to consider the importance of such a space for African women in America to come together and share cultural norms that contrast American norms and most importantly, be themselves. Although Ifemelu initially rejects this camaraderie, she recognizes that despite ethnic divisions, there is a familial connection present as the hair salon emerges as a space where she can feel at ease if she chooses.

Additionally, Adichie depicts this apparent sisterhood among Africans in one interaction with a South African client with no South African accent. The hair braiders are marveled by this client's ability to lose her accent and feel comfortable building community with her. Halima

shares a story of how her son was bullied daily by other Black boys because of his accent, but once he lost his accent, he had no more problems (230). The client's empathy for Halima not only suggests she is truly regretful that her son felt compelled to lose part of his identity to resolve his dilemma, but her earlier response to Mariama's delight that she is South African without an accent "It doesn't make much of a difference" implies that she may feel that she is still not truly accepted in this country and has been subjected to discrimination because of her origin (Adichie 230). Although their experiences of liminality as Africans in in the U.S. contrast, there is affinity present amongst these African women; they can share similar stories of their plight here as immigrants in America. The four reasons Benjamin Aigbe Okonofua provides for the divide between African Americans and African immigrants correspond to "the clash of social categorization systems and meanings" of what it means to be Black (3). Here, Adichie invites us to consider how cultural differences can trouble the hair salon as a liminal space; only when there is a mutual understanding present among Black women can the communitas take place.[44]

Despite Ifemelu's resistance to being a fully engaged participant of the liminal space, Ifemelu is privy to the cultural code-switching present in the salon and the hair braider's reluctance to yield to American standards of customer service. When Ifemelu insists that one of her twists is too tight, Aisha loosened the braid only after Mariama, the owner of the hair braiding salon, instructs her to. While Mariama suggests Aisha did not understand her request, Ifemelu knows better:

> Ifemelu could see, from Aisha's face that she understood very well. Aisha was simply a true market woman, immune to the cosmetic niceties of American customer service. Ifemelu imagined her working in a market in Dakar, like the

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[44] For more discussion on intraracial conflict, see *Black love, Black Hate: Intimate Antagonisms in African American Literature* by Felice D. Blake.

> braiders in Lagos who would blow their noses and wipe their hands on their wrappers, roughly jerk their customers' heads to position them better, complain about how full or how hard or how short the hair was, shout out to passing women, while all the time conversing too loudly and braiding too tightly. (Adichie 15-16)

Within in this example, Adichie demonstrates, again, the mutual understanding present among these African women within the hair braiding salon as a communitas. Additionally, Ifemelu's savviness as an Afropolitan allows her to "translate, adjust her compass, and move between multiple transnational cultural zones physically and psychically" (Iromuanya 172). Her specific inbetweenness allows her to enter the space and readily understand the underhanded workings of the salon. Therefore, her capacity to access a "pan-African framework" allows her to easily identify a fellow African resisting the American standards of customer service (173).

Although Ifemelu knows she is connected to the hairdressers in the space automatically, she rejects this camaraderie and focuses on the limits of the hair braiding salon as a liminal space. From the start, she is overcritical of the hair braiding salon's lack of basic amenities and repulsed by her hair braider Aisha, who is described as having discolored skin that looked infectious (12). The hairdresser/client relationship and conversation does not start pleasantly. Aisha and Ifemelu argue about which hair color Aisha should use on Ifemelu's hair and why Ifemelu doesn't get a relaxer. Ifemelu becomes annoyed that Aisha relies on limited resources that tell her ethnic Igbos only marry other Igbos. She is also irritated that Aisha has yielded to America's ignorance about Africa and does not identify the country she is talking about.[45] While

[45] Solomon C. Madubuike in "Culture, Gender and Identity: Images and Realities in Igbo Community, Nigeria" underscores the importance of ethnicity when selecting a suitable partner and states, "Igbo tradition [is] characterized by collective solidarity of people who share common customs and beliefs" (47). Note that the Igbo are

their contentious relationship may be grounded in their ethnic divisions, their disagreements are also representative of the different phases of immigrant life and subsequent social classes they find themselves in. Julie Iromuanya identifies the apparent tension between Ifemelu and Aisha as a rift between "two communities of African immigrant women-- those of the working class and those of the middle class" (171). For example, Ifemelu is well-adjusted and highly successful in America, so she can negate American standards of professionalism and beauty, while Aisha is struggling to adjust to American life and adopts American mores to survive. Within this setting, Julie Iromuanya elucidates that the social mores Ifemelu has adopted as the norm "are decentered and nonnormative in the locus of the hair-braiding salon" (172). For this reason, their differences compel Ifemelu not to be open to the space; although she benefits from being in it as she ignores Aisha's questions, she can reflect on her journey in America as a non-American Black. Different occurrences in the salon serve as a catalyst for her reflection. For example, Aisha's comment that her hair is "hard" makes her think back to her mother cutting her beautiful hair as part of her conversion to a charismatic sect of Christianity (Adichie 49). Here, she associates "hard" with beautiful to highlight her mother's many religious conversions from being a free-spirited woman known for her beautiful, long locks to a person obsessed with religious practices that impact her health (Her mother fast excessively to becoming malnourished) and disconnects her from her daughter (51-54). Nonetheless, the six hours spent in the hair salon allow her the time not only to reflect on her vast experiences in America, but also sort out her thoughts of what these experiences evoke.

Nevertheless, not only do the hairdressers create in the space, Ifemelu, too, can create in this space. While she criticizes Aisha for adhering to American standards, Ifemelu needs to be

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just one of many dozen ethnic groups in West Africa; other groups include the Yoruba, Fulani, Akan, and Wolof, to name a few.

accepted by her fellow African sisters. So, she fabricates narratives of herself to not only make herself feel superior to the hair braiders' immigrant experiences, but also to establish credibility with her African audience. When she lies about how many years she has been in America, "the new respect slipped into Aisha's eyes" (18). Altering the reason she was moving back home from finding work there to the story that she is marrying her boyfriend there suits and yields to the traditional norms of her audience. Through their interaction, Adichie also shows readers that despite Ifemelu's resistance of the camaraderie present in the hair braiding salon, she wants to belong and be affirmed. For example, when Aisha suggests that "Nigerian film is good," Ifemelu feels a small sense of pride as the compliment deviates from prevailing stereotypes of Nigerians as crooks by other Africans and non-Africans alike (16). Ifemelu explains her delight at this compliment: "Ifemelu thought little of Nollywood films, with their exaggerated histrionics and their improbable plots, but she nodded in agreement because to hear "'Nigeria'" and "'good'" in the same sentence was a luxury, even coming from this strange Senegalese woman, and she chose to see in this an augury of her return home" (16). Aisha's compliment not only serves as a good omen of her decision to return home, it also subtly reveals Ifemelu's insecurities about her Nigerian heritage, demonstrating that a part of her desires to build community with fellow Africans. Adichie includes this compliment as a way in for Aisha to build genuine trust and camaraderie with Ifemelu. Unlike Sherelle, who remains closed to the hair salon as a communal space in *`Da Kink in my Hair*, Ifemelu becomes open to the possibility of building community with Aisha.

Later, Adichie depicts the hair salon setting as a community where social barriers can be eliminated. Once Ifemelu fully relates to Aisha's unpleasant immigrant experience, she experiences an epiphany: "Suddenly Ifemelu's irritation dissolved, and in its place, a gossamered

sense of kinship grew, because Aisha would have asked if she were not an African, and in this new bond, she saw yet another augury of her return home" (Adichie 450-451). Really hearing the struggle Aisha has undergone to retrieve immigration documents and knowing that Aisha's transparency about the ordeal is because they are fellow Africans compel Ifemelu not only to help Aisha convince one of her Igbo boyfriends to marry, but also have her aunt diagnose Aisha's skin condition. Yet, Adichie describes their bond as "gossamered," implying that this bond is ephemeral. This description invites us to consider the possibilities of liminality even in a mostly transactional space can take place. Just as the hairdresser-client relationship is overturned in *Silver Sparrow*, Adichie subverts the relationship between Aisha, the hair braider, and Ifemelu in that the client is able to offer the hair braider help and counsel.

Before leaving the salon, her full acceptance of Aisha reassures her that she has made the right decision to journey home to Nigeria. Adichie's repetition of the word "augury" demonstrates how the unlikely braider/patron relationship forecasts Ifemelu's journey home as a good decision. In the first instance, Aisha's compliment, not readily given to Nigerians, functions as good sign and the second instance when Ifemelu feels a genuine connection towards Aisha, she knows her trip home is destined. While Adichie's inclusion of this moment demonstrates how the hair salon can become a space that eliminates social barriers and a reflective site, in this case, where African women's experiences are valued, this novel largely focuses on the limitations of liminality. Intraracial conflict and class differences between African immigrants, in particular, circumscribe the hair braiding salon as a liminal space as the communitas cannot occur if individuals do not feel a sense of equal footing and solidarity. Thus, safety is an important facet of liminal spaces. Patricia Hill Collins notes that "such spaces become less 'safe' if shared with those who are not Black and female…safe spaces rely on

exclusionary practices, but their overall purpose most certainly aims for a more inclusionary, just society" (121). This insight invites us to consider the ambiguity of communal spaces. Although these spaces manifest when individuals establish solidarity with one another, one's safety is lessened when commonalities are not present, revealing its limitations.

The Home as a Replica of the Hair Salon

In Jazz, Toni Morrison presents a familiar setting for Black women in their home —the kitchen salon. Violet Trace is an unlicensed beautician who sets up shop in her kitchen or other people's homes in New York City during the 1920s.[46] Haunted by her husband's affair with a young girl, Dorcas, Violet becomes a central subject of the community's judgment after she disrupts Dorcas's funeral by stabbing her corpse. Following the incident, she loses her regular customers. While the hair salon setting becomes a contentious space as a result, it eventually emerges as a reflective space where the relationship between hairdresser/client is overturned and social barriers are eliminated.

By design, the kitchen salon automatically functions as a contentious space; there are constraints to washing hair in the house sink. The narrator emphasizes these limitations: "[T]here is no way to get that deepdown hair washing at a bathroom sink. The beauticians have it beat when it comes to that: you get to lie back instead of lean forward, you don't have to press a towel in your eyes to keep the soap water out because at a proper beauty parlor it drains down the back of your head into the sink" (18). As a result of not having the amenities available that a

[46] In *Silver Sparrow* (2001), one of Tayari Jones' minor characters, Willie Mae is a mobile hairdresser who does the hair of her close friend Gwendolyn Yarboro in the boarding house. Unlike Violet who finds herself counseled by her clients, Willie Mae provides poor counsel to Gwendolyn by encouraging her to marry James. Despite knowledge that he is already married, Willie Mae serves as witness to the wedding. This example reveals that the counsel provided in these spaces is not always fruitful.

professional would in such a space, Violet can only charge “twenty-five cents or fifty cents” (13). Therefore, losing her regular customers puts Violet in a financial bind, particularly since her husband was not going to work.

After Dorcas’ funeral, Violet’s clientele changes to night women or sex workers. The narrator observes the following shift: “Since the business of Dorcas’ funeral, …Violet carries her tools and her trade more and more into the overheated apartments of women who wake in the afternoon, pour gin in their tea and don’t care what she has done. These women always need their hair done, and sometimes pity darkens their shiny eyes and they tip her a whole dollar” (13-14). Within these customers’ homes, Violet finds solace and a space where she is not condemned for her actions. They also offer her another perspective about men and women, in particular, her husband’s extramarital affair with Dorcas. While Violet and the sex workers are demonized within their community—Violet for her actions and the night women for their line of work—within the space of her customers’ homes they are both afforded a liminal space to be without judgment. They are both afforded a liminal space for reciprocity: the sex workers are able to help her stay afloat financially, as well as have a space to retreat, and Violet is afforded a space to redirect her anger, seek comfort, and be understood.

In particular, one of these women shows her tough love, encourages her to eat, and gives her some unsolicited advice about men: “‘Men wear you down to sharp piece of gristle if you let them’” (14). Violet challenges this notion by accusing Dorcas in her description of stressing her out: “Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down to nothing. It’s these hungry girls acting like women. Not content with boys their own age, no they want somebody old enough to be their father. Switching round with lipstick, see through stockings, dresses up to their you-know-what” (14). Here, Violet appears to share a common sentiment of blaming the other

woman instead of the husband. Her customer questions this prevailing idea: “Now I reckon you going to tell me some old hateful story about how a young girl messed over you and how *he's* not to blame because *he* was just walking down the street minding *his* own business, when this little twat jumped on his back and dragged him off to her bed. Save your breath” (14; emphasis in the original). By placing emphasis on the masculine pronoun, the customer offers another perspective to Violet and urges her to reassess how plausible her statement is about women and consider her husband's role in luring a young girl. Just as Miss Thompson offers Selina a new perspective regarding her family, this sex worker creates a woman-centered space for Violet to vent about her man troubles and, in turn, she strongly discourages Violet from blaming the other women. In this gesture, she not only advocates for women, but also engages opportunities for self-love within this space. By challenging patriarchal notions that women are “‘natural enemies'” and adversaries, she ensures that sisterhood is present in this liminal space (hooks 43).

