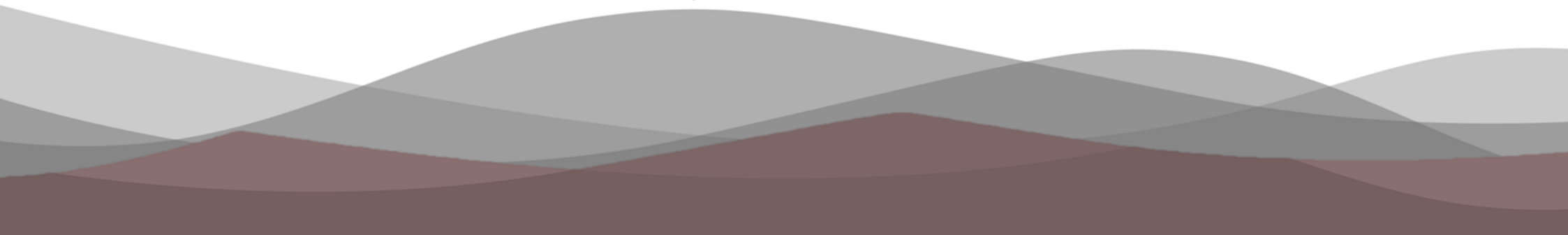


THE MAROON

Journal of Arts and Letters





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Printed in August 2019 in the United States of America, *The Maroon* presents a variety of viewpoints, and none of the perspectives in this volume reflects the official positions of university or its administration.

Note about the design: Multiple pages in this volume feature images of mud cloth – a decorative, hand-made textile traditionally produced by the Bamana people of Mali in Africa’s Western Sudan. In “Bokolanfini: Mud Cloth of the Bamana of Mali” (1970), Pascal James Imperato and Marli Shamir assert the Bamana refer to mudcloth by two names, “bokolanfini,” meaning “mud cloth” and “finignekele,” meaning “designed cloth.” Male and female Malians wear variations of the fabric, and designs not only indicate a person’s profession and community role, but they are also made to order and indicate the wearer’s personality (3-4). Each of the entries in this volume reflects a unique approach to #MeToo, and the mudcloth serves as a connecting thread that weaves together the diverse perspectives of the contributors. To view more illustrations of the textile, visit <https://bogolanfini.wordpress.com/about/history-of-malian-mudcloth/>

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Issue 1 · Fall 2019

From the Editors	4		
Break the Silence!	6		
Thomas Melancon			
Made into Nothing: Surviving Multifaceted Vulnerability	8		
Novella Brooks de Vita			
Me Too	16		
Tasia Ledet			
A Thought on Trees Prince of Flies	17 17		
Vikki Taylor			
Smashing Idols for the Culture	18		
Michon Benson			
A Survivor's Resolution	25		
Eric Wiley			
Ominous	26		
Nathaniel Donnett			
Runnin'	27		
Nathaniel Donnett			
		Consent?	28
		Michon Benson	
		#metoo #butipretend #forthem	29
		Freedom Wright	
		An Untethered Womyn	30
		Karen Celestan	
		Redeemer	37
		AE Fonsworth	
		The Propagation of Racialized Sexual Violence in American Literature	38
		Alexis Brooks de Vita	
		Encased in Amber Venus	49 50
		Aught I'd Been a Bird?	51
		Amber Lee	



FROM THE EDITORS

We are proud to present the inaugural edition of *The Maroon Journal of Arts and Letters*. As a product of the Texas Southern University Department of English, *The Maroon* is an interdisciplinary publication, featuring the works of professional, novice, and student creative writers, visual artists, and essayists who significantly contribute to the formal and extended Texas Southern learning community.

In 1947, while yet a college student, Martin Luther King, Jr. penned a short op-ed piece in the Morehouse newspaper “The Maroon Tiger.” In the article entitled “The Purpose of Education,” King spurred esteemed educators and his “brethren” to take seriously the twofold purpose of comprehensive education: “to think intensively and critically” and, equally importantly, to marry their knowledge with ethics. Coincidentally, in that same year, the Texas legislature renamed Houston Colored Community College the Texas State University for Negroes, and since that time, the institution we have come to treasure as Texas Southern University has prioritized building and sustaining a strong community of academic excellence and of cultural integrity. Indeed, as testament to the extent to which Texas Southern administrators and faculty have adopted King’s philosophy, his mantra “Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of a true education” – is prominently engraved in marble in the main hallway of the eponymous building which houses the TSU English Department.

An obvious nod to school pride, the title of this journal also honors the collective spirit of the Maroons – our African ancestors throughout the Diaspora who continually rebelled against their physical, psychological, and spiritual enslavement.

Although we have not identified the rationale for TSU founders’ choice of campus colors, the editorial staff of *The Maroon* fancies two possibilities: one, they recognized the liberatory practices of reading, writing, creating, and publishing analogous to the maroon people’s fearless liberation strategies; and two, they perceived Texas Southern as a maroon community, of sorts – an organized group of primarily African Americans, charting their own paths to freedom in their respective disciplines. Each volume of *The Maroon* will evince the ethical, critical thinking scholars employ to address diverse issues shaping the American socio-political landscape. For better than two years, the #MeToo Movement has figured so prominently in social media, in national mainstream news outlets, and even in the federal legislature that it has incontrovertibly shifted the national climate and culture. Thus, #MeToo occupies the center of this first volume, featuring seventeen selections from thirteen contributors – six professors and seven students. We hope the texts inspire readers to consider their own perspectives about the state of contemporary sexual politics and to actively and authentically engage in critical conversations within their own collegiate groups.

Michon Benson





There's lots of online information about sexual violence, but there's not a lot of information about how you as an individual can start dealing with the trauma.

Tarana Burke, founder of the #MeToo Movement

BREAK THE SILENCE!

A Choreopoem on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment

Silence sometimes becomes more painful than the memory. The memory imprisons every moment, every smell, every finger that breaks the sacred vows... you go on or try to go on living; but the past, like a wicked shadow follows you down every sidewalk, street, hallway, coffee room, office desk... silence becomes your enemy and your friend. Silence gives you temporary peace but threatens to speak when the wall blackmails...to tell... when the office desk he shoved you against recorded your painful wail; when the bed videoed your shame and anguish; and your tears crashing. Silence... women of military duty. Silence... women of corporate skyscrapers... women of stage, women of film, women sweeping floors.

Grab the
uncopyrighted pussy
place the lock on the undressed mouth
locker room
worship explains it
interrogate those breasts
while you are on the elevator
the eyes can be a weapon of
mass destruction
so can silence...
what it does to a person.

Silence can cause one
to abandon their tongue.
refuse to let
the band play their memories
or ask for people
not to stare at them
on trains.
They may know.



Silence has faces
 750 million around the world
 so does screams with broken jaws
 or shame on a battered Rose
 but the aggressor
 is always
 Someone who believes in
 the overthrow of God
 believes that
 the mouth will not speak
 the bruised soul
 will stagger from the assault
 and change its name
 hide behind
 a disgraced wall.
 Silence can be broken
 not with steel
 nor wrecking balls.

Silence
 can enter... head up
 a bold walk finally
 not cautious footsteps
 to the truth
 it happened.
 Time was there
 with you.
 It is your witness
 no matter how long ago.
 The scene has fingerprints
 still breathing.
 No matter how long ago
 truth breaks the silence
 no matter the
 Bitch screamers
 or... "you wanted it"
 Blues songs
 with self-blame melodies.

No matter the village chief
 the priest office
 the coffee room table
 the uncle's finger, the woman's lips
 the broadcaster's penis
 the athlete's thrust
 the preacher's tongue
 the teacher's hands,
 the actor's mouth
 Silence breaks
 when the chorus of 700 million around
 the world sing their secrets
 in B-Flat...
 unafraid, un-fearing, unshackled.

Speak now
 each woman, child, man, boy,
 girl,
 Silence is now
 Freedom
 Silence is the
 wall torn down
 Speak
 Silence is not more
 Painful than memory
 Break the Silence.

MADE INTO NOTHING: Surviving Multifaceted Vulnerability

How does one not betray oneself? People may find themselves handed a role by their larger society that fits others' scripts of who they should be and what they should feel. Frantz Fanon rejects these imperatives: "[My body] does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and the world" (111). Sometimes, as one struggles to construct that place of self in the world, it may feel easier to cooperate with oppressive dictation so that, at the very least, the struggle will not be so painful as it may be feared to be if one fights. People may find themselves in the unfortunate position of redesigning themselves in order to assimilate—or at least not to stand out too much—in their environments. Through the analytic lens of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1968), investigative biographical texts, such as John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* (1961), Els De Temmerman's *Aboke Girls* (2001), Antwone Fisher's *Finding Fish* (2001), asha bandele's *The Prisoner's Wife* (1999), and Anne Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) explore the varied aspects of destruction of the self and of efforts at self-actualization. This analysis identifies the ways in which one's sense of self may be systematically and thoroughly destroyed by outside forces and how, if possible, one may reconstruct oneself as an empowered and autonomous being despite that erasure.

Any individual's efforts to navigate and to survive oppressive systems begin from a position of relative social disadvantage. The protagonists in the aforementioned texts face obstacles others do not.

This analysis examines the different ways these characters survive, using their occasional advantages or insights to help themselves and others or relying on their solitary ability to resist deconstruction. Though these characters' predicaments span years, cultures, sexes, and countries, they themselves share potentially hopeless fates and must rely upon and be directed by their own moral and ethical compasses to overcome their challenges.

It may seem shocking to realize the extent to which outside forces influence the design of one's inner workings and shape one's identity. This is especially true of those social commentators who live in societies in which they feel both free and encouraged to so-called "be themselves." But are they? What does it mean to have influential factors around one that will have an effect, one way or another? Would it not be easier to let those forces do what they will without the conflict of watching the damage or feeling the pain they might cause? Through pain and adversity comes growth, but that outcome is possible only if one survives. Through the lens of difficult experience, people may gain unique and even healing insights. It may be difficult or may feel impossible to look at having faced horror or hardship with gratitude. After all, coupled with hardship, pain, and suffering is loss; what does one gain from loss? One might not seek out ordeals, but it is possible to be grateful for insights gained during challenging experiences.

In *Black Like Me*, investigative journalist John Howard Griffin lives through a series of awful epiphanies about US society and what it is like to be oppressed and terrorized for the sake of others' greed and quest for power. Having been asked to succumb to another man's request to expose his browned genitalia and having developed a fear of looking at or thinking about European American women, including his own wife, Griffin retreats into a Southern African American community he considers a haven. Already sensitive to and recognized by European Americans for his analysis of American racism, Griffin lodges with an African American family in their small home, and he realizes the cruelty of overt bigotry and social undermining each generation of African Americans is forced to endure:

One could then see it as the Negro parent sees it [...] He looks at his children and knows. No one, not even a saint, can live without a sense of personal value. The white racist has masterfully defrauded the Negro of this sense. It is the least obvious but most heinous of all race crimes, for it kills the spirit and the will to live. (Griffin 67)

The breaking of a person's or a people's spirit ensures the domination of one group over another. Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* highlights the fight some people wage against what they think is a threat to their established and often carefully constructed worldview and, therefore, sense of identity. The reality of the institutionalized racism and brutality Griffin experiences awaken what Fanon calls *phobogenesis*, for, in this situation, ethnic minorities—specifically those of African descent in European or colonized countries—"have become a stimulus of anxiety" (151). Evidence is fought against, for it deconstructs the entire structure upon which some have built themselves. What can be more terrifying than losing one's

security and rebuilding from scratch? If there is extreme personal crisis to be found in general self-deconstruction, what terror, then, is there for those who realize that they, by their very being, are meant to inspire fright?

Thus human reality in-itself-for-itself can be achieved only through conflict and through the risk that conflict implies. This risk means that I go beyond life toward a supreme good that is the transformation of subjective certainty of my own worth into a universally valid objective truth. (Fanon 218)

Fanon's discussions prescribe that one must question one's place and identity not only when it is dictated by outside forces, but also when those forces have turned one into a thing of terror to others. Those who find themselves in such positions may be shocked and disgusted by the forces which assign these roles to them and may vacillating between compulsions to fight against those assignments or to go along with them.

It is necessary not to completely dismiss those who feel they must surrender to the painful forces around them. However, at the same time that one is developing a deepened appreciation for what an oppressed or abused person is suffering, it is important that he or she identify the potential avenues available to that person and to oneself for empowerment and growth. Often, from some of the worst atrocities and experiences, people can grow and perhaps become stronger than they would have been had they not suffered, since they have chosen not to give in to the attacks on their very idea of self. An extreme example of this exists in *Aboke Girls*. Child soldiers and child hostages facing death, rape, and torture do not seem like the most hopeful protagonists. But these children's assorted dreams and hopes may guide them through and out of suffering that many adults might be convinced no one could survive.

Els De Temmerman's anthology, *Aboke Girls*, features stories of abducted Ugandan children who suffered atrocities at the hands of or on behalf of the Lord's Resistance Army. Their tales expose the process of the breaking of spirit. There is agony in the children's awareness of their dehumanization. They do not simply kill their parents. They miss their parents with their entire capacity for feeling while living with the knowledge that they must slaughter their extended families, if they see them again. The children find themselves in the contradictory simultaneous positions of being both victims and perpetrators of violence and suffering. They are children and, like most youngsters, wish for the comfort of those who raise and love them. At the same time, they are driven to desperation, drug frenzy, and bloodlust to fulfill the demands of the Lord's Resistance Army. If a child does become willing to torture and destroy others, some may wonder how much of a salvageable person remains.

In today's social and political climate, with crucial future-influencing decisions in the balance, when the *#MeToo* movement is swiftly exposing oppressive, degrading and violent wrongs, when misogynistic existing power-holders are just as swiftly trying to discredit and silence the abused, exposure to the dramatic stories of suffering and survival in *Aboke Girls* is both relevant and necessary. These victims—and soldiers—are children. They do not have power of their own. They are prey to the whims of the adults around them. One sees, through the eyes of boys and girls forced to become soldiers, how sociopaths are bred. Why care for others when that caring makes one vulnerable? Girls stolen to become murderers and war brides offer a disturbing insight. While

hopeful little boys' dreams are dashed, the girls start their entrapment at even greater disadvantages, raped and brutalized to such an extent that would cause many adults might give up.

But many of these girls and boys do not give up. Boys, driven by fear and longing to reclaim their innocence, girls, drawing their power from some emotionless, pragmatic well beyond their pain, soldier on. They play the roles forced upon them—like a form of extreme code-switching—while analyzing every new situation in which they find themselves. They search for ways to gain advantages among or over their captors, some of them remaining ever ready to make their escape.

