

## ABSTRACT

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  Jesse James Scott, Doctor of Philosophy, 2007

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### Disturbing the Peace: Cultural Narratives and Reparations

African Americans' pursuit of reparations began in the eighteenth century and continues in the present. At the twilight of the twentieth century, African American slavery and reparations for that experience became a controversial topic in popular and public discourse. Inevitably, the conversation turned to economics, specifically monetary compensation. Responding to this now-global controversy, Nigerian scholar Chinweizu observed that reparations are not primarily about money. Instead, he insists, reparations are about psychological repairs, institutional repairs, educational repairs, self-made repairs, repairs of all types. Drawing on Chinweizu's conception of reparations, "Disturbing the Peace: Cultural Narratives and Reparations" examines Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*, Sidney Lumet's *The Wiz*, Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus*, and Marc Forster's *Monster's Ball* as cultural narratives that illuminate the pitfalls of pursuing reparations that are restricted to the legal arena.

While this dissertation responds to a historical-political project, I do not offer these cultural narratives as political instruction on how to pursue reparations. Rather, this project examines how individuals and communities within these cultural narratives pursue reparations outside of the legal arena. Despite popular representations of the pursuit of reparations as being primarily about money, I argue that the pursuit of reparations is also a narrative pursuit that disturbs the highly imagined peace of national unity. As such, investigating cultural narratives for the ways in which they engage and revise popular notions of reparations encourages a more expansive approach to identifying and repairing racial injuries for individuals and communities. Narrative does more than calculate debts; it reminds individuals of what they owe both to themselves and to the communities they inhabit, reminds them that their lives and their histories are more than notations in slave ledgers, and reminds them that they are, first and foremost, human beings. Against this legal history, the cultural narratives under consideration in “Disturbing the Peace” suggest, as does Chinweizu, that reparations depend on communities’ willingness and/or ability to initiate self-made repairs.

DISTURBING THE PEACE: CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND REPARATIONS

By

Jesse James Scott

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Advisory Committee:  
Professor Sheri L. Parks, Chair  
Professor Nancy Struna  
Professor John Caughey  
Professor Eugene Robinson  
Professor Shirley Logan

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Over and above the scene there broods a portentous shadow—the shadow of law.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)

The common road on which we all traveled has brought us into stronger kinship than any words, laws or legal claims.

Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941)

## Dedication

For Rosa E. Scott, my grandmother, whose stories—fictional, factual, and those that emerged from the liminal space between fact and fiction—taught me to imagine and to remember the dead, before I understood that imagining, remembering and repairing are often the same act.

## Acknowledgements

I am indebted to a small group of family members and friends/colleagues who supported me in a various ways through the joys and the disappointments of completing this dissertation. “Thank you” cannot adequately express my appreciation for their unwavering support.

My mother never asked me when I was going to be finished, only if I was happy. I am grateful to her for allowing me to wander, sometimes aimlessly, without stern rebuke but rather with gentle encouragement. I have benefited, in ways too numerous to account for here, from my friendship with Angel Threatt. Ours has been a friendship that has endured over twenty-five years and continues to grow. At various moments during this process she has reminded me of a “contract” that we made when we were teenagers: “Trip regardless.” At some of the most challenging moments of graduate school it was laughter with and about Angel that sustained me. A writer of poetry and fiction, Angel’s language moved me to new understandings of living and loving. In particular, a single line from an untitled poem, “I will not, I will not tote the machinery of your past on my back,” resonated with the spirit of this project in its earliest stages.

Christie and Sherod Williams gave me home and family in Tennessee, a gift more precious than they can know. Christie has been there through the toughest moments helping me find the humor in those moments. She has consistently offered research suggestions and insights that animate many of the arguments presented here. My acknowledgement here cannot adequately express how grateful I am to Sherod, who resuscitated my computer on several occasions. Simone Drake endured many

rough-rough drafts, e-mails and phone calls about all things related to life lived under the duress of completing this project. She, too, contributed many insightful suggestions about my ideas and their expression in this project. Perhaps even more than the intellectual camaraderie that I have developed with Christie and Simone, I value our friendship. They are colleagues and friends in every sense of the word.

I am thankful for the Tennessee “crew,” Yulonda Sano and Ray Block Jr., who inspired and sustained me with their honesty, passion, and deep appreciation of story and laughter. “Tender” and “earnest” have gained new meanings that will endure. Deonne Minto and Dwan Henderson-Simmons contributed insightful (re)readings of and questions about this project that helped steer it in productive directions. Dr. Kandice Chuh also provided direction and insights, particularly at the earliest stages of this project. Her comments proved invaluable to my own attempts to “imagine otherwise.” Dr. Psyche Williams-Forson has been supportive from the beginning of my graduate school career. She often provided much-needed advice about negotiating the academy, as well as critical insights about African American culture.

I could not have asked for a more supportive committee. Dr. John Caughey, Dr. Nancy Struna, Dr. Eugene Robinson, and Dr. Shirley Logan offered me thoughtful responses to the project and, importantly, questions that will strengthen and expand future iterations of this research. Drs. Caughey and Struna were particularly supportive of this work in its earliest phases. I am particularly thankful for Dr. Logan’s and Dr. Robinson’s willingness to accommodate last-minute schedule changes; I could not have completed the project without their flexibility.



My advisor, Dr. Sheri Parks, established herself early on as a person who cared not only about my intellectual development but also about my personal growth. She encouraged my imaginative thinking and pushed me to make clear why such thinking was critical for the communities that my work addresses. Words cannot adequately express the gratitude that I have for Dr. Parks' unwavering support, as she always worked with me and on my behalf. Dr. Parks modeled the type of intellectual engagement and critical generosity that I hope to pass along in my professional life. She has helped me negotiate my ambivalence and, more importantly, helped me to find a community of elders who invested in me at a crucial moment in my graduate school career.

This community offered me not only opportunity and experience, but a sense of what could be if one remained committed to the politics of struggle. I am thankful, then, for Dr. Parks' introducing me to Dr. Javaune Adams Gaston ("Dr. J."), whose generosity of spirit and faith sustained me in some of the darkest moments of this project and the interpersonal complications which it unearthed. Dr. Parks also introduced me to John Bowman, who instructed me in diplomacy and taught me confidence by example. His support and encouragement throughout this project proved to be reparative for me. Both John and Javaune are scholar-activists in the truest sense of the word.

I had the pleasure of serving as a Scholar-in-Residence at Colorado College as I began working on this project. Victor Nelson-Cisneros, Claire Garcia and Adrienne Seaward were particularly supportive of my work and made my residency at the college productive.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my partner Michael Anderson, who lived with this project in ways that would challenge even the most devoted. Simply said, I could not have done this without his humor, patience, support, and love. Our differences have indeed helped me to understand the complexity of imagining grace.

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## **Chapter 1: Race, Reparations and Cultural Narratives: Disturbing the Peace and Transgressing the Law**

*The papers were always talking about the debt owed  
...according to them, it had to be paid. But that  
doesn't speak to the imagination. What really  
counted was the possibility of escape, a leap  
to freedom...that would give whatever chance  
there was for hope.*

Albert Camus, *The Stranger*

In her inaugural address as the newly elected president of the American Studies Association (ASA), Mary Helen Washington posed a question that would ultimately shape my work in American studies, African American studies, and African American literary studies. Washington's question, "What happens to American Studies if you put African American studies at the center?" draws attention to the historical marginalization of an African American cultural perspective in traditional American Studies scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Washington's answer to her own question, and the main title of her address—"Disturbing the Peace"—calls for increased collaboration between the two disciplines, given the myriad ways in which African Americans have influenced and continue to influence the various discourses and discursive formations that constitute America and its academic study.

In the course of her address, Washington maps the strangely separate histories of American studies and African American studies. As she notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Helen Washington, "Disturbing the Peace: What Happens to American Studies If You Put African American Studies at the Center?" Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 29, 1997. *American Quarterly* 50:1 (March 1998), 1-23.

The extraordinary experimental work that was being done in African American studies—the loosening of disciplinary boundaries, opening up the traditional disciplines to fields like folklore, music, and art as part of a synthesis of disciplines; the study of literature with a strong emphasis on history and the social sciences, its theorizing and historicizing issues of race, its multicultural perspective; and its critique of nationhood (so critical to the American studies project)—should have made, but did not make, African American studies and American studies natural collaborators, fraternal, if not identical, twins.

(2)

Washington's use of a familial metaphor speaks to the ways in which African Americans, the nation's darker brethren, were excluded even as they defined critical debates about the cultural, economic, political, and social complexion of the nation. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), Toni Morrison offers a similar analysis, observing that African Americans have become "a metaphor for transacting the whole process of Americanization, while burying its particular racial ingredients" (47). The critical work that Washington historicizes in her speech also speaks to what I identify as disciplinary reparations. With her long history of recovering the literary contributions of African American women writers and contributing to African American literary criticism and history, Washington is well-versed in disturbing the peace. Accordingly, Washington's historiography of the

separation of American and African American Studies makes clear why American Studies was not a home for her and many of her colleagues.<sup>2</sup>

In identifying the inhospitableness of American Studies, Washington speaks not only to the significance of the struggles to integrate the two disciplines, but also to the energy that drove efforts to institutionalize African American/Black Studies programs in the nation's universities and colleges. Such work, as Washington notes in her address, continued the political struggles that initiated and sustained the cultural production, literature, film, art, and theory that aided the various civil rights movements. These social movements understood that they needed to create and disseminate a cultural narrative that supported their political claims if their struggle was to be successful. It is, then, reasonable to suggest that these social movements understood the reparative potential of their work in material, spiritual, cultural, political, and psychological areas. While these various arenas are non-equivalent, they intersect in important ways that demand scholars' attention.

As a beneficiary of the work that Washington and others have done to strengthen the bond between American and African American studies, I move across the often blurry boundaries of the two fields and identify both as home. As I have suggested, Mary Helen Washington's and Toni Morrison's literary, theoretical, and editorial work involving African Americans and African American women writers link them as scholars who disturb the peace of disciplinary boundaries as they work to retrieve, situate, and introduce African American writers within the national spotlight.

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<sup>2</sup> Washington's *Black-Eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (1975) corrected the imbalance of coverage in previous African American anthologies where the writers selected were mostly male. Additional collections, *Midnight Birds: Stories by Contemporary Black Women* (1980) and *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960* (1987), continued this important recovery work.

For her part, Morrison has not only contributed compelling narratives but also critical scholarship on race; of particular interest is *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In that text, Morrison identifies an Africanist presence that has been significant to the nation's literary production. Like Washington, Morrison identifies the ways in which African Americans have disturbed the peace, noting that

the presence of black people is not only a major referent in the framing of the Constitution; it is also in the battle over enfranchising unpropertied citizens, women, the illiterate. It is there in the construction of a free and public school system; the balancing of representation in legislative bodies; jurisprudence and legal definitions of justice. It is there in theological discourse; the memoranda of banking houses, the concept of manifest destiny...from its origins on through its integrated or disintegrating twentieth-century self. (65)

Morrison's attention to the historical and contemporary figurations of African Americans as the source of disturbance speaks to this project's interest in what became a highly visible and vocal pursuit of reparations for African American slavery that began in the last decade of the twentieth century and continues in the twenty-first century. I can think of precious few other debates, save the Iraqi War and immigration, which currently disturb the nation as viscerally as the mention of reparations.

A limited conception of reparations has meant that African Americans' pursuit of reparations for slavery has been and continues to disturb the peace. As a result,

discourse that attends to the pursuit of reparations most often limits the pursuit to one that is solely about money. As such, it will be necessary to consider the etymology of the term “reparations” before identifying the conception of reparations that this project embraces. The Oxford English Dictionary records the earliest usage of the term as appearing in 1384 in Chaucer’s *House of Fame*, in which the term expresses the act of reconciliation. Subsequent uses of the term occur in relationship to religion and personal wealth and treat reparation as the act of restoring to a proper state, the restoration or renewal of a thing or a part. In light of this project’s interest in African Americans as subjected to injurious treatment in and through American legal history, this particular definition is particularly resonant for a broader understanding of the term. All of the cultural narratives engaged in this dissertation address the need to restore African Americans’ humanity, which was stripped away in the pursuit of a national narrative project, a project that sought to justify Africans’ exclusion from the human family and thus render them ineligible to become signatories on the social contract. I will explore this concept further in Chapter Three. Also of relevance to this project is the term’s use in relationship to spiritual being. That is, “reparation” can also refer to the spiritual restoration and salvation of persons. The Oxford English Dictionary lists these definitions of reparation(s) as rare; it does the same for definitions of the term in relationship to furniture, where it signifies a sum spent on repairs and, more generally, the condition of an object.

Even rarer is the usage of the term “reparation” in relationship to skin, specifically the complexion. However, in light of this project’s focus on race as a visual marker of difference, this definition too resonates with the ways in which,



historically, skin has constituted a source of injury for African Americans. It is not until 1645 that the term begins to be used in relationship to what we contemporarily think of as the action of making amends for a wrong done, or as compensation, remedy for/of some loss, and the repair of an injury. More specifically, the term's usage in relationship to war or to acts of aggression is marked by global conflicts; the Oxford English Dictionary marks usage of "reparations" in this vein intermittently from 1919 to 1976.

Reparations' etymology reveals not only that the term has had a broader meaning than its current life in popular parlance suggests, but also that our conceptions of reparations have steadily moved away from a holistic understanding of the human being—that is, the human being as a unity of body, mind, and spirit—and toward a view of the person in terms of material value and commensurability. This evolution of the term is disturbing, and for this reason I am drawn to Nigerian scholar and writer Chinweizu's consideration of the limited use and meaning of reparations in contemporary cultural and political discourse. I should note, however, that while I borrow Chinweizu's discussion of reparations, I do not wish to make comparison to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Jewish, Asian American, or other ethnic groups' attempts at pursuing reparations. Too often we sacrifice the specificity of African American experience in our attempts to link political struggles. Given the history of African Americans, in which their struggles for reparations have often been dismissed or minimized, I want to maintain my focus on African American pursuits of reparations as a particular response to America's investment in anti-black racism.

I discovered Chinweizu's speech in another article that examined the failures of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee.<sup>3</sup> Chinweizu does not offer a definition in the strictest sense; rather, he offers a consideration of the term which reflects the breadth of the history that contemporary pursuit of reparations aims to address.<sup>4</sup> That is, I understand reparations to be as much about narrative repairs as they are about compensation for injuries; collectively, then, the contemporary pursuit of reparations aims to prevail upon the U.S. to acknowledge its wrong-doing and to raise public consciousness about the nation's racial history, particularly the ways in which the legal apparatus of the state has perpetuated and continues to perpetuate racial injury.

In a presentation at the First Pan-African Conference on Reparations (1993) in Abuja, Nigeria, Chinweizu asserts that

reparation is not just about money: it is not even mostly about money; in fact, money is not even one percent of what reparation is about. Reparation is mostly about making repairs, self-made repairs, on ourselves: mental repairs, psychological repairs, cultural repairs, organizational repairs, social repairs, institutional repairs, technological repairs, economic repairs, political repairs, educational repairs, repairs of every type that we need.... in order to re-create sustainable black societies.... Let me repeat that the most important aspect of reparation is not the money the

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<sup>3</sup> See Hamber, Brandon, "Repairing the Irreparable: Dealing With Double-Binds of Making Reparations for Crimes Past," *Ethnicity and Health* vol. 5, nos. 3 & 4:215-226, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Professor Chinweizu's seminal work *The West and the Rest of Us* was edited by Toni Morrison. Morrison's editorial significance is extensive and worthy of a study that investigates the way that she shaped African American political discourse.

campaign may or may not bring; the most important part of reparation is our self-repair; the change it will bring about in our understanding of our history, of ourselves, and of our destiny; the change it will bring about in our place in the world.

I quote Chinweizu at length because his insistence that money is not the most significant factor in the pursuit of reparations shapes my investigation and readings of reparations as it is imagined and pursued in the texts treated in this study.

Chinweizu's inclusion of self-made repairs in his catalog of desirable reparations is important to this project because it recognizes that some repairs or reparations cannot be achieved through existing institutions.

One of the criticisms of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its work has been that, despite testimonials from victims, acknowledgements by the government about the violence of apartheid, and even apologies, broadly defined, for the injuries produced by apartheid's violence, substantive changes to the structure and behavior of the government and its people have not emerged. This failure is particularly acute for victims. In other words, what I identify in Chinweizu's constitutive elements of reparations is the need for something more than money and apologies and other symbolic gestures. That demand for "something more" does not dismiss the reality that individual acts of reparations and private efforts toward realizing greater equality are afoot, but rather acknowledges that the breadth of such work and its encouragement by the government may not exist to the extent necessary for such efforts to prevail.

I identify this same concern in the cultural narratives treated in this project; they reveal that the “something more” necessary for reparations must be pursued within the aggrieved communities, not in lieu of governmental efforts but in addition to those efforts. Reading Chinweizu’s conception of reparations as a critique of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee helps to make clear this project’s interest in pursuing reparations beyond its current emphasis on legalist discourse. The cultural possibilities and implications of rethinking reparations, particularly as reparations impact the political and cultural imagination, racial and gender identity, and popular culture are necessary to consider if we are to formulate a well-rounded pursuit of reparations.

As a category of reparations, the concept of self-made repairs opens psychic space to rethink the structures that shape both the individual and collective relationship to history and the present moment. Importantly, this category encourages the imaginative possibilities, to borrow from Avery Gordon, which can help us “imagine otherwise” (5). Chinweizu’s emphasis on self-made repairs is linked with a larger project that aims to account for the relationship between modernity and the particular racial histories and injuries it created globally. Though this focus is beyond the scope of my project, I translate Chinweizu’s specific reference to black societies, a designation that speaks to the diasporic nature of his vision, to African American communities because African Americans are the focus of this project.

Also of interest for this project is Chinweizu’s inclusion of cultural repairs and cultural products as part of his larger definition of reparations. While he does not specify what or how such repairs are to be produced within culture, that he includes

culture as a site where reparations must occur speaks to another aim of this project. In addition to reparations signifying primarily a monetary pursuit, it has also been largely discussed in relationship to legalist discourse. The law is primarily invested in closure; thus, the goal of lawsuits is to determine commensurability. Because reparations are expansive in scope, the legal arena is not the ideal location to pursue or theorize reparations in a meaningful way.

Given that Chinweizu includes understanding history and ourselves as a crucial part of pursuing reparations, it would seem that other cultural discourses are better suited for providing the space to do such work. Without a doubt, the work of understanding the epistemology of race and the subsidiary ideologies it produced must disturb the peace in multiple arenas. The word “reparation” in itself disturbs the peace. Reparations, as defined by Chinweizu and as the concept will be investigated in this project, is an appropriate focus given that, historically, African American studies—and more recently, American studies—“plac[es]...heavy emphasis on institutional critique ...identify[ing] white supremacy as a systemic and central feature of the American experience” (Washington 7). Importantly, both African American and American studies value the cultural arena as one that is fraught with competing ideological interests. These interests shape the various cultural texts and their reception and thus offer scholars endless possibilities to intervene in the production and critique of the political and economic exigencies that shape American cultures.

As Washington, Morrison, and Chinweizu observe, race has been and remains one of the most profitable ideologies, even as a disturbance, operating in the United

States. As I understand their work, they retain race as an analytic for the purpose of identifying the imperatives that created particular bodies of knowledge and the ideologies that such knowledge produced. In preserving race, they acknowledge that “for most of U.S. history, the state’s main objective in its racial politics was repression and exclusion” (Omi and Winant 81). That is to say that these scholars’ interventions or scholarly reparations aim at getting beyond race without discarding race’s work in the United States’ nation- and narrative-building. It is, then, the process of nation-building—a process that is simultaneously physical, cultural, and economic—that, as it was carried out, created the injuries identified in various requests for reparations in the scholarly, cultural, economic, political, and legal arenas.

*If you work in the area of culture,  
You will always be working  
in an area of displacement.*  
Stuart Hall

### **Culture and its Discontents**

Given my location at the intersections of African American studies, American studies, and African American literary studies, my engagement with reparations finds its grounding in the shared and contested arena of culture. As the quotation above suggests, working in the arena of culture often produces a sense of displacement, particularly when the focus is on race and its expression as racism and/or its intersection with other ideologies such as class and gender. As the terrain where significantly more than linguistic play occurs, culture has become a location that is anchored by and in a variety of contentious discourses in which the meaning and

nature of contemporary life, transnational and global in breadth and experience, occur. Arguably, these tensions render culture a generative site for identifying and exploring racial injury and the pursuit of reparations that have issued forth in both so-called high art and popular art, as this project argues. Not only does culture and its study in both African American and American studies facilitate my gathering of canonical literary texts and popular films, it also encourages conversation between these imaginative forms and the cultural, economic and political exigencies that both register.<sup>5</sup>

My attention to and interest in cultural narratives as products of culture does not aim to reject efforts to pursue material reparations, but rather recognizes “the central importance of cultural meaning in shaping political projects and political identities [and] corrects some of the imbalances of an approach to [reparations]...based on the attribution of ‘real interests’” (Barrett 2). The pursuit of reparations, then, inevitably enters the cultural arena both because of and despite its call for political and, more recently, legal interventions. Following Michele Barrett’s argument, my interest in the cultural arena speaks to the significance of subjectivity and identity as a means to “reinststate a somewhat neglected dimension of what we are that the focus on the purely material elides” (15). The cultural narratives engaged in the project do not announce their investment in pursuing reparations; rather, as I argue, they invite lay readers and scholars to attend seriously to the imaginative work bound up in their production, work that is at least cognizant of the larger political debates circulating within American culture, as my readings of the texts reveal to

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<sup>5</sup> See Raymond William’s work in *Culture*, in which he elaborates on the relationship between anthropological, sociological and linguistic senses of the term culture and how they extend the field of inquiry to all facets of life.

varying degrees. I am, then, arguing for identifying these cultural narratives and their creators as examples of cultural work and cultural workers; I also argue for the importance of cultural work as way of consciously engaging the political and legal debates that define, but are not limited, to a particular historical moment.

Reparations as a political and legal pursuit, then, might be viewed as a discursive project that exists in cultural narratives, which do not overtly announce their political or theoretical intentions except through the consumer's active imaginative reconstitution of the creative process that placed reparations there. I ask for latitude in reading these texts as responses to the contemporary pursuit of reparations and the political struggles that have given rise to such pursuits, especially in the last decade of the twentieth century. With the exception of *The Wiz*, this project's chosen cultural narratives entered the cultural arena from the 1990s to the present. *The Wiz*, by contrast, appears at the close of the 1970s; however, the anxieties that circulated within the cultural moment in which the film was produced serve as a precursor for what subsequently became a persistent question animating public discussions around the cultural, economic, and political health of African American families and, more specifically, African American men.

Ultimately, culture provides the location where the most dramatic political and public responses to reparations can be identified. As both a cultural and legal debate, the pursuit of reparations demands that we pursue a cultural studies methodology cognizant of the limitations of law even as it acknowledges that "law is a prime site in the creation of social enactments and rituals" (Austin and Sarat 245). Precisely because law creates social enactments and rituals of power, discrimination,



and violence—ingredients for social stratification and alienation and other forms of social inequities that potentially harm citizen—we must, then, also recognize that. Although law and its narrative force is perhaps the discourse that most literally governs citizenship, U.S. culture—the collectively forged images, histories, and narratives that place, displace, and replace individuals in relation to the national polity—powerfully shapes who the citizenry is, where they dwell, what they remember, and what they forget (Lowe 2). Law, then, operates as an over-determined factor within the contemporary debate largely because lawsuits for reparations have neglected to consider seriously the symbiotic relationship between legal discourse and cultural discourse.

Race and its expression as racism, particularly as it was experienced during slavery and subsequently during the Jim Crow era, is generally identified as the source of economic, psychic and political injury that fuels contemporary pursuits of reparations. The residues of these systematic and structural iterations of racism are a source of contention for the American public as many contemporary American citizens reject the argument that they are accountable for this history. Contemporary Americans have divorced themselves from the sins of their fathers, so that anyone who raises the issues of reparations encounters hostility. America's embrace of race as a form of knowledge, and particularly the expressions of racism developed from that embrace, entangles all Americans; race matters in America culture because it "is precisely the way we are implicated in each others' traumas" (Rody 192).