However, in the end, once the customers attain particulars about the present state of Violet's marriage and the affair, she and Violet both agree that Violet is in “deep trouble” because her husband is still in love with a dead woman (15). Nonetheless, this conversation forces Violet to consider her husband's part in the affair and his fixation, as well as reflect on her growing obsession of Dorcas. Here in this exchange, liminality emerges as a space for the sex workers to issue a caveat, prompting Violet to redirect her focus, view the affair differently and even reexamine her actions and thoughts that may put her in a potentially dangerous, situation. She recognizes later with Alice, Dorcas's aunt, the importance of this relationship as she defends their livelihood. Most importantly, this conversation demonstrates how the hair salon setting is akin to the communitas and emerges as a site for the sex workers to not only build community, but also affords them a space to have candid conversations with Violet.

While the armchair psychology of the hairdresser/client is reversed when Violet establishes a relationship with unlikely clientele who offers her new ways of looking at her husband's affair, a similar scenario occurs when she establishes an unlikely friendship with the adulteress' aunt, Alice Manfred. Even though she does not style Alice's hair, Alice's house replicates the hair salon setting in that it allows two unlikely women to have community that allows them to be vulnerable and ultimately find healing for their broken souls.

However initially, Joe and Violet, for different reasons, convert Alice's house into a contentious space. Joe initiates an inappropriate relationship with her niece while selling cosmetics in her home, while Violet's obsession with Dorcas drives her to stalk Alice in her home. Eventually Alice lets her in for possibly an apology, but she does not get one. Instead she gets something more— an unusual sister-girl to spend time with. Upon the first time Alice lets Violet in her home, she emphatically asks Violet "'What *could you* want from me?'" (Morrison 80; emphasis in the original). Violet's casual response "'Oh, right now I just want to sit down on your chair," foregrounds how Violet's frequent visits to Alice's house is a replica of the hair salon setting (80). In the same way that the hair salon becomes an oasis for Black women to restore their spirits, Alice's house becomes a site for Violet to regain strength, retreat, and relax.

From their first interactions with each other, the reader learns that Violet and Alice are both seeking something. Alice not only wants an apology, she also wants to know Joe's motive for murdering her niece and Violet's motive for mutilating her niece's corpse. Violet just wants to find somewhere to "rest [and] a place where [she] can just sit down" (Morrison 81). Additionally, Alice's view of Violet as a crazed woman changes within their first interaction: she realizes that she is definitely "odd acting… but not bloody-minded" (81). Here, the initiated

dialogue in their first encounter perhaps compels Alice to change her view of Violet as a monster, seeing Violet's humanity (Collins 279).

Just as the hair braiding salon becomes a space where social barriers are eliminated between Ifemelu and Mariama, this realization automatically prompts Alice to express her thoughts freely and asks Violet intrusive questions, demonstrating how Violet's frequent visits in the space eliminate social barriers and suspends social mores. The narrator notes, "When Violet came to visit…something opened up…The thing was how Alice felt and talked in her company. Not like she did with other people. With Violent she was impolite. Sudden. Frugal. No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them" (83). Within this space, Alice takes off the cloak of respectability; she can be herself. Violet's ability to act out her feelings despite the consequences invites Alice to respond with a lack of decorum. For example, the narrator notes in her second visit that "[Violet] looked so bad Alice wanted to slap her" (82). Instead of resorting to violence, Alice, who is initially characterized as timid prior to meeting Violet, issues a command: "'Take that dress off and I'll stitch up your cuff'" (82). Her offer to stich up her dress reveals how the hairdresser/client relationship is overturned in that just as the night women offer Violet advice Alice uses the ethic of caring framework (Collins 216). By offering Violet her alteration services, Alice focuses her attention on Violet's individual needs and there is also a space for Black beauty culture. Moreover, another model of sisterhood is again evoked within the space; though their relationship is combative, it still is reminiscent of a sister-girl relationship.

Not only is Alice's house a space where social barriers are eliminated, it also emerges as a reflective space where they become each other's muses—to co-create and inspire each other to be better human beings. Their adversarial, yet intimate relationship grows into one that is

described with ease and comfort. While Alice irons or does alterations for Violet, Violet sits. These activities prompt these women to reflect on for example, the art of ironing, or be in dialogue with the self. This liminal space allows these women to do as Quashie suggests, move toward "being enough" and recognize that they can achieve wholeness, despite their imperfections (78). More specifically to attain selfhood, these women use liminality to reflect on who they have become, retreat, and later make informed decisions that include recreating their lives: Violet chooses to renew her relationship with her husband and Alice moves back to Springfield, Illinois. Their choices to return back to the realities they tried to escape is significant to thinking about how the communitas can be a site where Black women can receive direction and confront their realities with a different mindset in order forge a different path. In all, liminality aids two people who are fundamentally lonely. Even though Violet does not serve as Alice's hairdresser, they both find solace in each other. Therefore, Alice's house is akin to the hair salon space because the dwelling is integral to both women's healing and there are acts of beauty culture and creativity. Though Morrison reveals that the hair salon space is not always foolproof, she shows readers how it, and spaces like it, can fill a void, again underscoring the notion that Black women need each other to survive.

Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is a framing narrative that reveals how concrete, physical spaces of familiarity can be sites for Black women to have community and be exposed, raw, and honest. In particular, I demonstrate in this chapter how the hair salon emerges as a hub for Black women. Toni Morrison, trey anthony, Tayari Jones, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in their varied depictions of the space as cohesive or contentious, all demonstrate how the hair salon replicates the provisional phase anthropologist Victor Turner refers to as the

communitas, emerging as a space for Black women to leave renewed, hopeful of a better tomorrow, and more reflective of new perspectives.

In many ways, the hairdresser creates the liminal space described; as a result, the hairdresser-client relationship of Miss Thompson and Selina serves as a model pairing for how this relationship manifests itself in *`Da Kink in my Hair*, *Silver Sparrow*, *Jazz*, and *Americanah*. In similar ways, Novelette of *`Da Kink in my Hair* and Laverne of *Silver Sparrow* create a space that essentially fulfills the needs of Black women, providing counsel and a sounding board. The hair salon settings, however in *Jazz* and *Americanah* display in more depth the constraints of the liminal space and the hairdresser-client relationship is overturned. The hair braiding salon in *Americanah* is a selective communal space where intraracial conflict only allows particular identities to enter the space with ease. Though Ifemelu is readily accepted in the space as an African, she initially rejects being part of the space, but ultimately is transformed by the space as a result of her interactions with one of the hair braiders. Although Violet Trace of *Jazz* is an unlicensed beautician who sets up shop in people's homes, Violet's clientele becomes her comfort and gives her another perspective of women and men. Also, Alice's home becomes a replica of the hair salon site as Violet and Alice establish community and an unlikely friendship with one another. Overall, each respective writer reveals how this multifaceted setting becomes a place where Black women can go for a service and leave with their spirits renewed and restored.

Furthermore, to reiterate, Patricia Hill Collins elucidates that community is essential to Black women's survival when she asserts that "people become more human and empowered primarily in the context of community" (261). The aforementioned writers seek to show how the hair salon emerges as the one site where Black women's relationships take center stage and their experiences of survival are acknowledged. In all, as these writers consider how the hair salon

functions as a truth telling space for Black women to reveal their innermost feelings. They invite us to consider the need for Black women to inhabit communal spaces that respect and understand them as more than strong, resilient women, but also as women who need to emote their feelings without being scrutinized or judged. The hair salon setting in different ways communicates to Black women "I matter," an affirmation vital to their wellbeing. Ultimately, the hair salon motif in all four texts are representative of a larger tradition in Black women's literature that invites us to consider how Black women's writing examines and Black women possess ingenuity to seek out their own "gardens" and also build community (Walker 241).[47]

[47] The term "garden" is a nod to Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" in which she argues that Black women are in fact creative spirits who seek out spaces to create in "unlikely places" (Walker 239).

Chapter Four: The Paradox of Home

The YOUNGER living room would be a comfortable and well-ordered room if it were not for a number of indestructible contradictions to this state of being. Its furnishings are typical and undistinguished and their primary feature now is that they have clearly had to accommodate the living of too many people for too many years—and they are tired. Still, we can see that at some time, a time probably no longer remembered by the family (except perhaps for MAMA), the furnishings of this room were actually selected with care and love and even hope—and brought to this apartment and arranged with taste and pride.

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)[1]

In Who Set You Flowin': The African American Migration Narrative, Farah Jasmine Griffin points out that Black women often forge a safe space in the home "in the hope of providing a space where dreams are possible" for its inhabitants, especially in the years after the Great Migration (110). Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) by playwright Lorraine Hansberry has such hopes for her family. In this play, Hansberry echoes the questions Langston Hughes asks in his poem "Harlem" (1951), most notably, what happens to a dream deferred [of equality and freedom]? In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry responds to Hughes' query with the story of a poor Black family living on the South Side of Chicago awaiting a life insurance check that could help them escape poverty.

As noted in the epigraph above, the themes and ideas introduced in the opening stage directions are focused on the living room setting, which is generally a site where women have provided character to the home. The living room is a liminal space because it is often kept off limits from its inhabitants and tends to be the most immaculate room due to these conventions. These conventions involve strict rules: the family can only enter the space for special occasions. Therefore, the living room is a place of welcome for guests, particularly those new to the house. Generally, no one lives in the room, but it is the space for introductions, niceties, and the coming together of family, friends, and guests. Elizabeth Alexander in *The Black Interior* (2004)

[1] Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin in the Sun*. 1959. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 23.

introduces the conventions of the living room space as a space of projection for Black women and Alexander's own heritage when she discusses the care and thought her mother put into decorating the living room. She suggests her mother's arrangement of the living room "speak[s] of her aesthetic and her eye— an aesthetic made collective as it speaks for my family to announce that this is our home, sacred and beautiful" (Alexander 4). The living room space is where the "mainstream imaginary exist[s] as fixed properties deemed 'real'" (5). It is a site that grants Black women power to evolve beyond their circumstances and situations.

With these conventions in mind, Hansberry describes the potentiality of the room as "comfortable" and "well-ordered" but, unfortunately, present circumstances, characterized as "indestructible contradictions," impede the possibility for the Younger family to adhere to the idealized living room setup, as the room has more essential functions (Hansberry 23). In spite of the contradictions, the stage directions reveal that the living room still functions as a liminal site for Black women in particular to tap into their inner creative selves and "reveal who [the family] is" (Alexander 4). In this case, family matriarch Lena Younger is cast as the enhancer of the dwelling as she is described as selecting the furnishings of the room with "care," "love," and "hope" (Hansberry 23). Although these three nouns are all abstract concepts, "hope" uniquely resonates (23). The audience can visualize how Lena Younger may show "care" and "love" in her placement of the furnishings with, for example, pictures and whatnots, but displaying "hope" is more difficult (23). By using the word "hope" to portray how Lena arranges the furnishings, Hansberry engages further the living room concept as a space that "reveals the interior wishes and hopes of its inhabitants" (Hansberry 23; Alexander 14). Additionally, her careful arrangement of the furnishings in the room "with taste and pride" reveals that the family is grounded in unbending principles: within this space, the Younger Family figures out who they

are (23). Twentieth-century playwright Lorraine Hansberry invites readers to consider the living room as a trope for how Black women use liminality to particularly designate spaces for themselves in the home not only to create and assert their identities, but also to realize their dreams for their families. Hansberry's text is formative and foundational in thinking about particular value systems embedded in Black families. By providing an inside-look of Black family life, Hansberry dismantles myths that the Black family is deviant and underscores that Blackness should first and foremost be associated with humanity.[2]

Additionally, Hansberry's work invites us to consider how the home is not only central to unifying family, but also is representative of the American Dream that promises opportunity, prosperity, and upward mobility. For this reason, her vivid portrayal of what happens when dreams are continuously delayed invites us to consider how Black women use liminality to manage these "indestructible contradictions" present in the home (Hansberry 27). The play charges us to deliberate on what home ownership means for both Black men and women and prompts us to consider how racism, classism, and patriarchy complicate or thwart Black men and women's chances of achieving the Dream of home ownership. Owning a home for Lena and Ruth Younger has similar connotations of keeping the family together and making plans for a fresh start. However, Walter Younger's focus is not on owning a home; instead, he wants to invest in a business with hopes that the profits will solve all his money woes. Interestingly enough, most of the conversations in *A Raisin in the Sun* take place in the living room and it is

[2] Although racial discrimination is an integral part of *A Raisin in the Sun*, some scholars and critics oftentimes want to focus solely on the universal themes to avoid the discussion of race altogether. Fittingly, before the play opened in Broadway, Hansberry wrote a letter to her mother conveying the play's significance: "Mama, [*A Raisin in the Sun*] is a play that tells the truth about people, Negroes and life and I think it will help a lot of people to understand how we are just as complicated as they are — and just as mixed up — but above all, that we have among our miserable and downtrodden ranks — people who are the very essence of human dignity" (qtd. in Freedman C13). Here, she considers the long trajectory of Blacks fighting for visibility and validation and conveys that her work continues, to this day, the project of demonstrating the full humanity of African Americans.

within this liminal space where the Younger Family not only find themselves individually, but also they collectively eventually recognize who they are as a family.[3] Though the home is often depicted as a complicated site of oppression and family, it still emerges as site in which Black women use liminality to negotiate this duality and manage to create and conceive of something different. Lena Younger's capacity to designate a space for not only herself, but also the family to draw inward underscores the significance of the home as not only a gendered space, but also a site for Black women to be, hope, and realize their dreams. Since the publication of Hansberry's play, Black women's literature continues to not only explore the duality of the living room as a site, but also the emotional attachments tied to the concept of home.