The Aboke girls are dealing with genocide and war crimes. Every problem, every decision is the difference between life and death for these children. The kidnapped girls are pawns in other people's war games, dehumanized prizes for adult and male actions. The first page of De Temmerman's account of Ugandan children's suffering at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army establishes that "there [is] no way [a kidnapped girl] could refuse. If she resisted she would be killed" (69).

Autobiographical narrators such as supermodel and activist Waris Dirie may have trouble seeing their roles in the events that unfold around them. They see how others' actions impact them, but they may remain apparently unaware of what it is that they themselves do that will influence the behavior of others. Dirie takes the disadvantages handed to her and uses her personal strength and firm sense of selfhood to turn her distressing fortune into success. A survivor of female genital mutilation, Dirie experiences traumas that are physical as well as emotional and psychological. Her desire to escape the future ahead of her in Somalia

alienates her from her community. She cannot accept her fate. Dirie faces death threats while contending with threats to her personal rights as a girl and then a woman, threats to her health due to her community's practice of extreme female genital cutting, threats to her career due to immigration status, and potential threats to her life because of an unhinged green card husband in England who wants her to take their scam marriage seriously and submit to his sexual advances.

The threats to safety, comfort, happiness, sanity, and autonomy are consistent between these accounts. Every woman and girl finds herself a pawn to another person's desires and lack of self-control: "not hundreds, not thousands, but millions of girls" (Dirie 215). Sex as power returns as an unsettling theme from one page to the next. One discovers that demanding weaponized sex as a tool for domination and control is horribly, globally pervasive, one of several byproducts of a self-loathing puritanical patriarchy that has infected the world. Concerning issues of autonomy, power and sex, the problems found in each text are startlingly alike. Yet, despite extraordinary odds facing the children and women of De Temmerman's *Aboke Girls*, Waris Dirie's *Desert Flower*, and Anita Hill's *Speaking Truth to Power*, the protagonists of these (auto)biographical works fortify themselves and push onward, working through the problems and distresses they face.

Hill faces the undermining of her reputation, her education and her career when she testifies about pending Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas's alleged sexual harassment of her when she worked for him. All the things that African Americans and women must do, time and again, to survive daily sabotage and insult to develop their careers and not

be driven to despair by the onslaught, were used to attack Hill's character and question her truthfulness. She comes to be treated by the Senate, by the nominee and the press as if she were the perpetrator of the abuse she suffered from Thomas, even as she is simultaneously attacked for supposedly making up her account of the assaults and insults.

It is necessary to recognize that while the differences between the exact predicaments of these women and children are great, they all suffer life-changing, life-shattering challenges that can destroy them. Sexual assault, something every woman and girl in these readings has to face and either endure or escape, is a real and constant danger. The actions of those around them imply that "calls for equal treatment are often seen as calls for 'special treatment' in situations where discrimination has become the norm" (Hill 340). A constant unasked question in each text is why these girls and women will not wordlessly submit themselves to those who want them, rather than disturbing others with their exposures of wrongdoing.

Hannah Hall, the administrative headquarters of Texas Southern University, features diverse historical murals. This cultural treasure expresses the history and psyche of the United States' African American community. As one of the nation's largest HBCUs and an intellectual training ground for major African American artists, TSU displays a visual record of many major points of the African American legacy. In a series of murals he created while yet a student, Kermit Oliver, shows the ways in which this historically abused community turns the shadows cast upon it, and the manipulation of its bodies highlight the community's strength and beauty. Instead of obscuring figures, the overwhelming darkness in many of Oliver's works highlights what light shines upon the subjects. While

shocking in the pain they communicate, the twisted, broken limbs in Oliver's paintings show how powerful those same bodies are. These written and visual works consistently use the most undermining of treatments to prove that those attacked can — and will — survive.

The autobiographical and biographical works in this essay exceed what many people are willing to admit are the historical and current legacies of the society in which they live. This may be due to the fear that acknowledgment, especially acknowledgment of a bad problem with no efforts to rectify anything, is equivalent to complicity in the injustices being committed. Perhaps it is complicity. There appears to be a line in an audience's psyche when something that has happened to someone is horrible enough that it seems fantastic. Social media shows this. Twitter users spent most of 2018 reminding one another that the calendar year was not yet over, yet the year's atrocities had exceeded most of their worst fears. They realized that the next day might reveal something even worse than what they had already been made to accept as reality. Activists remind armchair protesters that their retweets of dissent are only so helpful. At some point, one must take the next step.

The good thing about acknowledging a problem is that it is the very first step in fixing that problem. One must become aware of one's role in what is going on. In some cases, as in the cases of countless children suffering at the hands of the Lord's Resistance Army in the previous decade and now in Boko Haram, one may not be at fault, at least not for the initial problem. However, even these children, forced against their will into ranks of soldiers or child brides for a fight that is not their own, may come to realize that they do have space to make

their own choices, at some point. There comes a time that they, too, will become responsible parties in the devastation around them. Many of these children manage to save themselves and even save other children at huge cost to what is left of their safety, psyche and ability to recover. But many take the risk and do what they must to do the right thing and to try to heal.

This discussion of traumas and one's reactions is not to say that others are absolved of their guilt for horrible actions and responsibility for their behaviors. Those who do wrong are wrong. They have harmed others. But fixing problems and even healing from the damage these other people's behaviors have inflicted requires survivors and witnesses to become cognizant of their performance in the acts unfolding. Though one should never be put in the position to have to correct someone else's wrong choices, it helps to know if one is exaggerating or minimizing the effects of what someone else has done or suffered.

Details about the histories of World War Two survivors of the Jewish Holocaust are widespread. In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman's father shares the raw trauma of that Holocaust with his son, reflecting in his old age about his complicity and possible roles in the horrors that afflicted him and his family. *Maus* offers a perspective of the abused and dehumanized from yet another perspective. The work allows readers to immerse themselves in the harsh realities of torture, genocide, debilitating discrimination, and betrayal through the safety and distance of hand-drawn humanoid rodents. Had this true story been presented in the completely real-world context of how it was experienced, it might have been found to be too brutal. From the first page to the last, the story is

not a happy one. No characters are admirable. Even those who are not major characters or antagonists leave the reader wishing that there had been more sympathy or empathy shown to those in pain. It is depressing to observe, and it is even more disheartening for the reader to wonder at his or her own complicity in the suffering of another. Few but the most sadistic recognize or intend their own damaging part in the story, but it is there, nonetheless. Every interaction, every choice echoes throughout the course of the volumes of *Maus*, showing the healing or destruction caused immediately as well as several years down the road.

While discussing events of 1941 and 1942 with Spiegelman, Spiegelman Sr. pauses to reflect on the public hanging of four Jewish men. During his story, he pauses, appearing to feel that passing by the corpses will highlight his guilt. So many years later, he wonders if any of them could have saved themselves by implicating him to the Gestapo. He ponders: "Maybe one of them could have talked of me to the Germans to try to save himself" (84). This guilt and pain remain poignant enough over the years that he cries, surprised that even his dead eye now weeps.

In her memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968), Anne Moody describes a phenomenon that both displaces blame and correctly assigns blame that would otherwise be denied. Escaping her stepfather's unwanted sexual advances, young Moody witnesses more scenes of extreme domestic violence among her father's relatives. When her aunt Emma is shot, Emma entreats family members, "Don't y'all go blamin' Wilbert for this" (208). Moody at first admires Emma:

What I admired most about her was the fact that she didn't blame Wilbert for shooting her. She placed the blame where it rightfully belonged, that is, upon the

whites in Woodville and how they had set things up making it almost impossible for the Negro men to earn a living. (208)

While it is true that the community and society at large have conspired to create the sort of hopeless environment in which a man like Wilbert would do something so unthinkable, it is nevertheless also Wilbert's fault. His loved ones' and community's forgiveness of his actions and their willingness to overlook what he chooses to do within the confines and damaging effects of his situation only serve to compound the problem. Wilbert is not at fault, the community reasons: he was wronged, so he will wrong. This natural byproduct mentality that avoids the assignment of responsibility for one's part in events, good or bad, helps to ensure that this will happen again. If it is not Wilbert's fault now, it will not be his fault the next time, or the next, as his victimizing behaviors continue and increase in severity.

However, these texts teach that, as painful and unfair as a situation may be, one remains an active participant as soon as he or she makes a choice. There are always choices to be made and always actions that have consequences. While the final results may not be what one initially intends, those results will be affected by and will affect all involved.

How does one choose to heal? It is tempting to many, as it is with Antwone Fisher, to shut down and cooperate: cooperate with abuse and cooperate with what there is of life after abuse. It may seem like a more attractive and less tumultuous choice to put aside one's own traumas in favor of the dictates of a larger society that may not be aware of or concerned about what one has suffered, or that may act justified in perpetrating such suffering upon others, continuing the abusive cycles.

Fisher's feelings regarding personal surrender are not unique, nor are they a sign of personal weakness. Rather, they provide insights into how the tumultuous experiences of Fisher and others may drive a person to feel. From there, the individual may attempt to see himself through another's eyes, as does Fisher, having lost his sense of self after years of childhood sexual, emotional and physical abuse. Fisher has been forcefully stripped of the positive characteristics he might have naturally developed in himself. In that void, he has few alternatives but to create a new persona for himself. As an adult, when an abusive larger society has handed him potential roles to fill, it is up to Fisher to develop into them or to manifest something else. The erasure of self in order to fit a mold—and avoid conflict—results not in the painful epiphany of self-discovery but the increasing horror and eventual numbness of surrender and self-betrayal. Through the hopeful and invested eyes of another, Fisher, however, chooses to build an empowered, competent and hopeful persona. As Fisher heals, it is important to him to realize that “mine was not your run-of-the-mill shyness, that it was on the level of a brutal terror in my bones. As normal as I tried to be, I couldn't undo the fact that most of the human touch I'd experienced in my life had hurt” (168).

Fisher goes through the terror and pain of learning that there are human interactions that are not brutal and damaging, and that there are rewards for facing the risk of reaching out and trying again. His awareness of what he has lost and what he feels he lacks informs what he should develop as he progresses. He reconstructs his worldview one terrifying step at a time but comes to understand his own growth and healing, in the process. From being sacrificed for another person's self-satisfaction to

sacrificing his shaky sense of comfortable self-protection for healing and positive growth, Fisher has survived and grown productively from a life of uncertainty and risk.

Just as the Aboke children in De Temermman's *Aboke Girls* were pulled from their lives of relative privilege and made into objects of terror and alienation, and just as John Howard Griffin discovered as he disguised himself as an African American man for his study, *Black Like Me*, asha bandele also finds herself treated very differently after she becomes involved with her future husband in *The Prisoner's Wife*. bandele begins the book as a prison volunteer. She is treated with some level of respect and support as she goes about her duties. However, once she has become involved with Rashid, she is treated with as much suspicion as a prisoner. “Being a volunteer afforded me a tiny measure of courtesy, but being a lover, a girlfriend, afforded me mostly hostility and suspicion. Mothers, sisters, friends, fathers, cousins, and wives, all of us were treated with hostility and suspicion” (bandele 45). She has become that other, one of those things that it is the prison guards' job to confine and control. bandele is stripped, by this treatment, of her identity and her potential to contribute positively to those groups and to larger society. Instead of being seen as asha bandele, she has become the wife of a prisoner, a woman without a name or a purpose, a woman scorned not by her lover but by her society for her loyalty to him.

These texts guide the reader through the varied developmental stages of self-awareness, self-understanding, self-actualization, and self-acceptance. From the perspective of an ultimate victim – someone who can find no refuge to be free from fear or pain – to that of the complicit

outsider, whose actions or inactions have resounding consequences on the lives of those around them, the histories contained in these texts give readers the opportunity to vicariously live these events and work through these people's dilemmas. From this point, readers may begin to self-reflect, drawing comparisons to their own lived experiences and gaining crucial understanding of their own developing selves. All stages of deconstruction are as necessary as those steps toward reconstruction and personal growth. Without them, necessary levels of self-awareness cannot be and are not developed. Without self-deconstruction, a person cannot be driven to comprehend and become what he or she is capable of being.

Each of the people in these texts discovers that it is not possible to simply disappear into the roles demanded of them. It is not possible to strip themselves of their own humanity, nor is it easy to ignore the humanity and the pain of those around them. Try as some might, they are too humane to become societal automatons. As Fanon states, one's very core and relationship to the world must be (de/re)constructed. Others can see Fisher's, the Aboke children's, Dirie's, and Hill's pain and journeys and model their own growth on that bravery. Fanon describes this process of realization and emptying as a devastating realization:

Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep. (140)

Coming out of these horrors, no one can or would go back to the way their lives were before. But every new day, alive and trying to heal, they are gifted with new perspectives and new appreciations that the world needs.

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Texas Southern University



ME TOO

Society tells women that dressing or acting a certain way makes them more susceptible to being attacked or taken advantage of. When I was younger, I was taught and experienced things that I look back on in horror, not even realizing what all those lessons were for. Were you ever told that if a man was in the house around bedtime, you couldn't wear your gown or shorts in front of him? Me too. Were you not allowed to sleep over at friends' houses and sometimes even family because your parents didn't know what kind of people would come in and out of their houses? Me too. Have you ever heard about the parents who question their children – boys and girls – about whether they were sexually harassed at their other parents' houses? Me too. Have you ever been so nervous to walk through a crowd of men that you took a much longer detour to avoid the potential harassment? Me too. Have you ever chosen to not get on the dance floor to avoid a man coming up behind you? Me too. Have you read the horrifying stories of women being killed by men who were fueled by anger after being rejected? Me too. Have you ever heard a woman say that a man can't be sexually harassed? Me too. Have you heard that if you dress in a way that shows skin – your legs or even a strip of your stomach – you could be looked as a slut, and you could be raped? And that it would be your fault because of what you were wearing? Me too. Do you have social media, and if so, did you notice the tremendous number of men and women ridiculing the #MeToo movement? Me too. Have you ever been in or escaped from a situation where you could have been sexually assaulted?

Me too.

It's one of the scariest things people can have happen to them, feeling powerless and blaming themselves because of lessons they learned growing up. We all have observed the way society blames the victim for someone else's disgusting animosity. Standing by these men and women who do come out and who share their heart-wrenching experience is one of the few things we can do because, ultimately, wouldn't you want someone on your side?