Contemporary pursuits of reparations, then, must face a culture of denial, which is itself a product of cultural narratives and cultural work that insists that the shared or

inherited racial past has not produced unpaid debts and/or unjust enrichment, the legitimating basis for contemporary pursuits of reparations. Disturbing the peace, then, transcends the contemporary moment and, instead, reaches back to the very founding narratives and philosophies which framed the United States.

The competing claims about history and accountability, coupled with an ever-growing political and legal discourse which argues that race no longer constitutes a significant obstacle in pursuing opportunity, a non-binding acknowledgment of racial injury, and the premature celebration of achieving a colorblind society (largely a legal maneuver) have engendered a widespread belief that race does not matter. Ironically, both African Americans and white Americans share a desire to get beyond race and racial thinking. They do so, however, for very different reasons. At the risk of being too reductive, getting beyond race for many white Americans has become a means to escape the sins of our nation's forefathers and the (un)conscious guilt that these sins have engendered.

For African Americans, getting beyond race means shedding the persistent badge of inferiority with which U.S. legal history has often stamped African Americans. This sense of inferiority reiterates the imperative of identifying reparations in terms other than financial if African Americans are to pursue seriously the gamut of reparations that Chinweizu identifies. However, as long as the public's understanding of reparations links it to remuneration only, reparations' life in legal discourse will be similar to its cultural life—a disturbance—that is largely dismissed and/or denied. While there has been a proliferation of scholarly tomes aiming to legitimate the case for reparations, these texts have not successfully cultivated a

critical mass of political activism on behalf of reparations as much as they have provided fodder for the ever-more-frequent talk radio discourses that dominate the nation's airwaves.

In this project I understand and treat reparations as part of the anti-racist work being carried out by activists and scholars. In light of this positioning, the concept of reparations constitutes “a counternarrative to the story that white privilege would tell about the commodification and racialization of people of African descent used as slaves and subjected to societal discrimination” (Westely 81). I will argue that reparations in the cultural narratives that I treat address what poet Cornelius Eddy identifies as “the brutal imagination” that sought to make race “real.” The cultural narratives offer an imaginative environment that encourages identification of and debate about the nuances of pursuing reparations, a space that, according to my readings of Morrison, Washington, and Chinweizu, is of great value for disturbing the peace productively and rethinking/repairing history. Importantly, as “counterhegemonic narrative[s] of self and community,” the texts under consideration—*Beloved*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, *The Wiz*, *Get on the Bus*, and *Monster's Ball*—seek to transgress the boundaries created by race and racial thinking, boundaries created and policed through law and the political, economic, and social culture from which its underlying jurisprudence issues forth in the United States (82).

The cultural narratives treated here do not disavow that race exists as a recurring fiction treated and experienced as “real.” Race continues to matter, but these narratives announce both the possibility and the necessity of transgressing the complex of cultural and juridical laws that race and its attendant fictions have

enacted. The act of transgression, then, captures the spirit of the quotation drawn from Camus' *The Stranger* at the start of this chapter: that our attentiveness to debt and the pursuit of repayment risks becoming a prison. Ironically, as the quotation points out, our obsession with debts, justifiable as it may be, thwarts the imagination in its attempt to produce or conceptualize reparations that are equally meaningful—reparations that allow African Americans to “escape” and/or take the “leap to freedom” identified in the quotation.

Importantly, the emphasis on self-made repairs in Chinweizu's statement on reparations acknowledges that African Americans are indeed owed a debt, but that they have a greater debt to themselves and their communities. The escape and leap to freedom that potentially issue forth from discovering and claiming the self speaks to the significance of the imagination and imaginative spaces in the pursuit of reparations. It should remind scholars and activists that “our imaginative life, as evidenced by our legal and cultural discourses, can dictate our actions” (Holland 26). With that in mind, I want to move from situating myself and the project as existing in the overlapping disciplinary discourses of American and African American studies to a more specific explication of the intellectual and cultural origins and goals that drive this project. For that explication, I must turn to African American bodies, specifically African American women's bodies, as they have often marked the site of legal and cultural transgression that disturbed the peace.

*In the version I know the woman is the daughter of slaves, black, American, and lives alone in a small house outside of town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression.*

Toni Morrison, 1993 Nobel Lecture

### **A Story of Debts of Debts and Memories**

“Disturbing the Peace: Cultural Narratives and Reparations” is indebted to Toni Morrison’s literary and theoretical work. This project emerged when I reread *Beloved* simultaneously with my initial reading of Randall Robinson’s *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*. It became apparent that the contemporary discourse about reparations for African American slavery had been myopically focused on materiality; however, as Chinweizu reminds us, reparations are not primarily about money.<sup>6</sup> My reading of *Beloved* revealed the need to imagine and pursue reparations that recognize the diverse and complex injuries resulting from African Americans’ experience of slavery and its aftermath. Efforts to repair these injuries ought to reflect the vast scope of slavery’s history, a history which embraces the material, spiritual, cultural, political, and psychological realms. While these are each unique areas of concern, they are equally important.

Currently, reparations discourses focus primarily on justice secured through the nation’s courts. U.S. legal history, however, suggests that such an emphasis might be misguided, even dangerous. My project draws its title from Morrison’s 1993 Nobel Lecture. In this address, Morrison invokes an old black woman “who is both

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<sup>6</sup> I use the term “African American” throughout this project, recognizing that the Transatlantic Slave Trade initiated a long process that transformed Africans into African Americans. My use of this term does not intend to jettison the various names attached to African Americans within the U.S. historical continuum.

law and its transgression,” an image which I use to frame this section and much of the project. Morrison’s phrase “among her people” is crucial, since her recognition of the communal aspect of narrative articulates the ways in which the trope of the old black woman and Morrison herself attempt to speak directly about and to African Americans’ experiences. The phrase also speaks to Chinweizu’s identification of self-made repairs as an integral part of campaigns for reparations. Morrison’s reference to the significance of the black woman’s body in relationship to the construction of and transgression of law registers the interaction between official legal and cultural narratives that produce a peculiarly American history. African American women’s bodies have become the space in which the need for reparations can be articulated and pursued, as they are often called upon to represent the most abject subject in racist and patriarchal discourse.

A pateroller passing would have sniggered  
To see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws  
A slave and a...whitewoman.  
*Beloved*, Toni Morrison

### **Sexing the Intersection of Disturbance and Transgression**

Let us consider colonial Virginia, where colonists began perfecting slavery by differentiating the legal status between free whites, blacks, and other indentured servants. Of particular interest are two statutes separated by thirty years, for they reveal the ways in which African American women’s bodies and their reproductive capacity, though highly prized, also mark them as a source of disturbance and transgression in the colonial world. A 1630 statute reports that Hugh Davis, a white colonist, was soundly whipped for “abusing [and]... defiling himself by lying with a

black woman” (Henning 27). The record does not reveal whether this sexual relationship was consensual or an act of violence. Such a distinction, however, was irrelevant, since the black woman’s body was both a critical commodity in the economy of a burgeoning slave trade and a site of simultaneous curiosity and repulsion. Hortense Spillers observes that “African American women became the primary passage between the human and non-human world” (76). Hugh Davis’s crime, then, was transgressing the boundaries between human and non-human in a culture working tirelessly to assure itself of its own humanity. With the help of Davis’s punishment as evidence, we can identify that African American women also become a marker of acceptable and unacceptable decorum in various arenas of colonial life. Simultaneously despised and sought after, African American women marked transgression in both the legal and cultural realms of colonial life.

A 1662 statute reveals that Hugh Davis’s punishment was not severe enough to prevent similar indiscretions. This statute decrees that children born in the colony inherit the status of their mothers. Once slavery became a well-entrenched feature of the colonies, relationships between white colonists and African American women took on enormous cultural and legal significance. In the official and cultural laws that policed inherited property (and thus cultural power and legal standing), the children from these illicit relationships disturbed the boundaries erected to separate the free from the unfree and ultimately influenced the contemporary pursuit of reparations. Children of interracial relationships generally did not receive the benefit of their father’s wealth as their white siblings were able to do and thus were unable to build wealth for future generations. Equally important, both statutes reference these

sexual liaisons as offenses to Christian principles and levy monetary fines. These statutes are but two of literally hundreds of Virginia statutes which reveal the relationship between law and culture.<sup>7</sup> Not only do these statutes make visible the process of slavery's creation, they also reveal how and why African American women became a critical marker of transgression and disturbance. Morrison's invocation of the black woman, I believe, speaks to the centrality of her presence in African American communities as well as to her significance in Americas' nation- and narrative-building projects.

With African American women's lives often marked by these two powerful poles of law and transgression, we can appreciate Morrison's claim that African American women become a multivalent signifier of the anxiety over all number of taboos. Morrison's work consistently addresses this historical reality; of particular interest for this project are Morrison's female protagonists in *Beloved*, Sethe, Baby Suggs, Beloved, and Denver. Each of these women embodies the juridical condition of African American women and African Americans more generally, and in deploying the characters this way, Morrison identifies African American women as the site of both law and its transgression within the communities that they inhabit. I take Morrison's use of this phrase—"the law and its transgression"—as a way to identify the relationship between structuring agents, such as the law, and its representational currency in the economy of images that populate imaginative cultural

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<sup>7</sup> See Henning, William Waller, compiler, *The Statutes at Large; Being A Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, From the First Session of the Legislature, in the year 1619*. 14 vols. Richmond: J. & G. Cochran, 1821.



productions such as literature and film. These narratives intersect with law's structuring role in the United States' history.

Morrison's work, then, draws attention to the ways in which African American literature not only engages the legal status of African Americans, but also encourages scholars to identify reparations, broadly defined, as it appears in some cultural productions. Contemporary efforts to construct a cultural arena and an attendant legal discourse characterized as "colorblind" or "post-race" makes this project all the more critical. Pursuing colorblind or post-race politics engenders an ahistorical response to contemporary social issues that are in fact rooted in the past. Congress's refusal to support John Conyers' (D-MI) bill H.R. 40, "[The Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act](#)," articulates congressional, and by extension the public's, embrace of post-race politics. Conyers has submitted H.R. 40 annually since 1989, but to no avail.<sup>8</sup> H.R.40 does not request monetary reparations, but simply a study to examine slavery's impact on African Americans living in the present. It then calls for experts to recommend appropriate remedies to redress the harm inflicted on living African Americans. Such a study would reveal that slavery, as a market economy, relied upon what Patricia Williams calls a partializing standard of humanity [that] assumes...that the psyche is not a significant part of the whole human...it overlooks the fact that most definitions of humanity require something beyond mere biological sustenance, some healthy measure of autonomy beyond anything that slavery could conceive. (219-20)

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<sup>8</sup> H.R. 40 refers to Thaddeus Stevens' 1867 H.R.29 bill which did not include a mule. The bill did specify forty acres and the sum of fifty dollars to be given to former slaves. The monetary payment was assumed to be used for the procuring a mule to work the acreage.

A reparations discourse, then, must address what has been lost to the partializing standard of slavery and its residues in the present. In other words, the discourse must assist the political and judicial agents that manage the nation's citizenry in identifying injuries, which it may be disinclined to recognize and/or accept. Congress's refusal to take seriously Conyer's proposal expresses a desire to get beyond race not only by denying its life in the present, but also in its failure to imagine the proposal to be little more than a precursor to demands for monetary payments. Congress's response, then, continues to situate African Americans as both abstractions and disturbances within the body politic. The peace they propose to uphold is rooted in political silences, silences that aim to erase or forget that race mattered and continues to matter.

### **Toward a Multivalent Understanding of Reparations**

Conyers's bill exposes how deeply entrenched the equation of reparations with monetary compensation has become in contemporary discussions of African American slavery. Williams' argument identifies the limits of placing such an equation into sharp relief; in doing so we can identify how such understanding erases the multivalency of the term reparations. As I noted, the term reparations has non-monetary meanings which include the restoration of a person, spiritual restoration, reconciliation, making amends, and a preparation for repairing the complexion, which is especially critical in light of our use of skin color and other phenotypical features to define or recognize race in the cultural and legal discourse privileged throughout U.S. history. The colonial statutes that rewrote traditional inheritance lines by branding the offspring of interracial relationships with the condition of the mother, both in color

and status, as non-free persons remind us of race's role as a visual marker that carries economic, political, and cultural determinations; to focus solely on monetary compensation or "damages" undermines the magnitude of slavery's impact on African Americans in multiple, though not necessarily equivalent, arenas. Moreover, such discussions fail to recognize that material compensation is perhaps less effective and meaningful if it is not secured in the context of other forms of reparations that address the whole person.

In short, money may not be the most significant component of reparations for African Americans, despite the popularity of this political and legal argument. Morrison's work emphasizes the importance of narrative, an emphasis which animates this project. Morrison's acknowledgement that the past is always present offers a useful way to think through the ideologies, operations, and objectives of various iterations of reparations discourses that have resurfaced as the twentieth century arced into the twenty-first century. Accepting that the notion of reparations necessarily references race, my project seeks to consider reparations outside of its current location in legalist discourse and instead resituate it in the realm of culture where the imagination is perhaps more valued. As reparations discourses concern race and racism and their injurious relationship to African Americans in history, they cannot be articulated adequately and explored exclusively in the legal arena because the law itself has frequently been a source of injury through decisions that legitimated and reproduced race and racism in response to African Americans' grievances. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* case comes to mind as a particularly compelling example of this history.

Let me be clear: I am not using race and racism interchangeably; rather, I place these terms in close proximity because of their historical relationship. Biological concepts of race that relied on distinguishing physiological features and inscribing such differences with negative meanings have often fueled expressions of racism, actions that signify an acceptance of racial differences as a rationale for discriminatory practices in a variety of arenas. Race combined with racism, according to Omi and Winant in *Racial Formation in America*, constitute a racial project in which the primary aim is to reproduce structures of oppression based on essentialist categories of race. African Americans' pursuit of reparations reflects the persistence of race in public discourse and cultural life within the United States. Increasingly, public and academic discourses are animated with debates about the future of race and "the lore that brings the virtual realities of 'race' to dismal and destructive life" in the United States (Gilroy 11). Attempts to apprehend both racial thinking and its modus operandi situate culture as a critical site to pursue such understandings. Despite calls from various constituencies within the U.S. to move beyond race as the lens through which the nation shapes, reads, and responds to political and economic discourse, race continues to matter primarily because the history of racial differentiation is indelibly imprinted on the cultures of the United States. The intersection of cultural beliefs and values about race with U.S. jurisprudence helped cement racial discrimination in all aspects of U.S. life, including housing, education and employment.

I argue that it is both feasible and desirable to work against race, an idea that circulates prominently within this project, without jettisoning race's history as a

structuring force or, as Omi and Winant identify it, as an integral part of the United States' racial formation. Working against race, then, "must be complemented by precise historical reasons why these attempts are worth making" in the United States at this particular moment (Gilroy 12). Race's interaction with legal discourse is one of the most compelling reasons to pursue such a program. I am guided here by Neil Gotanda, who argues that we must recognize the historical uses and meanings of race—what he calls historical race—if we are to resist effectively race's negative historical use and its persistence in the present. If we are to appreciate fully the potential of reparations, our understandings of the term must embrace the significances of race in its historical and contemporary uses and misuses in political discourses, and the impact of those significances on intersecting cultural and economic discourse and discursive formations in the United States. "Working against race," like "reparations" as I deploy the term in this project, is a linguistic intervention that insists

that only by recognizing the complicity of argumentative and critical discourse can we realize in language itself a potential to overcome the languages of oppression and domination [and the cultural narratives produced with/through such language] which have impact on our lives. (McPhail 97)<sup>9</sup>

Conceptualizing reparations beyond monetary pursuit, then, is not about articulating a less threatening or even deracinated political and cultural project but, ultimately, about announcing why such a project benefits all Americans. I do not suggest that

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<sup>9</sup> See Mark Lawrence McPhail's updated edition of *The Rhetoric of Racism Revisited: Reparation or Separation?* for an extended discussion of the ways in which racial rhetoric contributes to what McPhail identifies as a politics of innocence that undermines progressive politics and social change.

monetary reparations are unwarranted, only that this project aims to explore reparations outside of pecuniary terms.

### **Renewing the Call for Reparations**

The pursuit of reparations and the debates surrounding it are literally as old as the nation itself. As Roy Finkenbine notes:

Calls for compensation in some form to slaves and their descendants precede the founding of the United States, dating back to at least the 1760s, and have been and continued to be sounded in relatively unbroken form for some two-and-a-half centuries up to the present.

Indeed, the pursuit of reparations persists, as evidenced by the proliferation of texts and movements in the final decade of the twentieth century, a burgeoning that continues in the twenty-first century. Of particular interest is historian Mary Frances Berry's *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations*. Berry documents Callie House, an African American woman born into slavery, as the founder of what Berry identifies as the first national grassroots movement for securing reparations for ex-slaves, the Ex-Slave Association. Berry documents the destruction of that movement by the Department of Justice, which worked through the Postmaster General to charge and imprison House for mail fraud. Additionally, House's movement led the U.S. to declare many African Americans "suspects," which "allowed" their mail to be opened and/or remain undelivered under the smallest pretext of fraud or threat. House's only transgression or "crime,"

however, was her belief that her freedom gave her the right and standing to pursue a monetary claim against the United States.

Berry also documents that House's efforts were dismissed by African Americans who were better educated and financially solvent. The pursuit of reparations, it seems, has always suffered from intra-racial class stratification. Such tensions remind us that community as a means of expressing solidarity is indeed imagined. As a result of this imagined relationship, legal pursuits of reparations are often dismissed by whites and African Americans alike. Berry reads the class-based response to House's efforts as a rejection of the very idea that reparations would ever be paid by the U.S. government. There has neither been nor likely will be intra-racial consensus that African Americans are due reparations. The idea of a universal injured African American subject, individual or communal, does not exist. That the rejection of House's and others' call for reparations falls along class lines speaks to the ways in which America's emphasis on the individual poses a struggle that demands not only embracing a particular relationship to U. S. history, but also embracing the spirit of the "we the people" imagined and inscribed in the nation's constitutive contract. House joins the nameless African American women in those colonial statutes that mark the law and its transgression.

More recent efforts to pursue reparations have been successful in capturing public attention, though not the American public's support, because they have focused on familiar corporations such as Aetna and CSX, whom activists argue benefited from slavery. These legal pursuits are part of a larger push for reparations that include texts and movements such as Randall Robinson's *The Debt: What*

*America Owes to Blacks*, the re-release of Borris Bittker's 1973 book *A Case for Black Reparations*, Raymond Winbush's *Should America Pay?*, Ellis Cose's *Bone to Pick: Of Forgiveness, Reconciliation, Reparation and Revenge* and Roy L. Brooks's *Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations*. These texts combined with other efforts such as Daedria Farmer-Paellman's class-action lawsuits, The Millions for Reparation March, and the passage of several resolutions by city councils to explore reparations.

In the wake of President George Bush Jr.'s much discussed almost-apology for slavery during his 2003 visit to Goree Island, an infamous slave trading post in Senegal, several states have issued apologies for slavery and still others are debating the merits of issuing such statements. In February 2007, Virginia became the first state to issue a formal apology, in which it professed profound regret for slavery. Maryland quickly followed Virginia's lead and issued an apology for slavery in March of 2007. Currently, Missouri and Georgia are considering issuing apologies as well. Missouri is currently commemorating the sesquicentennial anniversary of the Dred Scott decision; an apology for slavery would complement the commemoration. Though non-binding, these apologies constitute a symbolic gesture that recognizes slavery's injurious impact on African Americans and Americans more generally. Though the pursuit of reparations is an old story, as Finkenbine observes, it does not appear to be one which will end in the near future; in fact, with the growing push for apologies for slavery in state legislatures, the discussion about reparations promises to intensify. Apologizing for slavery disturbs the peace that such gestures hope to create



and remind us that slavery was at the center of debate when the fledgling nation sought to articulate their grievances with the British crown.

Arguably, these debates are central to the development of the nation. In the original draft of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson argued, among many grievances against the monarchy, that King George III disregarded the inalienable rights of all men. Jefferson writes:

King George has waged a cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere...he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit and restrain the execrable commerce. (68)

The South, with its vested interest in slavery, demanded that Jefferson remove this reference from the document. The Declaration of Independence that we celebrate makes no mention of slavery as “a cruel war against human nature.” Perhaps such a statement would make African Americans’ pursuit of reparations less disturbing to the nation. Historian David Brion Davis notes that “on the eve of the American Revolution there was a remarkable convergence of cultural and intellectual developments which at once undercut traditional rationalizations for slavery and offered new ways of identifying with its victims” (122). Davis’ analysis of the pre-Revolutionary moment gives further evidence that African Americans have been enduring signifiers of status—especially the unfree, the enslaved, the non-citizen, the inhuman and the commodity—and have a history of being the sites of law and its

transgression within U.S. law and politics. Ironically, President George Bush Jr. rearticulated Jefferson's original claim in his speech at Goree Island, noting that:

At this place, liberty and life were stolen and sold. Human beings were delivered and sorted, and weighed, and branded with the marks of commercial enterprises, and loaded as cargo on a voyage without return. One of the largest migrations of history was also one of the greatest crimes of history.... Down through the years, African Americans have upheld the ideals of America by exposing laws and habits contradicting those ideals.... My nation's journey toward justice has not been easy and it is not over. The racial bigotry fed by slavery did not end with slavery or with segregation. And many of the issues that still trouble America have roots in the bitter experience of other times. (Remarks by the President on Goree Island July 8, 2003)<sup>10</sup>

I quote President Bush's Goree Island speech at length not only because it bears a striking resemblance to Jefferson's original argument in the Declaration of Independence, but also because it clearly validates the veracity of claims that contemporary pursuits of reparations issue forth. Such validation is crucial, particularly in light of the turn to the legal realm for adjudication of this matter. The claim that reparations are owed by various corporations and the government is, as various judges and legal scholars argue, invalidated by neither time nor the death of the original victims of racial injury. Essentially, these claims possess an eternal life, one that makes the law unsuitable for settling the matters of this particular historical

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<sup>10</sup> For the full transcript of President Bush's remarks see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/07/20030708-1.html>

outcome. In light of Nicholas Tavuchis's definition of an apology in his work *Apologies Mea Culpa: A Sociology of Apologies and Reconciliation* as an "acknowledgement and painful embracement of our deeds, coupled with a declaration of regret," it would seem that Bush's almost-apology on Goree Island is indeed an apology (19). History, then, remains the problem, because apologies are indeed important as they publicly acknowledge the veracity of claims about injurious historical moments and how these injuries exist beyond that immediate historical period.

The United States' racial history, however, renders it difficult to accept such apologies as genuine indications of the embracement and regret that Tavuchis identifies as defining features of apology. Given that the abolishment of slavery and subsequent constitutional amendments were intended to acknowledge and repair the damages wrought by the U.S. slave trade, we know that cultural beliefs, buttressed by legal precedent, allowed the spirit of the slavery to live on in Jim Crow culture and in private expressions of racism not regulated by legal discourse. Thus, the prevailing debate about the significance and meaning of apologies for slavery necessarily illuminates the disjuncture between issuing an apology and substantive change in the cultural and material lives of the recipients of said apologies. Considered in this light, when no obvious correlation between apology and improved standing in the non-equivalent but overlapping economic, cultural, and political arenas exists, it is understandable why the demand for material forms of reparations emerges as the primary focus of contemporary pursuits of reparations. Further, such emphasis on legal settlement for damages is to be expected in a litigious culture where the

dispensation of monetary awards for human injury and its attendant suffering—psychic and bodily pain—has come to stand in for reparation and regret.