By revisiting the themes and ideas set forth in the introductory stage directions of *A Raisin in the Sun* regarding the living room setting, I would like to add to the conversation and frame my chapter around the following queries: How do Black women writers negotiate the duality of the home as both a site of oppression and family and still designate spaces for Black women in the home? How do Black women writers use liminality and the concept of the living room as a trope to create feelings of safety and security in the home? What do Black women writers invite us to consider about rootedness and place? I contend that four representative texts, *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) by Rita Dove, a poetry collection; *Intimate Apparel* (2004) by Lynn Nottage, a play; and two novels, *Home* (2012) by Toni Morrison and *The Turner House* (2015) by Angela Flournoy all invite us to consider how Black women writers employ the living room as a trope to negotiate the duality of the home and illustrate out how the home is a site of rootedness. Using *A Raisin in the Sun* as a framing narrative, my final chapter examines the

[3] For example, Beneatha explores her African identity and even considers marrying Asagai and practicing medicine in Africa. Walter, on the other hand, sees investing in a liquor business with his friend as an opportunity to be his own boss and provide for his family, yet realizes the limitations. Eventually however, Walter Lee acts with dignity and leads his family into their new home in Clybourne Park.

various ways Black women create feelings of safety and security in their homes, one type of liminal space to create and illuminate their selves. Additionally, I explore how the concept of the living room serves as a trope for Black women to practice creative license in the home. Ultimately, I argue that reflecting on how Black women function as architects and creators within the houses they reside in invites us to consider how Black women use liminality to figuratively build a "home" and designate spaces for themselves to be and assert their identities despite the oppression they may contend with in the house.

In the next section, I will define key terms the four texts will engage regarding the home as a liminal space: liminality, Home, and the Black family.

Liminality

While I engaged the concept of liminality in Chapter three as an alternative way to create and feel a sense of community in communal spaces, in this chapter I consider how Black women designate liminal spaces in the home to create and illuminate their selves. Home often emerges as the first base where Black women come to voice through what Audre Lorde describes as poetry— "a revelatory distillation of experience…in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight"—a medium for accessing her emotions (37). She continues:

> If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as luxury, then we give up the core—the fountain—of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds. For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt—of examining what those ideas feel like being lived on Sunday morning at 7 a.m., after brunch, during wild love, making war, giving birth, mourning our dead—

> while we suffer the old longings, battle the old warnings and fears of becoming silent and impotent and alone, while we taste new possibilities and strengths. (39)

Here, Lorde underscores the mundane dealings of living in a domestic space as woman and concludes that poetry is vital for women to express their selves, release, and legitimize their existence. I argue that her charge that women should use poetry to emote their innermost feelings is akin to how Black women delineate liminal spaces within the home to draw inward and reveal their selves, as Lorde, like Walker, revels in Black women's creativity in the quotidian. Within their homes, Black women possess the ingenuity to create, despite the mundane.

Two liminal spaces in the home are the kitchen table and the living room, which both serve dual functions. The kitchen table and living room are both liminal spaces in that its formal functions include activities such as prepping food, eating, and welcoming guests, respectively. However, the lesser-known functions of both areas in the home emerge as a space for Black women to create and establish their subjectivity. Historian Jessica Marie Johnson refers to the kitchen table as a "space black diasporic women operate on, around, and through" (51). The kitchen table has been characterized as a key site for Black women and has been theorized often by Black feminist scholars as a meeting place for Black women to converse and relate to one another.[4] Therefore, for the purpose of this project, I am focusing on the living room as a liminal space for particularly demonstrating how Black women tap into their inner creative selves. Of note, women are more likely tasked with the job of decorating the living room space. Although the living room's presentation is usually distinguished by class, it is customarily the nicest room in the house and used solely for special occasions (Alexander 13). I am most interested in centralizing my chapter on the living room space as another integral site of Black feminist

[4] For example, Paule Marshall in "From Poets from the Kitchen" (1983) refers to "poets" as housewives gathered around a large, kitchen table sharing stories and discussing politics (627-628).

geography to unpack and think through the apparent intentionality present to create the site. Elizabeth Alexander describes "the living room [as a space] where we see Black imagination made visual, a private space that inevitably reverberates against the garish public images usually out of control" (9). Thus, the living room emerges as a safe haven for Black women's expression; within this space, Black women are free to imagine, dream, and to explore possibilities for themselves and their families.

While the introductory stage directions of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* underscore the significance of the living room as "a site of creation" the other texts I use do not explicitly talk about the living room as a space. Though these texts do not focus on the living room as a physical site, I argue in this chapter that certain rooms in the house distribute particular power to Black women so that they in turn can make room for themselves and practice creative agency (Alexander 13). For example, Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* and Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* demonstrate how an "unfettered dream space" can exist in the interiors of the home (5). Dove's Beulah designates liminal spaces in the home to imagine and ultimately escape the monotony of domestic undertakings. Similarly, Nottage discloses the many layers of intimacy in the bedroom to reveal how it is a liminal site for introspection and self-discovery. Additionally, both Toni Morrison's *Home* and Angela Flournoy's *The Turner House* demonstrate how the home overall not only houses collective memories of its inhabitants, but it also emerges as a liminal site where their protagonists return for sanctuary. In particular, Morrison shows how Black women use liminality to designate spaces in the home for healing and restoration, while Flournoy reveals how Lelah, in particular, uses liminality in her natal home as a gateway for starting anew. In all, I show how the living room concept underscores how Black women use

liminality to forge spaces for themselves in the home not only to realize their dreams for their families and themselves, but also to look inward.

Home

While the house is a physical marker of rootedness and place, the home can connote an emotional feeling because it is a place where kinship is present, and one can feel she belongs. Nostalgia is often associated with the home, particularly for its adult children who have left the home. For example, the term "home" is generally used to describe one's childhood home and current residence of one's parents. In the Younger Family, there is a sense of familiarity, kinship, and intimacy present in their morning rituals. Men and women are often separated by traditional patriarchal roles that delineate particular spaces. For example, the kitchen is generally considered a domesticated space if we consider the traditional role that the mother and/or wife cooks and cleans. Of note, Ruth and Lena Younger adhere to the roles regarded as woman's work, while Beneatha challenges what women are "supposed" to do within this space. Even so, some white feminist scholars have challenged the notion of the home as a site of empowerment. Patricia Hill Collins, however, demonstrates that Black Feminist thinkers ground their ideas regarding Black women's work and familial relationships around an opposing framework that is more nuanced. She declares, "Rather than trying to explain why Black women's work and family patterns deviate from the seeming normality of the traditional family ideal, a more fruitful approach lies in challenging the very constructs of work and family themselves" (54). Although Black women's work has been limited and/or forced due to slavery and systemic oppression, Collins elucidates how a more fruitful discussion should examine the ways in which Black women have found ways to transform the space to benefit their needs. Hazel Carby emerges as a major figure

that also challenges notions of the domestic in Black women's literature. In her text, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Carby points out that "[Black women] had to define a discourse of Black womanhood which would not only address their exclusion from the ideology of true womanhood" (Carby 32).[5] For example, in this chapter I illustrate how Black women refashion the home as not only a domestic space, but a liminal space to challenge normative ideals of womanhood, and achieve self-actualization As Carby suggests, Black women push back against these sentiments and view the home as a safe place for its inhabitants to demonstrate its humanity fully, even while they contend with its patriarchy.

Moreover, Alice Walker points out that Black women who create have "divided loyalties" between home, work, self, and family (236). She continues, "For her so hindered and intruded upon in so many ways, being an artist has still been a daily part of her life. This ability to hold on, even in very simple ways, is work black women have done for a very long time" (408). In highlighting Black women's capacity to survive, Walker reveals how Black women strategically map out spaces in the home to benefit their needs to express and create.

Additionally, in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990) bell hooks underscores the home as a gendered space and suggests,

> In our young minds houses belonged to women, were their special domain, not as property, but as places where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls. There we learned dignity, integrity of being; there we learned to have faith.

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[5] The Cult of True Womanhood, defined by Barbara Welter, closely aligns womanhood with the home and family and relies on four virtues—piety, domesticity, purity, and submissiveness. Such a value system ultimately excludes enslaved women and working-class women.

> The folks who made this life possible, who were our primary guides and teachers, were black women. (77)

For Black women, home is the one site where its inhabitants are protected, validated, and affirmed: "it was about the construction of a safe place …it was there on the inside…most often created and kept by black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits" (hooks 78). Though the space is gendered, creating traditional constructs for both men and women, the contemporary writers that I examine use the living room as a trope to show how their respective protagonists use liminality to map out a home for their selves, despite internal challenges.

Nevertheless**,** while there are many aphorisms associated with the home as endearing and nostalgic, the concept of home is often laden with ambivalent meanings and expectations for Black women. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) hooks also suggests that the idea of home is ambiguous as it consists of "locations," places where one must learn to feel comfortable with her position and open to new perspectives (hooks 148). But for the purposes of this project and chapter, I am engaging the way that she discusses the homeplace as a site of empowerment for Black women in her later work *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1990). In this text, hooks describes the home as a site where characterizations of Black women are most prevalent and a place where Black families can seek refuge from a world that dehumanizes them. According to bell hooks, what has historically distinguished Black women who operate in a white supremacist society from Black men is the tension between providing a service as a domestic to whites outside the home and mustering just enough strength and vigor to nurture their own families. Lena Younger's decision to purchase a home is centered on this notion—she wanted to "give something to her own" as she make plans to save some of the

insurance money for Beneatha's education, she says "ain't nothing going to touch that part of it. Nothing" (hooks, *Yearning* 84; Hansberry 44) Here, Lena not only invests in Beneatha's education, she has hopes that owning a home will impress upon her family a sense of pride. Lena's gesture points to bell hooks' charge for us to recognize Black women's conscious effort to use liminality to forge a "homeplace as the site for resistance" against racism and poverty (hooks, *Yearning* 87). I, too, will reflect upon the many ways Black women not only seek to designate a space to validate her family's existence, but also consider the ways in which they use liminality to map out rooms of their own within their homes.

It is important to also note how the very concept of home is a paradox. On the one hand, the home can be a site for resistance to the status quo for Black women. For example, the Younger Family's final decision to move to Clyborne Park becomes a way to challenge white supremacy. On other hand, the house can be a site of oppression where its inhabitants operate in a rigid family structure. Additionally, what is of interest about the home is whatever happens in its setting is contained and protected, and is often not made public, a circumstance that highlights its contradictions. Thus, underscoring these contradictions is significant to thinking about how the very essence of the home is liminal as it is termed as a site of both oppression and mirth, a space for creativity as well as triteness, and a source of identity and rigidity.[6] Even so, the home with its many contradictions nevertheless remains a site for Black women to not only build solidarity and instill a sense of pride in the family they hold dear, but also flourish and assert their selves. In my final chapter, I will use *A Raisin in the Sun* as an ur-text to consider how

[6] Several instances in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) describe the paradox of the home. While it is clear that Walter Lee and Ruth Younger are devoted to one another, Walter Lee undermines his wife frequently in conversations regarding money and the ways of the world. Though Lena Younger's loving presence emerges as the glue that keeps the family together, she ultimately makes the decisions in the household as the matriarch as no one can freely express values that oppose hers.

contemporary Black women writers view the paradox of the home and illustrate how Black women designate spaces within their home to escape the banality of their lives.