Me too.

**Tasia Ledet, English Major
Texas Southern University**





A THOUGHT ON TREES

I understand how the awareness of a wilting flower affects the trees around it, but I do not grasp the depth at which things grow. The broken serenity of missed coffee, the sweltering fields of dying grass and bugs and judgments, the anger directed toward the automated traffic lights in a busy intersection remind me of hands that slip and hide behind hips or trace the inside of lips. . . that is, I cannot understand the feeble-minded or the intricate design of blue tubes and green vines that make up life and fuel the choices of the of the mind. I feign naïveté, but am composed of nothing but experience, so I damn the sappy dictators of my body and their blackened bastards that beat, beat, beat. I am the flower, not the tree.

PRINCE OF FLIES

The handsome frog croaks

In a swamp of twitching flies

That gnaw at his mind.

Vicky Taylor, English Major
Texas Southern University

SMASHING IDOLS FOR THE CULTURE

I do think that in the next decade we can shift . . . how we talk about [#MeToo], we can shift how we respond to it, we can shift how the culture understands it — because it's going to make a difference in the number of sexual assaults that we see. It's going to make a difference in the way people respond to survivors of sexual violence, and that difference is really everything.¹

Tarana Burke

The Negro, too, for his part, has idols of the tribe to smash. If on the one hand the white man has erred in making the Negro appear to be that which would excuse or extenuate his treatment of him, the Negro, in turn, has too often unnecessarily excused himself because of the way he has been treated.²

Alain Locke

After work one day last month, I pulled up to one of the few vacant pumps at the bustling Chevron on the corner of Blodgett and Scott streets and was walking toward the Stripes convenience store when a maroon Toyota Corolla zoomed into the gas station driveway. Had I been distracted by my phone, the driver might have hit me. Stunned by the threat of danger and by the skin-shifting thuds of a subwoofer, I paused to witness five teenagers spill out and take their respective positions at the front and back doors. These young women were dressed in what could have been their little sisters' "booty" shorts and tank tops, and four of the girls yelled in unison, "Heeeey! We' heeere at the stayshuuuuun!" while the fifth recorded their performance on her cell phone. They vigorously twerked and dropped the proverbial "it" to a song I had never heard, and they alternated smiles and fish lips for the benefit of honking passersby and of the half-drunken catcalling panhandlers settled on the curb at the store entrance. By the time I returned to my car, a few male patrons had encircled the tribe.

Disheartened, I pumped my gas, shook my head, and paraphrased Tupac: "If this is what we' doin' now, 'it ain't no hope for tha future.'" ³

In truth, I could never lose hope for African American youth — for any youth for that matter — but I had grown up in the same neighborhood in which I witnessed the spectacle, and I had never seen such a brazenly soft-porn display within an ostensibly utilitarian space . . . in broad daylight to boot. Questions ranging from condemnation and protection to self-reflection darted through my head: *Were these young women aware that America was embroiled in a #MeToo climate? If so, were they so oblivious or apathetic to the larger #MeToo Movement that they failed to realize how their scantily-clad, gyrating bodies figured in the heated debate? If not, had they a clue that Houston led the country in sex trafficking and in the number of sexual assault cases, and might they have behaved any differently had they known that fifty-eight registered sex offenders lived within a one-mile radius of their makeshift dance stage?*⁴ *Wait -- was I one of the "old haters" Lil' Yachty had said who needed to "suck it up and understand that rap wasn't the same no more[sic]"?*⁵ *Further, did my critiquing the young women's self-expression place me on the side of a C.-Delores-Tucker-brand of respectability politics against which Tupac and Lil' Kim had railed over thirty years ago?*⁶ *Shoot! Did I need to check myself?*

I was still in shock the next day when I recounted what I had seen to a student of mine. She chuckled, fiddled with her phone, and handed it to me, assuring me that the girls I had seen had done what thousands of others around the country were doing — participating in rapper Megan Thee Stallion's (MTS) #GasStationChallenge⁷ -- and she added, "You know she goes to Texas Southern, right?" I grabbed my own phone and quickly perused Instagram clips of girls taking the challenge; afterwards, I

viewed the official video for MTS's Billboard top-forty hit "Big Ole Freak" (2019).⁸ My fifty-year-old heart sank.

For the next few days, and with a borderline obsession, I googled critics' reviews of MTS's album; the majority of their accounts lauded the rapper for her lyricism and for her brand of feminism.⁹ Admittedly, she is talented, and some of her songs do highlight a wicked wit and verbal dexterity. Then watching interviews featuring the artist, I learned that despite Rich the Kid's warning,¹⁰ in November of last year, a deserving Megan Pete aka "Houston Hottie," aka "Hot Girl Meg," aka "Megan Thee Stallion," aka "Tina Snow" became the first female rap artist to join Lyor Cohen's 300 Entertainment roster alongside trap rapper Fetty Wap, the gender-bending Young Thug,¹¹ and megawatt rap trio The Migos. Notwithstanding her lyricism and her legitimacy as an artist, I was not quite willing to let her off the hook. I took to the 'Gram and Twitter, mining fans' and columnists' responses to the gas station phenomenon. *Was no one as unnerved as I by this "Stallion" girl?*

On the morning of March 28, I thought I had struck Twitter gold when I read a tweet from R & B singer Trey Songz aka "Trigga" to MTS; he commented that after seeing the official video of "Big Ole Freak" (2019), he wanted to "knock the stallion [*sic*] head off for the culture."¹² *YES!* I exclaimed aloud. Although horrified to think Trigga would physically harm any young woman because he didn't like her music, I was energized: like so many other Black Gen Xers who had been immersed in old-school rap culture and who also remain tethered to our parents' Civil Rights Movement/Black Power Movement era race consciousness, when I read what I thought was Trigga's condemnation of Megan Thee Stallion's hypersexual performance in defense of "[hip-hop] culture" or even for the

sake of "[African American] culture," I was both relieved and elated. My joy was short-lived, though, because those interpretations did not hold; four hours after Songz's initial post, MTS had retorted with a modified line from her more current single "Sex Talk" (2019): "Somebody tell Trigga he can't handle me."¹³ A few hours after that, Songz responded, "[L]emme see sumn [*sic*] right quick."¹⁴ Clearly, Stallion and Trigga were engaged in verbal, sexually-charged "horseplay," and more than twenty thousand followers were in on the joke. Rather than reproving MTS, Trigga had publicly proclaimed his desire to have sex with, or to "smash" the hip-hop industry latest idol for "the Gram" culture; for "porno," "strip club," and "hotline" culture; and within a host of other public social contexts that lend him currency. I do not share these spaces with them, and in many ways, the liminal areas have come to signify the intergenerational gulf between contemporary Black youth and historical African American culture.¹⁵

Let me be perfectly clear about two points: one, I love hip hop and have enjoyed a diverse playlist of female rappers – from the more critically-acclaimed MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, Salt 'N' Pepa, and Yo Yo and the all-but-forgotten Real Roxanne, Oaktown 357, Vita, Queen Pimp, and Lady of Rage to even the "dirty rap" ground breakers Khia, Lil' Kim, and Trina. Two, I am not naïve about the minefield female emcees have had to negotiate. I get that "street cred" and "props" occupy a well-defined center of hip-hop sexual politics. Yet, in their effort to traverse the shortest distance between obscurity and fame, the majority of female rappers have either foregone or have never learned the lessons the anti-pornography movement of the mid-1970s taught their predecessors –within American patriarchy, women's hypersexualized performativity furthers their own oppression.¹⁶ Since the mid- to late-1980s, significant criticism has

identified the ways female rappers empower themselves in a male-dominated industry¹⁷ and ways they subvert misogynist impulses in their male counterparts' lyrics with their own misandrist, read "feminist" texts. That said, MTS' and Triggs' social-media exchange resuscitated the disappointment I had felt when I saw the young girls at the gas stayshuuuuun, and I realized that the rappers' as well as their fans actually embody the crux of cultural studies, specifically what cultural critic Tricia Rose identifies as "a slippage [between] the potential popular culture has to be a resistive space and the reality that popular culture does not always resist hegemonic norms."¹⁸ In other words, with no more solutions than their forebears, this new generation of hip-hop artists and fans engages in gratuitous and copious verbal and physical public sex acts, which, in theory, are potentially transgressive but which, in practice, perniciously rehearse the same, futile misogynist dilemma. So immersed in an alternate counterculture, mouthing a mercurial language system few of their elders can easily decipher, and bearing a set of expanded gender parameters that defy men to perceive them as anything other than paramours, would these women be willing to participate in constructive discourse, let alone forge a coalition with their elders to accomplish the requisite shift #MeToo founder Tarana Burke believes needs to happen?

Thirteen years ago, Burke initiated #MeToo to facilitate Black and Brown women's healing from the trauma of molestation and sexual assault. It wasn't until 2017, however, that the hashtag figured prominently in the media when actress and rape survivor Alyssa Milano directed any women who had experienced sexual assault to append #MeToo to their Twitter posts. Since then, elite- and Hollywood-dominated scandals have saturated mainstream media, reinforcing public

pedagogy about the toxicity of masculinity and the antipathy of man-bashing feminism. Given that young Black women experience the highest rates of sexual assault in the country, and given the power and influence of Black women in the music industry – Beyonce, Nikki Minaj, Cardi B, and now Megan Thee Stallion – does it not make sense that any notable shifts in "the culture's" understanding of #MeToo might begin with them? Again, as the Burke epigraph suggests, if the #MeToo Movement is to progress, these idols' discussions about and representations of women could "make a difference in the way people respond to survivors of sexual violence," especially the way American society responds to the thousands upon thousands of Black women violated every year. Essentially, instead of being satisfied with society's perceiving them as idols to smash, they should perhaps be encouraging their male and female fans to destroy debilitating representations of themselves for the benefit of a healthy Black womanhood.

Unfortunately, and for a host of reasons, critical conversations about #MeToo are continually stalled within the music industry, particularly within hip-hop forms. Even the most popular icons, such as Beyoncé conceive they successfully negotiate MTS's, Cardi B's, and the City Girls' brand of female empowerment and seem oblivious to the ways their purposeful performances weaponize prostitution and predatory porn/stripper culture and are, thus, anti-woman. My observation dovetails bell hooks's characterization of Beyoncé's feminism, in particular, as "terrorist" and that her album "Lemonade" (2016) commodifies effective feminism as successions of violent acts:

Female violence is no more liberatory than male violence. And when violence is made to look sexy and eroticized, as in the *Lemonade* sexy-dress street scene, it does not serve to

undercut the prevailing cultural sentiment that it is acceptable to use violence to reinforce domination, especially in relations between men and women. Violence does not create positive change.¹⁹

hooks adds that “showcasing beautiful black bodies does not create a just culture of optimal wellbeing where black females can become fully self-actualized and be truly respected.” To hooks’s point, in “Don’t Hurt Yourself” (2016), Beyoncé threatens a man, presumably Jay-Z, that if he cannot value her as better than the “average bitch” and if he cannot remain faithful in their marriage, then he will have to “watch [her] fat ass twist away” as she “bounce[s] to the next dick.”²⁰ As much as fans might argue the dissimilarities between Beyoncé’s and MTS’s artistry, Beyoncé’s threats sounds uncannily similar to a rejoinder MTS offers in “Cocky AF” (2018) wherein she acknowledges that she holds her “pussy like it’s a weapon” and that withholding sex or even communication with a man is as violent a tool as “a machete.”²¹ Feeling victimized, Beyoncé repeatedly confesses that her husband’s infidelity has hurt her, and similar to MTS, she threatens to shift the gender/power dynamics in her relationship. Ironically, while identifying “the next” man’s phallus as a site of subversion against her cheating spouse, she also locates her own authority *only* in her “fat ass;” consequently, she becomes what Williams Acton calls an “active seductress” and, thus, “her sexuality . . . pathological and externally directed,” is the potential source of her own victimization.²²

Although each of the aforementioned female artists throw equally violent verbal barbs at other anonymous women they imagine as ineffectual rivals for men’s attention, their malevolence toward men is much more palpable. Most recently, and concomitant with my accidental introduction

to MTS, Cardi B posted a video on Twitter, responding to her “haters” who suggested she had not “put in enough work” to have won the 2019 Grammy for “Best Rap Album of the Year.” The rapper’s rage-filled Tweet scorns the people who “musta forgot [*sic*]” or who were not aware of her difficult childhood and her struggle to survive. In a jaw-dropping moment, she confesses that becoming a successful idol required her to actually hurt men -- to lure unsuspecting male strip-club clients to hotels where she drugged and robbed them.²³ Regrettably, another video surfaced, featuring a slightly younger Cardi B, hypothesizing about what she would do to a man who ever cheated on her. Resorting again to sexualized violence, she suggests that she would take the guy out, “get him all perked up” and set him up to have sex with a transsexual.²⁴ Certainly, so much more can be said about Cardi B’s employing a transgender female’s sexuality as a weapon to exact revenge. Yet, arguably as striking as her fans’ polarized reception of her behavior²⁵ are the artist’s insistence that her antics epitomize strong Black womanhood and the apologists who normalize and excuse her violent misandry.²⁶

At the risk of being likened to C. Delores Tucker or of being considered “out of touch” with contemporary hip-hop trends, I must suggest that the work of hip-hop is still aligned with what Harlem Renaissance philosopher Alain Locke dubbed “race work.” As such, the associated lyrics and images – progressive and limiting, alike – continually shape and affirm Americans’ collective consciousness about the intersectionality of race, gender, and politics. In his seminal essay “The New Negro” (1925), Locke laments that “[s]ome of the recognized Negro leaders and a powerful section of white opinion identified with ‘race work’ of the older order” rigidly fix race perceptions.²⁷ Although Locke does

not focus on the ways that women in the early-20th century negotiated social or political power, his theory about the hazards of performing mythologized formulae associated with the “old Negro” parallels the dangers women can anticipate if they perpetuate stultifying, countercultural misrepresentations of themselves:

[H]aving to appeal from the unjust stereotypes of his oppressors and traducers to those of his liberators, friends and benefactors he has had to subscribe to the traditional positions from which his case has been viewed. Little true social or self-understanding has or could come from such a situation.²⁸

Again, although Locke does not at all address decidedly “feminist” issues, his charge that race leaders stimulate a new aesthetic for race consciousness correlates with what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as “the new racism” – “the gender-specific ideologies developed to justify Black exploitation.”²⁹ It follows, then, that Burke and other leaders must not only purposely shift #MeToo conversations away from the “salacious” narratives framing “a gender war, that is anti-male,” but they must also facilitate the healing of younger Black and Brown women who regard themselves as the eroticized and fetishized idols men desire to smash and, further, whose sensibilities “excuse or extenuate” men’s and even American society’s treatment of them. In significant ways, when Black women employ *only* their hypersexualized body parts, their ostensibly resilient, “feminist” performativity does little more than veil the real corporal victimization they unwittingly yet complicitly perpetrate against themselves. Contrary to what fans of MTS believe, any successful challenge against misogyny or reclamation of cultural self-esteem does not involve twerking at the “gas stayshuuuuun.”