The difficult work of confronting the ethical dilemmas that undergird blatantly injurious behavior and practices overwhelms an institution primarily invested in identifying commensurability. Though vague in its identification of the specific contemporary issues that trouble America, Bush's speech, however politically obligatory, affirms the claims of actual African Americans pursuing reparations for slavery as well as the fictional and fictive African Americans in the cultural narratives explored in this project. Slavery's violence and the injuries and traumas produced therein exist intergenerationally or, as President Bush noted, "trouble" us today. If we are to reckon with this troubling, we must embrace the types of imaginative responses to the myriad expressions of racial injury and trauma. While "Disturbing the Peace: Cultural Narratives and Reparations" is not intended to be a history of reparations movements, its arguments are animated by and respond to previous legal and political attempts to repair the racial injuries produced by African American slavery.

These attempts at reparation include the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, post-Civil War reconstruction, *Brown v. Topeka*, *Loving v. Virginia*, the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, affirmative action, and other socio-economic programs intended to correct the racial inequality which became deeply woven into the nation's cultural, economic, and political fabrics. Reparative acts that span the nation's development not only demonstrate that race has mattered consistently, but also reveal that so-called legal remedies to economic and cultural problems have failed to move the nation beyond race and racism. While these reparative acts constitute important

advances that extended to African Americans basic rights and privileges attendant to citizenship, and even represent efforts to ameliorate some of the material damages incurred, these legal and official reparations have not been fully successful in altering race and racism's enduring life in social relations within the nation. As Lowe cogently argues, the "terrain of national culture [where] the individual subject is politically formed as an American citizen" has not been transformed at a fundamental level (2). The failures of law to bring about or encourage a culture in which reparations are an imaginable response to historical problems produced by race suggest that a different approach is required. Such an approach must recognize that law and race continue to interact to (re)produce racial injuries. Law cannot change peoples' hearts and minds and is even less likely to do so when a group or class of citizens benefits from its historical biases. Cultural narratives, be they canonical works of literature or popular film, are "disturbing in a way that history and social science writing is frequently not...and exact a frequently painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions" (Nussbaum 5). In light of the difficulty of pursuing reparations in the legal arena, this project values cultural narratives and their potential to offer their unique contributions to the public imagination.

### **Visions and Revisions**

"Disturbing the Peace" acknowledges that "race and law have become broader cultural texts that require more provocative reading technologies than have been applied in the past" (Sarat & Kearns 8). Chief among these technologies is situating the imagination as a critical component in anti-racist work. Arguably reparations exist

as a contemporary pursuit because the transition of African Americans from enslaved to freed subjects has not substantially occurred within the national imagination. Immediately after emancipation, separate and unequal access to goods and services, vigilante law, and the proliferation of sharecropping made this failure clear. In the contemporary moment, the disparity in wages, education, crime, and punishment articulate continued slavery-like relationships. Thus, the various political and legal reparations that have been issued have not been as successful as they might, because within the realm of culture and the social relationships that it produces, African Americans have remained “other,” not fully imagined as Americans or even more disturbingly as human beings. For this reason, Eady’s juxtaposition of “brutal” and “imagination” becomes more than a poetic phrase; it becomes a metaphor for the epistemologies of race that is instructive for understanding early national thinking about the African American.

Speculative and conjectural in nature and ultimately fictional, these discourses were critical to managing the aspirations and dreams embodied by the so-called New World. The production of the colonies and later the United States (and, in fact, of all nations) is fundamentally a narrative construction—“a dizzying concoction of writing and reportage, lying and ‘signifying,’ jokes, ‘tall tales,’ and transgenerational nightmare, all conflated under the banner of Our Lord” (Spillers 323). Our contemporary American cultures do not escape this narrative construction that Spillers identifies. We must, therefore, acknowledge that the forms, especially the popular forms, upon which such narratives rely in the contemporary moment are equally, if not more, complicated than those of earlier eras, as they are situated within

a vast network of virtual and real economies where racial and other differences continue to be the basis of exploitation and injustice. These narrative tropes come together as a powerful tool for binding what Benedict Anderson identifies as “imagined communities.” Dickson Bruce reminds us in *The Origins of African American Literature 1680-1865* that both race relations and the status of Africans in the colonies were complicated, primarily because of the “thoroughgoing ideas of an African distinctiveness and inferiority, drawing on preconceptions rooted in images of blackness and on behavioral and physical differences” (2). Dickson further suggests that a prolific and widely read canon of travel literature circulated in the colonies and Europe that contributed to the sense that Africans were “brutal and ugly people, filthy and licentious” (2). The imagination, public and private, that Eady describes as brutal becomes so when racial difference is negatively articulated to create or preserve power.

The public imagination, like the eye itself, is susceptible to cataracts, which then obscure its vision. The danger of this “condition” is compounded in a nation that actively cultivates these peculiar cataracts in its citizenry. Again, the importance of narrative as an integral site for shaping the public imagination emerges in Dickson’s analysis of racial difference as a structuring force in early social formations. The discursive rendering of African colonists in law as slaves, non-persons, and inferior began as “a ‘discovery’ on the retinal surface [and culminated with] the appropriation of land and historical subjects” (Spillers 322). The middle ground of Spillers’s claim is the production of knowledge, which combines with other forms of power to both justify and execute the appropriation that she identifies as inevitable. Racial injury

thus began with the earliest sightings of and encounters with blood, hair, skin, bone—phenotypical or visual differences—and took further shape with the transmogrification of these differences into race/racial identity and its expression in distinctive cultures. Culture, then, has subsequently been called into the service of validating race and racial differences as immutable or “real.”

While it might appear that I am overstating the significance of the visual life of race, I intend only to acknowledge how the exchange of what is visually perceived shapes people and their relationships with others. Derrida identifies these exchanges and the attendant oral and written language that accompanies the visual intake of difference as a type of anthropological warfare. That is, Derrida identifies language and its life in writing as a potential precursor to violence, if in fact the act of inscribing subjects is not always already violent. Though culture is not apprehended solely through the retinal surface, as Spillers suggests, I would argue that culture emerges from what is visually perceived, whether “real” or imagined in our daily experiences. It is these experiences that give birth to representations, in the form of laws, cultural beliefs, and values—Spillers’s “dizzying concoction of writing and signifying”—that shape racial discourses. In turn, these representations appropriate science and other discourses to substantiate cultural narratives about race and racial difference.

The intersection of science and culture has been easily manipulated. Nowhere do we discern that manipulation more clearly than in the law, particularly as it has been called upon to produce a taxonomy of race and racial markers. Ian Haney Lopez maps the ways in which decisions about who was legally white depended invariably



upon common knowledge—vision, which is of course culturally mitigated, and scientific knowledge—nature. Ultimately, race’s affirmation relies on vision deployed as a measurable expression of what people believe.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Africans have generally been rendered in “a language [and narrative] that [they] never made” (Butler 26). My purpose in identifying African Americans as injured and traumatized does not aim to create a universal African American subject, and thus is tempered by serious reservations, upon which I will elaborate within the chapters that follow, but will explicate most vigorously in the conclusion. My use of (racial) injury intends to acknowledge that the subjection Africans Americans endured in slavery occurred both corporeally and psychically and often vis à vis each other. As a result, reparations must address both African Americans’ bodies and the subjective experiences that emanate from inhabiting bodies subjected to various kinds of brutality. In light of these experiences and the specific texts gathered here, understanding reparations as a multivalent term becomes critical.

### **Rethinking the Language of Reparations**

Ultimately, reparations not only identifies history as a source of injury for African Americans, but also the difficulty of wresting power from sources “that are, admittedly, implicated in the very power one opposes” and how to effectively reconfigure such power so that its power to injure does not merely change hands (Butler 17). As part of this negotiation, the stories that we permit ourselves to imagine

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<sup>11</sup> See *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*. New York: NYU Press. 1996. Lopez examines a series of cases brought under U.S. naturalization law between 1790 and 1952 that maintained a racial bar on citizenship.

and tell in various forms remain critical. Despite its popular representation as a purely monetary pursuit, the pursuit of reparations is simultaneously a narrative pursuit.

In light of my reading of this project's selected cultural narratives as complementary to the pursuit of monetary reparations, I am attentive to the fact that, while poverty exists palpably in these narratives, the pursuit of money is not the overwhelming motivation for their characters. In this instance, when the injuries to be addressed are indicated not only by material need, but also by spiritual absence and psychic disturbance, money fails as reparation. American society sustains itself with externality rather than examining its internality, and, therefore, trains its citizens to do exactly the same, monetary reparations are imagined as the only valuable "gesture."

Activists and scholars must resist unconsciously retrojecting the courtroom of the twenty-first century into either an eighteenth-century or nineteenth-century slave auction, where judge, jury, plaintiffs and defendants reenact the slave commerce in which African Americans are reduced to commodities bargained for and sold. Samira Kawash observes that slavery "relied on the untrammelled mechanism of the marketplace to balance the potential profitability of a lifetime against the flesh" (85). African Americans cannot profit from any attempts to make commensurate that which cannot be made commensurate. In such an attempt, money becomes a substitute for something much more difficult to secure: justice that is imaginative enough to address effectively the breadth of injuries that past racial projects have produced. We must not think about slaves as money, lest we run the risk of condemning the memory of slavery and its life in the present to an abstraction, to a social ledger where pursuits of reparations "substitute economic calculation for

ethical accountability” (86). Disturbing the peace, then, does not translate into a political response defined by “noisy” social protest, but rather responds to the historical interaction between race and law, the real disturbance, with imaginative and meaningful solutions that extend beyond purely material concerns in search of justice.<sup>12</sup> African American cultural narratives—both those produced by African Americans and by non-African Americans—that are explicitly engaged with the historical experiences of African Americans and the political, legal and cultural concerns that issue forth from that experience, provide a crucial site where conditions and experiences that prompt contemporary pursuits of reparations are theorized and considered with greater depth and nuance.

These narratives complement legal pursuits of reparations because they explore and re-present imaginatively the implications of both what race is and what it does; they can then potentially help contemporary readers to identify how race perpetuates social and economic inequality. Thus far, African American cultural narratives and/or those which focus on African American experience have not been mined for their potential to contribute to existing reparations discourses. These cultural narratives explore a diverse range of reparations projects that reflect the fullness of the term; it is not limited to identifying unpaid debts, as argued by activists and scholars such as Randall Robinson. Instead, the texts attempt to produce more humane humans by restoring the complexity of personhood that race and racial thinking erases in order to justify dominance and exclusion. The emphasis on the humanity of the African American that characterizes these narratives is indebted to

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<sup>12</sup> African Americans’ pursuit of reparations for slavery exists in a broader global context. While “Transgressing the Law” focuses on African Americans’ pursuit of reparations, its arguments are animated by both historical and contemporary global conditions that produce racial injustice.

the slave narrative and its sustained reflection on African Americans' juridical lives and experiences. Pinning down the meaning of justice, however, presents its own special problems if we accept that the term ultimately denotes

a language whose charge is to disentangle the world, to resolve its conflicts into commensurate order—a language that abstracts as much as it translates and omits as much as it abstracts...the porousness of that language, a porousness especially noticeable and especially worrisome when seen against the stubborn densities of the human experience. (Dimock 5)

For the pursuits of reparations that look to the nation's courts, the trial becomes an especially fraught location in light of the “stubborn densities” that define race and jurisprudence's intersection and the ensuing dispensation of justice. Literature and film are two forms of cultural narratives that help illuminate omissions and slippages that (re)produce violence and injury in the execution and/or pursuit of justice.

Cultural narratives reveal the ways that law, with its supposed aim of delivering justice, is itself the product of the violence that often surrounds the production and execution of law. Law is often reactionary, particularly toward violent disruptions to the established consensus of peace or order. Cultural narratives and the cultures from which they spring provide particularly powerful instruments for elaborating strategies of resistance to such reactionary violence that has been consecrated in law. In addition to functioning as sources of affirmation, cultural narratives have long been recognized as important in various efforts to pursue and achieve social and economic reparations for African Americans.

### **Within the Tradition**

I have noted previously that the slave narrative marks the beginning of a literary tradition in which the injustice of slavery and the injuries that it inflicts are engaged. As a primarily political text that complemented the call for abolishing slavery, slave narratives were often “written” by and for white Americans.

Nonetheless, the subject of these narratives was the suffering produced by slavery and, importantly, the ways in which slavery debased not only those who were subjected to its violence but also those who perpetuated the institution.

Philosophically, these early cultural narratives, which used the experience of the enslaved, sought to illuminate the ways in which slavery threatened to produce the Hobbesian state of nature. As Hobbes tells it, the unrestrained violence that marks this state of existence leads all human beings to live degraded lives; the slave narrative, then, articulated the relationship between the spiritual health and political health of the nation as a way of calling for the restoration of African Americans’ humanity. These narratives, like the narratives engaged here, give voice to the collective trauma and individual trauma produced by slavery for men and women.

Pauline Hopkins, one among many African American women working for racial justice at the dawn of the 20th century, identifies that “fiction is of great value....[from] generation to generation...[to] portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro, yet unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race” (5). Hopkins’ identification of the exigency of literature and other cultural narratives is rearticulated in the early 1920s in W.E.B. DuBois’ essay “Criteria for Negro Art” and

Alain Locke's introductory essay to *The New Negro*, a collection of writings and art by "new negroes." As the founder and leader of the NAACP, DuBois established *The Crisis*, the organization's publication. In this venue, DuBois championed the idea that literature and art could assist in improving the image of African Americans, which would ideally aid in African American's pursuit of equality.

Current treatments of the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement such as Brent Edward Hayes' *The Practice of Diaspora* identify and map the so-called Harlem movement, among other periods, as one which was transnational in both its scope and impact. In this configuration, artists and intellectuals from various locations within the Diaspora met on the grounds of shared political struggle. Edwards's text embraces the contentions that arise within political struggles rather than arguing for an essentialist unifying thread. Edwards builds upon classic explorations of the Harlem Renaissance by Nathan Huggins (*Harlem Renaissance*) and David Levering Lewis (*When Harlem Was in Vogue*) and, like earlier scholars, Edwards illuminates the nuances particular to historical moments and why they resonate long after the moments have passed. Writing in the 1940s and responding to what he identified as the overinvestment by the middle-class architects of the Harlem Renaissance in what white Americans thought, Richard Wright offered his "Blueprint for Negro Writing" as a corrective. Wright asserts that African American cultural narratives are "being called upon to furnish moral sanctions for action, to give a meaning to blighted lives, and to supply motives for mass movements of millions of people" (Napier 45).

Wright's sense that cultural productions should inspire mass movements is perhaps best considered against the creative energies that produced the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King describes that movement as a "creative struggle" in his Nobel Lecture and other speeches. Black Nationalism, and the cultural discourse that articulated its tenets, the Black Arts Movement (BAM), shares threads of Hopkins's, DuBois', Locke's, and Wright's articulations of the significance of cultural narratives. Closer to Wright's politics, however, BAM urged the production of cultural narratives that furthered the political aims of Black Nationalism. BAM's aesthetic demanded art that spoke to the lived political and legal realities of African American people.<sup>13</sup>

While these theorizations of the significance of literary and other cultural narratives are the subject of cyclical debates about their politics and their efficacy in larger cultural and theoretical discourse, they nonetheless establish a genealogy of political struggle for reparations that was broadly conceived and inclusive of cultural narratives. That is to say that this genealogy contributes to the "difficult task of making critical, historical, and philosophical encounter with racism productive" across different historical moments to produce a theory of justice that issues forth from sustained experiences of injustice (Gilroy 33). This legacy of cultural narratives as part of political struggles, combined with Chinweizu's broad conceptualization of reparations, shapes my readings of the texts examined in this project. I understand "Disturbing the Peace" as both inclusive of and expanding this tradition of African American cultural discourse that provides a counternarrative to the prevailing representation of United States racial history. I find it difficult to identify a cultural or

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<sup>13</sup> See Stephen Neal's essay "Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic."

social movement prompted by injustice (social, economic, political, or otherwise) that has not produced or called upon existing cultural narratives as part of its work. Such is the case for the pursuit of reparations, which at its core calls for the nation to acknowledge and repair the damages that accrued as a result of a particular understanding of property and property values that allowed human beings to become commodities. In light of this conception of property and the deleterious impact on those legally defined as property, I cannot imagine a pursuit of reparations that does not include a cultural text of reparations, if we are seriously seeking a legal text that responds favorably to the claims made by proponents of reparations. Here I am guided by a conversation with Jon Christian Suggs, who offered that

the centrality of private ownership of productive property so dominates our cultural narratology that we find it hard to tell stories of the acceptance of responsibility in any other way than as some directly observable consequence of a specific action. Then, we say, we can be held responsible. But we do not give up property as a result of a chain of argumentation without a serious fight. So we have very little literature of the reparative "moment," I guess you'd have to call it....We need, perhaps, novels and films that illuminate the economic infrastructure of slavery and its complex effect on lives lived on both sides of the line. (Suggs, quoted from e-mail correspondence)

I agree with Suggs's observation about the relationship between law and cultural narratives; however, I believe that there already exists a substantial body of cultural narratives that identify the complex relationship between historical racism, property,



and responsibility. I am, therefore, not calling for a new subcategory of African American cultural narratives, i.e. the literature of reparations, but rather for greater recognition of existing literature and other cultural narratives that complement and further the pursuit of reparations.

Focused primarily on the juridical realm, contemporary pursuits of reparations have largely neglected to indicate how cultural narratives might contribute to pursuing reparations outside of the legal environment.<sup>14</sup> As a result of this absence, I arrived at this project profoundly aware of the significance of cultural narratives in political and legal struggles, as my gloss of that history sought to make clear. To my knowledge, however, there is no existing cultural studies project that engages reparations as a discourse present in the cultural narratives that this project treats. In light of this absence, I identify theoretical inspiration and guidance from many sources to articulate this project's call to rethink reparations as an analytic term that extends beyond calculating and recuperating monetary losses. The project, however, grounds itself in the complementary discourses that investigate whiteness, race and racism as they appear in the nation's legalist and philosophical discourse, trauma studies, feminist studies, and an increasing body of scholarship on African Americans and their relationship to death. These discourses provide direction to some of the most incisive work being carried out in both American Studies and African American literary studies.

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<sup>14</sup> In a private conversation with Raymond Winbush, author of *Should America Pay: Slavery and the Raging Debate on Reparations*, he responded to my questions about the place of literature by saying that he thought Morrison's *Beloved* did a good job of engaging why reparations were necessary. Winbush, however, is particularly interested in monetary reparations as a way of improving the lives of the most disadvantaged African Americans.

In particular, I draw upon the work of Charles Mills, Jon Christian Suggs, Martha Nussbaum, Abdul JanMohammed, Sharon Patricia Holland, Cathy Caruth, Barbara Christian, Richard Delgado, Paul Gilroy, Patricia Williams, Frantz Fanon, Wahneema Lubiano, Shoshana Felman, Toni Morrison, Avery Gordon, and Robin D.G. Kelley, among others, to apprehend the ways in which these texts affirm and elaborate upon my argument that reparations are not primarily about money but rather a panoply of repairs that often depend on individuals and communities' willingness and/or ability to initiate self-made reparations. While this project references what I identify as the most important early legal cases involving those who would become African Americans, *Scott v. Sanford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, it does not focus on specific legal cases; instead, it acknowledges that the legal history of African Americans comprises a series of legal decisions that have ultimately reaffirmed colonial discourse in which African Americans were invariably non-persons or subhuman and thus non-citizens.

This cultural disposition shapes the legal practices that would come to define the juridical (un)consciousness of the emerging nation. As a result of this history, my project emphasizes the significance of the imagination; specifically, I appropriate Baby Suggs' call for her community to "imagine grace" as a call that resonates throughout the texts examined here. I suggest also that this imaginative call might be useful beyond its life in the cultural narratives that I examine. My project, then, does not promise a continuous reading of reparations, but rather addresses the attendant concerns that the term engenders as they appear in the cultural narratives that I treat in this study. "Disturbing the Peace" constitutes an American Studies project because

it examines the implications of race, class, and gender, along with ideology and identity, in light of contemporary pursuits of reparations from a historical, legal, political, and cultural viewpoint. What follows, then, is a discussion of the theories I call upon to engage reparations as they appear in the selected cultural narratives. As I have noted, I draw the title and frame for this project from Toni Morrison's Nobel lecture and her novel *Beloved*. I bring together the ideas of transgressing the law and imagining grace as the basic reparation that must occur, and identify the ways in which other forms of reparations occur while this happens. Transgressing the law, imagining grace, and reparations cohere in recognizing that the law often has been the site of and cause of racial injuries—by which I mean the law's adoption, promotion, and affirmation of race in jurisprudence and in the actual execution of law. Racial injury, then, speaks to the myriad forms of violence and trauma that attend upon race, particularly in its expression as racism. Race and racism impact the body, the mind, the spirit, and the material possibilities of people's lives; in other words, racial injury comprises the nexus of institutional and social forces and their impacts on, for this project, African Americans—and has done so systematically since the colonial period.

In light of the variety of legal decisions that have supported this system, transgressing the law operates on two levels in this project. At one level, it constitutes rejecting official laws and the locations in which such laws are practiced. In *Beloved*, the decision to escape slavery puts Sethe in direct violation of the Fugitive Slave Law. The community of newly freed African Americans contains a significant number of fugitives. The community identifies Baby Suggs as more than elder; she

and her home become the center of the community. Her calls bind the community together and bind the community to her.

I derive the second concept for the project, imagining grace, from one of the only calls that the reader is privileged to in the novel. In that call, Baby Suggs tells the community that they, in light of slavery and its violence, must imagine grace for themselves in the present, for without doing so, they will not have any, and will be more susceptible to the law's violence. Imagining grace then becomes an active pursuit of the subjectivity that was denied under slavery, in which the African American subject existed as abstraction, non-being, notation, flesh—property in cultural and legalist discourse. This attempt to erase the African American subject, placing him/her outside of humanity, constitutes the primary injury for which African Americans have sought reparations since the eighteenth century. I mark this injury as critical in light of the subsequent treatment that occurred because of this construction, which is simultaneously a legal and narrative construction in the nation.

In light of my argument that reparations neither are nor should be primarily about money, reparation takes the form of storytelling, educational repairs, affirmation of self in and through community, and various confrontations with the narrative construction of African Americans in the law. Such confrontations, however, do not generally take place in the nation's courts but rather within the community. Women usually are the markers of the law and its transgression, and spark the pursuit of reparations as defined here in the two literary texts that I treat in the project. However, in the three popular films I examine, women also function as transgressions. In these texts, such transgressions are more complex because they are

represented as invariably both negative and positive in their potential to influence their communities and, more generally, the nation.

## Chapter 2: Gathering Pieces: Theory and Its Locations

*Narrative is radical, creating us at the  
Very moment it is being created.*

Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture

*Teaching slaves to read and write tends  
to dissatisfaction in their minds,  
and to produce insurrection and rebellion.*

William Godell, *The American Slave Code in Theory and Practice*

I return here to Morrison's Nobel Lecture to the Swedish Academy. She prefaces her remarks to the Academy with a reminder that "narrative has never been mere entertainment." The remainder of her lecture announces, through a story, her concerns about the (mis)uses of language. Reading the above excerpt from her lecture in conjunction with the excerpt immediately following, taken from a North Carolina colonial statute, identifies why cultural narratives and their dissemination are an important component in reparations. Though my interests here are specifically grounded in the contemporary pursuit of reparations, I would suggest that law is potentially a barrier to justice whenever a social movement calls for rethinking what has been accepted as tradition or precedent in law and, by extension, culture. Thus, citizens with particular interest in addressing issues relating to gender, race, science/technology, and religion to other concepts/practices that have shaped and continue to influence our sense of reality often find that legalist discourse is not on their side when it comes to making changes to prevailing social and economic relations. Law is always both the articulation of the rules and regulations that bind citizens in and to a designated geography and a narrative project that, as Morrison

reminds us, constructs us at the very moment that said laws are created. Homi Bhabha observes that:

To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself. If the problematic “closure” of textuality questions the “totalization” of national culture, then its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life. (5)

If I interpret Bhabha correctly, narration, whether as legalist discourse or imaginative cultural representations of life in a particular nation, not only maps the ways in which a nation’s citizens interact, it also identifies fractures and fissures in the nation’s narrative presentation of itself. Jefferson’s indictment of King George in the original version of the Declaration of Independence and President George W. Bush Jr.’s contemporary validation of the indictment offers a compelling example of the ways in which the nation narrates itself and how such narration resists revision when such revisions acknowledge injury or hypocrisy, as in the case of U.S. slavery. Since law and literature are narrativizing forces in American culture, I personify both as human to foreground their force—both positive and negative—across time and geography in the lives of African Americans as both persons and “non-persons” living in the United States. That is to say, if law functions as the primary apparatus for establishing so-called peace within the nation, I can think of no other cultural form that both contributes to and disrupts that work than cultural narratives.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*; and Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism*.