The Black Family

The Black Family is multifaceted, complicated by race and gender roles and particular value systems. While it seeks to sustain, validate, and define the existence of its members, the family is also a site of oppression. Oftentimes, the family's identity is circumscribed by particular value systems that consist of decency, pride, respectability, and faith. Susana M. Morris considers how Black women writers discuss what she terms as "the role of ambivalence" in the Black Family (9). She observes, "Black women writers configure ambivalence in a variety of ways, perhaps most notably through portrayals of familial relationships marked by intense notions of duty, honor, and respect coupled with thinly veiled enmity, indifference, estrangement, repression, and even outright domination and/or violence" (Morris 9-10). This paradox present in the Black familial relationships is a significant theme for Black women writers and invites us to consider how Black women use liminality to contend with the described contradictions present in the home (9).[7]

While patriarchal roles exist in shaping the family, Black families have sought to challenge the system by coming up with flexible, malleable roles of family life. For example, Lena Younger serves as matriarch of the family, making the final decisions for the family. Black women, however, have been assigned a punishment for their will to work in whatever capacity they can to support their families. Even so, it is unclear that Black folk in the United States ever had true patriarchal arrangements, because of slavery. Frances Smith Foster, in her

[7] For example in *A Raisin in the Sun*, though Lena Younger functions as mediator in most cases, her values are what counts in the home as Beneatha cannot freely express her values on religion and Ruth cannot openly get an abortion.

groundbreaking text *Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Marriage and the Making of African America* (2010), challenges prevailing narratives about the rarity of marriage among African Americans particularly during the antebellum era. She says, The pages of black newspapers and magazines illustrate that contrary to popular belief, African American marriage, even during antebellum times, was frequent, that family ties were strong, and that love was both an adolescent fantasy and a fulfilling adult reality." (Foster xv). Thus, Foster dispels sentiments that this reversal of traditional roles aforementioned has emasculated the Black male and mythologized the Black male.

Nonetheless as I stated in chapter two, the Moynihan Report demonized Black women as emasculating and reinforced, for example, stereotypes, such as the Mammy and Sapphire. So when, in *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, Walter Lee insults Black women by suggesting they are "evil [with] small minds" and don't encourage Black men's dreams, he parrots the ideas of Moynihan Report that Black women are emasculating (27, 35). And though Moynihan readily admits that the patriarchal system is ineffective, he points out that since this is the system mainstream America is operating in, and thus Black women must adhere to the social codes embedded in the patriarchy. Subsequently, Black women's writing, such as Hansberry's play pushes back robustly against this characterization of Black families being caught up in a "tangle of pathology" (Moynihan). Though Walter suggests Black women are parochial, it is Walter Lee that has the pipe dreams of investing in a liquor store without knowing all of the logistics. The women, however, are more insightful and ambitious. Beneatha wants to be a doctor, while Lena and Ruth see the value of owning a home. In her characterizations of these Black women, Lorraine Hansberry challenges Walter Lee's misogynoir and celebrates these

women's use of liminality to find alternative ways to survive in a system that is not designed for them to flourish.

Although Lena Younger emerges as the matriarch of the Younger household, entrusting Walter Lee with the rest of the insurance money reinforces ideas that masculinity is central to Black familial experiences. Though Black women's reasons for "making a home where all black people could strive to be subjects not objects," Lena's desire to create a safe space for Walter Lee reveals to us how the fervid need to carve out a safe space void of discrimination is complicated by racism and patriarchy (hooks, *Yearning* 78). Kyriarchy, a term coined by feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, elucidates how women contribute to maintaining the social order; such a system demands the buy-in from women. While the Black family can sustain, validate, and define the existence of its members, the unit does not come without its contradictions as the family also serves as a site of oppression, often silencing its members and/or limiting the mobility, in particular, of women and children. Even at the end of the play, the gaze that trumps in the end is the male gaze. Though Lena serves as the catalyst for Walter becoming a man, it becomes apparent that he probably would have formally accepted Mr. Linder's offer if Lena did not insist that Travis stay in the room.[8] In all, this insight invites us to consider how Black women's experiences of liminality are complicated by gender oppression and kyriarchy in the home. Nonetheless, this chapter seeks to show how Black women use liminality and the living room trope to assert themselves in the home, despite the oppression present.

[8] Lena's insistence that Travis stay in the room is significant because he represents the future and his presence compels his father, Walter Younger, to think about the legacy he wants to leave his son—one of dishonor by signing the papers or one of endurance by refusing to sign the papers.

The complexities of the Black family life along with its habits, customs, and rituals are culturally unique. In all, what Lorraine Hansberry and other Black writers to follow continue to do is prompt contemporary culture and the critical discourse to collectively recognize the full humanity of Black folk and seek to align Black identity with ideas that are regarded as universal in their depictions of Black family life. For example, she addresses issues surrounding identity, socioeconomic conditions, intergenerational conflict, and moral responsibility. Undoubtedly as a result, perceptions of the Black family in the way that Hansberry fashions it in her play are fortifying for not only other Black people, but also the larger American culture.[9] Rita Dove, Toni Morrison, and Angela Flournoy take similar approaches, while Lynn Nottage's depiction of Black family life in *Intimate Apparel* greatly contrasts. Dove in *Thomas and Beulah*, Morrison in *Home*, and Flournoy in *The Turner House* generally depict a nuclear family structure to describe their respective homes. The family structure in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* consists of Esther living in a boarding house with her landlady serving as her surrogate mother. This difference is significant in revealing how the Black family may share commonalities, but the varied structure may create different outcomes. For example, many people consider the nuclear family paradigm as providing the most stability, but these writers reveal its contradictions. In *Thomas and Beulah*, Beulah lives in a stable environment, but is unsatisfied, prompting her to use liminality to mind travel and escape the monotony of domestic life. Though Lelah of *The Turner House* grew up in a relatively stable environment, her gambling addiction thwarts her life; as a result, she has to return home in order to reassess the tools of liminality she needs to

[9] The Obama Family is reminiscent of such a quintessential family. Additionally, the sitcom era of the 80s and 90s sought to change the narrative about the Black family and interrogate notions that Blackness cannot be aligned with marriage, family, and love. Though Bill Cosby's legacy is now tarnished by his recent conviction of sexual assault, characterizations of Black family life of the Huxtable Family are indelibly etched as part of the American collective memory. To name a few, other television shows of the era that led conversations about showing more full characterizations of Black family life include: *Family Matters*, *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Sister, Sister,* and *Moesha*.

draw inward and survive. Moreover, *Home* by Toni Morrison challenges the notion that a nuclear family is the most suitable arrangement as she details the harsh childhood the Moneys endure. Conversely, Lynn Nottage's play deviates from the nuclear family structure and in some respects redefines notions of motherhood and intimacy, particularly in the relationship between Esther, the resident of the boarding house and Mrs. Dickson, her land lady. In all, these variances described invite us to consider the role of liminality for Black women in the home manifest itself in diverse ways.

Literature Reviews

Thomas and Beulah by Rita Dove chronicles the lives of an African American couple surviving the Great Depression. In this collection, Dove recounts their stories through a series of lyric poems first from the perspective of the husband, Thomas and later from the perspective of the wife, Beulah. Inspired by her grandparents' lives to write this work, Rita Dove was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for this collection in 1987.

Most scholars of *Thomas and Beulah* center their discussions around Rita Dove's "expression of history as not only cosmopolitan but universalizing" (Righelato 774). Yet, they recognize the shift in her work with this collection as a "turn to racially authentic themes" in part because the collection is a fictional account of her grandparents' lives (Quashie, "The Black Woman as Artist" 397). Even so, these scholars suggest that Dove seeks to recover the history of African Americans differently through her ability to "work from different angles" (Dungy and Dove 1032). For example, Therese Steffen argues that "Rita Dove counteracts [the] stereotype of black family disruption" by moving beyond discussions of how slavery negatively impacts Black people and focusing on other pivotal moments of history for African Americans, such as The

Great Migration (95). Though Dove's focus is on giving voice to her grandparents' trajectory, many scholars observe that she does not explicitly underscore the impact race, class, and gender has on Thomas and Beulah. Helen Vendler observes that her use of lyric poetry emerges as "Dove's rethinking of the lyric poet's relation to the history of blackness"; instead "she lets the raw data (perceived by a man and by his wife at the same epoch and in the same circumstances) become pieces for a reader to assemble" (393). For example, Dove discusses individual memories within the historical context for example, The Great Migration, The Great Depression, and Million Man March, to name a few.[10]

In fact, Rita Dove recognizes herself as

> part of a tradition [of] growing …African American poets…finally exploring the freedom to write about anything [they] choose without it necessarily having to be about 'being black'…to have the poetry emanate from the entire person, with race, gender, age, et cetera emerging in the poems as needed, as they color the life, without such distinctions being the sole point of the poem. (Dungy and Dove 1039)

Here, Dove encourages other Black writers to practice creative license in their poetry and avoid being burdened by particular writing expectations explaining her disbelief in "boundaries" (qtd. in Steffen 6). Even so, Steffen observes that "borders and barriers prevail…in her work [and] are there for [Dove] to revise, overcome, or enliven with new meaning" (Steffen 47). For example, Dove evokes the life experiences of her grandparents, as well as relates the individual experiences of Thomas and Beulah. Nonetheless, her ability to "transgress boundaries of space and time" is signature to her work (Steffen 26) In *Thomas and Beulah* (1986), Dove recounts the

[10] For more on this discussion, see *Rita Dove's Cosmopolitanism* (2003) by Malin Pereira, *Forms of Expansion: Recent Long Poems by Women* (1997) by Lynn Keller, and *Crossing Color: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove's Poetry, Fiction, and Drama* (2001) by Therese Steffen.

lives of her grandparents by giving readers "both sides of the marriage—the husband's and wife's (Dungy and Dove 1032)

Some scholars observe that most discussion primarily examines how Thomas' trajectory in the collection is informed by the "unrecovered loss" of his childhood friend Lem while Beulah's life is informed by "unfulfilled promise" (qtd. in Steffen 102). Other conversations consider how the couple's lives are independent of each other as most of their memories are separate. For example, they note how gender identities, in particular, circumscribe their lives. Kevin Quashie, however, observes that very limited scholarship focuses on Beulah as her story follows Thomas's and her life as a domestic "manifests as marginal to Thomas's sadness and its impact on the disparateness of their shared life" ("The Black Woman as Artist" 398). Quashie, however, seeks to "read Beulah's consciousness through an idiom of the black female erotic…who is the object of her own interest and affection" ("The Black Woman as Artist" 399-400). Using Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Quashie concludes that reading Beulah in this way "resists the expectation that black women exist on behalf of others"; instead, they can establish their subjectivity on their own terms ("The Black Woman as Artist" 399). For example, Beulah is able to use her imagination to transcend her life as a domestic. Quashie points out that this "aesthetic" is most prevalent in "Dusting" and "Weathering Out." ("The Black Woman as Artist" 404). Beulah in the poem sequence "Dusting" is able to metaphorically abandon domestic role and use her thoughts to recall the name of a boy from her past ("The Black Woman as Artist" 407). Similarly in "Weathering Out," she frames her first pregnancy around "yearning for solitude" ("The Black Woman as Artist" 407). In all, Quashie elucidates that in reading Beulah as queer, Dove's collection becomes an "extension of black feminism' argument about female being" ("The Black Woman as Artist" 413). I would like

to extend this conversation to consider further the significance of Black female expression via imagination and consider how Beulah uses liminality to designate spaces for herself to not only establish her subjectivity, but imagine the possibilities she desired in life.

Home by Toni Morrison focuses on Korean veteran Frank Money, who reluctantly travels home to save his sister from the hands of a doctor's malpractice, and Ycindra (Cee) Money, whose life is fraught by child neglect, domestic abuse, and turmoil. With this text, Morrison refashions our concepts of home as safe and inviting.

The scholarship on *Home* generally focuses on how Morrison contextualizes the Korean War to include other voices and engages particular notions of home and memory. When asked why she chose to write about the 50s era, Morrison states that she wanted to remove the sense of nostalgia and "take the skin or the scab off of our view of the fifties" (qtd. in Darda 80). By underscoring how Morrison sought to grapple with depicting the Korean War in *Home*, they point out that she impresses what most describe as "the forgotten war" into the cultural memory of her readers (qtd. in Penner 214). For this reason, Joseph Darda points out that Toni Morrison "constructs an alternative narrative of the Korean War to expose truths of how Korean veterans are not venerated in the same way as other veterans (98). He also suggests that her portrayals of war in *Home* revises U.S. narratives of war as a "movie or theater" (Darda 101). To add to this discussion, Erin Penner suggests that by writing *Home* in the post 9/11 era, she emphasizes the historical consequences of a country forgetting past transgressions: "[Morrison] reminds readers that forgetfulness is dangerous, that the worlds inside and outside American borders are connected, and that Americans are not only victims of violence, but also perpetrators of it at the same time" (222).