Michon Benson, Assistant Professor of English
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NOTES

- ¹ Klerk, Amy de. “The Founder of the #MeToo Movement on How It Needs to Change.” *Harper's BAZAAR*, Harper's BAZAAR, 25 Oct. 2018, www.harpersbazaar.com/uk/culture/culture-news/a24205132/tarana-burke-metoo-reflecting/.
- ² Locke, Alain. “The New Negro. 1925.” *Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Simon* (1992).
- ³ TuPac. “Keep Ya Head Up.” *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, DJ Daryl, Interscope Records, CA, 28 Oct.
- ⁴ “Sex Offender Map Control.” *Records.txdps.state.tx.us*, Texas Department of Public Safety, 2 Apr. 2019, 10:21:58 AM, records.txdps.state.tx.us/SexOffenderRegistry/map/load?mapReqId=1&channel=pSexOffenderJs&address=Houston%2C%2BTX%2B77004%2C%2BUSA#.
- ⁵ Respect, D. “The 90's Weren't the Golden Era of HipHop.” *YouTube*, YouTube, 6 Sept. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7T8aTtw-joE&feature=youtu.be.
- ⁶ Molloy, Tim. “How C. Delores Tucker Became the Most-Hated Woman in Hip-Hop (Podcast).” *TheWrap*, TheWrap, 17 Nov. 2018, www.thewrap.com/how-c-delores-tucker-suge-knight-tupac-became-the-most-hated-woman-in-hip-hop-podcast/.
- ⁷ “Hot Girl Meg on Instagram: ‘WASSSUPPPP WE OUT HEREEE @ THE STATIONNNN COME AGAINNN #Bigolefreakchallenge #ATTHESTATION #WEHERE @Iwantdjduffey IM CHALLENGING ALL MY BIG...’.” *Instagram*, @Theestallion, 9 Mar. 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BuzbTBRIX6k/?utm_source=ig_embed&utm_campaign=embed_video_watch_again.
- ⁸ Stallion, Megan Thee. “Megan Thee Stallion - Big Ole Freak [Official Video].” *YouTube*, YouTube, 28 Feb. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBYf6gpVvRA.

⁹ Bowen, Sesali. "Search Results for 'Megan+the+Stallion'." *Results for 'Megan+the+Stallion'*, 19 Dec. 2018, 9:16 AM, www.refinery29.com/en-us/search?q=Megan%2Bthe%2Bstallion; Spanos, Brittany. "Song You Need to Know: Megan Thee Stallion, 'Sex Talk'." *Rolling Stone*, Rolling Stone Magazine, 22 Mar. 2019, www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/megan-thee-stallion-sex-talk-new-song-810728/.

¹⁰ Akademiks, DJ. "Rich The Kid Goes Off on 300 ENT 'YOU SUCK. LET ME OUT THIS CONTRACT! ILL GIVE UR MONEY BACK!'" *YouTube*, YouTube, 28 July 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYga6Ci7SC4&feature=youtu.be.

¹¹ Adegoke, Yomi. "Young Thug's Airport Rant Reveals a Misogynist in a Dress." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 13 Dec. 2016, www.theguardian.com/music/2016/dec/13/young-thugs-airport-rant-cross-dressing-misogynist-sexism. "The Guardian" columnist Yomi Adegoke's observation about Young Thug's problematic persona is comparable to what I perceive is troubling about MTS's female persona. For example, Adegoke expresses her disappointment in critics' applauding young Thug as an "eccentric, effeminate exception from the usual woman-bashers. . . . [when] he never really was." Moreover, while he might have seemed the "new face of more inclusive rap. . . . [p]atriarchal strictures [of misogyny] stay entirely unchallenged, and women remain nothing more than canvases for cum shots."

¹² @TreySongz. "Big Ol Freak Make Me Wanna Knock the Stallion Head off for the Culture.." *Twitter*, Twitter, 28 Mar. 2019, twitter.com/treysongz/status/1111218032284585984?lang=en.

¹³ @TheShadeRoom. "#MeganTheeStallion Has a Message for #TreySongz 🗨️." *Instagram*, Theshaderoom, 28 Mar. 2019, www.instagram.com/p/BvjjeVoBQj0/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

¹⁴ @TreySongz. "☐☐ Lemme See Sumn Right Quick..." *Twitter*, Twitter, 28 Mar. 2019, mobile.twitter.com/TreySongz/status/1111350861173669888.

¹⁵ According to Urban Dictionary, "for the culture" or "doing it for the culture" has no correlation with racial or ethnic culture. Instead, the phrase refers to performing an act solely because it has "additional perceived value" for others, namely social media "followers" or "friends"; Maria5143. "For the Culture." *Urban Dictionary*, 28 Nov. 2018, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=For%20the%20Culture.

¹⁶ Lederer, Laura. *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*. New York: Dutton, 1989.

¹⁷ The following texts offer some of the most comprehensive scholarly investigations of feminism in hip-hop music culture: Balaji, Murali. "The Construction of 'Street Credibility' in Atlanta's Hip-Hop Music Scene: Analyzing the Role of Cultural Gatekeepers." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2012, pp. 313–330., doi:10.1080/15295036.2012.665997; Campbell, Melissa. "Go White Girl!: Hip Hop Booty Dancing and the White Female Body." *Continuum*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2004, pp. 497–508., doi:10.1080/1030431042000297626; Crenshaw, Kimberlè Williams. "Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew." *Words That Wound*, 2018, pp. 111–132., doi:10.4324/9780429502941-5; Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2000; and Rose, Tricia. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop - Why It Matters*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008.

¹⁸ Rose, Tricia. "Black Feminism, Popular Culture, and Respectability Politics – Professor Tricia Rose." *YouTube*, YouTube, 24 May 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtDJQ3TcaNc.

¹⁹ bell hooks Institute. "Moving Beyond Pain." *Bell Hooks Institute*, Bell Hooks Institute, 9 May 2016, www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain.

²⁰ "Beyoncé (Ft. Jack White) – Don't Hurt Yourself." *Genius*, 23 Apr. 2016, genius.com/Beyonce-dont-hurt-yourself-lyrics.

²¹ "Megan Thee Stallion – Cocky AF." *Genius*, 15 Feb. 2018, genius.com/Megan-thee-stallion-cocky-af-lyrics.

²² In Gilman, Sander L. *Difference and pathology: Stereotypes of sexuality, race, and madness*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

²³ Ratchet, Hip Hop. "CardiB Says She Used to What? 🗨️ Pic.twitter.com/NJWigTlb9Z." *Twitter*, Twitter, 24 Mar. 2019, mobile.twitter.com/HipHopRatchet/status/1109894804790366208. In a subsequent post on March 26, Cardi B clumsily back peddled, asserting she had actually dated the men she had admitted to drugging and suggesting they had been "conscious, willing, and aware" of her behavior. That post appears at <https://mobile.twitter.com/iamcardib/status/1110636182344482816>

²⁴ "Rap News on Instagram: 'Yo @Iamcardib Ain't Playing Fair ☐ Is This the Mentality of Most Strippers?...the Hash Tag #Survivingcardib Is Appropriate..

#Cardib.” *Instagram*,
www.instagram.com/p/BvgJssPHqcW/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

²⁵ Some fans tweeted that Cardi B’s behavior was dissimilar to Dr. Bill Cosby’s or R. Kelly’s treatment of women: Basil. “She Robbed Men She Met in a Strip Club. She Didn’t Rape Them. She’s Not Comparable to R. Kelly Who Literally Has Sex w/ Children. Bill Cosby Raped Women Who He Was Supposedly ‘Mentoring’. Don’t Take Your Inability to Recognize That Cosby Is a Rapist & Try to Turn This around on Her.” *Twitter*, Twitter, 31 Mar. 2019, https://mobile.twitter.com/Basil_Soper/status/1112263793801940992. Many others believed Cardi B should face legal repercussions: Ayonitemi, Sosanya, and Trait News. “The #SurvivingCardiB Trends Following the Release of Old Videos Where She Admitted to Stealing from Men While She Drugged Them.” *Trait News*, 27 Mar. 2019, www.traitnews.com/the-survivingcardib-trends-following-the-release-of-old-videos-where-she-admitted-to-stealing-from-men-while-she-drugged-them/.

²⁶ Grady, Constance. “Cardi B Says She Used to Rob Men. Her Image Was Built to Withstand Scandals like This.” *Vox*, Vox, 27 Mar. 2019, www.vox.com/culture/2019/3/27/18284220/cardi-b-drug-rob-controversy-scandal.

²⁷ Locke, Alain. “The New Negro.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014, pp. 973–979.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 974

²⁹ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Routledge, 2006, 55.



A SURVIVOR'S RESOLUTION

Rape
 Was never a concern for me
 And the possibility
 That someone I know has been violated
 Never occurred to me
 All I've known was her beauty and strength
 Her quick wit and well-developed mind
 So her decision to share her story
 Touched my heart
 And as I listened
 I felt the power of a survivor
 I heard her passion as she helped me understand
 How a woman sees certain things
 And the care she must take when being
 approached by a man
 Her words shed light on the why
 That lingers when communication suddenly dies
 For her, the slightest sign could trigger an
 unspoken goodbye
 Because the wrong place at the right time
 Could lead to a fight for her life
 Literally

The reality of our time makes her cautious most
 times
 As a man, I never considered
 The depth of care a woman must take
 And the courage she must have to go on a date
 With someone who is little more than a stranger
 How she has to wonder if he is the type
 That is quick to anger
 Fast to strike
 Because his prowess gives him a distinct
 advantage in the event of a fight
 Or maybe he's the one who gains her trust
 Showing her a fantasy while subduing his lust
 Until they're alone
 And the word "No" doesn't matter
 You see
 "Me too" used to be
 Attached to smiles from childhood memories
 But in 2019 it's a warning
 That protection is not guaranteed
 These days
 We look the other way
 Or press record and go live on social media
 Or we say, "It's none of my business!"

Turning her personal tragedy into a hashtag
 travesty
 No more!
 Awareness and understanding now requires
 much more
 From the real men that remain
 The ones that see how the failure of society
 has left a stain
 On the collective integrity of men
 And as I ask her what I can do or say in
 support of the me-too movement
 She tells me, as a woman
 She still wants our protection
 And the best way to cover her is to keep it
 from happening in the first place
 To be proactive in making all women safe
 So that they don't have be
 Survivors of rape

Eric Wiley, English Major
 Texas Southern University

OMINOUS



Ominous, 2015 by Nathaniel Donnett. Acrylic paint, conte, graphite, plastic, paper bags 78in x 68in

RUNNIN'

Delaney – Trayvon – Hampton,
 Campos – Torres – Gilliam
 Killin' on sight military might militia
 Crews in blues
 Will come to get ya'
 In the middle of the night
 They wanna be knights with nightsticks
 Turning off your lights
 Switch with
 Honor your honor without a warrant
 Won't warn ya'
 Disarm ya' with their armor
 Badges shining
 Police state of mind and
 State ya' name
 Circulate your body frame in chalk
 Dying or line in a line up
 Like pop-stars climbing to the top
 Or redlining

But
 Ain't no music playing here
 They get tased and graved here
 They enslave and invade here
 We're raised and engaged with fear
 So what you hearing is melodic sirens
 And percussive gunshots firing
 I'm hit
 A target running
 Jesse Owens through the landscapes
 My lungs in hell
 (Breathe) inhale
 Oxygen diminished then it's time
 Finished before the finish line
 Won't win hunger games its dinner time
 Their hunger pains can't wait to serve you
 Like prey up on the plate
 Escape route mode denied
 Identified as armed and dangerous

In their palms
 Anger is their psyche supplied
 Followed by hollow points
 Intervals, criminals who don't look like me
 It's highly unlikely this cop get convicted
 It's not because of witnesses
 Code silent benefits like Monsanto
 But it can't grow because it ain't no
 Love
 Death is in the killing fields
 I hear ya' champ they coming
 But if you don't take a stand
 You might as well keep
 Runnin'

Nathaniel Donnett, Fine Arts Alumnus
 Texas Southern University

CONSENT?



Michon Benson. *Consent?*, 2019. Digital collage, featuring images of Muhammad Ali and Cardi B. Original Getty image of Ali is viewable at <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/muhammad-alis-heart-would-not-8115542>, and Frazer Harrison's photograph of Cardi B is available at <https://www.elle.com/culture/celebrities/a27312173/cardi-b-offset-billboard-music-awards-2019-kiss-photos/>

#METOO #BUTIPRETEND #FORTHM

I'm okay.

Well sometimes I'm okay. I get up, I get dressed, go to work, teach my students, come home. Yeah, sometimes I'm okay just being Freedom Wright. (But this isn't my real name, so maybe I'm not okay.) I mean I'm okay being a Wright, but I'm not okay being a _____. I'm strong enough to put pen to paper, but I'm not strong enough to stand on the highest mountain and yell, #metoo. I'm not courageous enough to tell my story, and quite frankly, I don't think the Wrights are ready to hear it.

So for them, I pretend...

...the sexual abuse didn't happen. I pretend that a female cousin didn't slap or punch me when I said "no," when I told her I didn't want her to touch me, and when I cried and begged for my Mommy. I pretend that I was not a defenseless eight year old girl who was too scared to tell my parents because my cousin threatened to beat me if I did. I pretend that these memories haven't started resurfacing more and more lately. And I pretend, when they do surface, that that I *can* breathe and the horror of the memories *don't* consume me.

I have dressed myself in pretense so well...

...that at 46 years old when I visited my uncle in New Jersey (but not really New Jersey), and he told me, because of limited space, I would have to stay with the second female cousin who molested me, I pretend that I don't feel fear, anxiety, and nervousness as I walk down the street to stay in the same house as my abuser. I pretend that I don't have to lock the door and sleep on the floor just in case the lock isn't enough. I pretend the words "Abuser," "Molester," and "I said no!" don't struggle to be freed my mouth when I have to sit across from her at the breakfast table with other family members.