Read together, the quotations above reveal what the earliest African Americans already knew, what has become a postmodern anthem courtesy of Michel Foucault: “knowledge is power.” The criminalization of education, along with the narratives and facts about the world where slaves existed and the world beyond, speak to why cultural narratives and sharing those narratives have been important parts of African American cultures. Such activity has been and remains a necessity, not only as a response to the law’s attempt to regulate African Americans’ knowledge of various subjects (including themselves), but also as a form of liberation, psychic and even physical in some instances. Telling and teaching cultural narratives passed down—as in the African American oral tradition— and/or learned from experience allowed African Americans to create a counternarrative and, importantly, to launch practical and theoretical inquiries into the nature of freedom in light of their bondage.

Each of the texts under consideration here expresses the significance of narrative not only to the survival but also to the reparation of African Americans, whether it is Sethe telling Denver in *Beloved* about her harrowing escape from slavery, or Jefferson and Grant writing a counternarrative to a hegemonic legal narrative that renders them no better than hogs, or African American male analogs in *The Wiz* rejecting the popular narratives that render them “sorry,” or Lawrence and Tyrell Musgrove from *Monster’s Ball*, who, through their art, make present for contemporary audiences the necessities and even benefits of cultural narratives. Though received by audiences as visual texts, films, like all narrative expressions, begin as ideas merged with imaginative thinking, take further shape in story boards and scripts, and culminate in the films that audiences engage imaginatively—that is,

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we talk about the stories that film tell. It is not my intention to flatten out the differences between the two forms of cultural narratives, but rather to focus on their delivery of stories by and about (African) Americans that, while consumed in different ways, nonetheless carry the same potential for critical engagement.

African American narrative production, then, not only marks the status of African Americans in legalist discourse, but also becomes one of the ways in which African Americans respond to that status. In a legal system which often seeks to erase or silence African American testimony, cultural narratives offer what law refuses: testimonial space. In this project, I treat narrative as both literary and sociological; I believe that an “either/or” approach fails to harness the richness of narrative, particularly in light of its (mis)uses in the earliest nation-building projects. The pursuit of reparations necessarily responds to narrative constructions found in the law, such as North Carolina’s colonial-era prohibition against teaching slaves to read. I will take up issues of education as they relate to the pursuit of reparations more fully in subsequent chapters.

*What stories can do, I guess, is make things present.*

Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*

### **To Make Present**

O’Brien makes the above claim in his celebrated novel about the Vietnam War. I invoke his claim in relationship to this project for two reasons. The violence of the Vietnam War, or any war for that matter, was and remains incomprehensible for many; likewise, I find slavery’s violence to be incomprehensible. To fully articulate violence and its attendant bodily and psychic injuries is impossible within the bounds

of a single statement. In light of this impossibility, narrative or story does indeed help make present human testimony to the complexities and enormities of violence. Even narrative's telling, however, is disturbed by its own slippages and cleavages. Both memory and imagination are limited in no small way by the languages of expression—visual, oral, and written—available to us; however, the imagination is also limited by our conscious and unconscious investments in rejecting other views and narratives that do not conform to preconceived notions of “truth” or “reality.” This is the struggle of reparations: how to articulate an alternate view of history and its experience in a culture where remembering and forgetting are bound by complex economic and social ramifications. Cultural narratives make present not only what we seek to forget but also the reason for our cultivated amnesia.

While this project leans distinctly toward the literary, it is not a literary project; rather, it is an African American and American cultural studies project that centers on race and racial discourse. Race is a complex gathering of discourses; thus, attempting to theorize its life and consequences in American cultures requires a constellation of theoretical approaches. With no comprehensive analysis of reparations as it appears in literary and/or filmic texts, I take a multiperspectival approach to exploring what I identify as nuanced considerations of the nature and meaning of pursuing reparations for individuals and communities in the text under consideration. I bring to bear feminist, psychoanalytic, critical race, poststructuralist, neo-Marxist, trauma, and literary theories, among others, in order to consider how death, whiteness, gender, race, history, class, and trauma are constitutive components of a complex formulation of reparations. I should note that the literary texts I engage

are authored by African Americans, while the films I engage are not exclusively the creative work of African Americans in writing or directing. The films do, however, share a thematic concern with the juridical and cultural condition of African Americans and feature predominantly African American casts (with the exception of *Monster's Ball*, which has a racially mixed cast). We live in a culture that has been and continues to be hybridized. That is, the collective of cultural narratives that circulate are appropriated, consciously and unconsciously, so that a cultural narrative that engages the questions of race and reparations does not automatically or even most authentically emanate from African Americans. In making this move, I acknowledge that it is possible to create a race-specific cultural narrative without being racist, and locate African Americans' pursuit of reparations within a larger discourse of social justice.

In light of African Americans' construction in and their relationship to legalist discourse, "the living entities of law and [cultural narratives]—trial and story—relate to each other not as reality to fiction or as empiricism to estheticism but as two narratives of...cultural and social intervention" (Felman 57). I am not suggesting that literature or film provide "the truth" about "the African American experience," but rather that they illuminate complicated and often painful ruminations about the ways in which race and racism produce injury. Literary and filmic texts alone cannot repair the racial injuries African Americans have sustained in the United States, but perhaps they are instructive for imagining alternative ways of living with a past that is always present. In other words, while my project responds to a cyclical historical political project in its most contemporary phase, I am not offering political instruction on how

to pursue reparations. Rather, my readings of these cultural narratives are intended to emphasize some of the complications that arise from conceptualizing and pursuing reparations in the legal arena and in light of U.S. legal history.

### **Literature as Theory**

Of particular interest to this project is Barbara Christian's article "The Race for Theory," which poses a series of provocative questions that direct scholarly attention to the trajectory of African American literary criticism. Christian engages what she calls "the race for theory," specifically postmodernist theories and their applicability to African American literary productions. She cautions scholars against marginalizing, if not overlooking, theories embedded in the literary texts under hermeneutic scrutiny. Michael Awkward, in his article "Appropriative Gestures," rejects Christian's claims, suggesting that to "argue that literary theory cannot serve...our literary tradition is to devalue in significant ways...recent contributions to our understanding of black textual productions" (336). I would argue that Christian's identification of literary texts as theory, and by extension their authors as theorists, does not devalue literary theory, but recognizes that theory can and does in fact emerge from the novel. Toni Morrison's work exemplifies this possibility and is especially relevant for my project. Reading African American literature alongside reparations discourse requires that we identify these texts as both fiction and theory, rather than as one or the other. Moreover, Morrison's claim that "narrative is radical," constructing us as we construct it, suggests that a careful study of the narratives we

produce will indeed tell us something about the various forces that come together to produce both story and storyteller.

Christian argues that scholars must not privilege particular types of theory as “the” lenses through which we investigate African American literary production and reception. She suggests that the reception of African American women’s writing, and African American writing generally, fails to be treated as theory. Christian views this failure as problematic given that African Americans have “always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic.... Our theorizing is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (281). Christian’s description of African American writing seems to embody some of the postmodernist qualities that her critics argue are necessary to advance African American literary studies.

African American literature deserves to speak to existing material, cultural, political and economic conditions and to imagine what might exist in the future. Christian’s insistence on identifying and valuing literature as theory releases theory from debates about relational praxis and proximity to material conditions and thus empowers it to work as a tool of social critique and change. Christian magnifies literature’s power by invoking its life as theory, rather than limiting it as the object of theory. Her call to identify literature as theory allows literature to exert a substantial force in conversations that might otherwise dismiss it as merely fiction. Scholars must work against sociological readings of texts, but such counter-reading does not mean that texts cannot be invoked as instructive tools for considering alternative ways of

thinking and existing. In this project, for example, African American literature offers ways to identify what reparations are needed and suggests, through its engagement with legal history, various approaches to pursuing them. The African American literary imagination supplements and extends legalist discourse, as both *Beloved* (which was adapted into a film) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (also adapted into a film) both demonstrate, for reasons that will become obvious in the subsequent chapters dedicated to them in this study.

Wahneema Lubiano echoes Christian's concerns about postmodernism and postmodernist theory in relationship to African American cultural production. Both scholars suggests a different kind of postmodernism. Lubiano argues that to avoid the easy celebration of postmodernism, scholars might find it useful "to think of African-American postmodernism as a way to negotiate particular material circumstances in order to attempt some constructions of justice" (209). These constructions of justice, I would argue, correspond with how some twentieth-century African American literature engages the concept of reparations. Lubiano is adept at specifying the parameters of such engagement:

If we are willing to consider a postmodernist concern with deconstructing the hegemonic ideologies of the West, insofar as they construct a universal human subject, metaphysical grounding, and "truth," then African-American cultural practice and cultural artifacts can be "read" within such an economy. (212)

Here, Lubiano's description of the postmodern concern reflects my sense of what reparations, as a political and cultural project, aims to undertake. Lubiano, read in

conjunction with Christian, grounds my arguments about narrative representations of and engagements with multifaceted reparations, which I argue are necessary to repair African Americans' racial injuries. My project's arguments also respond to Jon Christian Suggs's theory posited in *Whispered Consolations: Law and Narrative in African American Life*. Suggs argues that all African American literature is universally grounded in the law and particularly the question of African Americans' legal status. In Suggs's bold argument, African American literature becomes the site of theoretical discourse about the nature and context of law in African American lives. We might think of African American literary studies as providing a counternarrative not only to American literary discourse, but to American legal discourse as well.

In this project I use the terms "counterstory" and "counternarrative" synonymously. I borrow Hilde Lindemann Nelson's definition of counterstories from her work, *Damaged Identities and Narrative Repair*. Nelson argues that counterstories are rendered in two steps, beginning by

identifying the fragments of the master narrative that have gone into the construction of an oppressive identity noting how these fragments misrepresent. Secondly, [counterstories are rendered by] retelling the story about the person or the group...in ways as to make visible the morally relevant details that the master narrative suppresses. (7)

Reparation, in the sense of returning to an individual what has been erased or negated by the master narrative, defines Nelson's concept of the counternarrative. Nelson's definition shares the sensibility of Richard Delgado's expressly legalist interest

(which I will shortly explore further) in what he calls “destructive” or “oppositional” storytelling. Delgado identifies these narrative forms as possessing the power to demonstrate to us that “what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel[,]... help[ing] us understand when it is time to reallocate power” (65). As a counternarrative, African American literature interrogates the validity of the premises and myths that circulate within both American legalist discourse and American literary production. Since colonial times, African Americans have been constituted invariably as both subjects of the law and factors in the law.

Recognizing the historically tenuous position of African American vis-à-vis the freedom that African Americans sought/achieved, Ralph Ellison observes that narrative “is in itself a small though necessary action in the Negro struggle for freedom” (142). Following Ellison’s argument, African American literature constitutes a crucial site where African American authors can engage the discourses that have questioned their humanity and often impinged upon, if not denied, their freedom in the various arenas of life. Reading African American literature as a counternarrative and as theory rejects nineteenth-century semiotics in which money equals slaves and thus, slaves equal money. As a counternarrative, African American literature offers a space for scholars to consider the ways in which African American literature theorizes the law and justice.

Some twentieth-century African American literature attempts to transgress these monetary interests, opting instead, consciously or unconsciously, to employ reparations as an analytic term that examines African Americans’ historical relationship to the law. These works find the law to be either of limited value or, quite



simply, lethal. African Americans' relationship with the law is complicated and as such, the relationship has bred suspicion about law's genuine concern for African Americans. Such suspicion is palpable within broader American cultures and plays out in the literature even when the juridical condition is not the primary concern of the literary texts. Understood in this light, Suggs's claim becomes all the more compelling if we consider seriously the viability of U.S. courts as a location of justice for African Americans. Linda Greene takes this question up in "Race in the Twenty-First Century: Equality Through Law", in which she observes that African Americans' historical relationship to American jurisprudence and its apparatuses "forces us to refocus on a question presented time and time again, before and after Dred Scott—whether meaningful equality can be obtained for African Americans through law" (292). Negotiating the political, economic, and cultural ramifications of race and law, then, is not only the subject of these literary texts but also the source of theory, for it presents, as Suggs suggests, a "provocative and exciting [location that offers] its richness and its insight" into how African Americans have sought to counter their sobering experiences with law" (324). *Beloved* and *A Lesson Before Dying* suggest that a meaningful discussion of reparations requires us to place U.S. legal history and practice on trial.

That such trials are enacted in the pages of fiction should not diminish their significance, for as Herbert Marcuse suggests, "art stands under the law of the given while transgressing this law" (3). The importance of imagination has been crucial throughout human existence, and concepts such as race emerge from the imaginative realm. Given this history, it is especially crucial to extend public and private

understandings of the significance of reparations, not just for African Americans but for all Americans. In other words, working against race will require an even greater capacity to imagine. Texts that facilitate that capacity in the public are valuable.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Limits of Law**

In “The Force of Law: Toward a Sociology of the Juridical Field,” Bourdieu argues that law is the quintessential form of the symbolic power of naming that creates the things named, and creates social groups in particular. He goes further: it is not, he claims, excessive to say that law creates the social world, but this is true only if we remember that it is the world that first creates law. The juridical field, as Bourdieu identifies it, is organized around a set of internal protocols, self-sustaining values, and assumptions.<sup>17</sup> Accepting Bourdieu’s assessment of the juridical field, it is safe to argue that race constitutes one of the assumptions that influence the ways in which the law reproduces itself. In order to bring together my interest in cultural narratives and my concerns about the viability of the law as the generative location for pursuing reparations, I look to Richard Delgado, Shoshana Felman, Paul Gilroy and Charles Mills, all of whom help identify the ways in which race and law interact and how we might respond to their intersection. I work with them in two clusters: the first reads Shoshana Felman’s and Richard Delgado’s emphasis on storytelling in legal discourse, and the second examines Charles Mills in relationship to Paul Gilroy.

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<sup>16</sup> In *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, Martha Nussbaum submits that “we have compelling reasons to invite [literature and film]...not only into our homes,... but—wherever the public imagination is shaped and nourished—as essential parts of an education for public rationality.” Certainly, my project concurs with Nussbaum’s identification of literature’s value in the public domain.

<sup>17</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Force of Law: Toward a Sociology of the Juridical Field,” 38 *Hastings L.J.* 814, 837–39 (1987).

Both Mills and Gilroy examine historical uses of race to construct social, economic and political relations.

Collectively, these clusters suggest how storytelling might assist in the project of working against race imaginatively and how such work potentially impacts our social relationships which are defined by the paradox of race and racial thinking. Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks argues that “exploring the structure of race requires a toleration of paradox...a willingness to see beyond the relations of power in order to mine the depth of subjective investment in it” (9). Appreciating this paradox helps us to account for the ways in which African Americans themselves are invested in race as a highly symbolic way of structuring group identity and organizing political struggle against race’s historical meaning and usages. I will examine the role of desire at length in the final chapter of this project, which focuses on *Monster’s Ball*. This project embraces race as a complex concept that inevitably produces paradoxes, contradictions, and discomforts in the process of working against race. With any theoretical discourse comes the question of praxis, and while I recognize that some of what I suggest may not in fact be possible in the so-called real world, I do not believe it diminishes my argument’s significance. As with the theorists that I employ here, my work is grounded in the imaginative possibilities that accompany hope.

### **Narrative/Storytelling and the Law**

Both Shoshana Felman and Richard Delgado emphasize that storytelling is a productive way to negotiate the limits of law and jurisprudence. This storytelling takes the form of both oral narratives shared among people and more formal storytelling in the form of novels and other creative writings. In the case of Delgado,

storytelling becomes another method of illuminating the ways in which law influences the life of race in law and, by extension, in the lives of people of color and women. Delgado identifies his work as being shaped by and part of the Critical Race Theory movement that developed from an earlier attempt to intervene in the ways in which law schools taught law, Critical Legal Studies. Delgado occupies a place in the academy from which he champions the importance of storytelling as a means of training lawyers at least to consider the ways in which the law reproduces certain racial inequalities. For Delgado, storytelling as a way to negotiate the law is not abstraction, but rather a concrete approach for intervening in legalist discourse both inside and beyond the academy. Delgado and other critical race scholars suggest that our emphasis on rights is misguided because the law's investment in reproducing existing legal traditions ensures that race will continue to shape the legal terrain. That legal education has largely rejected critical race theory, despite many law programs offering courses in it and in feminist legal theory, does not for me indicate the theory's failure. It does, however, demonstrate the law's conservative nature, which is to say that it exposes law's resistance to rethinking the jurisprudence which guides it.

Delgado and critical race theory more generally are valuable as counternarratives because, like the cultural narratives engaged in this project, both Delgado and the theory that he champions point to reasons why justice is not always best pursued through the nation's courts. If nothing else, stories told as part of critical race theory's pedagogy or as cultural narratives that respond to the juridical condition of African Americans mark the significance of history, and particularly the interaction

between history and the concept of race.<sup>18</sup> Both Delgado and Felman argue that narrative functions as a desirable complement to legal discourse. Storytelling, they argue, opens spaces that the law forecloses and functions as an oppositional narrative or “counter-narrative,” challenging the dominant story that law tells about itself and about the United States’ national identity and its beliefs and values.

African American legal history is a series of repetitions because the same issues of personhood and citizenship emerge in various facets of America’s cultural, economic and political life. According to Felman, the law is “unable to see that a judicial case becomes a legal [injury] in its own right and therefore is bound to repeat itself through traumatic legal repetition” (57).<sup>19</sup> I disagree with Felman’s assessment that the law’s operation and the jurisprudence from which it issues forth are unable to identify their actions as injurious. In the context of race, law is unwilling to see itself as negligent (at best) or as a perpetrator (at worst). In other words, so-called juridical blindness, contemporarily iterated as the law as colorblind, seems more a calculated response designed to preserve, often violently, race and racial difference and its material, political and cultural investments. As Walter Benjamin argues, law and lawmaking are violent.<sup>20</sup> African American cultural narratives assert that the origins of race and racial difference were about producing and exercising new forms of power. The literature also identifies the conflation of racial discourse with legal

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18 See Kimberle Crenshaw et al, *Critical Race Theory and the Key Writings that Formed a Movement*; Patricia Williams, *Race and the Alchemy of Rights*; and Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved* and *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*.

19 See Kai Erickson “Notes on Trauma and Community ” *American Imago* 48:4 (Winter 1991) 455-72. Erickson argues that trauma results not only from a single assault or discrete exposure to danger but also from the constellation of life experiences a prolonged exposure to danger.

<sup>20</sup> Felman’s work is deeply indebted to Walter Benjamin’s writings, especially his *Reflections: Essays, Aphorism, Autobiographical Writings and Illuminations*. Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” is of particular interest to my reading of the historical interaction between race and law. Benjamin argues that law relies on violence to establish itself. Law does not cease to be a source of violence once it is bound to it in both its pursuit of power and as an expression of power. In other words, lawmaking is power-making.

discourse as an especially powerful and lethal form of power that helps us to account for the palpable cynicism about law as a location for pursuing justice within African American cultural discourse. The literary and filmic narratives in this project offer fictional responses to juridical blindness and the jurisprudence that encourages it. This coincidence of content is not simply a coincidence but rather the literary effort to wrestle with the residues of historical race.

Using Felman's argument allows us to identify the correlation between slaves as 3/5 of a person in the Constitution and the *Scott v. Sanford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson* decisions. Chief Justice Taney makes his arguments forcefully by pointing out that the language of the Constitution, on the matter of slavery, used "plain words—too plain to be misunderstood." Judge Taney's opinion in *Scott v. Sanford* was not only a pro-slavery declaration but also, in effect, a decision that redefined U.S. nationhood by limiting citizenship to whites. Taney argued that:

African Americans, free or slave, could not be citizens of any state, because the drafters of the Constitution had viewed them as "beings of inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect. (*Scott v. Sanford*, 60 U.S. 3931856)

With dominant cultural beliefs deeply entrenched in the nation's legal discourse, it is no surprise that later legal decisions designed to provide reparations for slavery in the form of citizenship (specifically the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments) failed. *Plessy v. Ferguson* brought this failure into sharp relief as it reaffirmed whiteness as a form

of property protected under law and insisted that social equality “must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits, and a voluntary consent of individuals” (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 1896). *Plessy v. Ferguson*, then, reiterates Taney’s declaration that social and political interaction was impossible between African Americans and white Americans because of the former’s inferiority. The Scott and Plessy cases demonstrate that race and its fictions, historically and contemporarily, constitute a seemingly immutable law within the U.S. legal, cultural, and political arenas. In light of this history, Derrick Bell argues that race and “racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society” (2).

In light of Bell’s identification of the permanence of race and *Scott v. Sanford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, landmark legal cases regarding citizenship and African Americans, we might better appreciate Suggs’s reading of African American literature’s preoccupation with the juridical condition of African Americans. Both in literary fiction and “the real world,” there is a persistent sense that law is neither a reliable nor a desirable location to pursue justice for racial injury.

Felman’s work intersects most productively with Richard Delgado’s argument for the value of oppositional storytelling in “Legal Storytelling: Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative,” as they both value narrative or storytelling as a way to challenge injustice and as a way to read history outside of its official presentation. Legal or other forms of counternarratives, such as those examined in this project, cannot promise justice. The value of these narratives emerges from their potential to illuminate and verify—make present—the experience

of injustice and perhaps offer guidance for negotiating race. These theorists believe that storytelling that is attentive to the fictions of race can make transparent what legalist discourse, a form of storytelling, obscures: our common humanity.

For Delgado, storytelling assists in “destroying mindset—the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdoms, and shared understandings against a background of which legal and political discourses takes place” (61). Read together, Delgado and Felman suggest that literature/storytelling constitutes a valuable mode of challenging law’s investment in justice. Narratives become competing testimonies “that fill in the silences produced by law where evidence will fail or will fall short; when they know that other sorts of testimonies will, for different reasons, not come through or that events have taken place that will, for different reasons not be evidenced” (Felman 97). Such evidence works against historical race by refusing an ahistorical deliberation of its significance in calculating the value of human life and the meanings of rights extended to U.S. citizens. Of particular interest are the ways in which these narratives can document and explore the relationship between African Americans and whites by examining positionality and systems of identification. Legalist discourse and its construction of differently empowered linguistic beings is a form of injury. Critical Race Theory, particularly its theorization of the intersection of law and race, recognizes “the intertwining of law and history, and that law and literature depend for their very existence on the word” (Sarat and Kearns 89). Engaging literature as an example of a counternarrative identifies the complicated and intersecting matrices that frame human interaction, and in doing so it acknowledges that legal discourse is after all, a story itself.



Finally, Delgado and Felman's identification of storytelling as a form of reparations intersects with Morrison's arguments in *Playing in the Dark*. Delgado and Felman's shared recognition of juridical blindness and storytelling as counternarrative helps them to identify narrative as a reparative lens that addresses the "willful critical blindness [that emerges from]...habits, manners, and political agendas [that] refus[e]...critical insight" within American literary discourse (18). According to Morrison, such blindness can only be corrected by rereading white American authors and the narratives that simultaneously mark and mask their engagement with racial and racist ideologies. Morrison, however, does not simply delegate this task to other authors and critics; rather, she engages in this rereading throughout her fiction. Morrison's fictive communities, like other African American authors' fictive communities, respond to law's inability and/or refusal to be critical of its historical relationship with race and, in doing so, illuminate alternative constructions of law. Working against race, then, becomes embedded in these texts as part of the solution for historical injustice. Morrison and Gaines's novels offer examples of the destructive potential of storytelling as a form of testimony that Felman identifies as necessary in light of the law's blindness and deafness.