Moreover, Candice L. Pipes in "The Impossibility of *Home*" observes that Morrison "complicates" idealized concepts of home that suggest "safety and security are achievable" for black Americans, particularly veterans (3-4). Thus, she suggests that Frank's return home is an "impossibility" (13). While she makes mention of Cee's return home, she does not underscore at length how the commune of women create space for Cee to recover and heal. Similarly, Aitor Ibarrola in "The challenges of recovering from individual and cultural trauma in Toni Morrison's *Home*" also queries if returning home is adequate enough for Frank and Cee, given the individual and collective traumas they have experienced. Ibarrola concludes that the novel's ending "suggests that individual recovery from past traumatic experiences is usually possible, it is not so easy to bring the insidious effects resulting from cultural and collective negation to a closure" (122). Melissa Schindler in "Home or the Limits of the Black Atlantic," however, challenges this notion and suggests that even though "the idea of a happy homecoming [is problematic] it's clear that for Frank and Cee, going home catalyzes their physical and emotional healing" (86). I will deviate from this discussion of home and focus my attention on particularly how a commune of women use liminality and the living room trope to strategically designate a space for Cee to recover and ultimately achieve wholeness. Additionally, I will argue that these women have to remind Cee of her liminality and give her tools of Black female survival necessary to maneuver liminal spaces.

The Turner House by Angela Flournoy provides a riveting account of a Detroit family of thirteen who all have a special attachment to their childhood home and different views of what to do with it in the midst of the 2008 recession and mortgage crisis. In the foreground, Flournoy captures the backstories of the mother and father who begin their lives in the South and travel north during the Great Migration for better opportunities. Their backstory threaded with the

Turner children's memories of the house prompt readers to consider the impact of family, home ownership, and more.

Although there is little to no scholarly conversation about this recent text, most reviewers focus on Angela Flournoy's sensitivity in depicting Detroit as rich and more complex than what most see on the news as a city of decline: "In her accretion of resonant details, Flournoy recounts the history of Detroit with more sensitivity than any textbook could (Thomas). Her empathy for not only her characters is also extended to her readers as other reviewers implicitly discuss her acute awareness of her audience and how she addresses largely undiscussed concerns in the Black community. Stacia Brown of *The Washington Post* credits her for "tak[ing] a refreshing approach" in addressing mental health and addiction "within a black family that's resistant to direct conversation about them" without condemnation. Moreover, reviewers also consider the emotional attachments—what the house represents to primarily three of the siblings: Cha Cha, Troy, and Lelah. I would like to extend this conversation and consider what the house represents for particularly Lelah and consider how returning home allows her to find herself. Further I will consider how Lelah uses liminality and the living room trope as a medium to draw inward, establish her subjectivity and position in the Turner family in order to heal old emotional wounds.

Set in 1905 in New York City, *Intimate Apparel* by Lynn Nottage focuses on the life of a Black seamstress who lives in a boarding house, sews lingerie, and longs to be married. Her profession allows her to establish unlikely close relationships with her patrons. With this job, she has managed to save a nice sum of money to achieve her dream of owning a beauty parlor, but is misguided by a Caribbean man whom she eventually weds, leading to betrayal and trouble. Although there is limited scholarship surrounding this text, most scholars have focused on

representation from the Black woman playwright's perspective, as well as the drama educator's perspective in incorporating her work in her curriculum. For example, Jackie Roberts in "Healing Myths from the Ethnic Community, or Why I Don't Teach August Wilson" explores how her students of color view inclusions of plays such *Intimate Apparel* as limiting and unreflective of their own concerns as students of color. Similarly, Brandi Wilkins Cantanese recognizes the challenges of Black women playwrights to have productions commercially. She points out that though these playwrights remain visible in mainstream theatre, they are largely underrepresented on Broadway. Additionally, scholars focus on her in depth portrayal of characters. Katherine E. Kelly in "Making the Bones Sing: The Feminist History Play, 1976-2010" frames her argument around Suzan-Lori Parks' charge in theatre—to "make the bones sing"—to explore how *Intimate Apparel* is a feminist history play because Nottage selects generally forgotten representative characters of the nineteenth century and gives voice to their stories (653-654).[11] Although some reviewers have referenced the director's artistic choices of incorporating a bed in each scene as compelling or unconvincing, very few have discussed the bedroom setting and its centrality to the plot at length. I want to examine this setting as a liminal space and site for women to create, connect, and tap into their inner creative selves.

"Home is where you belong"

Rootedness and place have become central to discussions for writers of the African Diaspora, as the involuntary dispersion of Africans has created this need to be rooted, to have a place, to reclaim and revisit histories lost. Toni Morrison in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor

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[11] Other reviewers such as Kerry Reid of the *Chicago Tribune*, Anita Gates of *The New York Times*, and Lorraine Dusky of *27east.com* make similar arguments about the way Nottage skillfully adds dimension and depth to characters who would otherwise be stock characters.

as Foundation," reflects on this theme and emphasizes the need for Black folk to return to their roots via genres like music or the novel: "We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical mythological archetypical stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out" (58). As noted by Morrison in the passage, the home is a significant marker of rootedness and place and is integral to such discussions. It is also the site where the kinds of stories Morrison describes get told. The home, for most Black women, is one of the most intimate spaces and Black women writers Rita Dove, Lynn Nottage, Toni Morrison, and Angela Flournoy, in varied ways demonstrate the abode's significance. These writers' intimate look inside the house as a liminal space is significant because these texts interrogate the notion of woman's place in the home and avoid solely focusing on the limitations, but focus on ways the space affords Black women rooms of their own to refashion their dreams and achieve wholeness.

Though the family structure greatly contrasts in *Thomas and Beulah* by Rita Dove and *Intimate Apparel* by Lynn Nottage, their focus on how spaces in the home's interiors can be used as a medium for Black women to access their emotions, as Lorde suggests, connect, and tap into their inner creative selves is most prevalent. Within these texts, these writers use liminality and the living room as a trope, not only to negotiate the home as a gendered space, but also to create, imagine the possibilities, and ultimately achieve wholeness.

Primarily, the section "Canary in Bloom" of *Thomas and Beulah* is devoted to Beulah's life and consciousness and is set in the home mostly as she describes the banality of her life as a wife, mother, and domestic. Though she glooms under the monotony of poverty and marriage, she finds spirituality and creativity in domestic undertakings. In considering the living room as a trope, memory is key in Dove's pieces here. For example, in "Sunday Greens," Beulah is struck

by a memory of her mother cooking and more specifically going through the same motions she is. In describing herself as cooking greens, often viewed as food that poor people in the South subsisted on, she uses liminality to reflect. While cooking affords her comfort and a time to reflect and be nostalgic regarding memories of her youth and her mother, it appears that she is also saddened that she finds herself in a similar situation as her mother. Just like her mother, she realizes her limitation as a Black woman and wants more:

> She wants to hear
> wine pouring
> She wants to taste
> change [but instead, [t]he house stinks
> like a zoo in the summer. (Dove 1-4,14-15).

Comparably, Rita Dove highlights Beulah's sentiment about her life in "Courtship, Diligence" as she discusses in more depth her limitations when she marries Thomas:

> She'd much prefer a pianola
> and scent in a sky-colored flask.
> Not that scarf, bright as butter.
> Not his hands, cools as dimes. (10-13)

Here, she longs for genteel music and fine perfume, but she has to settle for a yellow scarf and a man who plays a mandolin. Nonetheless, both scenarios invite us to consider how the home emerges as a harbor for not only Black female expression, but also a vessel for "fantasy." (Alexander 11). Further Alexander notes, "The will to beauty, the will to fantasy, the will to wish, the power of wish, wish translated to action, all are identified and enacted through the power of the visual. The living room is the space where this 'takes place'" (11). Within the home

space, Beulah uses liminality and the living room as a trope to look past the confines of her marriage and imagine another marital life that contrasts her own.

Dusting the furniture is another moment of contemplation for Beulah as she tries to recall the name of a boy she kissed once in “Dusting.” Interestingly enough, this poem implicitly focuses on the inbetweenness of Black women as she “renders the painstaking outward routine of her existence and her inward dependence upon memory as a solace to her spirit” (Righelato 94). As she performs her task, she uses liminality to reflect on an earlier life, in particular, she tries to recall the name of a childhood sweetheart. Further, by providing apt descriptions to mark two phases of her life: before marriage (her life was her own with fewer responsibilities) and post marriage (now her life is circumscribed by a life of domesticity as she is devoted to her husband and children), Beulah uses liminality to create what Alexander terms as “a theatrical space…a space for tableau” (9). Within this space, Beulah can refashion a life of yesteryear and escape the present. As she draws inward and reflects on her life, she forges a living room for herself, remembering at the end the boy’s name was Maurice. In doing so, Beulah use liminality to protect the self. In fact, Pat Righelato implies that her strategy is essential for Black female survival when he states “being wrapped up in her own thoughts insulates her from the worst stresses and hardship of the twenties and thirties that fall on Thomas [her husband] as the main provider” (95). Beulah’s ability to exact creative agency affords her an outlet to contend with the “divided loyalties” present in her life as a Black woman, wife and mother remains vital for her to subsist, inviting us to consider how Black women practice creative agency for their survival (Walker 236).

As noted in the poems above in performing the domestic chores of cooking and dusting,

Beulah's life is so circumscribed by domesticity that the only way she can escape is to travel in her mind. In "Pomade" while sweeping, she recalls their trip to Tennessee to see Thomas's sister Willemma. Although Willemma chooses not to leave her homestead, she is very intuitive: "Wilemma could wear her gray hair twisted in two knots and still smell like travel" (Dove 33-34). She learns from her that wisdom comes not only from experience, but also reflection, characteristic of how Black women use liminality to draw inward and escape their present realities. This lesson informs how Beulah copes with her life; by using liminality as medium to reflect, she is able to achieve wholeness beyond her roles of wife, mother and domestic.

In contrast in "Daystar" the speaker uses an unfavorable physical site as a living room to release, find solace, and be: "So she lugged a chair behind the garage/to sit out the children's naps" (Dove 4-5). Here briefly, she is divorced from being a parent and wife. She relishes the time to exist as nothing.[12] Beulah's ability to mind travel, and escape this realm compensates what she lacks. Through Beulah's continued ability to imagine even in her domestic undertakings, Rita Dove unpacks what it means to have a free mind as a Black woman who is limited in real time. Her capacity to create and have a free mind is empowering and significant to thinking about ways Black women use liminality to achieve wholeness despite their limitations. Black women remain cognizant of the need to "feed [her] creative spirit" and tap into the "Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free" (Walker 406, Lorde 38). Designating a living room site, both literally and figuratively, is vital in emoting and reifying Black women's feelings and authentic selves.

While Rita Dove in *Thomas and Beulah* describes domestic chores to demonstrate how Beulah designates a living room for herself, in *Intimate Apparel* by Lynn Nottage the bedroom

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[12] Beulah's tactic is in some ways similar to Mireille of *An Untamed State*, but at the same time, their circumstances greatly contrast. Mireille's reasons for becoming nothing is to survive captivity whereas Beulah becomes nothing as a form of release.

setting becomes a living room of sorts for Esther. Moreover, this setting is central to the plot for Esther to create and serve her clients the lingerie she designs. This intimate setting invites vulnerability for Black women and emerges as a site where Esther forms unlikely relationships. These unlikely relationships are close, familiar, personal, yet private and secret. For this reason, the very nature of the bedroom is liminal as it invites intimate connections, which involve the sharing of secrets and letting one's guard down, serving multiple purposes in the play for Esther.

Within this space, forbidden desires and companionship are allowed, emerging as a liminal site for unlikely relationships. For example, her relationships with both Mrs. Van Buren and Mr. Marks, two clients, become blurred. Both Esther and Mrs. Van Buren can create some semblance of a friendship in the bedroom, as their client-customer relationship temporarily becomes something more. The bedroom site, as well as her line of work, automatically creates a space for liminality in the home and an unlikely opportunity for more than pleasantries, but intimate conversation with fewer reservations. They both share sentiments about marital relationships and their fears of being alone. Though Mrs. Van Buren is a Southern bred white woman who is a part of New York's upper echelon, she is lonely and insecure because she has not been able to conceive a child yet and believes her husband is losing interest in her (Nottage 12-13). She purchases lingerie from Esther to hopefully rekindle her relationship with her husband. Esther inquires "if there's something wrong with a woman alone" (Nottage 13). Within the space, social constraints are somewhat suspended, a significant feature of a liminal space. In all, Mrs. Van Buren and Esther relate as women and help fill each other's voids of loneliness.