I pretend that I have forgotten the abuse...

...but at 48 years old and with the symptoms of chronic depression consuming my daily life, I wonder if pretending is the best thing for me or for the Wrights. I wonder if sharing my abuse with my family will make me whole again.

I want to be set free from the pretense...

...but I feel like my freedom will cause my family to lose theirs. I feel like my truth will cause them pain, anger, and feelings of hopelessness, so I pretend that these feelings are not the same ones that keep me locked inside myself, incapable of truly living.

I pretend that I am not helping myself by pretending.

I pretend to not to hear the voice that screams inside my head...#metoo.

Because when I stop pretending, I have to tell my truth. And maybe, just maybe...that scares me the most.

So I choose to take one small step forward by *not* pretending that the words on this paper will empower another victim to tell his/her truth. And then I will take a bigger step forward as I choose *not* to pretend that their choice to walk in truth may help me find the strength to walk in mine.

Freedom Wright, English Aluma
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AN UNTETHERED WOMYN

An excerpt from *Kuharmisha*, a collection of memoir essays

My place in society as an untethered womyn (feminist spelling, both singular and plural) – no husband, no identifiable spoozie, no match.com account, no complaining about my love life or offering details (thus leading to speculation about my sexual preference) – unnerves more folks than I care to acknowledge. During a lunchtime group discussion about today's dating scene, one acquaintance said that such womyn should search ourselves and figure out what's wrong – the 'error' being that we can't attract and keep a man. She attributes these state-of-non-affairs to our career ambition, unpermed and unweaved hair, comfortable clothing, no crippling stilettos, and faces free of make-up. I don't bother to explain that I have a host of male friends and will not discuss my privacy under any circumstances.

Another theory floated by a male friend is that I don't have a partner because I'm past childbearing age. His pseudo-logic indicated that I am not sexy because part of the attraction for a man is the possibility that he could make me pregnant. My brow furrowed so fast and hard when I heard that flawed philosophy, the skin on my forehead burned.

This is a prime example of the intersectionality of patriarchy and how men and womyn contribute to a 'gender war' that does not have to be waged among rational, fully formed adults. I learned over time and with sadness how many men fear and hate womyn. There is a direct correlation between insecurity and hatred of feminines. I was middle-aged before I recognized this insidious and frightening phenomenon. More womyn are educated and can pursue careers to support themselves, and this can appear to be a direct threat to men and their status in society.

Gone are the days when womyn, especially those of color, have to remain in abusive, controlling, demeaning and loveless relationships or marriages in order to have a home for themselves and their children. Womyn have been guilt-tripped into staying in a lifelong prison for generations by politicians and religious leaders. The right to the "pursuit of happiness" has been extended legally to women since the passing of the 19th Amendment and *Roe v. Wade*, but unfortunately, that hasn't changed much of the status quo. There are legions of smart, informed, progressive men and perceptive womyn identify them with a quickness. Brava to those fortunate feminines, Godspeed to those couples!

And, no, Menfolk, this does not mean womyn regard you as unnecessary or irrelevant. As singer Jill Scott has so ably warbled, "we need you!" Now is the optimum time to revise the narrative of one sex holding the reins of another. The path to survival and exponential growth of the species is to view life and loving as a partnership. If we could let go of the notion that one side or the other must be in control, our collective effort on this earthly plane won't be wasted.

And feminine people, it is time to lose the Cinderella/Prince Charming fantasy fed to us as little girls. So many of us play a role in our objectification and then complain when poor treatment is delivered. Shows such as *Say Yes to the Dress* (more than \$10,000 for one frock!) and *Four Weddings* fosters a billion-dollar wedding industry that focuses on the exterior and not the satisfying, yet difficult interior work necessary to keep a relationship vibrant, loving and thriving. The fairy tale binds everyone and dooms a host of relationships that might survive if folks put on their grown-up underwear and behaved in accordance.

The primary issue not discussed is that society is still holding on to the male superiority/man-as-head-of-the-household agenda, all promoted by religious institutions and governments dominated by men. It is beyond time to recalibrate. This mindset has been the source of so much physical and psychic pain for both genders – right down to how the feminine arena has been labeled, with the letters ‘men’ being used to categorize and define human beings of both/all genders.

It is understandable that such talk is a source of discomfort for people, but the mindset of males as the dominant/dominating force is outdated and has contributed to the stagnation of humanity. So many are unable to move with the flow of society and are stuck like a bad transmission, unable to switch gears.

Feminines garner attention as girls and young womyn – not all of it healthy – because the perception by a lot of males is that it is easier to manage our wombs and grab sex without love or commitment. But oh, when we enter the fullness of our womynhood, this poses a problem to some men. And don’t let one of us reject a man’s sexual attention or be seen as less than deferential to the altar of manhood because that is when the slurs and pejoratives become marauding raptors on the wing. Further, if a *married* man approaches, and you reject him out of respect for the marriage and his wife, there is another peculiar level of anger. You are cold, arrogant and uncooperative or worse, a *feminist* – delivered with the primordial ooze of male superiority – and the other word, *bitch*, is thrown in with derision or saved to end the argument, a skin-popping power slap. The last time this scenario happened, I declared with pride that I was such a person, laughing so hard, I had to excuse myself. The male perspective on this issue is aptly covered in the book, *Guyland* by Michael Kimmel. Another book that might

provide a different worldview about gender and gender politics is *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* by Leonard Shlain.

Monica Hesse, a columnist for *The Washington Post*, penned an incredible and accurate view of life as a feminine in America entitled, *The perils of being a woman who’s just asking to be left alone* (August 27, 2018). Womyn of all ages know that the incidents covered in this article happen often. *Post* commenter Rosie T said, “A woman doesn’t belong to herself, but is public property and so men naturally feel justified in demanding her attention, forcing her to make a facial expression he finds pleasing, becoming enraged if she doesn’t adequately express gratitude for everything he says or does, and he even gets to decide what she does with her internal organs.”

Senator Kamala Harris, while interviewing then-Supreme Court justice candidate Brett Kavanaugh, asked, “Can you think of any laws that give government the power to make decisions about the male body?” There was a long pause and Kavanaugh asked for specifics. He stammered through his answer, saying that he thought Harris was “asking about medical procedures that are unique to men...” before admitting that that he could not think of any such laws. (Think Progress, Sept. 6, 2018)

Womyn are fighting back through the #MeToo and #shepersisted movements that have forever altered the lives of major offenders such as Bill Cosby, R. Kelly, Les Moonves, Harvey Weinstein and others. This country needs more people to stand up to regular attacks, including the bar server in Savannah, Georgia whose behind was groped by a man she didn’t know as he walked past. She fought back, punching him until he fell and then had him arrested for assault – surveillance cameras bolstered her case because he was the clear aggressor. Electronics designed to protect the

establishment against liability when fights and robberies occur became a support system in the push for feminine freedom.

Kristin Luker, in her 1984 book, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, strikes an exacting tone in explaining the travails of progressive feminines that are bound to the pro-life movement: “As much as opponents of abortion claim to care about the killing of the unborn, the argument goes, in reality abortion restriction is a means to a different end: The restraint of women’s choices, the restriction of their sexual freedom, their subordination to the rule of fathers and husbands and patriarchy writ large.”

Battling so much societal pushback, what does this mean in term of a thriving sex life for the feminine in today’s world? The point of concern for eligible males and the dichotomy for single womyn of a certain age: we are not supposed to want sex, but to pose ourselves as being sexy; be sexually available, but don’t broadcast desire; convey to a man that you’re available, but don’t be aggressive. Womyn can be self-assured and independent, but not overtly so (translation: scary to men). We should be aware and know what gives us pleasure, but not articulate how we are best satisfied. And we should consider positioning ourselves as either sexless mummies, kid- and house-keepers or silent sex kittens whose single desire in life is to serve.

The proliferation of Viagra, Cialis and ‘low T’ (testosterone) drugs make it clear to womyn that when the issue is reduced to the most common denominator, it is still all about male fascination with erections. (There is a steady run of television ads outlining a solution to Peyronie’s Disease – a malady that causes a curvature of penis due to vigorous sex. Really, people?!)

Again, none of this thought process means that I am anti-male or that I have given up on finding the right man with whom I can engage in a warm relationship, it means I am not interested in playing the game. I

want to meet an emotionally secure man that appreciates that I have interests other than being Beyoncé in *Partition*. (It is perfectly fine for Queen Bey and I love the fullness of her expression as a maturing, sexual being.) The lack of game-playing is inclusive of my respect for a man: if a male wants a real womyn, that’s exactly what he is going to get: not a caricature, not a video-game fantasy feminine, not a porn actress, but a self-assured, supportive grown-up who is a mother, sister, daughter, aunt, friend, partner. I want to explore our commonality as adults: books, football, basketball, music, art, culture, cuisine, national and world events, and – oh, yes, please! – romance and sex.

I should not have to defend my practice of turning the key and walking into a quiet home, ditching professional attire in exchange for a cropped-top t-shirt, cozy pants and slippers to curl up with a good book. It is sheer bliss. I can plate a nice meal with a fine glass of wine (an addition is the grocery-saving joy of being able to feed myself for several days from one pot) and sup at my leisure. Binge-reading or binge-watching shows on Hulu or Netflix. A long stroll through my neighborhood. Writing the first (second, fifth, tenth...) draft of an essay or short story. A hot bubble bath at any time I choose. Playing Words With Friends until I’m sleepy. Solo, yes; lonely, no.

Society continues to rely upon specified roles for people based upon antiquated views, even though mores have changed. Such designations are in place to control and monitor, to put individuals in neat categories so the powers-that-be don’t have to waste time and money figuring out who and what you’re about. How else can you be marketed to and targeted unless you are in a particular box? Stand here. Do this. Be that. Hush.

The world can be a cruel place for feminines and there is a particular circle of hell for those who are African-American. A fresh outlook has been created by Dr. Moya Bailey for the Crunk Feminist Collective. She defines *misogynoir* as the "...particular brand of hatred directed at Black women in American visual and popular culture."

We wander in search of caring and tenderness, and when it is not found, we are admonished to push our tears back into rusty ducts and move on. This psychological damage is turned inward and then flung out at other unaware feminines in the form of sniping, gossiping, front- and back-stabbing each other. Menial and inconsequential issues regarding another person's looks, speech, hairstyle, mode of dress, religion, partner or life-path are dissected and used as weapons to diminish, wound, and subjugate each other. We ask for diversity in our workplace but can't or won't embrace it in our places of worship, neighborhoods or lives. We hate each other and expect men to somehow 'rise' and deliver something we cannot do for ourselves. This doesn't absolve their role in creating the spectrum of pain through setting up systems of dominance, but we can do our part to ease the overall struggle.

My belief is that a healthy interaction operates with a modicum of balance – partners working in concert to create a positive, nurturing life. I'm not fond of labels, but I consider myself to be a progressive Christian feminine and that designation is what works for me now. But there is one other critical aspect that appears to be a barrier for men that enter into the grown womyn circle: the consideration of a 'proper, possible mate' that involves the feminine image as 'virtuous' (nee 'virginal') – whose door hasn't had way too many visitors.

This thought process says that a womyn should have only had partners numbering in single digits – a complete absurdity. If a young womyn's dating life begins at 15 or 16, what is an acceptable number of male partners? What about when a feminine reaches her 20s and dates while still trying to figure out who she is and what she truly wants? If that womyn has been engaged to at least one man or married to another, how many is too many? Once a long-term relationship is in play or marriage has been discussed and could be on the horizon, is five men too many? Ten? Does a male partner not want to consider 23 other suitors? Does 30 mean that she has entered 'whoredom'? (Recognizing that there is not a derogatory analogue for males with many lovers.) Should a potential husband be told the body count? Is any number okay as long as it is not more than your fiancé?

The irritating aspect of this milieu is that men do not have these questions asked of them and are not expected to answer. Gentlemen friends have shared that the probe into a womyn's sexual backstory is about children and the family tree – the whole "mother's baby-daddy's maybe" thing; that men worry about whether or not a child is his ("I'm not taking care of some other [expletive]'s baby.']"). Whether it is 1958 or 2018, the same sexual mindset exists. When a male partner joins my life, I am expecting that he is not a virgin (certainly would not want to be bothered with that...) nor am I compelled to check the conquest notches on his nightstand. I'm not interested. I've got a her-story, you've got a his-story, every grown-up has a story.

It is critical to discuss sexual life and partners in such a way to determine whether or not there are any perversions in place that might impact my safety or mental health, if there are any children (hopefully, adults

by now with children of their own...) and whether their mothers remain in knee-deep engagement with the object of my affection for any reason (running in the opposite direction if they are). His-story matters if he has a sexually transmitted disease and I have the right to information in order to make an informed decision if I should keep him in the friend zone or exit, stage left. I want the freedom to avoid being locked into an untenable situation. The same applies in reverse: a man can ask questions to protect himself but should not expect a tally. None of this means that I am a loose or wild womyn (can't believe that people are still using those terms...), but want to be in control of my life, pure and simple.

I'm not thirsty, just waiting. Love and marriage again? Maybe. He wouldn't have to be some magical, mystical person, just someone willing to be at his best and unafraid to take that journey. I will give the same in return.

A number of friends from various avenues of life have asked what I am looking for in a mate and I have to answer with truth that I don't have a predetermined list or a vision of who he is or what he would look like – that exterior stuff is ephemeral and quite meaningless. It isn't difficult at all – the man would have to come into my world and show his full, true spirit to receive mine. Just seeking a modern, progressive, intelligent, thoughtful man who is as secure in his manhood as I am in my femininehood. What an excellent and dynamic partnership that would be!

I know the thread of this theoretical journey is that life is a series of lessons. Some of the textbooks were a joy to plow through and others were difficult and burdensome. Sometimes I was an A+ student and other times, I failed miserably:

'Sexy' is one of those relative terms in that hinges on pheromones and how one appears to the other. I love to evaluate the masculine form,

but also want to engage his brain and check out what is happening between those ears. I enjoy talking to men on a variety of topics, even some of the more taboo issues, such as sports, politics and religion. A spirited, intellectual conversation can be stimulating and sensual.

However, dealing with males often can be a field sprinkled with landmines. You can walk along enjoying the fresh air and scenery, hear *click-up* and experience the out-of-body sensation of a gender explosion. I've heard men say that womyn – particularly single ones – are out of their minds.