### **Working Against the Racial/Social Contract**

Charles Mills and Paul Gilroy's work focuses on race as an organizing principle in the social and political projects identified as ushering in modernity. More specifically, both Mills and Gilroy interrogate the "foundational moves of modern philosophy and social thought" (39). Mills and Gilroy interrogate the ways that

antagonistic relationships emerge and help to (re)produce racial “knowledge” that advances historical articulations of African Americans’ inferiority. Mills and Gilroy reject these immutable differences; their arguments collide in their efforts to identify ways of conceptualizing social and political existences that move beyond the antagonisms produced in and through race’s privileged position in history.

Gilroy’s *Against Race: Imagining Culture Beyond the Color Line* is often read by Afrocentric scholars such as Molefi Asante as negating racism’s endurance in the present and envisioning a colorless future in the name of pursuing a new humanism. Asante identifies Gilroy’s *Against Race* as “a book that runs counter to the wisdom of experience in the African American community” (Assante). As I understand it, however, Gilroy’s work is to be read as advancing an argument for studying “race” as an underlying condition of racism. Gilroy announces the need for “revitalizing ethical sensibilities [and] moving away from antiracism’s tarnished vocabulary while retaining many of the hopes to which it is tied” (6). His attempt to displace race is not specific to African Americans’ identification with blackness, but the identification with racial identities more broadly as they have become the source of politics that undermine the possibility of an inclusive democracy. In his most recent work, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Gilroy reiterates this point as if to answer his critics. He argues the necessity of “seeing ‘race’” as moral as well as political and analyzing it as part of a cosmopolitan understanding of the damage that racism is still doing in democracy” (33). Gilroy treats race as a very tangible and immediate presence that threatens to eclipse the possibilities for the future.

Paul Gilroy's argument recognizes that race continues to matter because of its historical use, even as we attempt to move beyond its fictions. Because race, racial difference, and racism are embedded in bigotry, pride, property, and public policy, a shift in the way that we understand and (dis)articulate race in the United States, specifically in relationship to African Americans, constitutes progress against anti-black racism. Getting beyond race may not be an immediate possibility in the political discourse; however, it does not mean that communities cannot reorient their understanding of the ways in which they have internalized and reproduced racial thinking. In the texts under consideration, the authors embrace this response to race, presenting community as a location "where elaborating strategies of self-hood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration...in the act of defining society itself" (Bhabha 2). While the texts that I consider make reference to the juridical condition of African Americans, the texts' preoccupation with challenging the production of racial knowledge that has created favorable conditions for racial injury is of greater interest. It is the effort not only to imagine but to enact a new relationship with the self and the community that ultimately provides the possibility of avoiding and repairing racial injury.

Gilroy challenges us to recognize race's fictional origins and its paradoxes, observing that we must do so in order to discredit race thinking and the paralysis that it engenders in our political and cultural lives. Gilroy's work might be better situated within the context of other scholars working in sociology and African American studies, such as Avery Gordon, who encourages scholars to recognize what she identifies as "complex personhood," and Robin D.G. Kelley, who reminds scholars

and activists that “the catalyst for political engagement has never been misery, poverty, and oppression but hope; the promise of constructing a new world radically different from the one they’ve inherited” (Johnson 21). Both imaginative and hopeful in purview, Gilroy calls upon readers to work against race as neither natural nor inevitable.

One of the paradoxes of race is that it unleashes racism, yet race is a concept necessary to pursuing anti-racist work; therefore, it is reasonable to encourage scholars and activists to refocus their energies on identifying the ways in which race, racial difference, and their attendant racism have shaped the development of social contract theory within the U.S. This is the intellectual ground where Gilroy and Mills meet productively. Because social contract theory has been foundational to the development of social relations in the United States, reparations is necessarily as much about addressing the particular ideas that have shaped history, specifically the innate inferiority of Africans, as it is about repairing the material conditions that have accompanied this history. The work of critical race theory is especially helpful in shedding light on this aspect of reparations. Though Charles Mills’s *The Racial Contract* is not expressly interested in the practice of law, his provocative reading of the intersection of social contract theory and race as political and cultural products of Enlightenment thinking provide a useful departure point for engaging reparations as I have conceptualized it in this project.

Mills’s investigation of the ways in which race shaped the formation of what he calls a “racial contract” exemplifies anti-racist work which investigates the “socio-

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21 See Robin Kelley’s *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* for an expanded consideration of the relationship between hope and various social movements.

historical process by which race is created, inhabited, [and] transformed” (Omi and Winant 55). The formation of race, particularly of whiteness as a legally recognized, protected, and privileged racial category, is crucial to both the articulation and formation of U.S. national identity. While Mills does not cite George Lipsitz’s *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, Mills’ identification of a racial contract that promises its signatories cultural, political, and economic privileges and dividends echoes Lipsitz’s identification of a “possessive investment in whiteness,” expressed in both cultural stories and systematic efforts which create and perpetuate economic advantage that limn U.S history.<sup>22</sup>

Reexamining Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau’s social contract theories, Mills concludes that these theories buttress the unequal social and economic relations between non-whites and whites that characterize modernity.<sup>23</sup> Mills renames these theories the “racial contract,” in which a complex set of social exchanges or meta-agreements created the white race and defined it as superior. Mills reminds us that the Social Contract is actually comprised of several contracts in one; he argues that “usually contemporary contractarians distinguish between the political contract and the moral contract before going on to make (subsidiary) distinctions within both”

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22 See also Cheryl Harris’s “Whiteness as Property.” Harris maps the ways in which race and property conflated and thus create a form of property contingent on race that results in the construction of whiteness as property in U.S. legal history. Harris’ argument situates her grandmother’s experience of passing and the economic opportunities that her decision to do so brought. Ian Haney Lopez in *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* argues that the law made pursuing happiness a distinctly white privilege by employing arbitrary, if not questionable scientific rationales and “common sense” cultural ideas about race in court decisions. Lipsitz, Harris, Lopez are additional examples both of the significance of culture in legal matters and of the importance of culture as a location as where reparations should be pursued.

23 One of the strengths of Mills’ racial theory is that he connects the major philosophical thinkers with their political entanglements. For example, Mills posits that Locke’s investment in the Royal Africa Trading Company and his assistance in writing the slave constitution for the Carolina colony reveals that despite Locke’s objection to hereditary slavery and the enslavement of wives and children, his participation in the production of slavery registers that Locke saw “blacks as not fully human and thus subject to a different set of normative rules” (68).

(9).<sup>24</sup> A critical transformation occurs in social contract theory when natural man crosses the line to political or civil man and thus becomes bound by justice and self-prescribed laws. Mills contends that Africans were not allowed to make such a transition, because of the invention of various anthropological narratives.<sup>25</sup>

These narratives were the first crucial steps in subordinating Africans by force, by culture, and later, by legal discourse in the United States. Despite arguments advanced by social contract theorists like Rousseau, who argued that “force does not create rights... no man has a natural authority over his fellow...convention form[s] the basis of all legitimate authority among men,” the use of race renders Rousseau’s arguments inapplicable to Africans (426). The imagined failure of Africans to transition from natural man to civil/political man allowed Europeans to (re)produce narratives predicated on Africans’ alleged second-rate mental capacities. Cultural difference, particularly the absence or lack of written language, became one of the primary evidentiary forms used to register this imagined deficiency and to justify the exploitation of Africans, initially by transforming them into legally recognizable property and subsequently by their treatment in both slavery and freedom.<sup>26</sup> Mills’ play with the social contract and its defining terms, transforming it into the racial contract, reveals the linguistic play at work historically. That Africans transformed into African Americans as property, non-persons, and

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24 Though my project is focused on the United States exclusively, Mills’ analysis does not limit its gaze to the United States. Mills explores how the body of rules established by cultures to regulate social interactions and behavior subordinated non-whites globally.

25 See Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, particularly Part II where he considers the relationship between violence and language.

26 Throughout U.S history, Africans’ “difference” has served the dual role of expressing both inhumanity and humanity depending upon the rhetorical needs in the context of political discourse. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson posits Africans’ supposed inferiority as a universal truth and reveals a more accurate articulation of Jefferson’s view of Africans than what he offered in the original draft of the Declaration of Independence. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler argues that the language of a universal truth in demands for social justice inscribed through law can never be exhausted in any particular historical moment. In fact, it is this inexhaustible claim of the universal that allows for those excluded under prevailing definitions of it to “seize the language [and idea] of [justice] at any given historical moment and set into motion a “performative contradiction,” claiming to be covered by [it] and thereby exposing the contradictory character” of prevailing notions of justice (89).

subhuman, among other terms, has always animated the discursive practices of culture and law and their interaction. Mills suggests that “personhood can be taken for granted by some, while it (and all that accompanies it) has to be fought for by for others, so that the general human political project of struggling for a better society involves a different trajectory for non-whites” (85). Like the work that influenced Mills, Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract*, he recognizes that the universal freedom imagined by contract theory is always a hypothesis, a story, a political fiction, not an embedded fact. In light of such knowledge, we should consider the ways in which the contract creates political rights through domination and subordination.

As disturbing as it is, the contemporary pursuit of reparations is still addressing this history of Africans as both non-persons and as inferior persons. Mills observes that “the Social Contract in its modern version has long since given up any pretensions to be able to explain the historical origins of society” (19). In other words, because whites only need to register the phenotypical characteristics ascribed to whites and embody the “correct” political ideologies, white Americans need not think critically about the ramifications of the social contract (re)produced as the racial contract. The perception that they stand outside of the historical continuum that has produced African Americans’ pursuit of reparations is evidenced by attempts to disavow the benefits of the contract with responses such as “I never owned any slaves.” African Americans’ historical status as non-persons or undesirable persons in the contemporary moment leaves them continually alienated from their communities, despite the legally mandated end of slavery and subsequent attempts to repair

historical racial injury. Thus, I dwell on Rousseau's *The Social Contract* because it argues both the absurdity and inconceivability of any man giving his freedom to another, noting that:

any man who gratuitously gives himself to another would be out of his mind adding that should a group of people agree to give themselves away is a people of madmen and madness creates no right. . . .the words slave and right contradict each other (451,453).<sup>27</sup>

As juridical subjects, African Americans are keenly aware of their compromised standing within the legal arena because, historically, cultural understandings of race were affirmed repeatedly in law. Their legal status as property was especially injurious.<sup>28</sup> African Americans are also keenly aware of their compromised position within the complex web of rules, norms, and standards that constitute law. Law helped to instantiate what Mills identifies as a racial contract. Pursuits of reparations are thus both for specific injuries and also for history itself. History and the ideas that propelled it forward constitute the antagonistic arena that reparations must enter as it necessarily engages questions of power and truth. Reparations projects must face the tensions produced when African Americans live in a culture whose primary social interactions are governed by a racial contract built upon racial fictions, fictions that

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<sup>27</sup> The contracts that initiated indentured servitude recognized the value of the person's free will and limited the amount of time that such contracts could be extended. One of the important features in the transformation of indentured servitude to slavery is the extension of the mother's condition to the progeny of those initially indentured. This feature was especially critical for the children of interracial couplings who could not enjoy the same rights and privileges of their white fathers.

<sup>28</sup> See Orlando Patterson's landmark study *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Patterson argues that slavery was indispensable not only to the great civilizations of the past where it flourished, but also to the rise of ideas of freedom. Patterson's work challenges the popular linkage between slavery and property. He argues that such linkage is a particularly modern conception, one that is misleading because "all persons were seen as the objects of property...individuals differed in the degree of power, claims, and privileges others had in them and the counterbalancing set of claims of powers and privileges they had in others" (28). Patterson specifically identifies the significance of what he terms "coercive power," and its idiomatic handling which he argues falls into two categories: (1) the open acknowledgement of such use of power or, (2) the concealment of power. Patterson argues that the concept of dominium or absolute ownership ultimately gave rise to what he identifies as a "fiction that would haunt Western law for the next two thousand years...[a] fiction fitted perfectly for its purpose, to define one of the most rapidly expanding sources of wealth, namely slaves" (31).



essentially leave them socially dead or, at the very least, injured.<sup>29</sup> In other words, the pursuit of reparations addresses African Americans contemporary enslavement under race experienced as a master narrative.

Gilroy's and Mills's work, then, calls for a consideration of the significance of death in racial discourse and thus its significance in the pursuit of reparations in the texts under investigation in "Disturbing the Peace." Abdul JanMohammed, Sharon Holland, and Karla Holloway investigate death in relationship to African Americans' subjectivity—as an always-present threat beyond the biological inevitability of a natural death. Mills identifies how and why African Americans were excluded and denied the opportunity to become signatories to the social contract that ultimately made whiteness a legally recognizable and materially beneficial category. This denial did not grant them volition in becoming bound by what they experienced as a racially exclusive contract; the designation of racial difference became a form of coercion foisted on African Americans. JanMohammed identifies what he terms "the death-bound-subject," one whose entire life is managed by the threat of an unnatural or premature death that lie beyond his/her control. Mohammed further advances that the death-bound-subject, like the subject of the racial contract, lacks volition in his relationship to the death-contract, which finds its force and power in the ever-present threat of death. JanMohammed argues that "because the contract is enforced with the

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<sup>29</sup> Mills argues that Kant's writings as an anthropologist are critical despite the fact that scholars tend to focus on his philosophical expressions. In these anthropological writings, he advances the hierarchy of racial classifications, which ultimately prove more instructive than his philosophical theories about the nature of man.

perpetual use of violence and because it is ubiquitously articulated, its terms permeate all the capillary structures of the subject” (278-9). I should make clear that JanMohammed relies on Hegel and Marx, among other philosophers, and uses Orlando Patterson’s work to make his case for the death-contract and its production of the death-bound subject.

Though Mills does not specifically invoke these three scholars in unison, his conception of the racial contract can be understood as speaking to the master/slave relationship that emerges out of the racial contract, as well as to the transformation of humans into commodities who generally do not retain the ability to claim or negotiate their value in the slave economy. In a strictly economic understanding of reparations, this is the injury—the loss or theft of one’s labor and that of his/her unborn children. The death bound subject adds another layer of complexity to the slave economy; while the threat of death is omnipresent, the master is not able to execute the threat freely, lest his larger investments be negatively impacted. Death looms, suspended, as a “postponement in order to generate ‘exchange value’” for the master (279). I want to suggest a relationship between Mills’ racial contract and JanMohammed’s death-contract. The two contracts share a symbiotic relationship that assures the maintenance of economic and social dominance over the African American: the inability of African Americans to be bound by the Social Contract has historically and by default made them signatories to the death-contract. In Gaines’s and Morrison’s texts, for example, the claims that are most dramatic emerge from an impending death or the realization that one is already socially dead. The films *The Wiz* and *Monster’s Ball*, under consideration here, grapple with social, spiritual, and physical deaths that

occur as the result of the historical significance of race and racism and its perpetuation in the present.

In Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe's rejection of the Fugitive Slave Law marks this relationship most clearly. As a non-person she does not have protection under the law, and as property she can be lawfully retrieved; her decision to flee, though she is both non-person and property, renders her a criminal and ultimately leads her to believe that she can only lay claim to her life and her children's lives by murdering them. Claiming her own death, however, does not become an expression of agency, but rather an expression that justifies why she and those like her were not signatories to the social contract. The memory of that decision haunts not only Sethe but the entire community, which in return renders Sethe doubly socially dead, to the nation and in the community, until the community understands why it must, as Baby Suggs instructs, imagine grace for themselves. Put differently, the texts under investigation here reveal point to the injuries incurred as a result of the "coercive arm of the state ... which needs to be seen as the enforcers of the racial contract" (Mills 84).

At first glance, such an arrangement would seem to erase African American's agency and seal their fate as perpetually dead subjects haunting the nation's margins. Death, however can only belong to the individual; quoting Derrida's "The Gift of Death," JanMohammed agrees that "dying can never be taken, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised or transmitted" (280). All humans own their own deaths; thus, when the death-bound subject realizes this, he/she is able to renegotiate his or her death. This project's texts identify the ways in which death can be reparative for the subject who is death-bound as well as those living. JanMohammed registers that those

who ran away or revolted in other ways clearly understood the power bound up in their death.

All of the texts gathered for this project engage death literally and/or metaphorically. As such, I follow Sharon Holland's scholarly directive to dwell in the space of the dead and allow the dead to speak. Such speaking and the possibility of what might be uttered speak to the significance of Delgado's and Felman's concerns about what the law attempts to silence or elide in its decisions—that the dead in fiction speak in unison with the dead from history. It is, then, the dead and the living that construct reparations as a narrative and legal pursuit that ultimately works against race. Reparations, as I conceive of it and deploy it in this project, contests the logics and fictions embedded in the legal and cultural discourse, discourses which the scholars considered here identify as having an investment in maintaining the social/racial contract in the present moment. To return briefly to the previous chapter's efforts to locate this project in the overlapping spaces of African American and American studies, we can identify that the Africanist presence that Morrison detects in American culture and specifically in American literature, along with the disturbance that Washington proposes in her address, mark not only the identification of those who dwell in the space of death but also scholarly efforts at raising them so they may speak.

In listening to those voices and the stories they propose to tell, we may better understand the significances of pursuing reparations of all types in multiple arenas. The call to transgress the law is but one means of disturbing the peace and does not reject the law as a location in which to pursue justice. The call is, however, intended

to draw attention to the underlying philosophical traditions, jurisprudence, and economic imperatives that the law served both explicitly and implicitly. These traditions are indebted to and shaped by the bodies of racial knowledge, often received as empirical, that emerged from Enlightenment philosophy and were embraced in the United States. Clearly, African Americans have made tremendous gains by virtue of legal decisions that challenged race and its operation in the United States. Yet, in the contemporary moment, when scholars and activists question the success of legal decisions such as *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* and continue to identify appearances of separation and inequality, and in light of allegations of voting rights violations in the last two presidential elections, I do argue that we must attend to the reality that law has not and cannot be the only grounds in which to pursue reparations.

Chinweizu's stipulation of the separate and overlapping locations that warrant reparations hinge on getting beyond the historical uses of race. I reject the idea of an authentic cultural form produced by a particular class of people and understand that human emotions such as love, joy, sorrow, despair, and hope, among others, constitute the themes of literature and film. The universal is always experienced specifically in and against specific historical moments; what is universal, then, is the ability to identify a concept despite its expression in a specific context. The power of culture, particularly its artistic expression, "lie[s] in its power to break the monopoly of established reality to define what is real" (Marcuse 9). We do not stand outside of the law. The law *is* us as a result of the intersection of history, law and culture. When

we forget this fact, we relinquish our power as human beings to define the world we inhabit.

Though I specifically address the ways in which the old black woman that Morrison identifies as “the law and its transgression” appears in text treated here, the texts reveal that we are all capable of committing transgressions that are generative for individuals and the community, in that they offer a counternarrative to “the law” and remind us that, in fact, we are the law and its transgression. We make these transgressions not only or even mostly in the space of the courtroom, but within and through cultural productions that reflect and revise the political, historical, cultural, and economic factors that constitute the “real world.” Literary and filmic explorations of justice broadly defined do not constitute a panacea for racial injury; rather, they are a crucial part of a dialectical conversation about U.S. history and justice that might advance and proliferate our understanding of reparations. In the chapters that follow, I engage themes that include death, whiteness, gender, race, love, and history, though not always simultaneously or even continuously.

In Chapter Three, I examine Toni Morrison’s relationship to reparations as a former editor for Random House, as an author and as literary/cultural critic. I treat her relationship with Oprah Winfrey to consider how that relationship allows her to “teach” beyond her academic position. In Chapters Four and Five, I treat *Beloved* and *A Lesson Before Dying* and pay special attention to the ways in which death—threatened and actual—produces calls for imaginative responses to resist the legally sanctioned abuse of African Americans. Morrison’s and Gaines’s novels, with their explicit focus on the imaginative work that is necessary for any type of reparations to

occur, speak to Robin D. G. Kelley's calls to rethink our appraisal and approach to conceptualizing social movements. Kelley says that "making revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us" (13). I argue that the imaginative responses to racial injury in these novels are themselves transformative and liberatory, a form of reparation for their characters, and that they call upon their respective communities to pursue reparations collectively and individually.

In Chapter Four, I explore *Beloved*, particularly Baby Suggs's sermon (though she disavows that title) in the clearing, as conveying this notion of reparations. The sermon acknowledges that physical, psychic, and spiritual reparations are needed for the community of ex-slaves; the sermon also attempts to initiate a new social contract for the community. Imagining grace becomes the basis for the various types of reparations needed by individuals and communities, and thus is offered as the one law that the community must abide. In Chapter Five, I consider Ernest Gaines's use of the hog trope and argue for reading it together with Claude McKay's famous protest poem, "If We Must Die." Gaines's novel advances the protest concept as it has been deployed in African American literature. Like *Beloved*, *A Lesson Before Dying* understands the necessity of a community's acting on its own behalf in order to create meaningful reparations. McKay and Gaines urge African Americans to fight back; fighting, however, is not always about physical confrontation. Gaines's novel does, in fact, offer lessons before dying, but also—equally important—lessons about dying. In Chapters Six, and Seven, , I engage three films, *The Wiz*, *Get on the Bus* and *Monster's Ball*, and explore their relationship to historical discussions of African

American masculinity and cultural expectations or, perhaps better, the burdens of African American women in the pursuit of reparations.

In Chapter Six, I examine *The Wiz* as a film that participates in the perceived crisis around the African American family, most infamously articulated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*. The crisis of the African American family becomes the perennial crisis of African American masculinity. The film calls our attention to Dorothy's anxiety about the meaning of family and her ability to create such a family. Dorothy's journey is perhaps less about self-affirmation than it is about becoming a surrogate mother to the wounded African American men whom she encounters throughout her travels in Oz. In Chapter Seven, I begin my consideration of *Monster's Ball* by including personal narrative as a means to articulate why this film, which is obviously different from the other cultural narratives here, speaks to the challenges of pursuing reparations outside of African American communities. I suggest that race and racism injure white Americans, as well, and explore what that means for making various repairs. I treat *Monster's Ball* in relationship to what is articulated in African American popular cultural discourse as "keeping it real." By attending to the criticism of the interracial relationship between Leticia Musgrove (Halle Berry) and Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton), I problematize readings of the film as "another white man's fantasy" and consider whether it is possible to love across racial lines in light of historical, legal, and cultural restrictions.

I conclude this project by returning to Morrison's Nobel acceptance speech. Morrison reminds us that ultimately we are all responsible for the language that we



use. I suggest that Tavis Smiley's *The Covenant with Black America*, as a text and a movement, reflects an understanding of reparations that is as nuanced as Chinweizu's conception of reparations. Smiley's book and the movement it hopes to spark embraces the significance of communities working in relationship with organizations and political activists engaged in legal and political struggles to secure resources that will improve the quality of African Americans' lives.

### Chapter 3: In Literature, History and with Oprah: The Case for Toni Morrison and Reparations

*I have to place enormous trust in  
my ability to imagine others and  
my willingness to project consciously  
into danger zones such others may represent  
for me.*

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

As a teacher, author, public intellectual, former editor, and African American woman, Toni Morrison has indeed negotiated many danger zones and continues to do so. Her willingness to imagine others and, importantly, to intervene in the often-contested debates that emerge from these danger zones enriches Morrison's work. I begin this chapter by tracing what I read as Morrison's interest in and support of reparations in her own experience, both through her editorship at Random House and in her own literary and theoretical work. From there, I explore how some scholars have responded to Morrison's interest in and/or treatment of the subject of reparations and the legal issues associated with it more generally. I then consider Morrison's relationship with Oprah Winfrey. Oprah has selected four of Morrison's eight novels—*The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Sula*, and *Paradise*—as Oprah Book Club selections. Additionally, she purchased the rights to *Beloved* and adapted the novel into a film. In light of Morrison's and Winfrey's prominence collectively, in media, the academy, and literary history, their relationship is quite powerful, allowing both women to engage in extended conversations about suffering and transformation in the United States and to carry those conversations into the public sphere.