However, social codes still seep into the site and limit the opportunity for the two women to fully connect as friends. For example, the way in which they reference each other reveals that they are not at equal footing, suggesting that the bedroom space, particularly in Mrs. Van

Buren's home cannot fully be a liminal space for Esther. Further, Mrs. Van Buren is aware she can be in Esther's world outside of the bedroom, but Esther can never fully become a part of her world. For example, when Mrs. Van Buren demands that Esther "must take [her] to one of the [colored] shows," she asserts her authority as a white woman of high social standing in her tone (Nottage 27). But, when Esther asks Mrs. Van Buren to "take [her] to the opera next time," Mrs. Van Buren says, "I would, if I could. It would be marvelously scandalous just the sort of thing to perk up this humdrum season" (28). Mrs. Van Buren's response reveals that this relationship can only be contained in the bedroom, as she has concerns about destroying her reputation. The bedroom site, in this case, is a selective liminal space exclusively for Mrs. Van Buren to be herself, but not Esther because Black women "enter into competitive discourse…. with white women as blacks" (Henderson 352). Esther's social location as a Black woman will not allow for equal footing as Mrs. Van Buren can still establish superiority over her, restricting Esther's movement in the space. Although the bedroom site invites us to consider how these two women can relate as women and "enter into the testimonial discourse ….with white women as women," their racial differences limit the opportunity for intimacy and means for Esther to be her self in the liminal space (352).

While Mrs. Van Buren is free to share her fears and act out sexual desires that are forbidden due to race and gender, Esther is more careful in her conversations and actions. When Mrs. Van Buren kisses Esther to "show [her] what it's like to be treated lovingly," Esther rejects Mrs. Van Buren's advances yet Mrs. Van Buren insists that she and remain "friends" (Nottage 47). Esther, in turn, challenges the notion that she and Mrs. Van Buren are friends: "Friends? How we friends? When I ain't never been through your front door. You love me? What of me do you love?" (Nottage 47). In questioning Mrs. Van Buren's concept of a friend/lover, Esther is

aware that Mrs. Van Buren's unwillingness to cross social boundaries reveals that these private encounters are pretentious, inviting us to reconceptualize what intimacy entails, what it implies, and what is expected. Mr. Marks who is a Romanian Jewish immigrant, on the other hand, shares Esther's love and interest for fabric and honors Esther by supporting her craft. And though their covert romance cannot materialize due to cultural differences of religion and ethnicity, he breaks social codes at the end of the play and allows Esther to touch him and style the jacket on him, inviting us to consider how intimacy breaks down social barriers. Conversely, her husband, George is disinterested in intimacy. Though Esther "wants [George] to know [her story], George argues that his story is not worth revealing (Nottage 39). In doing so, he dishonors the bedroom site. Thus, there is no potential for Esther to create a liminal space in their new bedroom as George's misconceptions of intimacy are steeped in an ideology of rigid gender expectations of the male being dominant and disallows opportunity for imagination and fantasy. In all, these varied scenarios of intimacy, genuine and false, invite us to consider how Black women can map out the liminal space in the home when there is equality present.

Not only does Esther use the bedroom as a liminal space to create and imagine extravagant intimate apparel for her clients, she also uses the site as a reflective space, particularly with her client Mayme. These two women use the bedroom to escape from reality and articulate their consciousness unlimited by racism, sexism, and respectability politics. As they refashion their livelihoods as concert pianist and entrepreneur, respectively, there emerges a semblance of equal footing between them. In this space, they are two cultured Black women with big dreams. Mayme's boudoir becomes reminiscent of a "representative interior space" where both Esther and Mayme can imagine and lead different lives (Alexander 13). The visibility of these two women is apparent in the space as they can establish "selves that go far, far beyond the

limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be" (Alexander 5). Like Beulah of *Thomas and Beulah*, Mayme and Esther can escape their realities as Black women and illuminate their inner selves. Mayme imagines herself as "a concert pianist playing recitals for audiences in Prague… [with her] own means" (Nottage 20). Her fantasy as a concert pianist contrasts her reality as a sex worker; within this space, Mayme can refashion her life as a cultured, independent Black woman. Like Beulah, Mayme would prefer a more refined life. Reluctantly, Esther describes her dream beauty parlor as "someplace east of Amsterdam, fancy, where you get pampered and treated real nice" (21). Here, Esther imagines a liminal space where Black women can retreat, relax, and "be treated like a lady" (21). Like Mayme, she can refashion her life as she imagines a site where she can serve and affirm Black women, recognizing their value.[13] While Esther plans to make her dream a reality, Mayme sees her bedroom as merely a space to temporarily escape her reality as a sex worker: "Let me tell you, so many wonderful ideas been conjured in this room. They just get left right in that bed there, or on this piano bench. They are all scattered all over this room" (22). Mayme contains her "interior wishes and tended hopes" in her room; however, the site for Esther propels her forward to make her dream a reality (Alexander 14). For this reason, Esther sees real possibility in their relationship beyond the bedroom site, but Mayme is disinterested in changing her line of work. Nonetheless, their experiences of liminality as Black women establish this connectedness they can "enter the testimonial discourse…with black women as black women" (Henderson 351).

Later, it becomes apparent their relationship is reminiscent of Sula and Nell's friendship in the 1973 novel *Sula* by Toni Morrison when Mayme, with no hesitation, has sexual

[13] In similar ways, my third chapter underscores the significance of the hair salon as a liminal space for Black women to communion, relax, and retreat.

intercourse with Esther's husband, George.[14] However, the key difference is that though Mayme does not care about the social consequences of being involved with married men, Mayme, unlike Sula, shows remorse and scolds Esther for belittling herself. When Esther calls herself a "foolish country gal" and blames herself for falling for her husband's scheming ways, Mayme's response again shows their connectedness as Black women: "No you are grand, Esther. And I ain't worthy of your forgiveness, nor will forget what you done for me. You ain't never treat me like a whore. Ever" (55). This space invites us to consider how Black women can disclose their interior selves and extend their present realities with each other. Because Esther and Mayme share similar realities as Black and woman, these women are able to fully suspend social constructions that divide them. Ultimately, their relationship invites us to consider how Black women use liminality to establish themselves as subjects in the home. However, Mayme's affair with Esther's husband violates an unwritten moral code, making it difficult in the end for Mayme and Esther to remain friends.

The bedroom for Esther in Mrs. Dickson's boarding house is not only a site for Esther to create intimate apparel, but also emerges as a sanctuary and site of instruction. As her mentor and surrogate mother, Mrs. Dickson wants the best for Esther and continuously affirms her despite her anxieties regarding her marital status: "You were a godsend when you come to me at seventeen…I remember thinking how sweet and young you was with a sack full of overripe fruit smelling like a Carolina orchard" (Nottage 8). For this reason, Mrs. Dickson issues a caveat to Esther for upward mobility and not love. She says, "[Y]ou have godly fingers and a means, and you deserve a gentleman. Why gamble it all away for a common laborer?...Don't you let a man have no part of your heart without getting a piece of his" (Nottage 33-34). Hence, it appears that

[14] *Sula* (1973) by Toni Morrison describes the friendship of Nel and Sula, broken when Sula has an affair with Nel's husband. Undoubtedly, Nel resents Sula for years, but Sula does not understand her betrayal of friendship as she just views the affair as sex.

Lynn Nottage intentionally frames her play to showcase sacredness of this bedroom for Esther by beginning the play with Esther in this space and ending the play with her in this space. In fact, the production note that the "set should be spare to allow for fluid movement between the various bedrooms" underscores its significance (5). At the beginning, Esther is frustrated that she still resides in this space, yet in the end, she is content, more so relieved to have a space to return to following her marital conflict with George and broken relationship with Mayme. This particular bedroom space is most significant as a site of creation as this is the sole site where Esther's secrets are honored and valued by Mrs. Dickson, unlike with Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren, inviting us to consider how the role of liminality in the home is contingent upon trust, a key component of understanding.

Like Beulah who refashions another life for herself in the home, Esther maps out liminal spaces in the bedroom(s). In her bedroom, she imagines being married and keeps seed money for her dream beauty parlor. With Mayme, they imagine more elaborate lives as hairdresser and concert pianist respectively. With Mr. Marks they share each other's interests in fabric and real intimacy although social implications disallow a real union.[15] With Mrs. Van Buren, they share fears of being alone, but social codes involving primarily race ultimately limits their relationship, inviting us to consider how equality has to be present for firm relationships to truly manifest in liminal spaces. Nonetheless, the bedroom site, most particularly in this play, invites us to consider how Black women use liminality to map out ways to cultivate their hopes and dreams even when they are left unfulfilled.

Although the symbols of the living room and bedroom are most prominent in *Thomas and Beulah* by Rita Dove and *Intimate Apparel* by Lynn Nottage, the notion of Black women

[15] Mr. Marks's bedroom is described as a "tenement flat" where he has a makeshift bed and fabric shop (Nottage 16).

finding sites in the home to create remain prevalent in *Home* by Toni Morrison and *The Turner House* by Angela Flournoy. The house emerges as a character of sorts in both texts. For Ycindra (Cee) Money and Frank Money in *Home*, the house holds bad memories and shared histories; in particular, they both witness a senseless murder as children. Similarly, for the Turner household, the house represents shared traumatic history, but also represents hope and future, particularly for the mother and father. Additionally, Morrison and Flournoy seek to engage how the house serves as a space where women can "create 'home' in hope of providing a space where dreams are possible" (Griffin 110).[16] This insight invites us to consider how Black women's experiences of liminality are aligned with their capacity to dwell in the possibilities and delineate the space where such "dreams are nurtured and sent forth" (Griffin 110).

Though Morrison refashions traditional concepts of home as safe in her depiction of Cee's childhood, the denouement of *Home* is most significant in thinking through how Black women create and designate liminal spaces in the home. Immobilized by a eugenics experiment, Cee encounters the "reality of medicine: sometimes blood, sometimes pain" (Morrison 64). As a result, her brother has to come to rescue her from the doctor's malpractice and from there he takes her directly to Miss Ethel's house. With Miss Ethel as the lead, the women in the latter half of the novel create a commune to restore Cee back to health. Interestingly enough, they maintain a gendered space, believing that "a male presence would worsen her condition" (119).[17] This particular set-up parallels hooks' notion of how Black women designated the house as "their

[16] This objective present in these two texts also resonates in *A Raisin in the Sun* as Lena Younger's dreams for her children are to have a space to realize their dreams.

[17] While Miss Ethel's house serves as the center for Cee to come into being, the home serves as a distraction for Frank in thinking about his sister's crisis: "he busied himself cleaning and repairing his parents' house that had been empty since his father died" (120). All in all, the house is significant in serving both siblings' needs. For Cee, the home represents sanctuary, refuge, and restoration; for Frank, the house emerges as a space for catharsis and defense against anxiety regarding his sister.

special domain" (hooks, *Yearning* 77). The commune of Black women is instrumental in Cee's recovery from being a part of a eugenics-type experiment; it is within this space where Cee achieves wholeness and moves from seeing herself as "the gutter child" to seeing herself as worthy of love.

Miss Ethel's house is reminiscent of the living room space because within this space, Miss Ethel and the other women offer Cee a place to belong: "There was no trash or garbage in their homes because they had a use for everything. They took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them" (Morrison 123). By offering her such a place, Cee first learns the importance of dignity. By scolding her for subjecting herself to doctor's experiments, the commune of women prompts her to change her way of thinking. They ask exacting rhetorical questions like 'You a privy or a woman?' and Who told you you was trash?' to teach her the "integrity of being," which hooks points out is generally taught by Black women in the home (77). Following this lesson, the narrator notes that, "As she healed, the women changed tactics and stopped their berating, [bringing] their embroidery and crocheting and finally they used Ethel Fordham's house as their quilting center" (122). What is noted here is that the women found it vital for Cee to know her worth prior to teaching her how to practice creative agency and tap into the creative self that Audre Lorde and Alice Walker insist are crucial for Black's women's survival. Audre Lorde states that, "In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real" (39). Similarly, Alice Walker underscores the need for Black women to cultivate their own garden by "fearlessly pull[ing] out of ourselves and look[ing] at and identify[ing] with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know" (237). Cee learns how to reassess liminal spaces in Miss Ethel's home; more specifically, these women give her the tools she needs to empower herself in spite of

her circumstances. Once Cee knows her worth, she is able to connect and tap into her creative self through embroidery, crochet, and quilting as she reassures Miss Ethel "[she] ain't going nowhere [and proclaims] This is where I belong" (Morrison 126). Thus, Miss Ethel's home becomes not only a sanctuary where she can recover physically, but also a reflective space where she is offered emotional support and tools to exist as Black and woman.