Maybe, this is why:

≈ Smiling and saying 'morning' as one passes in the hallway at work is a basic courtesy. A few more words in the commission of one's duties is not an invitation. One Friday, I stopped at the bank on my lunch break. I saw the guy from another department who I spoke to in a professional manner whenever I saw him. I recognized him and went into the institution to handle my transaction. When I returned to my car, Mr. Man was leaning against my bumper, smiling as if I were ready to offer him some cash. *Oh, mercy, what does he want?*

"So, what are your plans for the evening?" I maneuvered my body to avoid any incidental contact. "You're not going to talk to me?"

"No, sir, I'm not. Have a good afternoon." I checked my key ring and opened the car door.

"I've got to tell you, I have a twelve-inch. I can take care of you right."

I nodded, my lips drawn in to form a thin, somber line as I slid into the driver's seat, started the ignition, cranked the radio, and slowly backed out so Mr. Man could move out of the way without

injury. His lips were moving, but the music and glass helped me to ignore him and drive away.

≈ A co-worker wanted to set me up on a blind date with his college buddy. I had never been involved in this kind of social situation before – never saw value in the whole random, mystery thing of a blind date – but was curious because the co-worker spoke of him with high praise. He had known the man for years, in fact, and we were all going to a public place...

I chose a blouse and skirt that wouldn't show any cleavage or too much thigh, swept my hair into a fun 'do, put on some sparkly earrings and applied a light spackling of makeup. Wasn't nervous or jittery, just ready to hear some music, have a drink or two (no more than two because I was driving, and don't imbibe heavily with co-workers or when I'm more than ten minutes away from home). Chat, sip and groove – that was the plan.

I searched the club's first floor, then headed to the next level to find my colleague. Located him and his fiancée with their friend. The couple had the happy aura of a first round, relaxed but not yet buzzed. Their friend was hunched over, nursing a glass of brown liquor, neat. He stood slowly as my co-worker handled the introduction.

I held out my hand for Buddy to shake and he swayed, limbs caught in the strong gust of alcohol. Fiancée guffawed. Colleague was talking fast, telling me about Buddy, his education and stature as he signaled the bartender to take my drink order. Buddy eased himself back onto the stool and turned toward the bar.

"You're pretty," Buddy said, keeping his focus on the glass in front of him. I turned to Colleague and batted my eyes in a 'what's-wrong-with-him' flurry as I responded with a mannered 'thank you.' The jazz combo was on-point, offering the right mix of mellow and up-tempo beats. Buddy downed three more in the next hour.

Colleague and fiancée kept the conversation going but were uneasy. Buddy had shared five full sentences with me, so I reached for my purse and indicated my intention to leave, thanking all for the invitation. Buddy tried to stand, but his body did not respond. He offered a weak smile and in slow motion, pulled a ring of keys from deep in his pocket and set them on the bar with a jangly thud. Colleague and fiancée tried without success to cover their expressions, aghast.

"Perhaps someone should call him a cab," I said.

≈ My book collection has been a source of ongoing pride. Books had such a hold on me that having them evolved into what others might consider to an obsessive-compulsive disorder. The librarian in me led to each tome being arranged in alphabetical order by the author's last name – Cooper, Davis, Dyson, Ellison, Giovanni, Morris, Morrison, Walker, West, Wiley. Easy to locate, easy to replace. Never lost, always at my fingertips if the mood struck. The one, true orderly thing in a life of occasional disarray.

I had been out on a few dates with an electrician – strong, clean hands, groomed beard, solid build, skin smooth and dark – he was the friend of a friend. He invited me to take in a movie and I figured it was okay at this point in our interaction to let him pick me up at home. If anyone came to visit, the entire right wall from the floor to Kareem-high displayed shelves of books. Beautiful lacquered wood lovingly burnished by my uncle holding precious bound gems.

Mr. Electrician eyed the rows and then looked at me, perplexed. "You've read all of these books?" Each letter of 'all' stretched and elongated such that his mouth became an oval and his tongue snaked out slowly. I fixed my face so as not to show amazement.

"What are you, a schoolteacher?"

"No, I like to read. I love books."

"And you've read every one of them books?"

“Yes, some of them more than once.”

“You must be a genius or something. I’ve heard that books make people crazy.”

“No, I’m not a genius or crazy, but I am psychic because I can see that our time together will be short.”

A dedicated football and basketball fan, I watch both sports with the fervor of a non-athlete. Players and stats. Rivalries and championships. My weekends are scheduled according to which game is being televised. Close friends have been schooled not to call or expect a reply from me (except in emergencies) on fall Saturdays and Sundays between 1:00 and 10:30 pm. Favorite television comedies and dramas are DVR’ed for quiet weeknights or post-season viewing.

Mondays and Thursdays are football nights, Tuesdays and Wednesdays are basketball nights. Sundays are reserved for morning service with an immediate mad dash for home from the sanctuary – it is a miracle I’ve never gotten a speeding ticket on the Lord’s Day – swapping church clothes for a jersey and jeans to immerse myself in football all afternoon and deep into the night. Family members are equally devoted as we commiserate over food and drink, alternating between cheering and jeering. Halftime phone calls are permitted if it is important, texting is preferred.

One would think that with an insane love of sport and cooking skills, I would encounter a range of personable men (preferably with game tickets in hand) in line at my doorstep, jockeying for time to argue over favorite teams and place game bets for (ahem!) favors. *Au contraire, mon frère...*

When the issue of sports arises, yet another layer of sexism is made obvious. Now, I have been dedicated to treating each man as an individual and expect that to be reciprocated. I don’t believe in burdening

a new friend with the baggage of a predecessor, but it doesn’t take long to see a person’s true self. If a man’s words or actions causes me to give him more than a few side-eyes, there will be a polite fare-thee-well, taking-my-leave if I’m in his space or an escort to the front door as I snap the locks behind him if he is in mine.

Here is a sample of menfolk who have had their numbers and e-mails blocked:

Man #1: “Girl, are you really into football or are you playing at liking it?”

Man #2: “I don’t like sports much, but I can sit with you while the game is on.”

Man #3: “Cool! I’ve always wanted a woman who is on top of what’s happening on Sundays. Now, I don’t have to worry about getting in the kitchen. You can peek at the game and finish cooking during commercials.”

Man #4: “You are perfect! But my boys wouldn’t be comfortable with you hanging out for the whole game.”

Man #5: “My mother doesn’t understand why you don’t want to be in the other room talking with the women.”

Man #6: “Are you a lez-bine (lesbian)?”

I wind up doing a lot of head-shaking and looking heavenward, asking the ancestors and God for guidance. There’s always room for change and compromise in any situation, but I have to be true to myself, accept what is and understand that it’s all copasetic. For now, it’s just me – content and untethered. *A luta continua...* (The struggle continues...)

**Karen Celestan, University Advancement
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REDEEMER

I can remember the glass half full
 Of dreams and ideas and the wonder of adolescence
 I remember spilling it to her for the very first time
 And her pouring in anger and disdain and disgust and
 disapproval
 I remember the overflow of my tears
 The splashing wet sound the glass made as she shattered it
 with silence and swept up the mess with distance under a rug
 7 hats for 7 days and 7 of the same 1 face that wears them
 A brave face for the child
 A sad face at departure
 A relieved face at the absence
 A face of apprehension at the possibility of returns
 A confused face at the sound
 A shamed face in the presence
 A familiar face
 Her face
 Replaced a dozen times with she's...claiming to love me just
 like her
 The beautiful warrior who was so hurt that she granulated and
 poured her soul into a bottle...

I thought she was a genie
 My only wish was for her freedom
 I broke her bottle and I cut myself
 There is blood on my hands...and her scent in the air
 A drone with not thoughts that only lived to serve me
 So I slit her throat just above her vernacular and started cooking for myself
 A siren with a double edged sword
 She teased me as she sang sweetly lulled lies and deceit in D sharp
 The cuts were so deep I didn't even know I was bleeding until I moved on
 Others...mothers, sisters, cousins, friends in love
 Or so they said they were
 Was that, this, for them
 Is it this fleet feeling of flights in fancy?
 Is it innocent intentions and instances?
 Is it warm?
 I was there...but that wasn't me...
 Neither of us really knew myself at all
 How do I know and who will tell me?
 I ask myself now faced to the east
 So far gone
 Right back where I started
 Living outside the body
 At rock bottom high
 A cool breeze and then an iceberg right ahead
 Dazed and confused so unfamiliar
 A greeting, interest, patience, kindness
 Commonality is contempt
 Thin striped scarred flesh
 ...I still pick my scabs sometimes
 Blushed by design
 Touched like none other and pushed
 Falling with a fear of drowning in water under the bridge

THE PROPAGATION OF RACIALIZED SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The normalization of sexual violence in literature that originates in the United States perhaps begins in autobiographical accounts of practices evolving in its uniquely race-based institution of chattel slavery. While America's firstborn novelist penned a tale of extraordinarily chilling domestic violence, Charles Brockden Brown's 1798 publication of *Wieland* cannot be taken as a work of necessarily sexual violence even though the murderous antihero's interests may be sexually motivated. Beginning instead with autobiographical accounts that attempt to demystify and raise public sentiment against chattel slavery, this essay will explore the development of American literary revelatory or romanticizing efforts to defamiliarize the nation's increasing obsession with and seeming literary approbation of violent sexual domination. The purpose of this examination is to consider if select works of classic American literature highlight, explain and perhaps promote the United States' historical investment in gendered and racialized sexual violence.

American literary obsession with romanticizing or delineating shocking acts of sexual domination and violence that uphold gendered power structures have moralizing European precursors, most notably Boccaccio's Griselda in his *Decameron's* "Tenth Tale" on the Tenth Day. Love as a Platonic third entity in relationships, due its own prerogatives and considerations (as in *Symposium* and Andreas Capellanus's *The Art of Courty Love*, for example), is shown neither to be present nor needed in marriage

in Boccaccio's Middle Ages. However, while Boccaccio's "Tenth Tale" of Patient Griselda could be said to prove the truth of the argument given by European courtly wives reluctant to take royal lovers who outrank them that, "Love is not honourable, unless it is based on equality" (Marie de France 58), Boccaccio's version also demonstrates that, between a husband and wife, if there is a third ideal that functions as an entity in their relationship, it is not Love but the ideal of absolute masculinist Dominance, to be received and nurtured by complete female submission. In reading *Decameron* and its derivative

Canterbury Tales, issues of class may legitimately be raised, as the Marquis has chosen Griselda from among the lowest class of serfs on his property. But despite his wife's lowly origins, Boccaccio's narrative voice makes it clear that the torturing Marquis Gualtieri, set on proving his wife's accommodating nature by forcing her into untenably cruel positions, first giving up her children to be killed and then being driven from his house in nothing but her shift, expecting her to comply without a murmur or side-eyed glance, is popularly considered to be in the wrong by his Sienese compatriots.

English literature carries this saga of domestic terrorism further and de-emphasizes social disapproval of the husband's sadism in Geoffrey Chaucer's "Clerk's Tale," elevating the longsuffering Grisildis (apparently affectionately nicknamed "Grisilde" by her abusive husband, who has been renamed the Marquis Walter) to social isolation in her suffering. Grisildis is relieved only by the commiseration of her father when she is sent home in disgrace, believing her disguised long-lost daughter is about to become the Marquis's new bride. Nevertheless, for

the purposes of this essay, it is important to note that even Walter's and Gualtieri's extremes of domestic cruelty fall short of the victimization woven into the daily fabric of Anglo-American chattel enslavement of human beings of African descent. American human chattel routinely had their children taken away by their fathers-as-owners to be sold into lifestyles of sexual, incestuous and physical violence that both the Marquises Gualtieri and Walter disavow having ever contemplated perpetrating on Patient Griselda, no matter their privileges of class and gender. The point of Griselda's tale, in both its Italian and English iterations, seems to be less to evaluate the cruelty of the Marquis and more to witness the boundless and generous longsuffering of his wife as the nurturing and nurture-needing pagan Love that should have bound them finds itself cannibalized instead by Europe's rising preference for Dominance, a Saturnine and destructive force. In a poem named for that ultimate masculinist European god, Sharon Olds describes a man with his "mouth open, the darkness of the room/filling his mouth, and no one knew/my father was eating his children" (Windling 132).

It is worth considering that the British Isles' brands of Protestant Christianity espoused extremist views of being God's chosen people that included Ranting, a theory that God's select were such special people that it behooved them to deliberately practice the breaking of God's laws to demonstrate their faith in God's forgiveness. These acts of lawbreaking, according to John Bunyan, required indulging in "all manner of filthiness, especially uncleanness" (Bunyan 16), meaning taboo sexual acts. However, without claiming the privileges of Ranting, in the English colonialists' decision to disassociate from British law and racialize class, as described in *The Black Jacobins* and explained in Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone*, Anglo-

Americans and their independent government practiced extreme acts of human and moral degradation and depravity, including disavowing recognition of so much as the human status of chattel captives based solely on the pseudoscientific European invention of race. In short, it may be argued that American racism exceeded even the extremes of masculinist domestic Dominance to echo the self-righteous lawlessness of Ranting, in acting out the belief that one race and one gender of that race was privileged by God to be exempted from obedience to Judeo-Christian laws.

Paula Giddings's groundbreaking study of the combined influences of gender and race on the establishment of United States social power hierarchies in *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* describes African American women as having been "impaled on the cutting edges of this race/sex dialectic" (Giddings 35). After detailing complex legislative struggles throughout the 1600s "which managed to combine racism, sexism, greed, and piety" (Giddings 37) to establish the supremacy of the Englishman in the "model colony of Virginia" (35), Giddings concludes that, "by the early eighteenth century, an incredible social, legal and racial structure was put in place" that was to be "perpetuated through the Black woman's womb" (Giddings 39). In other words, the legally structured sexual subjugation of the woman or girl of African descent rapidly became crucial to all definitions of property, wealth, power, and status in the English colonies that were in the process of becoming the United States. Olaudah Equiano's autobiography describes his witnessing the rape of captured girls as young as ten by sailors on slaving vessels. Though their socially-ascribed roles in this radically skewed society were inverse, Anglo American women "whose imprisonment in the home virtually guaranteed piety and purity" (Giddings

47) and women of African descent who were increasingly unprotected targets of lasciviousness both found that their acquiescence was crucial to their growing patriarchal slave society's self-concept and survival. Giddings summarizes that "any change in the role of women *or* Blacks would contribute not only to the downfall of slavery, but of the family and society as well" (43). Ira Berlin labels any society whose relational structures all mimic the extreme power skewing of the owner/property diametric a slave society.