## **Morrison and Literary, Social, and Slave History**

The significance of African American life and experience in America has not escaped Morrison scholars. They have long explored Morrison's preoccupation with history, trauma, and memory in her novels. Morrison's canon pursues two goals: being a witness for the effects of what Omi and Winant identify as "racial formation," particularly as it was developed in and through slavery; and relating slavery's injurious impact, both immediate and long term, on African Americans. Morrison engages these two issues as her means to contemplate why freedom has been a complicated endeavor for African Americans and the nation more generally.

Commenting on the significance of history to her work, Morrison says that "the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance...there is a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure" (Davis 224). In Morrison's arguments about the significance of African American history and in *Beloved*, I identify the basic premise crucial to the pursuit of reparations, which is not only to recover wages but to repair the nation's memory. That Morrison identifies this work as paramount to her own work suggest that reparations is more than a political debate, and one that she considers seriously. *Beloved*, then, attempts to relate not only the experiences of African Americans under slavery but the instruments used to render them as abstractions in a nation purportedly founded on equality.

Morrison's continuous engagement with slavery and its ramifications seeks to "penetrate areas that seem erased from history" and might be conceptualized as a form of literary reparations in its own right. At the very least, it can be read as

contiguous with the contemporary dialogue about reparations for slavery in the United States. (Mautus 17). Yet, for all of the scholarly attention to the significance of history as a thematic continuity in Morrison's work, scholars have not, until recently, mined Morrison's work explicitly for its engagement with reparations. Therefore, this chapter situates Morrison's novels as part of the explosion of public and scholarly dialogue—really public debate—about reparations that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and continues presently.

### **The Case for Toni Morrison and Reparations**

The publication of Randall Robinson's *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks* (2000) acted as a catalyst for the proliferation of other texts and increased debate about reparations. Shortly after Robinson's work was published, Boris Bittker's 1973 book, *A Case for Black Reparations*, was re-released twice, with the second re-release in 2003 containing a forward by Morrison. In 1972, under Morrison's stewardship, respected Yale law professor Boris Bittker published *The Case for Black Reparations*, a book that focused primarily on considering proposals for reparations in relationship to "injuries caused by a system of legally imposed segregation" (19). Arguably, Morrison's tenure as an editor for Random House marks the origin of her participation in public discourse on African Americans reparations. As an editor, Morrison's work was not merely to provide copyediting and the like, but also to offer serious consideration about the ideas and books that promoted thought about reparations in the larger public discourse and marketplace.

Random House's publication of Bittker's work attests not only to Morrison's commitment to exploring history, memory, and trauma as a form of reparations, but also to the other ways in which the law might constitute a source of remedy for injuries produced/inflicted by slavery. Further, as an editor working in the post-civil rights moment, Morrison's decision to publish a work that called for reparations in light of the perceived failures of civil rights legislation speaks volumes about Morrison's engagement with both literature and the law. In both her literary and theoretical work, Morrison rejects the constructions of law as merely a body of rules and instead explores how these "rules" produce or reproduce actual social practice.

Morrison's literary and theoretical exploration of the life of race and racism in various American institutions in her literary work reveals that hegemonic beliefs about individualism and communalism, time and space, and power and representation can challenge the utility of law for African Americans seeking racial justice. Morrison's work in this area is not confined, however, merely to her editorial involvement with Bittker and her own literature. It is also revealed in other non-literary projects of Morrison's that might be described as expressly theoretical. Her engagement with race, whiteness, and canon formation and their relationship to nation formation and law is exemplified in her production of *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and its influence on literary and cultural studies. In that work, Morrison explores the ways in which race appears in the American literary canon, less by direct reference than as a shadowy figure—what she calls an Africanist presence. More explicit engagement with law is evidenced by her editorship of *Rac-ing Justice and En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill and*

*Clarence Thomas*, and *The Construction of Social Reality and her contributions to Birth of a Nation's Hood: Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case*. In these critical texts, Morrison continues her exploration of the ways in which the national narrative continues to be “ruled by race” and combined with gender. As was evident particularly in the case of Anita Hill, race and gender as a combined narrative disempowers and erases African Americans’ ability to narrate their own testimony. Additionally, Morrison has produced two children’s books that engage freedom and history, respectively. In *The Big Box* (2002), Morrison extends her interest in freedom by considering the tendency of teachers and parents to place children who do not conform to expectations in boxes. Self-expression becomes punishable because it is treated as evidence that children cannot handle their freedom. Morrison does not limit this propensity to any particular race, but rather treats it as a cultural problem that cuts across racial lines. The second children’s book, written for elementary to middle school students, is titled *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004). It is a collection of photographs and fictional dialogue of children involved in school integration. Morrison’s literary success and, more generally, her recognition as a public intellectual have afforded opportunities to be involved in legal matters in which cultural narratives and their value are at issue.

Toni Morrison was called upon as an expert witness for the defense in the copyright case involving Alice Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*, a parody of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*. Mitchell’s novel offers an example of how fiction becomes both iconic and historical within American cultural discourse. The question before the court was whether or not Randall could create new work with copyrighted

characters, plot, and scenes from the original novel. Morrison recognizes that within American culture, particularly southern culture, Mitchell's novel acts "as an idea about Southern history so powerful that it might as well be history itself" (Miller). In light of Morrison's interest in language, power, and history, she identifies the case as one that is fundamentally about who gets to write history.

As part of her testimony, Morrison asks, "who controls how history is imagined? Who gets to say what slavery was like for the slaves?" (Miller). Both of Morrison's questions are consistent with her preoccupations with language and power, questions that are encapsulated in a line from *Beloved*: "definitions belong to the definers—not the defined" (Morrison 190). It would seem that Morrison regarded Randall's so-called parody of *Gone With the Wind* as a text that sought to intervene in and even correct historical representation of the experience of slavery across racial lines. That is because Randall focuses on Tara from the perspective of African American slaves; in her revision of the original text, Randall gives Mitchell's egregious stereotypes agency and power in the same way that Morrison grants agency to the community that is at the center of *Beloved*.

That a fictional narrative rests at the center of this legal debate, which is undoubtedly intertwined with the residues of cultural beliefs and values about the south and slavery, reveals the power and significance of story within American cultural discourse. Randall admits that what prompted her to write *The Wind Done Gone* was the absence of mulattos on Tara. Her novel responds to both the cultural and legal history of the South, in which interracial relationships were taboo but nonetheless common. Morrison's interest and willingness to participate in the case

offers further evidence of her interest in reparations, particularly in the realm of cultural production. Though Randall and Morrison write in different forms and enjoy different critical responses to their work, it would seem that Morrison recognizes Randall's efforts to intervene in the ways in which slavery has been and continues to be represented in the United States. Morrison consistently speaks to the politics of race and its life in the cultural and legal discourses circulating with the United States.

Morrison has never denied her interest in the political, arguing that "all good art has been political... the artist bears witness and in this way she cannot avoid being political" (Taylor-Guthrie 68). My reading of Morrison's literary and theoretical work recognizes her interest in the political and identifies that interest as inclusive of legal questions and cultural debates that have historically colored—and continue to color—contemporary American politics.

While this project focuses expressly on *Beloved*, it is impossible to fully grapple with Morrison's engagement with law without examining intertextual references to the problem of law in her other texts. In Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, she investigates how race remains a powerful lens through which contemporary African Americans engage and think about beauty. Morrison deploys the rhetoric of master and slave to explain race's enduring power on the psyche, telling the story of Pecola Breedlove and her family. Morrison emphasizes the "devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause." The Breedloves cannot be convinced that they "[are] not relentlessly and aggressively ugly...it was though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each of them a cloak of ugliness to wear, and that they each had accepted it without question" (Morrison 38-39). The Breedloves become a symbol



for race and the potential of racial thinking to overpower the imagination and injure the human psyche.

In both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Morrison engages the extra-legal policing of African American men's bodies and the devastation that it brings. Interestingly, Chuck Jackson, in his essay "A Headless Lynching: *Sula*, Soldiers, and Lynching," argues that while Morrison does not include actual lynching in *Sula*, she does employ the lynching narrative signifier with the return of soldiers in 1919. We should also recall the "scene of subjection," to borrow phrasing from Sadiya Hartman, where Cholly's first sexual experience becomes a violent and degrading spectacle that forever alters his relationship with women. These texts and their characters highlight the intersection of culture and law and the impact of both on actual lived experience for many African Americans.

Both *Sula* and *Beloved* focus on quantifying injury and trespass that occurs in and against African American communities. These texts ask who determines communal transgression and what constitutes behavior that is "too much." In other words, what are the implications and dangers of too much love or too much freedom? The significance of the power of race to distort the imagination and vision of individuals and communities is embedded in all of Morrison's texts. In *Paradise*, the African Americans who are hoping to create a safe home fail to imagine their community without the racial assumptions that prompted their journey in the first place. The narrator attributes the community's failure in this respect to their "thin human imagination" (306). Morrison indeed does not confine her exploration of race's destructive force to interpersonal relationships, but rather extends her critical

gaze to the legal realm to consider how actual legal history has shaped African Americans' responses to the law.

Morrison's *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon* include dialogue that explicitly addresses the limitations of law for African Americans. Milkman in *Song of Solomon* questions the legitimacy of the Seven Days, the secret African American organization that seeks to repair the injustices of the American legal system by exacting their own vigilante justice. Milkman suggests that there must be another way to achieve the same end, to which Guitar, a Seven Days' member, responds, "Where's the money, the state, the country to finance our justice? Do we have a court?" (76). Morrison extends that query further in *Tar Baby* with Son's response to Jadine's suggestion that he attend law school. Son replies, "I don't want to know their laws; I want to know mine" (263). Milkman's and Son's response to the discussion of law reveals a deeply felt sense that law and the courts do not serve the needs of African Americans.

In fact, Son's fuller response, "I can't hassle nobody who looks like me, or you either" expresses his conviction that the law is primarily interested in harassing or policing African American bodies (263). Son's response to the law is reiterated in *Paradise*, where the citizens of Ruby/Haven refer to the institutions of law outside of their communities as White law, a location and experience which is to be avoided at all costs. Although these are fictional texts, they speak to and reflect a pervasive distrust of the nation's judicial system in actual African American communities across the nation.

Morrison's interest in the psychic life of race and racism runs through her literary and theoretical work, but her personal investment in this subject is most

powerfully articulated in her essay “Home.” Drawn from her presentation at the 1995 Race Matters Conference at Princeton (which includes strands of Paradise’s narrative), Morrison declares that her work is invested in discovering a means “to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling” (5). That journey necessarily demands attention to the law and its venues and how it litigates claims. Morrison’s sustained interest in legal questions, particularly those that are tethered to race and racism, announces an interest in not only the need for reparations, but also the viability of the nation’s courts as the venue where reparations might be successfully pursued. Morrison comprehends that reparations is necessarily and simultaneously a legal and cultural question, indeed a question about the legacy of the color-line for the United States in the twenty-first century. In the political and legal realm, reparations has become a contested discussion precisely because of its life as a cultural and legal issue. Discussions about the efficacy or justness of reparations have transformed themselves into discussions about whether African Americans living in the present have a valid legal claim. The pervasive sense that African Americans have already received too many reparations in the form of Welfare and Affirmative Action Programs buttresses the debate about the validity of African Americans’ claim.<sup>30</sup> Quantity and commensurability thus become the dominant terms of the reparations discourse, which then unfortunately generates a discussion that is primarily understood as an unjust monetary request, despite the fact that many proponents of

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30 See David Horowitz’s *Uncivil Wars: The Controversy over Reparations for Slavery* Encounter Books: San Francisco, 2002. Also see Dinesh D’Souza’s *So What’s So Great About America?* Regenery Publishing Inc: Washington D.C., 2002. Both texts are representative of arguments against reparations that treat programs such as Affirmative Action as evidence of reparations already being paid to African Americans. In the case of D’Souza’s work, he treats what he essentially defines as an “attack” on the historical past and what many perceive as injustice as unpatriotic. He calls for renewed patriotism. As part of that call, he rejects critiques of America’s history as shameful and specifically offers rationalizations for America’s involvement in slavery and the larger colonial project that defines modernity.

reparations have noted that reparations is not primarily about money but, as Chinweizu registers, “repairs of all types.”

*The construction of injury, remedy, and identity can be usefully studied in specific social locations where one finds distinctive understandings of time and space, self and community, and norm and breach.*

David Engel, “Injury and Identity”

### **From the Legal Stage to the Literary Page**

African American genealogists have identified major corporations such as Aetna, CSX, JP Morgan, Bank of America, and other companies who profited from slavery as the perpetrators of crimes against African Americans and so have clarified the connection between injury and profit for many African Americans.<sup>31</sup> Many, however, readily recognize the danger of trying to establish a price for the experience of slavery. Nonetheless, the research and the mathematical calculations of debts are critical for articulating the significance of slavery in America’s economic, political, and cultural history. Claimed by lawyers who are pursuing reparations through the nation’s courts, their research has been critical to the development of the reparations discourse that emerged at the end of the twentieth century. Public and political response, however, to this research and the lawsuits that have emerged have largely rejected the legitimacy of these suits and the claims that they make on the living. Such responses suggest that reparations is perhaps less about unpaid debts and more about whether the nation can or will claim a particular facet of its history or allow that

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31 Responding to public discourse about Brown’s founders’ involvement in the slave trade, initiated by the student paper’s refusal to run an anti-reparations ad, Brown University, under the leadership of its first African American female President, Ruth Simmons began a very public discussion and investigation of its history. The findings of that investigation and other related materials can be found at [http://www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery\\_Justice/report/](http://www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice/report/)

facet to remain largely “disremembered and unaccounted for” (Morrison 275). Recently, a reparations case—initially rejected by a federal judge who believed that the reparations debate was best decided by either the legislative or executive branch—was heard in the Seventh U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Chicago. During the hearing, lawyers for the companies argued that “the case is without merit and the corporations did nothing to harm the current-day descendants...[and that] these are inherently speculative claims” (Heher). One of the judges, Richard Posner, asserted that, “If you think you've been wronged, it shouldn't take one hundred years to investigate the conduct of Aetna, Lehman Brothers and the like” (Heher). The responses of both the lawyers and the judges ignored the complexity of the slave experience and, even more significantly, disavowed the law’s role in preventing a more timely pursuit of reparations. Their responses reveal the ways in which agents of the law practice legal amnesia when they ignore the cultural and legal reasons that impeded such pursuits. The African American subjects of the lawsuits were either not citizens or, even as citizens, were not regarded as such in cultural and legal practice.

The case for reparations exposes a critical limitation of the law: its ability to obscure its own investments in the history of injury. The law is not a neutral arbiter of injustice; it is intimately linked to the cultural, political, and economic forces that perpetuated slavery. What is at stake in these lawsuits is not only the coffers of corporate giants, but the (re)presentation of our national history and how we remember it publicly. While Morrison’s fiction does not explicitly feature legal settings, it does engage the legal challenges that African Americans face as they pursue freedom and the ways in which law’s discourse and practice curtail or police

that freedom. Ultimately, Morrison's attention to these legal matters in her fiction replicates the intersecting and challenging questions about responsibility that the nation's courts are being asked to decide today in reparations cases. The difference, however, is that Morrison's work does not seek to question the validity of these claims, but rather the complicated responses that such claims will produce; after all, how do you calculate a payment for the suffering and injury that defined slavery?

Morrison asks readers and critics of her fiction to consider what claims the formerly enslaved population might pursue on their own behalf; what institutions are implicated in such claims; and how these institutions and individuals respond to those claims, and she uses her writing to do so. We can, I argue, identify a clear connection between Morrison's literary projects and the growing discourse about reparations for African American slavery. *Beloved*, in particular, expresses serious reservations about American law and its venues as a source of reparations and/or justice for African Americans.

In her Nobel lecture, Morrison identifies the language of law as a one source of injury, describing law as being "without-ethics...designed for the estrangement of minorities....calculated to render the suffering of millions mute; crafted to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness" (18). Morrison's analysis of law reminds us that justice has never been blind. Morrison posits the imagination as the path out of captivity and the suffering that legalist discourse has created for many African Americans. In fact, Morrison suggests that the very pursuit of justice depends upon our collective imagination and our willingness to extend grace to ourselves. In conceptualizing justice in these terms, Morrison merges "hope, reason,

imagination, and moral responsibility tempered by recognition that the good life is a collective affair” (Giroux). Yet, Morrison’s work is not content to offer uncomplicated responses to historical injustice. Rather, her work in *Beloved* offers a way of repairing the past and imagining grace. She also explores the challenges that confront communities working to build a life that is more than the life lived under slavery, a better life in which racial difference does not place them outside of the nation’s legal imagination.

In her fictional investigations of the ways in which race and its expression as racism impacts fictional communities, Morrison draws our attention to a fundamental idea that organizes and promotes civil social relations in the United States: the social contract. *Beloved* and the texts that are examined in this study not only operate as fiction, but also as theoretical spaces that are fertile in their possibilities to identify and explore what Wendy Brown in *States of Injury* identifies as “eternally a nettlesome political value,” i.e. freedom (Brown 5). Reading this novel in relation to the contemporary pursuit of reparations does not lend itself to a singular analytic approach if we wish fully to appreciate Morrison’s treatment of the complicated and sometimes self-defeating ways in which African Americans, both fictional and real, imagine and pursue their freedom.

### **Critical Responses to Morrison’s Legal Engagement in Fiction**

In Richard Schur’s article “The Subject of Law: Toni Morrison, Critical Race Theory, and the Narration of Cultural Criticism” he argues that we should resist focusing exclusively on Morrison’s identity as a writer of fiction, noting that:

To do justice to [Morrison's texts] students of Morrison must not use the tools of the literary tradition to limit the meaning of her work. . . . because her literary and critical efforts have aimed at the cultural effects of unconscious racialized and gendered thinking[,] perhaps Morrison should be considered a critical race theorist. (278)

Schur, perhaps unintentionally, posits a reading of Morrison's fiction as an expression of critical race theory at the expense of its literariness, a view that is problematic given that Morrison describes her work as constituting a "running commentary on race theory and cultural practice and how each shapes the other" (Fultz 9). Schur's attention to students of Morrison does not account for what appears to be a larger project for Morrison. Morrison promotes her work to a significantly wider audience, a breadth of exposure particularly signified by her relationship with Oprah's Book Club. Her interest in popular discourse on race and culture is not limited to the academic realm. Readers of Morrison's fiction, whether lay or academic, struggle with her subject matter as well as the forms of expression she chooses. Schur should not assume that, if Morrison announced her critical influences, doing so would impact the way readers consume her fiction; arguably, the risk of an uncritical consumption of Morrison's fiction is neither greater nor less in either audience.

Schur's analysis fails to extend to Morrison's lay readers a belief in the level of sophistication that Morrison herself seems to extend to them. In fact, Morrison says, "I lean heavily on the reader...you have to rely on the reader to make images work" (Koenen 76). She elaborates on her relationship with readers and "students" of her literature, saying that "I respect the emotional and intellectual intelligence of



black people because I respect my own emotional intelligence, therefore I did not want to write simple books that had simpleminded points” (Davis 224). Though she specifically addresses African Americans, I believe that her statement can be extended to readers more generally in light of her ongoing involvement with the Oprah Winfrey Show. While Morrison’s diverse audiences may not be able to identify the theoretical tradition that she engages, this does not mean that her readers cannot appreciate the significances of African Americans’ and, even if they are not themselves African American, their own uncomfortable relationship with the law and other American institutions.

I agree with Schur’s suggestion that we must do more than track the literary influences on Morrison if we are to offer greater critical insight in Morrison work. Schur suggests “foregrounding those with whom she is in dialogue [to] provide a clue to whom Morrison is writing and which discourses she hopes to influence” (Schur). Morrison does indeed signify on those who have come before her as well as her contemporaries in order to address the problem of race, and she does so most explicitly through her attention to language, both as a writer who refuses certain racial tropes and does not allow her writing to be pigeonholed, and as theorist who identifies “language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency—as an act with consequences” and thus investigates the way in which the system is called into the service of domination and erasure (Morrison 13). These two identities emerge from the same engagement of language expressed in different, but not inherently competing, forms. As Christian noted,

stories have always been a source of theory for African American writers, particularly women.

Criticism of Morrison's work does not benefit from either/or approaches. Schur's assessment of Morrison's criticism rests on a slippery slope that brings him dangerously close to repeating the problem that he identifies and proposes to address. To be fair, however, Schur's work draws our attention to the importance of Morrison's engagement with the historical and legal processes that created African Americans as invariably "other" and non-human. In this way, her work shares the characteristics of self-identified critical race theorists who aim to "intervene in the ideological contestation of race" (Crenshaw xiv). For some critical race theorists, storytelling constitutes a critical component of explaining the implications of law's impact on individuals' lived experiences; we can therefore identify Morrison's work with the Oprah Book Club as one way to practice the theory that Schur identifies in the author's work.

Although such work does not promise to end racism or any other nagging social issues, it does keep such issues in the public discourse in ways that are potentially substantive. Given that Oprah's show has turned its focus more recently to spiritual, physical, and psychic health, we might treat the relationship between Oprah as a media mogul and literary giant Morrison as an effort to help audiences imagine grace for themselves and others.

*Ms. Winfrey is the most powerful book marketer in the United States. On a really good day, she sends more people to bookstores than the morning news programs, the other daytime shows, the evening magazines, radio shows, print reviews and feature articles rolled into one.*

Gary Feldman, *The New York Times*

*It's one thing to win an Emmy and special awards.  
It's another thing for somebody who hasn't picked  
up a book since they were forced to in high school  
to read [Morrison's] Song of Solomon  
and start thinking differently about their own life as a result.*

Oprah Winfrey

### **Excruciating Responsibility**

Morrison acknowledged early in her career that she could not “rely on a huge, aggressive Black audience” but she also believed that “in the future that will all change” (Wilson 133). Although *Beloved* was not chosen as one of Oprah’s Book Club selections, Oprah has helped to introduce Morrison and her work to a broader African American and general American audience by selecting *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Paradise* as Book Club selections. Morrison’s relationship with Oprah has given the author greater sales and, more importantly, an opportunity to reach a wider audience even as the publishing industry has maintained “a normative whiteness” (Johnson). Winfrey’s Book Club has created an enormous market for the kinds of books Winfrey wants to read, just as Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* because she could not find books like it to read.

As a film adaptation, *Beloved* was unsuccessful at the box office; the film benefited from Oprah’s “formidable resources of her television show and her international celebrity.... the film, however, was “outgunned at the box office by *Antz* and the newest Chuckie movie” (Tibbetts 77). I take the subheading for this section from David Denby’s article, “Haunted by the Past,” which appeared in *The New Yorker*. Denby argues that the film’s excruciating sense of responsibility made it

something to be “endured.” Denby’s analysis of the film speaks to the overwhelming public resistance to various efforts to engage seriously the implications of slavery and its life in the present. Despite its emphasis on endurance, Denby’s analysis fails to register that neither the text nor its adaptation as a film can approximate what slavery demanded its subjects to endure. Morrison’s novel and Oprah’s adaptation of it seem to emerge from a shared sense of responsibility to offer (African) Americans a story that is “not to be pass[ed] on” since it is the nation’s responsibility to come to terms with its racial history” (Morrison 274).

In the Nobel lecture, Morrison deploys the image of the old woman who is the law and its transgression as a way of both conveying the significance of language and depicting the elder or ancestor figure in African American culture as the preserver of important narratives. In essence, Morrison uses the old woman as a thinly veiled expression of herself as a writer and an elder who, as the old woman states at the center of her speech,

is worried about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, put into service, even withheld from her for certain nefarious purposes (13).

Interestingly, Morrison describes her feelings upon accepting the award as a moment of grace. That moment almost replicates the scene in the clearing in *Beloved* when Baby Suggs calls upon the community of recently freed African Americans to reflect on their lives and look to the future that they can only make if they do imagine grace.