To these women, existing as a Black woman includes being self-sufficient and achieving personhood. They tell Cee:

> Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. Seed your own land. You young and a woman and there's a serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world. (126)

The very place she and her brother ran away from is the very place she finds sanctuary and achieves self-actualization. With the women's guidance and tough love, she realizes that she can boldly walk in her truth and accept the consequences for her mistakes, while unsubscribing to the lies her grandmother told her about being worthless. By knowing her worth, she will not willingly subject herself to the abuses she once endured. Additionally, these women offer guidance for occupying a liminal space, which entails finding sites of creativity, exploring the possibilities of discovering herself and recognizing the freedom she has in her humanity to make her own decisions. Moreover, Jean Wyatt observes that, "Spiritual empowerment is indeed an integral part of the Lotus women's healing methods. It is partly the women's example….and partly their exhortations to Cee …. that persuade Cee to give up her sense of worthlessness and

take charge of her life" (160). The Lotus women's first lesson—to inculcate a sense of worth—is essential for Cee's survival and ability to manage her life independently. In all, their instruction points to the significance of Black women using liminality to establish their agency as a Black woman.

As Cee has to go back home to recover in more ways than one due to becoming a victim of doctor's malpractice, Lelah in *The Turner House* by Angela Flournoy ultimately gets a new lease at life upon returning home. Though Lelah's gambling addiction compels her to go back home, she is evicted from her home and is ashamed to ask if she can stay with her daughter or other siblings. But, figuratively, Lelah automatically is drawn to returning to the home house to find herself. bell hooks points out that the home for Black folk emerges as a space where "[W]e could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world" (hooks, *Yearning* 78). In Lelah's desperation about her eviction, she subconsciously thinks of returning to place where she can be restored invites us to consider how the home becomes the first liminal space Black women delineate as a place where they are visible, acknowledged, and loved in spite of their vices. As the youngest of thirteen children, Lelah is still trying to figure out how to make a home as she has been infantilized and not allowed to become part of the Turner tradition and live in the big room: Each child was allowed to live in the big room once an older sibling leaves, but when it is Lelah's turn, her mother opts to use the room as a sewing room. This seemingly minor insight is interesting to note as it demonstrates how the mother maps out a liminal space to create. Interestingly enough, on the night she goes back to her mother's vacant home, the narrator notes that "Lelah claimed that long-denied right of passage" and describes her act as "one small triumph on a day marked by defeat" (Flournoy 15). In this small gesture, Lelah

claims a liminal space and asserts herself as part of the Turner familial tradition. By "claim[ing] the big room for sleeping," she like Cee, can begin to face her struggle with self-definition and feel a sense of belonging to something bigger than herself (15). In fact, her gambling addiction is a consequence of not feeling a sense of rootedness and place. For this reason, bell hooks emphasizes the significance of the homeplace as a site where its inhabitants "[have] the opportunity to grow…develop, [and] nurture [their] spirits" (*Yearning* 78). For Lelah, the home becomes a liminal space—a hub for her evolution and site where she ultimately empowers herself.

Additionally, her vivid memories of the space when it was occupied allows Lelah to have sanctuary even in its dilapidated state: "Lelah had spent whole afternoons on the floor in front of that chair, watching the comings and goings of Yarrow Street as her mother or an older sister greased her scalp and combed her hair. The memory made her feel safe for a moment, like maybe she'd made the right choice coming back there" (Flournoy 17). By gleaning to childhood memories housed in this space, Lelah can designate the home as a "space where [she] can return for renewal and self-recovery, where [she] can heal [her] wounds and become whole", inviting us to consider the significance of the home as a liminal space for Black women (hooks, *Yearning* 88). Just as the living room traditionally remains unchanged, the Turner house is a constant and relic for the children. For example, Lelah can be more than her faults in this space as she has established a shared history and connectedness in the home as someone's daughter and sister. Elizabeth Alexander suggests that "the living room is where [the mother] reveals who [the family is]" (4). In keeping the children's mementos, Lelah's mother subconsciously reminds her who she is, for example, Lelah feels inclined to pull out the flute her brother and sister-in-law purchased, but remembers that it was her parents who "thought to get it engraved" (101). This

particular memory prompts her to remember that she was and still is not only cherished but acknowledged, as this space allows her to celebrate the self she has neglected. The Turner house emerges as a space where she can reflect on her choices and find a way to become more independent, as she tells her eldest brother "I don't wanna be saved anymore…I'll figure it out. I have to" (260). Her need to chart her own course independently parallels the charge Miss Ethel issues Cee once she recovers and also parallels the codependent relationship Cee has with her brother Frank. Though Lelah is still left unsure about her future at the end of the novel, she is hopeful about repairing her relationship with her daughter and the possibilities of starting afresh. Ultimately, returning home becomes the launchpad for a fresh start. In all, Lelah's evolution can only take place in the liminal space of the home because that is where she last remembered the intact self. This invites us to consider how the home emerges as a liminal site for Black female empowerment.

There is a cultural resonance to *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) with all of the texts regarding the notion that their homes would be temporary, yet represents hope. How Black women use liminality to manage this discontentment, however, is varied. Lena reminisces on this fact when she says,

> I remember just as well the day me and Big Walter moved in here. Hadn't been married but two weeks and wasn't planning on living here no more than a year….We was going to set away little by little, don't you know, and buy a little place out in Morgan Park. We had even picked out the house…Looks right dumpy today. But Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back---…And didn't none of it happen. (Hansberry 44-45)

Here, she describes her dream house as a fixer upper, but ends with the fact that these dreams did not come to fruition. Even still, Lena uses liminality to dwell in the possibilities and imagine making the dream house she and her late husband wanted. Additionally, what is interesting to note is the fact that within in this space she uses the living room trope to bring the inside to the outside to reflect her art. This dream Lena has of creating a space of legacy parallels Alice Walker's description of her mother's garden as an expression of "art" and space where "she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible—except as Creator and eye" (241). In all, *A Raisin in the Sun* frames the varied ways the women of the other texts aforementioned "order the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty," inviting us to consider how Black women use liminality and the living room trope to not only manage the discontent associated with unrealized dreams, but also to become architects of potential possibilities that will leave a legacy (Walker 241).

Similarly, Beulah in "The House on Bishop Street" of Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah* expresses her disappointment about the house she resides in as having no front yard and being surrounded by unfriendly neighbors. However, later in the same vein Lena points out that God blesses us with children to make our deferred dreams reality (Hansberry 45-46). Likewise in "Company," in her eulogy to her husband she admits "*we were good though we never believed it*" (Dove 12-13). Here in the sonnet filled with all the things she never told him, Beulah acknowledges how her feelings of discontentment regarding delayed dreams unrealized often took precedence over what they were actually able to attain as a family. Her sentiment is significant because it implies regret that she spent most of her time using liminality to imagine another life rather than focusing on what she had. Although liminality is a more nuanced way for thinking through how Black women establish their subjectivity, Beulah's regret here invites us to

consider its limitations. In *Home* Toni Morrison describes the Money family as an itinerant family who moved from Texas to Georgia to live with their abusive step-grandmother and grandfather. When they eventually rent a place, unlike Beulah who expresses discontentment regarding the home, the narrator describes Cee as feeling blessed to be embraced by neighbors who extended to her generosity opposite of her grandmother's behavior: "Cee remembered the relief and pride they all took in having their own gardens and their own laying hens. The Moneys had enough of it to feel at home in this place where neighbors could finally offer friendship instead of pity" (Morrison 46). This description is significant in underscoring the value of making a home where charity and sanctuary are present. In all, these texts invite us to consider how Black women use liminality to create spaces for legacy and companionship.

Unlike the other texts that depict a nuclear family structure, in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* Esther, orphaned at seventeen, is a 35-year old single seamstress living in a boarding house, identifying herself as "just another piece of furniture" (8). When she marries George, she moves to a "spare studio flat" (37); this brief description implies that her new dwelling is void of liminal spaces where she can tap into her inner self. After the brief courtship, she moves back to the boarding house, inviting us to consider that home is a place one can always return to for safety and security. Although these unexpected events are not a part of her original plan for her life, it functions as a catalyst for thinking through how the home serves as a liminal space for Esther to evolve. First, the home serves as a site to foster Esther's growth and vitality and later upon her return the home emerges as a space where Esther can revitalize the self. Out of the four texts, the scenario in *The Turner House* by Angela Flournoy portrays a family that realizes its dream of purchasing a home, inviting us to consider how the home construct prompts its

inhabitants to designate liminal spaces not only to dwell in the possibilities, but also to establish a legacy.

Throughout this chapter, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* provides a solid context for the living room space, revealing how the home, the most intimate site, can be a space for Black women to achieve creative license and wholeness and create a legacy. The final stage directions that place Lena alone culminate what home means for Black women. Hansberry writes:

> *MAMA stands, at last alone in the living room, her plant on the table before her as the lights start to come down. She looks around at the walls and ceilings and suddenly, despite herself, while the children call below, a great heaving thing rises in her and she puts her fist to her mouth to stifle it, takes a final desperate look, pulls her coat about her, pats her hat and goes out. The lights dim down. The door opens and she comes back in, grabs her plant, and goes out for the last time).*

Her actions here imply that the move to Clybourne Park is bittersweet, as her deceased husband and memories of her children growing up are attached to this space. Thus, in these stage directions through her final look around and heavy sighs, Lena pays homage to the apartment that catapulted the dreams realized. For this reason, the centrality of the home, in particular the living room and the bedroom, serves as a classic motif for how Black women map out liminal spaces for themselves in the home to articulate their most authentic identities in *Thomas and Beulah*, *Intimate Apparel*, *Home*, and *The Turner House*. Most fittingly to celebrate Black women's fortitude, Maya Angelou includes the living room space in "Still I Rise" (1978) to describe her unyielding confidence despite the challenges she is confronted with. She exclaims,

“Does my sassiness upset you? /Why are you beset with gloom? / ‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells/ Pumping in my living room” (5-8). In all, these writers invite us to consider how Black women respond to the world’s hypervisibility and disdain—make a space for themselves to recover, heal, and ultimately find wholeness.

Conclusion

Although writer Zora Neale Hurston once quipped that Black women were "the mules of the world," Black women, in their facility to transgress boundaries, nevertheless possess the fortitude to make spaces for themselves and acquire agency to make seemingly bold choices and reject social burdens. [154] My dissertation project reveals how Black women use liminality as a concept to unabashedly move through American society despite being afforded few opportunities to be full participants. What initially drew me to this concept was my particular fascination with how Harriet Jacobs used her limited space not only to escape and survive, but also protect her children. Notwithstanding what may be regarded by some as a rather harsh reality, the Black women writers I include in this project demonstrate how Black women nonetheless find alternatives to create, initiate positive change, and find places of renewal in liminal spaces. The commonality found in the literature I analyze is the crucial need to exist and thrive and these writers use liminality as an essential tool for Black women's survival in the face of white supremacy and patriarchy. All in all, my dissertation project contributes to the literary discourse of Diasporic Black women as it provides a critical paradigm for how Black women transform space and empower themselves.

My project largely considers how Black women writers use liminality as a trope in varied ways to redefine what Black womanhood entails, apart from normative social definitions, and how Black women survive under insurmountable circumstances, to retreat, and to achieve wholeness. The writers' delineation of liminality demonstrates how Black women map out ways to work around limitations set to circumscribe their ability to move through space. Moreover, my project contributes to Black feminist thought and engages how we should think about the role of

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[154] Excerpted from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), this noteworthy quotation is often used to underscore Black women's plight as the mule is known for navigating difficult terrain and carrying heavy burdens.

liminality in Black women's lives. By examining the "concrete experiences of Black women as a criterion of meaning," a key theme of Black feminist thought, I demonstrate how the concept of liminality also becomes a special epistemology for Black women to tap into as a frequent mode of survival (Collins 192). Additionally, I consider the importance of woman-centered spaces, another aspect of Black feminist thought, as the connectedness of Black women with one another often allows Black women to create and find wholeness. In all, what we gain by using liminality as a lens to engage fiction, poetry, and drama is a way to understand how Black writers not only revise stereotypes, but also how they construct more nuanced, complicated images of Black womanhood, inviting us to consider how Black women across the Diaspora negotiate liminal spaces and live at the intersection of race and gender.

Further, this literature provides a portal to the stark realities of Black women in the modern world, as well as the trajectory they undertake to forge liminal spaces. Though my focus is on contemporary literature, its relevance is paramount in everyday encounters. For example, tennis star Serena Williams was harshly judged for her decorum after losing the US Open by the media, such as when she was depicted as an angry Black woman with exaggerated features in an Australian newspaper by Mark Knight.[155] Unfortunately, such depictions of Black women are commonplace and my project explores some of the ways in which Black women contend with visibility and validation.[156] As poet Claudia Rankine mediates on the racial aggressions Black people experience in subtle as well as blatant ways in *Citizen* (2014), she makes mentions of the

[155] Despite the fact that male tennis players are celebrated for clashing with umpires, Serena Williams was punished for her altercation with the umpire in the US Open. The umpire issued a game penalty over warnings for being coached from the stands and smashing her tennis racket, which ultimately resulted in a lost opportunity for Williams to make a comeback in a match.