In her long-suppressed memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs writing as Linda Brent is at pains to expose American chattel slavery's system of "young girls dragged down into moral filth" (Brent 76) after being "reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear" (51). Brent describes enslaved men who will "sneak out of the way to give their masters free access to their wives and daughters" (43), concluding that, "Women are considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owner's stock. They are put on a par with animals" (49). But Brent goes further and exposes the fallaciousness of believing that moral degradation can be segregated by race or isolated by gender in a society reliant on the legality and permissibility of sexual persecution to define every member's relative status. Brent states that, "Southern women often marry a man knowing that he is the father of many little slaves" but that such relatively privileged women "regard such children as property, as marketable as the pigs" (35). While Brent freely admits that, "The slaveholder's sons are, of course, vitiated, even while boys" (52), she goes on to describe "the widespread moral ruin" (53) that engulfs planters' daughters who grow up witnessing so much sexual acting out that they may wish to experiment with the interstices of power and sexual play, themselves. The offspring

of such liaisons, Brent explains, may be "smothered" or sent away, "But if the white parent is the *father*, instead of the mother, the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market" (52). Finally, Brent advises that anyone wishing to test the veracity of her descriptions of "the abominations of slavery" need not take her word for them but, calling oneself a "negro trader," head South, "and you will see and hear things that will seem to you impossible among human beings with immortal souls" (Brent 53). Most importantly for this study, Brent's discourse serves as a warning to the United States that the abuses it condones against the chattel enslaved are not constrained by the invisible boundaries of race to remain confined among those of African descent. In short, Brent warns that American racist immorality, like any other communicable disease, would spread.

Brent observes and reports that, well before the Civil War and Emancipation of the targets of racialized domestic dehumanization, the assumption of the right to perpetrate acts of domestic cruelty and immorality had already leached through the social fabric to affect, infect and corrupt those whom chattel slavery was intended to empower and benefit. Hannah Crasson, interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project for her memories about chattel enslavement at the age of eighty-four, laments, "Lord, why didn't they let us stay where we was, they wouldn't have never been so many half-white niggers, but the old marster was to blame for that" (Hurmence 17). Lest interviews such as Crasson's are too veiled for twenty-first-century researchers to clearly understand what they are being told, Jacob Manson states more bluntly that his owner "liked some of the nigger womens too good to have any other white man playing around them. He had his sweethearts among his slave women"

(Hurmench 41). Manson goes on to defend his own truthfulness before concluding that, “At that time, it was a hard job to find a marster that didn’t have women among his slaves. That was a general thing among the slave owners” (Hurmench 41). W. L. Bost also remembers that, “Plenty of the colored women have children by the white men. She know better than to not do what he say” (Hurmench 95), exactly the pitiable explanation that Zora Neale Hurston’s Nanny tries to give to her owner’s enraged wife regarding the Nordic appearance of Nanny’s baby at the opening of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “‘Ah don’t know nothin’ but what Ah’m told tuh do, ’cause Ah ain’t nothin’ but uh niggah and uh slave’” (Hurston 17). Bost is moved to elaborate further and points out that, “Then they take them very same children what have they own blood and make slaves out of them” (Hurmench 95), a reality Nanny confronts when her owner’s wife promises to sell Nanny’s blonde-haired, grey-eyed newborn baby daughter as soon as she turns a month old, after her husband, who is Nanny’s owner and the baby’s father, has left the premises.

Mattie Curtis remembers not wearing a stitch of clothing until she was fourteen and began to menstruate, when her mother, whom she had seen tied to a barrel and whipped until the clothes peeled off her back in her owner’s parlor, demanded of their owner that her adolescent daughter be given clothing to wear. Curtis describes the system of flagrant incest that prevailed at her owner’s plantation: “Mr. Mordicia had his yellor [of both European and African ancestry] gals in one quarter to theirselves, and these gals belong to the Mordicia men, their friends and the overseers” (Hurmench 37). In case this wealthy man’s voluntary enslavement of his own children has not been informative enough for this survey, Curtis goes

on to specify that, “some of these gal babies got grown, and after going back to the yellor quarter, had more chilluns for her own daddy or brother” (Hurmench 37).

In the long-unpublished *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, Hannah Crafts is also at pains to clarify that chattel slavery is about sexual terror and domestic domination. Discovering her mistress’s identity as a woman of undiscernible African descent, mistress and servant go on the run together to escape the inevitable sexual servitude that will be expected of them. The book abounds with the author’s efforts to recount the atrocious memories, news items and eye-witness accounts of sexual deviance, jealous persecution, and the conscienceless selling of children into prostitution of which she is aware. Forced to couple with an overseer in his cabin already peopled by “near a dozen women and children” (Crafts 209), the narrator elects to escape, once and for all: “when she sought to force me into a compulsory union with a man whom I could only hate and despise it seemed that rebellion would be a virtue” (Crafts 206). Editor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. takes this opportunity to accuse the author of bias, declaring of Hannah Crafts that, “She is a snob, in other words, but she is not a racist” because she finds the African overseer with whom she has been commanded by her mistress to mate “loathsome and reprehensible, uneducated, uncouth, and unwashed” and has admitted that she wants to “avoid the squalor of life in the slave quarters” (Gates in Crafts lxvi). Gates appears to presume that, given a cleanly enough venue and a sufficiently erudite rapist, the victim should acquiesce to not only the loss of her human rights but also of her human status in the performance of money-making procreative activity for the benefit of her owner. However, having traveled with Crafts’ narrator through many perilous adventures, beginning with her stumbling with a

maddened previous mistress upon a cabin in the woods where a bloodied hatchet matted with human hair is stowed in a corner and an unburied skeleton is stashed under the berry bushes (Crafts 66), perhaps it is appropriate to take Crafts at her word that rape in any locale, no matter its cleanliness, and by any man, no matter his education, is a dehumanizing and unappealing prospect. Certainly, Linda Brent's flight from the well-to-do Dr. Flint throughout the decades of her adult life would argue the validity of this perspective.

Pauline Hopkins describes American chattel slavery society erupting into Civil War and *de jure* emancipation as a place in which, "Cotton was not merely king; it was God. Moral considerations were nothing" (Hopkins *Hagar's Daughter* 4). Little wonder, then, that even after the violent and abrupt liberation of the nation from *de jure* chattel slavery into the *de facto* continued slavery of sharecropping and racially-targeted imprisonment using the new Vagrancy Laws (see Blackmon *Slavery by Another Name*), the institutionalization of sexualized patriarchy that had made chattel slavery possible remained firmly interwoven in the post-slavery social fabric. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins recounts the European fascination with African-descent women's rounded (rather than flat) buttocks and fixation on parading naked for their own titillation a particular captive, Sarah Bartmann. Lascivious fascination with Sarah Bartmann's naturally rounded rear end became such a point of Western sexual obsession that it seems likely to have helped spark such European and American fashion anomalies as beribboned bustle cages strapped to wealthy women's waists and backsides and the surgical removal of their ribs to give them the curves of an hourglass African figure. Nor was Sarah

Bartmann unique in being held captive to the dehumanizing gaze of Europeans and Americans who theorized themselves into hallucinations of racial difference and, *ipso facto*, racial superiority. Karla Holloway recounts the tragic entrapment and suicide at the turn of the twentieth century of Ota Benga, caged with monkeys at the World's Fair, the American Museum of Natural History, and the Bronx Zoo, callously kept from ever returning to his Congolese home. Holloway theorizes Benga's "overwhelming loss and the agony of derision and exhibition" (Holloway 101). Horrifically, when Benga decides to end his life with his own means to escape "the deeply wounding and callous experience of American racism" (Holloway 101), he chooses to "Shoot," just as he was taunted to do by a child observing him with monkeys at the Bronx Zoo (Holloway 102). Collins cautions the reader to understand that securing victims in such a way that they were unable to free themselves from their captors' obscene gazes bolstered the bulwark of racist capitalism. "It is no accident," Collins writes, "that racist biology, religious justifications for slavery and women's subordination, and their explanations for nineteenth century racism and sexism arose during a period of profound political and economic change" (Collins 139).

Slavery's sexualized abuses were not and could not remain racially selective or regionally isolated. One hundred years after the end of chattel slavery, Frantz Fanon describes a colonized global society in which, "One must apologize for daring to offer black love to a white soul" (Fanon 56), just as freeman Jim offered the sexually disgraced Anglo-American outcast Mag in Harriet Wilson's antebellum *Our Nig* one hundred years earlier. Author Harriet Wilson imagines her New England African American businessman father apologetically proposing interracial

common-law marriage to her mother in the decades before the Civil War. What would have been a preferential arrangement in the English colonies throughout the early 1600s, according to Giddings, had evidently become disgraceful even to a seduced, abandoned and fallen Anglo-American woman, only two hundred years later. “‘T’s black outside, I know, but I’s got a white heart inside” Jim apologizes and philosophizes to Mag (Wilson 12). Fanon explains this bizarre turn of historical events and their racial environments with linguistic and Anglo-Christian metaphors:

The torturer is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black-whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or of moral dirtiness. It would be astonishing, if the trouble were taken to bring them all together, to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin. (Fanon 189)

Works of what is widely considered classic twentieth and early twenty-first century American literature such as *Invisible Man* and *Tender Is the Night* highlight the racially dichotomous splitting of depictions of domestic misogynistic and pedophilic abuse. Both African American and Euro-American literatures overwhelmingly tend to portray the African American rapist as perpetrating violence, though he usually goes unpunished if his target has been an African American woman or girl. One startling exception to this pattern may be found early on in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when Janie learns that her enslavement-born mother Leafy was kidnapped and raped by her teacher at age seventeen, upon Emancipation (Hurston 9-10, 19), and that he was hunted by bloodhounds until he attempted to rectify the wrong done by returning to offer marriage to his victim.

Coming of Age in Mississippi’s Anne Moody recounts fleeing her mother’s home as a high schooler to escape the increasingly violent attentions of her stepfather, only to find herself later fleeing a Civil Rights activist boyfriend at Tougaloo who believes that her virginity should be his due. Rapes of African American teens performing domestic or farm work and providing childcare, as a form of racial domination and persecution, are part of the tradition in Centreville Mississippi, Moody’s hometown. The issue arises in the Movement when Moody is taking reports at the Freedom House in Canton regarding the increasing rapes of African American teenagers by farmers who have hired them to pick cotton. Moody presents these men as expecting that they have the right to rape African American girls and women. “‘Them niggers even got the nerve to complain about getting rid of a little pussy” one rapist announces, to which his friend replies, “I used to could pick up a nigger anytime; now they is all scared somebody might see them” (Moody 324). Moody’s account of all these efforts to rape African American young women and girls uniformly condemns all the perpetrators, only fully exonerating her former boyfriend once he is safely married and working hard to register voters in Mississippi.

Dichotomously, the Anglo-American incestuous and/or pedophilic rapist may be depicted with astonishing sympathy for his suffering. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, two texts academically considered to be among the greatest achievements of twentieth-century literature, depict the rapists of European descent in sympathetic impressionistic tints as suffering from loneliness and misplaced desire, driven to their horrific deeds by an excess of devoted tenderness. Conversely, however, Jane Yolen’s grim retelling of the German fairytale “Allerleirauh,” a princess constrained to marry her

widowed father and bear him a daughter in recompense for her mother's dying in childbirth, closes on the surmise that, "It is an old story. Perhaps the oldest" (Windling 39).

Fanon appears to agree when he argues that, "The civilized white man retains an irrational longing for unusual areas of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest" (165), wanting to unleash "the uncivilized savage, the Negro who slumbers in every white man" (187). Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* highlights this disturbing voyeuristic vicarious licentiousness with the rapt attention and offers of money, goods and protections that every Anglo-American in the vicinity, from the Southern sheriff and preacher to the visiting Northern millionaire, converge to heap upon Jim Trueblood, a formerly impoverished Mississippi sharecropper who is willing to describe to them in salacious detail what it is like to rape and impregnate his own daughter. "You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!" the daughter-mourning Mr. Norton bellows incredulously at Trueblood before settling down to hear about the incestuous assault from beginning to end. Trueblood's dreadful story is generously leavened by the minstrelsy misery of his impotent wife, who sees too late that she has been incapable of protecting her daughter. The odd juxtaposition of the white flies that keep swarming around the hatchet wound his wife has left on Trueblood's face serves as a troubling metaphor for the price he now pays to keep his family well-housed and well-fed: Trueblood must continually revive the account of his incestuous rape with fresh relish every time another Anglo-American male comes around offering him something that he and his family need, the collectivity of these listeners feeding on the Truebloods' destruction as a family just as maggots feed on dead and dying flesh.

While analyst Houston A. Baker, Jr. recognizes in the Trueblood episode that, "The rambunctiously sexual, lyrical, and sin-adoring 'darky' is an image dear to the hearts of white America" that is used to "subsume their guilt" (193), he nevertheless argues that *Invisible Man* in general and Trueblood in particular serve as pawns to "black male sexuality": "Trueblood becomes the primal father, assuming all sexual prerogatives unto himself" in contrast to the male college students, trapped "in a course of instruction that leaves them impotent" (Baker 180). It is Baker's contention that the incestuously abusive Trueblood emerges as "the only person capable of ensuring an authentic African American lineage" (180) though, surely, if she had been left to accept the "boy" Trueblood is jealous of at the time when he goes to bed with his teen daughter suggestively lodged between him and his wife, it would seem that Matty Lou might have ensured an authentic African American lineage to her children without her father's intervention. Baker's analysis of *Invisible Man*'s celebration of "the black phallus" (181) seems to determinedly avoid considering the agency or humanity of the girl who has been raped, as a counterweight to Baker's positivism. Baker sums up Trueblood's wronged daughter and wife in terms that centralize the rapist as the real victim, with Matty Lou as an "ersatz Eve" and her raging mother as "the irate agent of his punishment for fulfilling his desire" (185). But then, Baker concludes, after wife Kate "cleans up the pollution, the dirt and danger, represented by Trueblood's taboo act," it is time for the family to reunite and celebrate the impending double births faced by Trueblood's pregnant wife and daughter. Baker sums up that wife Kate's clownish "moral outrage," after all, "will not pay the bills" (Baker 186), just as—

Baker neglects to remind readers—neither did Trueblood’s honest labor as a farmer.