In this public oratorical moment, during which Morrison has the academy and the “world’s” attention, she chooses to address the intersection of art and politics,

observing that narrative is “one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge” (7). Morrison then reminds her audience of the “excruciating responsibility” that comes with being a writer, responsibility that, if taken seriously, requires active engagement with the residues of historical injustices in such a way as to allow for more than simply enduring. Morrison’s writing, then, also announces the ways in which some authors negotiate the balance between exposing injustice so people can perceive it and documenting justice to help create a healthy society.

Curiously, Denby’s comments invoke those of another Nobel Laureate, William Faulkner, who is often linked with Morrison. At the end of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel that focuses on the demise of an aristocratic Southern family, the author takes account of the changes that will come as the old South collapses. In that account he says of his African American characters, Dilsey and her family, “they endured” (302). Faulkner offers enduring/endurance as noble for those who suffer, but terribly burdensome for those made to witness such suffering, a sentiment that Denby’s criticism of *Beloved* reiterates. In his own address to the Swedish Academy forty-four years earlier, Faulkner invoked the idea of enduring again. This time, however, he says, “The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail” (Faulkner). I reference Morrison in relationship to Faulkner here not as a way of validating her work, but because her work, particularly *Beloved*, takes up the challenge of suggesting how Americans might do more than endure their racial history and the injuries it produced therein. Oprah’s and Morrison’s partnership speaks to this project’s interest in culture as a critical instance/point in time where

reparations might be pursued. If we are to read the cultural interaction between the literary (Morrison) and the popular celebrity (Oprah) productively, we might do so best by considering that both cultural icons are invested in preparing people, real and imagined, to move beyond simply enduring suffering toward prevailing in their endeavors to free themselves from the sources of that suffering.

In “Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences,”

Young argues that it is

vital to recognize that Morrison's interaction with Oprah produces more than just another example of contemporary society's obsession with media events, as the actual experience of reading *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise*, or *The Bluest Eye* intersects with these texts' transformations into objects of TV discourse. In the end, Winfrey and Morrison both emphasize the experience of reading these books. (190)

Winfrey's interest in Morrison's novels, especially *Beloved*, suggests that, like Morrison, she believes that imagining and enacting grace becomes not only a way of repairing the injured or traumatized self but also a responsibility. Such an interpretation of Oprah's show resists the criticism that the program participates in and expands the so-called “victim culture” that plagues the United States today.

Like Johnson, Eva Illouz, in her work *Oprah Winfrey, Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture*, identifies the book club as a significant feature of Oprah's power. The launch of Oprah's Book Club in 1995 marked the beginning of a new direction for the show. The show redirected its focus toward self-empowerment. Suffering and the possibility of transformation that comes

from “enduring” became a central theme on Oprah’s show. Through the book club and a series of psychologists and life coaches such as Dr. Phil and Iyanla Vanzant, Oprah encouraged her audience to both look within and “get real.” In developing a focus on self-healing and the transformation that results from that process, Oprah sought repairs of all sorts for herself, her guests, and the subjects of her philanthropy. Illouz observed that “suffering best explains the relationship of this style within which she [Oprah] relates to them [her audience]” (80). Oprah’s franchise expanded in part because of her business savvy, one facet of which has been to share her personal struggles and traumas with audiences. Clearly, Oprah does not occupy the same class status as most of her audience; however, her willingness to talk openly to them about her pain and failure allowed her to develop “suffering as a trope of identity” (Illouz 103). Working to overcome her suffering at its source binds Oprah the celebrity and media mogul to the “everyday housewives” that constitute her primary audience demographic.

Illouz argues that the “the Book Club is a continuation and even radicalization of the biographical project of suffering” (103). For the most part, Oprah’s Book Club selections depict female protagonists who are struggling with some aspect of their identity, as well as the relationships that produce particular identities and the process of transformation that these protagonists undergo as they work through their suffering. The Book Club, then, not only aims to increase reading in the United States, but also to foster a culture of self-help in the name of creating a more healthy and functional public. Similarly to Morrison in her fiction, Oprah works through her empire to call upon readers to imagine, not only for the sake of connecting with

characters in the books, but also as way of pursuing their own grace in a world that is rife with alienation, injustice, loss, and suffering.

Again Illouz's reading of Oprah and her Book Club is instructive, as she registers that "Oprah's texts offer themselves as cultural strategies to cope with chaos and meaninglessness" (116). Oprah, then, like Morrison, uses her talents and audience to address contemporary problems that have historical roots. It is not surprising that a book like Morrison's *Beloved* would appeal to Oprah, given its emphasis on women's trauma and its resolution. In discussing why she maintains control over her empire/self, Oprah has responded with language which I find to be strikingly similar to Baby Suggs's and Sethe's responses in the clearing when talking about her personal struggles to claim self-ownership.

In talking about her early years, Oprah describes herself as a "doormat." Now, however, she is older and wiser, and clear about the necessity to claim her self. "Now," she says, "I will never give up my power to another person" (quoted in Illouz). Oprah's response bears a striking resemblance to Sethe's response to Paul D when he suggests that Sethe abandon 124 Bluestone Road, "I will never run from another thing in my life" (Morrison 15). In rejecting Paul D's efforts to influence Sethe's choices, she effectively claims the power to determine her own fate. Similarly, Oprah addresses why she retains control over every facet of her business, saying that "if I lost control of my business...I'd lose myself-or at least the ability to be myself. Owing myself is a way to be myself" (quoted in Illouz). Oprah's response conjures up the injury of slavery for African Americans, which consists in



the inability to own the self and to be recognized in law as the rightful owner of one's body and its productions.

By reading the fictional *Beloved*, specifically the characters of Baby Suggs and Sethe, with Oprah Winfrey and her talk show, I am aiming to identify the ways in which Oprah's stated interest in Morrison's fiction illuminates the ways in which cultural narratives (specifically fiction, in Oprah's case), influence the producers of other cultural narratives. Cultural narratives can and do take on a life beyond their original form in culture. Oprah's fascination with Morrison's fiction and her well-documented adoration of the writer help to make clear how cultural narratives can become the source for carrying out cultural work. Oprah, with her vast audience and commercial influence, is able to (re)iterate Morrison's exploration of African American slavery as a historical injury that the nation seeks to forget or erase. Additionally, Oprah's use of Morrison's cultural narratives complements the spiritual and psychic work that Oprah advocates.

Claiming personal history and national history, according to both cultural producers, constitutes a means for fully inhabiting or claiming the self. Morrison's stature as a Nobel Prize Laureate and Oprah's stature in the world of entertainment present a formidable cultural influence. Both African American women are able publicly to identify and advocate for pursuing self-ownership as a type of cultural work necessary for individual and communal well-being. Together, Morrison and Winfrey embody the spirit of the African American woman who is both the law and its transgression, as they occupy and speak from positions of immense power that have historically been reserved for white Americans, particularly white men.

While Sethe is unable to make the same type of assertion as Oprah in the text, she does recognize that such ownership is critical. As she recalls Baby Suggs' call, she tells Paul D that more challenging than securing her freedom from slavery is the ability to claim one's self. While it is not my intention to argue definitively that Oprah identifies herself as either Sethe or Baby Suggs (although her demand to play Sethe might offer persuasive evidence of such identification) it is clear that *Beloved* in particular lends itself to Oprah's interest in trauma, suffering, and the transformation that can emerge from embracing and working through such experiences. Oprah has been very forthcoming about her own sexual abuse, personal failures, and family dysfunction. Oprah marks herself as both trauma and the ability to overcome that trauma.

Read as a trauma narrative, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and particularly the Book Club, "has a certain affinity with the [neo-]slave narrative, for it emerged in the public sphere as an act of "remembering" one's ordeal, claiming agency, and owning one's own voice" (Illouz 192). Winfrey has often acknowledged that books identified for her the possibilities of life. Winfrey's relationship with narrative and her incorporation of it into her show demonstrates that the realm of culture is an important place where reparations, broadly conceived, might indeed occur. Despite the varied critical responses to Oprah's Book Club, its influence speaks affirmatively about the potential of culture "to foster virtues and values with the ultimate aim of producing worthwhile political and moral communities of meaning" (Illouz 209).

Whatever criticism we might level against the depth or rigorousness with which the books in Oprah's Book Club are explored and discussed, the fact remains

that, because of the Book Club, “serious” literature is being engaged by many who might not otherwise do so. The often elitist assumptions of critics who argue that only those trained in the literary arts and their criticism can fully embrace the depth and complexity of literature ignore the politics of criticism involved in book reading and the production/creation of critical discourse that grows out of various interpretive communities.

Oprah has often professed her love of literature, particularly literature written by African American women. In fact, Oprah’s acting career has been built upon playing African American women whose lives are marked and often circumscribed by profound suffering, loss, and abuse that connects to the most horrific expressions of race, class, and gender intersection in African American literature. Winfrey played Sofia in *The Color Purple* (1985), Mrs. Thomas/Bigger Thomas’s mother in *Native Son* (1986), and Mattie Michaels in the *Women of Brewster Place* miniseries (1989). Collectively, these roles and Winfrey’s focus on her show and her Book Club articulate “Oprah’s insistence that lives are made meaningful by grasping their moment of suffering and that [claiming an] identify is a restless work of salvation from the most difficult moments of life” for African Americans (Illouz 191). Given Oprah’s affinity for Morrison’s work and their continuous collaboration, one wonders if Winfrey does not in some ways identify herself as a version of the law and its transgression. Winfrey’s show and Morrison’s novels share “a predilection for documenting the pain that derives from the difficulty of being a self and of entertaining relations with others” (Illouz 102). Ironically, Oprah’s success with this formula on her show has enabled her to make her own reparations as well as extend

opportunities for material, spiritual, and psychic repairs to others. Transformation as a form of reparations has allowed Oprah to become an ongoing source of capital, and as such, she is able not only to identify the ways in which women, in particular, are injured by and through the racial and gender contracts that shape social and economic interactions in the U.S., but also to grant new opportunity, almost daily, for these women and others to create a psychic space in which they can imagine grace for themselves. This space is crucial, as ultimately the act of imagining is the first step toward self-empowerment and self-affirmation.

It is not my intention here to treat African American literary texts and their subjects or the films in this project as a source of bibliotherapy or cinematherapy. Read as cultural narratives, *Beloved*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, *The Wiz*, *Get on the Bus* and *Monster's Ball* illuminate the intersections of aesthetic, political, and philosophical concerns about the nature and meaning of reparations particularly as they relate to racial identity, gender relations, and more generally the imaginative possibilities of working against race and its expression as racism. I seek to identify the ways in which these narratives circulate within U.S. culture and observe that the producers and consumers of these cultural narratives identify the narratives as valuable sources for considering and challenging some of the most vexing contemporary problems in our society. Such an approach hopes to steer clear of naïve or simplistic speculation about the reparative power of cultural narrative.

Arguably, the embrace of certain narratives and their subject matter does speak to a need and desire for other ways of negotiating the economic, social, and political landscape of the twenty-first century. Given this need, reparations and the

litany of repairs that constitute the term as defined in this project strike me as both an appropriate and generative way of reading all cultural narratives. Importantly, my consideration of Toni Morrison as author rejects the postmodern theoretical premise that the author is dead or that s/he does not matter. Oprah and Morrison's personal and business relationship, together with Oprah's influence in publishing (as this section's epigraph notes) open up new space for identifying and studying the relationship between the production of literature and its consumption. Moreover, given Morrison's experiences as an editor, she is especially aware of the role of marketing in contributing to sales, as well as the potential for the product itself to influence (re)thinking in its consumers. If, as I believe, one of Morrison's goals is to produce literary project that intervene in the ritual sacrifice of African American subjectivity in the American public imagination, her partnership with Oprah Winfrey is certainly consistent with that work.

Loaded with the past and hungry for more,  
it left no room to imagine, let alone plan for the next day.  
*Beloved, Toni Morrison*

### **Morrison and Imagination**

The above lines from *Beloved* describe Sethe's mind and warn strongly against becoming "stuck" in history. Such a warning, however, does not advocate simply forgetting the past, but rather not allowing the past to determine the future. Imagination is critical to Morrison, whether it be literary or theoretical imagination. Morrison calls upon her readers and critics to remember imagination as a cultural space that provides the greatest promise for justice. In the Summer 2006 issue of

*Modern Fiction Studies*, the second issue of that journal to be devoted to Morrison scholarship, Nancy Petersen introduces the issue of essays by reminding us that

only in creative expression, Morrison insists, can we find the means to illuminate and communicate that the wounds and fissures that result from certain kinds of trauma visited on people are so deep, so stupefyingly cruel, that—unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, rights, or the good will of others—art alone can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination. (Petersen 262)

Morrison's commentary on the relationship between art and imagination reflects Felman's argument that literature promotes justice because art and literature are not interested in establishing commensurability between crime and its resolution. Certain breaches in human behavior simply overwhelm the legal system and expose its limits.

As Morrison suggests, traumatic experiences create open and festering wounds that may only be healed by calling upon the critical imagination. Morrison expresses these possibilities in her literary explorations of historical injuries and their life in the present and what that means for imagining and creating a new, no less complicated, community. Rarely settled once and for all, trauma resists singular expression or resolution. Instead, trauma often exists in the form of (un)claimed memory that pushes the boundaries of language to describe, to remember, to feel what travels in corporeal, psychic and spiritual pathways in the body.<sup>32</sup> The imaginative space that cultural narratives offer becomes not a romantic escape in which trauma does not

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<sup>32</sup> See Cathy Caruth's edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and her own work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*.

exist, but rather a place in which it is possible to identify how to work through trauma and how some trauma resists working through.

Felman argues that literature “is a language of infinitude that, in contrast to the language of the law, encapsulates not closure but precisely what in a given legal case refuses to be closed and cannot be closed” (8). Felman is not alone in her reading of literature as a critical location where questions of justice and commensurability are engaged. Wai Chee Dimcock, in her work *Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, Philosophy*, sees novels as the “domain of the incommensurate” (10). Morrison’s commentary on the significance of imagination in her various editorial, literary, and oratorical endeavors, reveals her commitment to imagining what reparations might resemble for those injured by the dominant culture’s acceptance of race and racism as the normative lens through which society developed social, political, and economic practices. In discussing the difficulties of writing about slavery, Morrison links the imagination to both power and law, observing that African Americans “have to take the authority back, you realign where the power is.... [Whites] were very inventive and imaginative with cruelty, so [we] have to take it back—in a way that [we] can tell it” (Caldwell 244-5). Morrison deploys her literature in a continuous effort to make present that which haunts the cultural memory of African Americans.

Story and storytelling, then, might be understood as an attempt to claim this authority for an injured population. In Morrison’s literary canon, the law and specifically the nation’s court system is not posited as a location in which the story of African American experience can be heard and responded to effectively. As a result, Morrison seldom offers explicitly legal solutions to crimes; rather, Morrison

examines how “crimes constitute cultural problems that illustrate how racialized thinking affects the psyche and communal identification” (Schur).

Unlike Schur’s essay, Dean Franco’s essay, “What We Talk About When We Talk About *Beloved*,” takes issue with the prolific scholarly readings of *Beloved*, which focus on the “ethically problematic and politically limited discourse of co-memory and co-mourning” (415). Franco identifies the discourse of reparations, even as he notes the difficulty of producing this discourse, as the key to addressing the legal, material, psychical, and spiritual injuries that African Americans incurred during slavery. For Franco, reparations discourse encourages us to consider a form of justice or a rhetoric that comprehends and “enables both mourning and material redress...that is neither so wedded to the past nor so utopian” (Franco 428). I am indeed interested in the legal, political, personal, and ethical questions that accompany freeing and claiming the freed self. I am specifically interested in the ways that Morrison identifies how such work can be done in light of the law’s inability or unwillingness to hear or process the claims of the injured. Cultural narratives are neither bound by statutes of limitations nor forced to determine commensurability and settle questions of liability—who pays and how much.

Unmotivated by qualitative demands or accounting protocols, cultural narratives are useful for exploring what reparations are (im)possible in light of jurisprudence. In the chapter that follows, I explore the significance of imagination and grace in *Beloved*. I focus on Baby Suggs’s call in the clearing, in which she asserts the importance of imagining grace, and ask that her call be read as an effort to create a new social contract/law for the community. Such laws are complicated,



demanding that we attend to the psychic residues of historical injury for the ways in which it challenges our endeavors to imagine and create a new future, one that is not simply different than the past but significantly improved from it. I consider the community's transgression of Baby Suggs's law—to imagine grace—by examining the degree to which the community understood the implications and demands of Baby Suggs call for a new law, a law that must be articulated in a grammar invested not in race and racial difference, but rather grace and the love that emanates from returning to that state of existence.

## Chapter 4: Imagining Grace: Baby Suggs's Call to Transgress the Law in *Beloved*

*Reparations are fraught with repressive potential. Without attitudinal and social structural transformation of a sort meaningful to recipients, reparations may be illusory, more damaging than healing. No repair. Cheap grace.*

Eric Yamamoto, *Interracial Justice: Conflict and Reconciliation in Post-Civil Rights America*

Toni Morrison's neo-slave narrative *Beloved* is based in part on the trial of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave charged in 1856 for killing her children rather than seeing them returned to slavery. The novel explores multiple expressions of slavery at Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation where Sethe and her family "live." Sethe endures slavery under two very different masters. Slavery under Garner slavery seems a "compassionate" bondage. After he dies, his brother-in-law Schoolteacher replaces him and under his rule, slavery at Sweet Home becomes the violent and dehumanizing experience that the term invokes in the public imagination. *Beloved* reveals that both expressions of slavery are equally egregious and damaging.

Schoolteacher's arrival prompts Sethe, the fictional counterpart of Margaret Garner, to flee Sweet Home after Schoolteacher's arrival. Sethe believes that she has saved her children from the horrors that she endured, yet, Schoolteacher locates Sethe and the children and intends to reclaim his property. Rather than allowing her children to be returned to slavery, Sethe attempts to kill her children; however, she succeeds in murdering only one child, Beloved. Beloved's memory then haunts the community of free persons to which Sethe escapes. Both Sethe and Beloved become

pariahs, unpleasant reminders of a past life (slavery) in the present (freedom). The community views Sethe's response to Schoolteacher as prideful, and throughout most of the text the community shuns Sethe. Beloved in her corporeal form forces the community to struggle with what freedom means as well as the nature of the social relationships and responsibilities that freedom demands.

After Sethe's escape, Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, offers the community instruction in what appear to be sermons. However, Baby Suggs identifies herself as "too ignorant" to preach and simply identifies it as "calling and the hearing heard" (Morrison 177). Baby Suggs's language is important; the term "call" carries not only spiritual but political connotations, which in light of the subjects of these calls is significant. She calls for the community to embrace their newfound freedom, telling them that they will only find grace if they can imagine for themselves and for others. Taking into account the call's subject and the location of its delivery, I argue for reading the call as not merely religious instruction but also the basis of a new social contract, a contract designed to repair and protect the community from the violence of U.S. slave law, particularly the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law.

Imagining grace both contractually obligates the community and constructs its citizens as subjects who are responsible to themselves and responsible for others. In light of the fugitive status of almost all of community's population and the possibility of being "contracted" back into slavery, the call takes on additional significance. Imagining grace is not only spiritual but legal; the community must not only create a protective space but guard against intrusions. Imagining grace places a tremendous responsibility on the community. Freedom is dangerous for this community. While it

may be Baby Suggs who marks the law and its transgression, it is only when and if the community embraces imagining grace as an act of agency that it can potentially provide the safety associated with freedom.

In Baby Suggs's call/contract, imagining grace becomes the first reparation pursued by the former slaves if their freedom is to have any value. *Beloved*, then, might be more appropriately read as what critic Angelyn Mitchell identifies as "liberatory narrative" in *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002). If we accept that the pursuit of reparations carries the potential to be repressive and dangerous, Mitchell's suggestion that we engage novels like *Beloved* as texts that "analyze freedom" takes on greater urgency (4).

*I don't go by what the law says I go by what is right.  
The law is liable to say anything. It don't matter what the law say.  
I take a look at it for myself.*

August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson*

### **Baby Suggs: The Law and Its Transgression**

The old black woman that Morrison references in her Nobel lecture is authoritative and revered in ways that actual African American women have not been in American culture, especially in the eyes of the law. Although esteemed and strong—descriptions that often conjure up the Mammy stereotype—the women that figure prominently in Morrison's fiction defy that stereotype. Morrison's old black woman appears as Ms. MacTeer in *The Bluest Eye*, Eva Peace in *Sula*, Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon*, and Therese in *Tar Baby*. Undeniably, Baby Suggs and Sethe

continue this genealogy in *Beloved*. Although Baby Suggs's experiences in slavery have left her with little to make a living with other than her heart, it is precisely that organ that creates her power and authority. She leads from her heart and speaks from her memory of what slavery sought to erase—her humanity and the capacity to imagine.

We might then identify Baby Suggs as a literary representation of what critical race theorist Mari Matsuda describes as “looking to the bottom” for insight about how we might live differently than our current legal and political lives either permit or encourage. Elaborating on Antonio Gramsci's organic intellectual, Matsuda argues for the value of “adopting the perspective of those who have seen and felt the falsity of the liberal promise—[that] can assist critical scholars in the task of fathoming the phenomenology of the law and defining the elements of justice” (63). Reading Baby Suggs as both the law and its transgression speaks to the importance of evaluating the life of law in culture and specifically in the lives of so-called minority communities. Experience taught Baby Suggs that the law is capricious and self-interested. Further, although law supposedly protects and regulates human interactions, law's subservience to cultural, economic, and political investments in race and racism permit the law to deny and/or, depending on the historical moment, undermine African Americans' legal standing. The law matters because it is official; however, as this section's epigraph urges, it is in the best interest of those who have been and continue to be degraded or injured by the law to be critical of it.

Ultimately, Baby Suggs and eventually the community must establish what is just for them in light of the arbitrary and punitive relationship that defines African

Americans' legal status. This response is not a call for lawlessness or vigilantism, but instead proposes a set of laws enacted by the community to protect its most valuable property, "their best thing"—their bodies and their minds—from the vicissitudes of slavery. Baby Suggs's call, with its interest in protecting property, invites a reading of her call as something more than religious instruction.

We are told that Baby refuses a "title before her name, [only] a small caress after it" (87). Baby Suggs's refusal indicates her disinterest in separating herself from the community that she inhabits by embracing formal titles and the attendant privileges that often accompany such titles. Her sermon/call constitutes a "self-conscious commitment to a subjective perspective... [Baby Suggs] places herself [and by extension the community] in the linguistic position of subject rather than object, as being capable of acting upon the world rather than a being whom others act upon" (Lawrence 339). She gains her authority because she speaks from shared experience. She "did not tell them to clean up their lives [or] that they were the blessed of the earth or its glorybound pure" (88). Her call emphasizes the present moment, which reflects her engagement with the law; for it is only in the earthly present that law has its force. It does not extend into what we might think of as heaven or other versions of an afterlife.

Returning to this section's epigraph, Baby Suggs evidences an understanding that law exercises the power to preserve and manipulate the designations of the spirit and the body. Her invocation of grace calls upon us to retrace the law's origins in order to identify its use of "the lure of the spirit, banking on religion and the debate on matter and spirit, corporeal and incorporeal, in order to transfer the power of the deity

and the dominion of the master to the corrective of the state” (Dyan 54). Religion becomes part of the network of tools that slavery relies upon to dominate the slave population. That Baby Suggs distances herself from formal expressions of religion without rejecting the possibilities bound up with faith speaks to her careful analysis of the relationship between law and religion. The colonial laws revoking the right for slaves to practice indigenous religious expression and asserting that Christian baptisms would not change a slave’s status provides the most compelling evidence of the ways in which cultural and legal dispositions about religion, particularly Christianity impacted the lives of African (American) slaves. In “Wonder What God Had in Mind”: *Beloved*’s Dialogue with Christianity,” Deborah Guth argues that most problematic plane of memory in *Beloved* “concerns Christian belief and symbolism whose repeated appearance in outlined, displaced, and inverted form throughout the narrative creates a far-reaching tension” in the novel (84). It is this tension that animates my reading of Baby Suggs’s insistence on imagining grace as a liberating pursuit that fosters a generative relationship between law, religion and philosophy, one that neither displaces nor exaggerates human agency. I agree with Guth’s observation that “*Beloved* is a text in which Morrison wrestles with Christianity, challenging its paradigms, dismantling its images one by one and exposing the metaphysical comforts that were to substitute for dignity and freedom” (92). My only quibble with Guth’s reading is her reference to substitution; I do not identify Baby Suggs’s emphasis on imagining as an act of substitution. Instead, Morrison seems to remind us through the character of Baby Suggs and her call that, with or without

suffering and dehumanization, religion relies upon the human imagination for its meaning in human lives. That is, faith and its expression constitute imagining grace.