[156] Other modern day examples that degraded Black women include: former radio personality Don Imus casually calling the Rutgers women basketball team "nappy headed hoes," former small town West Virginia mayor referring to former First Lady Michelle Obama as an "ape in heels," and President Donald Trump insulting Congresswoman Maxine Waters by suggesting she has "a low IQ."

ways in which people assign a particular judgment toward Serena Williams regarding her style of dress as well as her competitive spirit as unsportsmanlike. She points out:

> Serena's frustrations, her disappointments, exist within a system you understand not to try to understand in any fair minded way because to do so is to understand the erasure of the self as systemic, as ordinary. For Serena, the daily diminishment is a low flame, a constant drip. Every look, every comment, every bad call blossoms out of history, through her, onto you. To understand is to see Serena as hemmed in as any other black body thrown against our American background. (32)

As Rankine critiques how Williams is unfairly read in historically white spaces, my project seeks to normalize how Black women move through space by calling attention to the racist tropes that seek to undercut Black women's experiences of survival. Though Serena's mere presence is troubling for some in the realm of tennis and her Black body remains under surveillance, she thrives and claims a liminal space as her athleticism cannot be denied. Despite attempts to punish and police her, Williams forges a space on the tennis court, creating a legacy for Black women to follow.

Moreover, an increasing number of Black women are dying in childbirth due to systemic oppression they experience, and oftentimes because their pain is not taken seriously. The mortality rates are disproportionately higher for Black women as they are three to four times likely to die from giving birth. Linda Villarosa recognizes that these health disparities are a direct result of negotiating

> …an inescapable atmosphere of societal and systemic racism …that lead directly to higher rates of infant and maternal death… that societal racism is further

> expressed in a pervasive, longstanding racial bias in health care—including the dismissal of legitimate concerns and symptoms—that can help explain birth. (Villarosa)

As Villarosa observes, simply living as a Black woman is a threat to their well-being. For this reason, Black women's experiences of survival and how they cope is a crucial topic of interest in my project. In addition to Serena Williams being judged harshly for her decorum and style over the years, she too, has had to advocate for her health. Following an emergency Caesarean section birth, Serena Williams was alarmed that she was experiencing shortness of breath given that she had a history of blood clots. She immediately expressed these concerns to a nurse. The nurse, in turn, dismissed her concerns, suggesting that she was disoriented from the pain medicine she was given. Williams continued to insist that the team order a CT scan. When the team finally acquiesced, the scan confirmed that she in fact did have blood clots in her lungs; if left untreated, she could have died. Williams uses liminality to advocate for herself, unsilencing the Black female body. Sadly, her experience is reflective of Black women across class; and, as we continue to contend with the sad reality of how Black women are dismissed, devalued, and silenced in both private and public sectors, it is vital to demonstrate how Black women negotiate such lived experiences and empower themselves, which my project does. Additionally, as we continue to grapple with what it means to be Black and woman in varied spaces, newer and potentially larger questions come into the fold: How do we read Black women and girls in different spaces, particularly in public, schools, the media, and the workplace? What does it mean for Black women and girls to be perceived as taking up too much space?

I am in good company as other Black women scholars continue to grapple with these concerns and shed light on particularly the movement of Black girls and women. For example,

Monique W. Morris in *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* (2016) describes the experiences of Black girls in school and explores how their decorum is judged differently, resulting oftentimes in suspension and expulsion at exponentially higher rates than their white peers.[157] Additionally, in *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower* (2018), Brittney Cooper provides a candid read of a Black woman's perspective on the ways in which she and other Black women are read in varied spaces as angry and continuously grapple with visibility and validation. As a result of these tensions, she considers how Black women can reclaim their right to rage to not only dispel mythologies regarding their identities but also to challenge interlocking systems of oppression. Other scholars in literary studies who explore Black women's movement through places and negotiation of spaces include Christina Sharpe and Saidiya Hartman, respectively. Christina Sharpe, in her text, *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), employs the metaphor of the wake to offer Black people across the Diaspora sites to engage in the possibilities and imagine spaces of freedom to resist. In similar fashion, Saidiya Hartman, in her most recent book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019), explores the intimate lives of Black women of the early twentieth century in Philadelphia and New York who transgressed boundaries and defied rules of respectability by claiming sexual freedom, choosing to be single mothers, and challenging traditional conceptions of marriage to name a few. In all, the common thread that is present in these scholarly texts and my work is the pressing need to validate and study the experiences of Black people fairly as well as delineate

[157] Morris points out that though "the number of girls (of any racial and ethnic affiliation) who experienced one or more out-of-school suspensions decreased between 2000 to 2009, …racial disparities remain" (68). For Black girls, out-of-school suspensions increased. In 2000, 34 percent of Black girls were suspended from schools; by 2000, 52 percent were suspended (68).

the movement of Black women and girls as complex, and more than what the majority society suggests.

Other exciting venues where Black women are transforming space are in popular culture. Most recently, Beyoncé debuted *Homecoming*, her documentary, about appearing at Coachella as the first Black woman to headline. As director, Beyoncé transforms the space by bringing her culture to the stage and, in doing so, celebrates the rich legacy and culture of Historically Black Colleges and Universities through her performance. As she politicizes the space, she uses her liminality to initiate an alternative form of protest, prompting a predominantly white audience to recognize the many facets of Black culture. In doing so, Beyoncé, more specifically, creates a space for valuing the HBCU Homecoming culture and legacy as iconic, rich, vital, and intellectually/artistically aware. Similarly, director Ava DuVernay creates space for Black people's experiences in films like S*elma* and *13th*.[158] Her most recent work, Netflix mini-series *When They See Us*, retells the story of five boys of color, known as Central Park Five, who were pressured to admit to raping jogger Trisha Meili in 1989 and who were wrongly convicted of the crime. What is telling about this miniseries is DuVernay's capacity to tell not only the story, but to prompt her viewers to consider how incarceration negatively impacts the individual families, especially Black mothers. Seeing the stories from the lens of a Black woman compels viewers to relate to the stories of these boys; her ability to display the grief of losing a family member to prison and to depict the terror the Central Park Five experienced is paramount. Repeatedly, DuVernay uses her liminality as a Black woman to ensure that the full stories like The Central Park Five's are heard, understood, and appreciated as part of the human condition. Additionally,

[158] *Selma* (2014) is a biopic directed by DuVernay that chronicles the 1965 Civil Rights Marches led by Martin Luther King, Jr., Hosea Williams, James Bevel, and John Lewis and especially recreates pivotal historical scenes such as Bloody Sunday in which Alabama state troopers and local police brutally attacked peaceful marchers on their route from Selma to Montgomery. Moreover, *13th* (2016) is a documentary that examines the prison system to make known that the history of racial inequality persists.

performer Janelle Monáe transforms space both literally and figuratively using the Afrofuturism aesthetic, which reimagines the future from the lens of the African Diaspora. She centers her music on the idea that the androids she creates represent the new "other," which includes Black women, queer folk, and all those who are marginalized in society. For example in her emotion picture "Dirty Computer," Janelle Monáe explores living in the future where the government tries to curtail queerness, blackness, and nonconforming behaviors. In doing so, Janelle Monáe, uses liminality to challenge marginalization in the present by operating in a setting hundreds of years into the future. Despite their differences, all three of these popular culture examples correspond to my dissertation project as they reveal in varied ways how Black women transgress boundaries and forge spaces to create and ultimately voice their own stories.

Moreover, as Black women continue to be devalued, misunderstood, misjudged, and silenced, it is imperative that we consider how liminality surfaces as a trope for Black women to harness during these current, dark times and to exist in a discriminatory world. Hence, the timeliness of this project is worth considering when we consider the growing number of Black women maneuvering politics in different ways. More specifically, in a future iteration of this project I will consider how prominent Black women, such as Stacey Abrams and Kamala Harris, maneuver spaces in electoral politics. For example, in *Minority Leader: How to Lead from the Outside and Make Real Change* (2018), Stacey Abrams garners a specific familiarity to her audiences through her effective storytelling of particularly her personal life. While Kamala Harris, too, appears to genuinely care for humanity, she is more private in her memoir *The Truths We Hold: An American Journey* (2019). Their stories invite us to consider how there is no standard for Black women's experiences of liminality as both Abrams and Harris demonstrate in varied ways how they assert themselves in spaces of exclusion. As Abrams and Harris step out

of designated racial and social margins, they invite us to consider how liminality emerges as an alternative way for scholars to look at how Black women not only deal with systems of oppression, but also establish their subjectivity.

Not only will I consider prominent Black women in the contemporary realm of politics in the expansion of this project, but also historic political figures like Pauli Murray and Fannie Lou Hamer whose movement in mainstream spaces is worth further discussion. For example, Fannie Lou Hamer, who received national attention for testifying at the Credentials Committee of the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, used her broken body to negotiate space and articulate the plight of African Americans like herself in the South.[159] Likewise, queer legal scholar and theologian Pauli Murray's early activism is largely shaped by her ability to acquire liminal spaces:

> She was without parents, yet she made parents of those who loved her. She was white and black, a materialist and a believer, a Northerner and a Southerner, in her own mind, a woman and a man. But Murray believed that God left nothing to chance…She came to believe that God had put her in the middle so that she would learn to stretch across the world's divisions. (Gilmore 326)

Here, her consciousness of this space allows her to be more transgressive. When asked about her career as an activist, Murray views her struggles as gains for the next crop of activists as she reflectively states, "In not a single one of these campaigns was I victorious …. In each case, I personally failed, but I have lived to see the thesis upon which I was operating vindicated … I've lived to see my lost causes found" (qtd. in Gilmore 443-444). Although some of the spaces Murray occupied were generally contested, her failed attempts to make a radical change emerge

[159] In her testimony, she recounts her 1963 experience in a Mississippi jail of being beaten so badly she suffered kidney damage, a blood clot behind her eye, and a permanent limp in a Mississippi jail (Lee 53).

as the blueprint for those who succeeded her, which include Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks. Indeed, politics emerges as a fascinating realm to explore as a liminal space because it is a space of transgression of Black women. Entering a space traditionally comprised of white men as a Black woman is worth discussion and it is my hope to find out how Black women in the political realm use liminality as a tool to forge ahead in the face of deep institutionalized forms of racism and patriarchy.

Another significant area of focus I want to consider in the future is the significance of childhood pastimes among Black girls as a cohesive communal space, akin to the hair salon space I discuss at length in chapter three, as a sanctuary for Black women. Pastimes that come to mind include Double Dutch, hula hooping, and hand/singing/circle games. A poignant passage from the memoir *Mama's Girl* (1996) by Veronica Chambers piqued my interest in this subject, as she refers to the jump rope as a liminal space. She writes, "There is a space between the two ropes where nothing is better than being a black girl. The helix encircles you and protects you and there you are strong. I wish she'd let me show her. I could teach her how it feels" (Chambers 7). At this juncture, Chambers longs for her mother to feel the sense of community she has in her pastime Double Dutch as she refers to the jump rope here as a space of release and catharsis. It is my hope to engage how the childhood pastimes of Black girls may emerge as a safe space where they can assert themselves freely. Also, I am interested in considering what it means to merge varied stories in chants recited in Double Dutch and/or hand/singing/circle games.

Additionally, it is my hope to invite others in conversation with me regarding Black women's movement to think through other significant liminal spaces. For example, the church and the workplace are often contentious spaces for Black women for different reasons. Though the Black church remains known as the cornerstone of the community and a haven to serve

spiritual needs, it has also disapproved of the LGBTQIA community and women in leadership roles, particularly in conservative congregations. Furthermore, Black women often contend with the harsh reality of navigating the workplace often inundated by microagressions. These and other sites are worthwhile in expanding how the concept of liminality can be used to contemplate further the subversive ways Black women navigate a discriminatory world and transgress boundaries of Black womanhood.

Ultimately, my intervention contributes to Black feminist studies, African-American literary studies, and studies of the African Diaspora in significant ways because I contend at length that occupying an in-between space and being in a state of perpetual liminality affords Black women a sense of possibility and provides alternative ways not only for dealing with systems of oppression, but also establishing their subjectivity. Because Black women writers hold a unique position in reading the spaces Black women occupy, their works help us understand this phenomenon in more depth. The aforementioned writers use the concept of liminality to think through the subversive ways Black women navigate a discriminatory world and transgress boundaries of Black womanhood. Consequently, the literature strategically examines the geographic implications for Black women in remarkable ways. These writers also explore the concept of how Black women are acutely aware that their very being in a space transforms the layout of that space. Altogether, in my exploration of the revolutionary ways Black women negotiate loopholes of retreat, transgressive spaces, communal spaces, and domestic spheres, my conceptualization of liminality establishes that such knowledge allows Black women not only to transform the space to benefit their needs but also create essential tools for Black female survival.

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