It is in analysis such as this that the appallingly out-of-place humor forced into Trueblood’s episode and upheld by glib analysis breaks down and reminds the reader of other darkly tragic literary victims of incestuous rape who parallel Matty Lou but cannot be read so dismissively, such as Toni Morrison’s Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. As if predicting the predatory Cholly Breedlove’s brutal and unapologetic assault on his eleven-year-old friendless daughter Pecola, it is Trueblood who, interrupting the raptures of his pornographic storytelling, states that, “sometimes a man can look at a little ole pigtail gal and see him a whore” (Ellison 59). Like the older Matty Lou who appears near “dead. Ain’t no color in her face and she ain’t hardly breathin’” (Ellison 65) after Trueblood finally rises from raping and ejaculating into her, Pecola Breedlove also “appeared to have fainted” (Morrison 163) following her rape. Pecola consequently receives the only recognizable act of tenderness from her rapist father that is going to be recounted in the novel: he leaves her on the floor but covers her with a blanket. What might be notable to the reader is that neither of these self-expressive rapists, not the limelight-loving Trueblood nor the self-pitying Breedlove, expresses any change of emotion such as increased pity, love or remorse toward their daughters after having violated and traumatized them. It is as if the act of violence has given these literary incestuous rapists of African American girls all the expression they needed. Both men rise from these acts empowered by having asserted their sexual dominance over the minor daughters who trusted them and who have little or no recourse to protection from them by the law. All their wives can do is throw them out of their homes and imperil the entire remaining family members’ survival.

Like the slaveowners of a hundred years before these stories’ settings, these rapist African American fathers of African American girls have used their phallic violence to establish themselves as having relative positions of power superior to those of any other members of their own households.

The tenacity of the United States’ obsession with sexual violence safely aimed at African American women and girls is continuously and painstakingly excavated in such fictional, autobiographical and film works as *The Color Purple*, *The Prisoner’s Wife* and *The Journey of August King*. The late twentieth-century *The Color Purple* looks back half a century to open with an adolescent African American girl’s confiding to God about her stepfather’s continual rapes and removal of her children from her with the claim that they have died, a situation strikingly akin to the suffering inflicted by the Marquis on Patient Griselda. By *The Color Purple*’s close, heroine Celie’s grown children will be reintroduced to their mother, following a circuitous series of unpredictable events. But the theme of African American girls and women suffering sexual predation from men of all races runs throughout the text. The only woman who physically stands up for herself in the novel, the buxom Sophia, named for the goddess or quality of Wisdom, explains that, “I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of mens [*sic*]” (Walker 42). Sophia’s sexual rival for her abandoned husband’s affections, Mary Agnes, tries to help get Sophia out of jail before the runaway wife can be beaten to death for refusing to work as a maid in the mayor’s household. But Mary Agnes is raped on her mission of trickster mercy by the sheriff, her uncle, even as he claims that the fact that he is raping her is proof that he is not her uncle and therefore is not guilty of any wrongdoing. “He say if he was my uncle he wouldn’t do it to me. That be a sin” (Walker 101)

Mary Agnes recounts, similarly to Trueblood's sophistry that the deliberate movement of his penis to exit his daughter's vagina would constitute a sin, as if its entrance and lodging there were not sin enough. In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the recurrent theme of violence against an African American woman not being seen as sufficient wrongdoing for punishment is similarly spotlighted by the spectacle of Bigger Thomas's girlfriend Bessie's raped and battered body being wheeled into court, not to convict him of her murder, but as evidence to convict him of the recognized crime of brutalizing an Anglo woman. As if that unlamented travesty were not unconscionable enough, Wright next has Bigger reflect on how Bessie would have felt about being used as a prop to condemn her murderer for another woman's murder: "He knew that Bessie, too, though dead, though killed by him, would resent her dead body being used in this way" (Wright 383). Perhaps fortunately for Bessie's memory and for twenty-first-century readers, Bigger Thomas is not consulted by the fictional judge or jury about his race-specific fitness to speak on behalf of one of his murder victims.

The Journey of August King looks further back, a century and half, to follow the carcass-strewn, harrowing escape of an incestuously raped young woman from her owner and father with the help of an intrepid North Carolina farmer, a widower who has become a somewhat brooding loner. Moving into the twenty-first century, college-educated *Prisoner's Wife* asha bande describes bigotry's social binds in contrast to the adoration of her incarcerated husband, all combining to force her to resurrect buried memories of sexual abuse at the hands of a trusted family friend, in her attempts to heal. Anita Hill's autobiographical study of the libelous and slanderous assaults she suffered when she attempted to disclose Clarence Thomas's unfitness for a lifetime appointment to the

Supreme Court concludes with an observation that the conditions that supported the development of chattel slavery over two hundred years ago still blame the sexually assaulted victim and excuse the exonerated perpetrator, a pattern that Hill says "encourages a dangerous and vicious cycle of abuse" (Hill 279). Hill points out that, "We all grew up in a society that tolerated harassment and in a pocket of that society, the black community, where our racial allegiance was measured by our own tolerance of it" (276-7). Hill concludes that this theory of victim-blaming in cases of sexual harassment and violence, accusing women and girls who protest victimization of overturning their community's social order, "is strikingly similar to those espoused to perpetuate slavery and segregation in America" (277). Hill's findings uphold and move forward Giddings' findings, as racialized and gendered hierarchies of sexual persecution have become internalized tools of self-suppression afflicting African American communities as they move into the twenty-first century.

Terry Windling's updated version of "Donkeyskin" parallels the French fairytale of a princess who must outwit and escape her widowed father's determination to marry her with a twenty-first-century Latina teen's flight from her violently abusive home, both navigating their way to safety past a daunting lineup of sexual predation traps. The poetic juxtaposition argues that little has changed other than the spreading of these abuses from the beds of royalty assaulting commoners to Americans of every station assaulting the most vulnerable upon whom they can get their hands. Such a devolved state of affairs would argue the necessity, beyond artistically uncovering the United States' deeply problematic history of positivizing sexual assault, of activists' continually exposing the

wrongheadedness of the equation of sexual predation with increased social power, if any lasting change is going to be successfully achieved.

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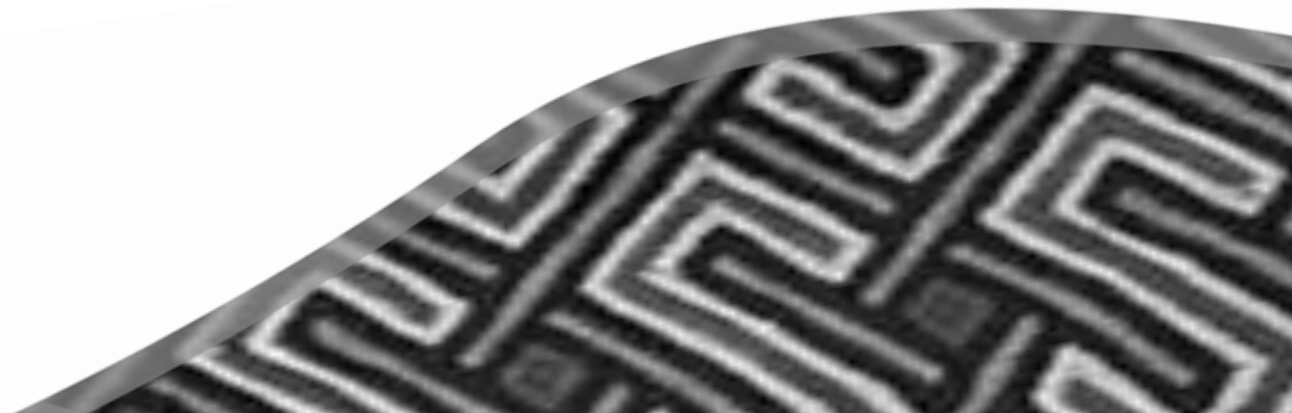
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ENCASED IN AMBER

She could keep a secret. Like living things encased in amber.

Suffocated. Stilled. Drowned in a pretty glass tomb. Waiting for a day in the sun when dead things would be given their due.

She knew better than to tell the family business. Little good it would have done her anyway. Walls telling her story with whole pieces of her innocence missing. They resembled nothing so much as bars, with all their broken spaces. People looking in on her like they had paid to see the show and would be damned if she wouldn't, at very least, beat her chest and roar. People, who confused the keeping of her, mistaking close for safe.

Her bars were slow-gold-brown-soft and fluid. Time made them harder. She grew her shell.

Like a living thing, encased in amber.

She began a giving of herself in dark moments. A sharing of things so easily stolen away. No one could take what you gave. That's how giving worked, she knew. When she gave she dug deep in her bag, searching for only the most precious parts of her soul. Separation key to organization she accrued many bags, all brown and gold. Convinced that the deeper she gave the more her gifts would be valued, she emptied. All her goods and all her good, gone in the giving of things. Her many bags now empty of every little treasure, their color the butter brown and deep mahogany and liquid ochre of crowned beings loved deeply by the sun god.

She caught the light as she walked, covered in her empty bags.

Looking like a living thing, encased in amber.

She knew someone had meant for her to die that way. All slow and sad and pretty like. Like living things encased in amber.

Keeping her secrets.

Content in her cage.

Giving away all her precious things.

A bag lady.

She knew they had already prepared the eulogy. Wishing her a peaceful rest like she had ever really awakened a day of her life.

Well, she was damn well woke now.

And she would have none of it.

She began a telling of things. Words like ember fountains, burning and blazing and building whole universes and timelines and dimensions. Secrets flowing like hot magma running down mountains that *moved when she whispered*. They glittered from her pores. Her every utterance a precious jewel searching for the sunlight.

Shimmering and shivering like a living thing, encased in amber.

When they came again to see the main attraction, she was ready for a show. Calling for her same old act, *she* emerged as the conductor. The bars they looked through had always belonged to their cage, not hers. She knew that now. Her innocence had gone to make way for her elegance. Heads swayed to the motion of her golden hips, entranced as she danced to the beat in her chest. Her roar rumbled, gentle and loving and strong enough to shine through the centuries. Dipped in sun beams she remembered she was a living thing, encased in amber.

To those things she gave away she said her final goodbyes. A unification was happening. A filling of things. A *feeling* of things. She knew that now. There was no space in her hands for all those bags anymore. She needed room to carry her loving self, heavy and huge and humble as it was. She tore apart those empty bags and stitched them back together into a fine-glitter-gold-ground-brown blessing that covered her breasts and blew across her feet and breezed in the wind like gold feathers on the crowns of her healing tree.

Covered as she was she resembled nothing so much as a living thing.

Encased in Amber

VENUS

Dark tidings come heavy on the wind.

Like a baby hoisted on hips just wide enough to bear the load.

Hips that sway like southern magnolias, moved by breezes that sifted desert sand over beating drums.

“She is blossomed”, they whisper, on the eve of spring.

Her flowering is a fragrant fear, drawing closer the bee who hums it is his nature that makes it so, and hers too.

So she is still - like the rose, like the lilac, like the sunflower, like those goddamn magnolias – as he plunders.

No one ever told her about the Venus.

Press the wrong petals and “goodbye little fly”.

She learned. She had to.

It is in the nature of the plucked rose to perish. And she got tired of dying.

He drifts closer, resting hairy jointed legs in unsuspecting places.

She snaps, lifts her head in defiance, devours mercilessly. Her graceful throat sways gently in the breeze.

Dark tidings come heavy on the wind.

AUGHT I'D BEEN A BIRD

Aught I'd been a bird?

So night would bid me fly?

Zephyrs take my song to places

Beyond the broken sky?

Aught I'd been a leopard?

Then through forests creeping I

Could stalk the lights of life that seem

In day to pass me by?

Aught I'd been a lizard?

Spotted, desert warmed,

Skittering cross and endless wave,

Fearless of the storm?

Aught I'd been a squid?

In deep waters, flashing on,

Off in search of dancing arms,

There again, then gone?

Aught I'd been anything but woman?

A bland, uncultured beast.

A flightless, song-less, silent bird that utters not a peep.

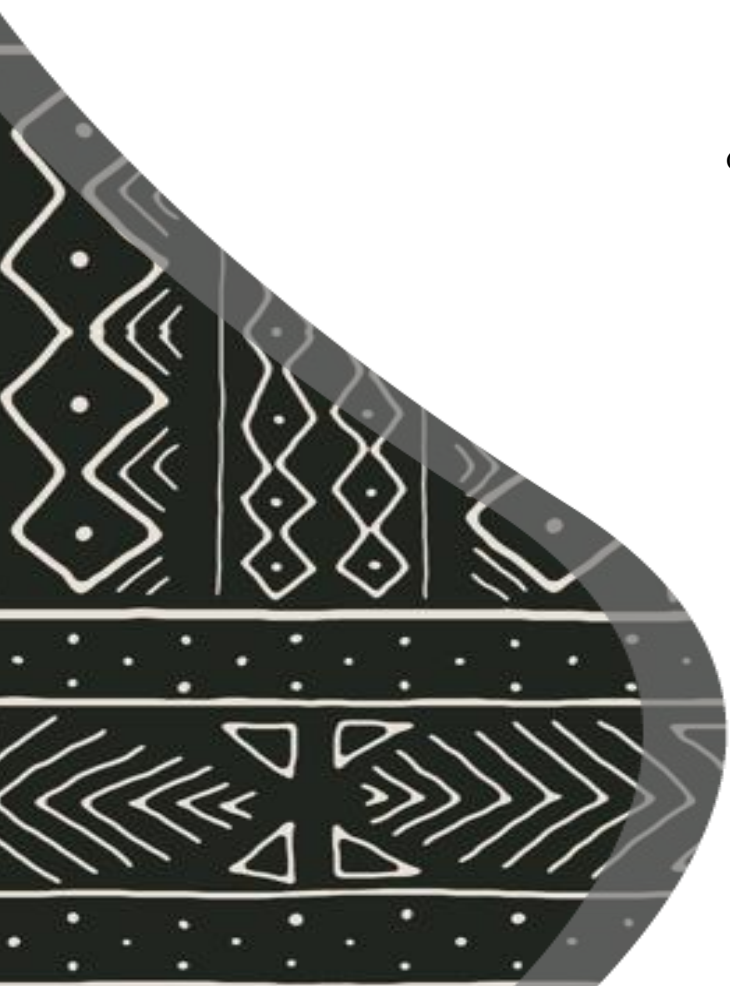
A tame, defanged, declawed house cat in domesticated bliss,

Who hides her scales and runs from gales far in the distance.

Unwilling to go too deep for fear of the darkness that lies therein.

Unaware that all the light she needs is buried deep within.

**Amber Lee, English Major
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The Maroon Journal editorial staff would like to thank the contributors as well as the faculty colleagues, and administrators for their support:

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