Delivered in “a wide open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path,” the location of Baby Suggs’s call connotes Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount; more important, the location and the call reflect both knowledge of and experience with the legal prohibitions against slaves’ gathering. The remoteness of the space serves to reinforce the danger signified in Baby Suggs’s reference to “yonder” as dangerous and potentially lethal where, “what you [slaves] say from it they will not heed and what you scream from it they will not hear” (89). Baby Suggs validates the experience of the silence that the law promotes and demands around the injustices of slavery—that unspeakable suffering, loss, and alienation that becomes the complex of injuries that remains disremembered and unaccounted-for, even in the twenty-first century.

The call, however, is not merely an affirmation of their experience, but also a response to the law. Ultimately, Baby Suggs’s examination of the law leads to instruction. That instruction begins with the call for the community to claim and embrace their free will. She is indeed the law and its transgression as she gives power to their fugitive state, a power that recognizes that justice for African Americans has most always been a fugitive justice. The experience of being a fugitive is recast as liberating, particularly when the fugitives imagine grace for themselves. It is impossible to read the phrase “imagine grace” wholly outside of a religious context; however, as Suggs offers the term, she certainly raises the possibility that grace carries a potential that is not confined to the Divine, but derived from it. If the call is,



as I read it, an affirmation of the value of their property and protecting that property, we should see “imagining grace” as the central tenet of what appears to be a social contract, created under the auspices of a “call,” that the community figuratively signs in the clearing.

If we reflect on Sethe’s conviction about what a marriage should be, we can better understand the significance of the call/contract issued in the clearing. Sethe says that marriage warrants something more than cohabitation: “there should be something to say it was right and true...there should be some ceremony” (59). The call, read as a social contract, is the “something” that marks the significance of Sethe’s entrance into the community. As a signatory to this social contract, Sethe benefits by gaining access to various forms of education. Perhaps most important of all is that the social contract grants both a sense of identity and affirmation of that identity. Sethe articulates both what was possible and what was lost for her and the community when it failed to imagine grace, the basic requirement of Baby Suggs’ contract. Sethe says:

No more discussions, stormy or quiet, about the true meaning of the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God’s way and Negro pews, anti-slavery, manumission, skin, voting, Republicans, Dred Scott, book learning, Sojourner’s High-Wheeled buggy, the Colored Ladies of Delaware, and other weighty issues. (95)

Sethe identifies that the community was incredibly civic-minded, astute in its attention to the political climate, and attentive to the tenuousness of their legal status. We learn, too, that the community was educating its children and its older members,

an endeavor that is announced prior to Sethe's reflection, as we learn that Denver attended school until the town turned its back on Sethe. Sethe, too, was learning to read from a fellow member of the community. In short, the community was both transgressing the law—learning from and teaching each other, participating in political debates about their lives and critiquing the anti-slavery discussion in relationship to religion ("Negro pews"). In these civic engagements, the community teaches and learns what freedom means through a sense of cooperation and a spirit of goodwill. Initially, the community was able to imagine and practice grace successfully.

Baby Suggs's call is a hybrid of Rousseau's and Locke's contract theories. Rousseau's social contract specifically defines the political state as one in which "each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will," and we see this dynamic in the relationship between the community and Baby Suggs (Ebenstein 405). Evidence of this communal cooperation comes from the description of 124 Bluestone, prior to the infanticide; the house serves as the place where the community was "loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed" by Baby Suggs (88). Baby Suggs gains her power from the community not by force or fiat, but rather out of respect and love—in other words, through grace.

In *The Social Contract* and *Discourses*, Rousseau argues that force does not create or legitimate power. Arguably, Baby Suggs's insistence on the significance of the freed and self-possessed African American body reflects Locke's argument in *Two Treaties of Government*, where he notes that "freedom from absolute and arbitrary power is so necessary to, and closely joined with man's preservation"

(Ebenstein 407). In *Sethe*, we can recognize Locke's argument that freedom is so precious that, in resisting the will of a master, the slave may take his own life.

Other Lockean features of Baby Suggs's social contract may be less obvious, given that Baby Suggs does not explicitly address private property. Baby Suggs's call emphasizes claiming the body. I read that call as an affirmation of the significance and value of private property in Locke's philosophy. The significance of the social contract for the (ex)slave is, as contemporary debate about the validity of pursuits of reparations emphasizes, centered about labor and property in the Lockean sense. Private property emerges when a person mixes his or her own labor with the raw materials of nature. Locke argued that nature is given to humankind for its shared subsistence, and each human cannot take more than he [or she] can use without robbing others of their fair share. Immediately, we are returned to the basic problem of identifying African Americans as persons.

In erasing the personhood of African Americans, they lost their ability to be protected under the social contract, which Mills insists was always a racial contract. Mills's reading of the social contract is affirmed by *Scott v. Sanford* in (1857), in which Chief Justice Taney asserted that "the idea that all men were created equal never meant to embrace the enslaved African race whose rights were not even on the minds of the framers of the Constitution" (Gordon-Reed 38). In light of Taney's argument, we might identify that African Americans' experience of democracy (whether enslaved or "free") resembled Hobbes's conception of the State of Nature as a warlike state "where every man is enemy to every man... wherein men live without security... worst of all, [they live] in continual fear and danger of violent

death; and the life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Ebenstein 373-74). Hobbes’s description of this life as being solitary must be revised to address African Americans’ lives under slavery. Collectively, African Americans were systematically alienated from the larger polity because of their race/racial differences and cultural differences. These differences were articulated as deficiency—African Americans, in this view, were poor, nasty, and brutish and thus collectively not covered by the social contract. Invoking Hobbes’s description of the State of Nature, Baby Suggs describes her experience of slavery as one that teaches her the “nastiness of life” (23). Baby Suggs’s description emanates from her experience of having her children taken from her without any regard to their or her welfare. It is that disregard for African Americans as individuals and as families that defines not the State of Nature, but life under slavery. Hobbes’s sense of the State of Nature is perhaps less historically accurate, given that he believed that the so-called savage people in America and elsewhere lacked government.

Hobbes’s own investment in the individual and his lack of historical perspective allowed him to (dis)miss the importance of family as an organizing principle in various societies. Baby Suggs’s commitment to the community stands in stark opposition to the notion that law produces a civil society. The social contract that Baby Suggs offers the community seeks to reduce the fear, violence, and sacrifice that slavery requires, so that the social/racial contract can guarantee its signatories not only citizenship, but a legally defensible and racial identity. In the community, inclusion and race are not bound together as they are in the social/racial contract. Through Baby Suggs and later Sethe, we can identify the relationship

between law and violence. Morrison, it would seem, aims to expose that the “laws—the court itself—are... not entirely on the side of justice; they partake in the violence of history...like history, the law has an inherent relationship to death” (Felman 16). This is to say that the law and its practice fail to reveal law’s historical investments in race and racism and attendant acts of violence that such investment produce. Given this feature of *Beloved*, community becomes the location where the nation’s laws can be transgressed most productively.

Baby Suggs’s argument for communal imagining is most powerful because freedom and the reparations that it promises cannot be experienced singularly. In imagining grace, community members (re)claim both an individual body and a communal body, a formation discouraged under slavery. The individual in Baby Suggs’s social contract is only as strong as the community in which he/she exists. Gaining access to the property that is the self is important, but only inasmuch as that property/self can be claimed communally. Morrison reiterates this notion through Paul D’s escape from the chain gang: “For one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none” (130). I am not suggesting that freedom demands conformity of identity, but that freedom does demand an agreement to act in the best interest, itself a slippery concept, of the community. Baby Suggs’s contract does not escape the vexing philosophical issues of traditional contract theory, which inevitably raises questions about the parameter of individual rights and their suppression under social contracts.

The innovative aspect of Baby Suggs’s social contract is the removal of the prerequisite of whiteness to become a signatory to the contract. Morrison does not

treat white Americans as a monolith; instead, she demonstrates the ways in which they too are bound by class and gender ideologies, also grounded in law, that make cooperation mutually beneficial to them. Denver, the child that Sethe gives birth to during her escape from Sweet Home, lives because a runaway white girl helps her. Philosophically, the grace that Baby Suggs offers as law rejects the Hobbesian view of man's natural state and instead offers grace as the natural human state, a state defined by compassion that shapes human behavior toward others. More closely aligned with Locke's view of the natural human state of being, Baby Suggs's call encourages compassion. Morrison's novel rejects the notion of interfacing with the memory of slaves as economic abstraction—i.e., as calculations of value and debt. In doing so, *Beloved*, with its emphasis on narrative sharing and remembering, suggests that “what has to be heard and [seen] in court is precisely what cannot be” (Felman 4). Through Baby Suggs's character, the act of imagining grace emerges as one way of articulating personhood and claiming all that attends to that identity in the community, a claim that slavery denied.

To fully appreciate Suggs's call, we should remember that what Mills identifies as the racial contract in its American iteration bears the linguistic features of a peculiar American grammar, one that is deeply structured by race and its expression as a negative feature of human diversity. Baby Suggs's contract attempts to replace racist grammar with a grammar of love, and not just a love of all African Americans. As a result, her contract is no less complicated and messy than the social/racial contract that Mills illuminates; however, Suggs's contract's greatest innovation lies in its aspiration to embrace difference. She does not suggest that the

community's suffering makes them a chosen people that are entitled to righteousness; they are, instead, a people who must imagine grace so that they can be both divine and human in their lives. Attending to the anti-racist character of Baby Suggs's call/sermon evidences Morrison's ongoing effort to produce race-specific but non-racist narrative. Using Baby Suggs as an expression of the project, then, is quite spectacular, given that the novel meditates on the violence and accompanying injuries that issue forth from the intersection of racist thought and belief and its life in the official languages that narrate U.S. nationhood. Language, according to Morrison, "leaves [the politically and economically empowered] with no access to what is left of their human instincts for they speak only to those who obey, or in order to force obedience...[theirs is a language designed to] to lock creative people into cages of inferiority and hopelessness". Embedded in the contractual language of Baby Suggs's call to imagine grace is the call for both the victims and the perpetrators of racial violence to claim responsibility for their lives.

### **Precursors for a New Law**

I want to return to Sethe's discussion of marriage and her desire to have something to mark its significance. As I suggested earlier, Sethe's feelings aid us in understanding the significance of Baby Suggs' call. The conversation about the meaning of marriage occurs twice in the text, before the reader receives Baby Suggs' call: once through a third-person narrator and again as Sethe tells the story to Beloved and Denver. On this latter occasion, Sethe reiterates what the narrator reveals about Sethe's response to Halle's marriage proposal, saying that "I found out that there wasn't going to be no ceremony, no preacher, nothing" (58).

While Sethe's sense of what constitutes a marriage ceremony comes from hearing Mrs. Garner's stories about her own wedding, Sethe's conviction that marriage deserves an official ceremony reflects more than romantic musing. Sethe recognizes that her commitment to Halle simultaneously signifies the joining of an existing family and the creation of a new one. In essence, Sethe recognizes that marriage is an institution, governed by a contract, that produces a set of obligations and commitments that the community should also recognize formally. Communal recognition of the contract between man and woman adds significance to what is largely a private relationship.

Like the marriage, the discussion of Halle's courtship of Sethe is revealed by a narrator and also Sethe. Both recollections emphasize that the demands placed on Halle, specifically his unpaid labor at Sweet Home and the labor that he sells to others to pay "the debt he owed for his mother," (26) limited the couple's courtship. Halle and Mr. Garner are signatories to a contract that allows Halle to claim a small part of his labor toward the purchase of Baby Suggs's freedom. Here Morrison is subtle in suggesting the validity of reparations, for Halle's contract with Garner makes clear that indeed he is the rightful owner of the products of his making and that those products are valuable in a slave economy. Moreover, the contract reveals the ways in which the Racial/Social Contract and its signatories depend on constructing freedom as a commodity rather than an inalienable right.

With the exception of Sixo, the other Sweet Home inhabitants do not actively engage their status as "unfree." Their seeming lack of concern or even awareness of that status is of course related to Garner's particular brand of slavery, in which he



manages his property by extending a sense of agency to his “men.” His management of the plantation allows the men to act freely within what appears to be a loose set of parameters. Halle’s contract exemplifies the potentialities that exist under Garner’s ownership. The contract simultaneously articulates the limits of Halle and the status of the others as Garner’s subjects; but it also expresses the possibility of negotiating a different status. It is not until Schoolteacher, Mrs. Garner’s brother-in-law, arrives that the community comprehends their inability to define and claim real freedom for themselves. A community existed at Sweet Home, but it existed under the constraints of Garner’s liberal view of slavery. Baby Suggs gains her freedom under Garner’s ownership, and it is Garner who physically delivers Baby Suggs to what will become the community over which she presides. Baby Suggs’s initial response to her freedom helps to shed light on why imagining grace becomes a form of reparation.

Baby Suggs questions the meaning of freedom, asking herself, “What for, what does a sixty-odd-year-old woman ...need freedom?” (141). When she steps down from the wagon that carries her to freedom, she understands that “there is nothing like it in this world. It scare[s] her” (141). It is in this exact moment that the call becomes what I argue is a new law and a new contract. Baby Suggs comes to claim her body and understands the significance of that claim to humanness as symbolized by the beating heart that scared her.

Interestingly, it is Halle who teaches Baby Suggs the significance of the imagination, when she reveals that “she could not believe that Halle who had never drawn one free breath knew what she didn’t” (141). Although Baby Suggs ultimately passes this knowledge on to the community in sermon form, her understanding of

the power of grace does not emanate from a divine revelation, but rather the imagination of her son. Baby Suggs's transformation from being unable to imagine the significance of her freedom to teaching others like herself how to claim freedom resonates with the breadth of repairs that Chinweizu identifies. We can, I believe, identify that these self-made repairs, psychic and spiritual reparations, and even institutional repairs, are embedded in Baby Suggs's call to imagine grace.

Baby Suggs's new "law" does not escape or transcend the paradox that haunts the relationship between the legal status of African Americans and the nation's embrace of freedom and equality as its primary principle. Rather, Suggs's law—grace—seeks to repair the injuries that emerge from the experience of being constituted simultaneously as non-human and non-white, and as a result, un-free. Law, of course, limits freedoms for the sake of protecting the citizens who exist under its force; however, for African Americans, the law did not merely limit freedom, but generally made it unattainable and/or unstable, depending on the historical moment and the geographical space in which African Americans existed. As a result, the justice that law supposedly engendered in the nation was not a reality for most African Americans. This rationale is precisely why Suggs must begin her call with a reference to the community's location and what that location marks—their place in a relationship to what Suggs calls "yonder."

That place reiterates that law manages not only the body of the slave, but also the perimeter in which that body may circulate. Suggs's initial response to her own freedom reveals that the laws that support slavery also impact the psyche; thus imagining grace in "free" space calls for more than faith in an abstracted Divine. It is

also a call for human faith and commitment to other human beings. I am not trying here to diminish the obvious religious implications of Baby Suggs's use of the term "grace" in her speech, but rather to address the significance of that speech in a judicial context. More specifically, I argue that the contract that Baby Suggs initiates with the community and the philosophy that underwrites that contract materialize from the abjection of slavery, particularly its repetitive injuries, losses, and traumas.

According to Sethe, the community debated the merits of the Dred Scott case. We can then deduce that Baby Suggs' call reflects both those conversations and her understanding of Chief Justice Taney's claims in the *Scott v. Sanford* decision. Africans, whether free or enslaved, because of their inferior status did not possess the "rights which the white man was bound to respect" (Gordon-Reed 38). Untrained in the law and without access to the written opinions of the court, Baby Suggs understands the intent of law through her experience. She discerns that the so-called social contract is in actuality a racial contract that legally and politically inscribes the status of those like her as being un-free and unequal. Her insistence on the imagination as the resource needed by the community demonstrates her awareness that the legal and philosophical work necessary to create and enforce contracts is highly imaginative work. That all parties must recognize the fundamental equality of each other requires the parties to suspend differences or at least agree to diminish the significance of those differences.

In the development of the United States, this imaginative work constitutes the basis of racial formation, particularly in the creation of white/whiteness as a recognizable category. As Mills makes clear, the social contract, like so many other

aspects of the national narrative, is peculiar because it is a contract “between just the people who count” (3). His emphasis on the people that count, however, calls up the infamous Constitutional designation of Africans as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of determining representation for whites. Mills reminds us that the history of the U.S. is a history of racial formation, one in which racial difference was the basis of political compromises that formed and continue to influence the nation. Mills is instructive when examining the institution of the social/racial contract for what Rousseau described as selective extensions of rights and benefits under the social contract. The social contract was, in Mill’s analysis, always deceitful.

*Amazing grace taught a wretch like me to see*

“Amazing Grace,” A Spiritual

*Such is thy pow'r; nor are thine orders vain,  
O thou the leader of the mental train:  
In full perfection all thy works are wrought,  
And thine sceptre o'er the realms of thought.  
Before thy throne the subject-passions bow,  
Of subject-passions sov'reign ruler Thou,  
At thy command joy rushes on the heart,  
And through the glowing veins the spirits dart.*

“On Imagination,” Phyllis Wheatley

### **Imagining Grace, A New Social Contract**

Imagining grace is the most sacred law for the community of fugitives in *Beloved*. It is the imagining and enacting of grace that will protect the community from the law.<sup>33</sup> Again, Baby Suggs’s call resists the confines of religious

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<sup>33</sup> References to grace appear frequently in Morrison’s fiction. *Paradise*, for example, contains a chapter entitled “Grace.” In that chapter, Morrison offers competing arguments for how humans obtain

interpretation. Baby Suggs attempts to create a social contract that “take[s] a fragment of the master narrative [race and racial difference] that has gone into the construction of an oppressive identity for African Americans”—the inferiority and expendability of the African American—as the very vessel that will “alter the community’s perception of itself,” thus allowing the community to claim both themselves and each other (Lindemann 7). Baby Suggs’s insistence on being a person “in this place,” as opposed to in a future paradise, evidences a commitment to enacting the community on Earth and composing it of subjects with agency as opposed to objects or simply abstracted flesh.

Reading the call as a social contract illuminates that Baby Suggs specifies flesh as it has been abstracted in slavery and as the reassembled human body. She undertakes this reconstruction by addressing the value of each of the organs and appendages that constitute the human body (heart, hands, lungs, liver, and the feet). Baby Suggs’s anatomical reconstruction maps the historical degradation of the African (American) body and simultaneously offers reparation for the “high crimes against the flesh [in which] African (American) males and females registered the wounding” or injury of slavery (Spillers 82). The first act of imagining grace, offered as one type of reparation for the community, breaks the legal bond that renders them as both abject and object and justifies their subjection in law. The call iterates a need to utilize the natural—appendages and organs—to protect and then realize the full value of what the law took away from them, leaving them in effect without “their fair share” of private property: their bodies and the products of their labor. The call, then,

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God’s love. Grace is also a female character pursued by both male and female characters in the text. Morrison’s current novel in progress is also titled *Grace*.

retrieves a group of people whose relationship to the law exists as “countercitizen[ship], an existence that allows them to contend with [claiming] oneself as a whole human being when the Constitution defined one as three-fifths” (Alexander 84).

Imagining, imagination, and grace become crucial terms for identifying the process in which the community might pursue non-material reparations for itself as a creative endeavor rather than a legal pursuit. I want to suggest that grace is perhaps not so “amazing” when that grace does not depend on divine intervention to imagine ourselves differently, even as we acknowledge and negotiate the overwhelming coercive presence and power exercised through legal decisions and their precedents.

Dislodging grace from its normative religious definition, which often defines the term as mercy or unmerited favor from God providing redemption from a sinful past, there must be a restoration to wholeness in order to live a creative and virtuous life. Doing that helps to strengthen the novel’s preoccupation with claiming the self as one of the forms, if not, the primary form, of reparation needed. Further, removing grace from the sole province of the divine mitigates what for me is the logic of why slaves or former slaves needed to appeal for unmerited favor, unless we accept that their plight was part of a divine plan that was preordained, an idea that I categorically reject. Imagining, imagination, and grace in Baby Suggs’ sermons become terms for reminding us that “the imagination [need not be] overcome with the absoluteness of present moment” (O’Connor 35). The slaves cannot exist wholly outside of the law’s reach; however, that fact does not prevent them from agreeing to protect the community from the reach of law and slavery, whenever and if possible. Calling upon

them to act on their own behalf transforms Divine Grace into a “functional principle...that guides the exercise of the imagination” (O’Connor 35).

The recounting of the only sermon/call to which the reader is privy in Morrison’s novel is not given by Sethe, but instead by the omniscient narrator. Thus, it is unclear whether we are receiving Baby Suggs’s actual words or the narrator’s paraphrase of what he/she was thinking, or even an interpretation. While I am arguing against restricting the meaning or implication of grace in the text to religious discourse, it is necessary to address one potential Biblical source of this phrase before exploring the implications of identifying the call in *Beloved* as a social contract. Speaking about the Bible’s influence on her life, Morrison has said that “The Bible wasn’t part of my reading, it was part of my life” (Ruas 219). Arguably, Morrison’s use of the Bible, like her storytelling, aims to be oppositional, a way to expose the limits, flaws, or omissions of African American experience.

Other scholars have read Morrison’s novel in relationship to the biblical references that serve as epigraphs for the story, Romans 9:25, and Psalms 124.<sup>34</sup> I want to suggest another biblical passage that I believe conveys the work that imagining grace calls the community to execute—and perhaps accounts for their failure to do so at a critical moment in the community development. Hebrews 11:1 offers a generative source for thinking through the implications of imagining grace, given its focus on granting individuals the ability to imagine grace for themselves. In essence, Baby Suggs instructs the community to develop faith in itself and act with

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<sup>34</sup> See Danille Taylor Guthrie’s article “Who Are the Beloved? Old and New Testaments, Old and New Communities of Faith” in *Religion and Literature* 27.2 (Spring 1995) 119-129. Also see Shirley Stave’s edited collection, *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities* and in particular, Nancy Bate’s “Toni Morrison *Beloved*: A Psalm and a Sacrament.”

and through that faith. In Hebrews 11:1, we find a discussion of faith as “evidence of things unseen,” which describes having faith in that which is not immediately visible. Suggs, however, does not talk about having faith as a passive state. Instead, faith is the impetus for creating a self. Her call is at least for a collaborative divine-human effort. Baby Suggs’ insistence that only the community can imagine grace for themselves suggests that “humans perform religiously [most] often by exercising their imaginations [and] that doing so gives meaning and purpose to their lives (O’Connor 4). We also learn that, “she told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (Morrison 88). Grace articulated as a state of existence (noun) can only be achieved by imagining (verb) it. The lives of freed and recently freed depend on their ability to pursue a state of grace in lieu of waiting for it to be delivered upon them, as the traditional connotation of grace imparts. Hebrews 11:1 and 11:3 define and affirm faith by saying that “now faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see.” Baby Suggs, however, suggests that faith is not about believing in what is yet unseen, but rather becoming the thing that has been unseen—that is, to be human under slavery.

By claiming and loving both bodies and selves that were, and to varying degrees remain, abject and objectified forms, the community becomes the evidence, the flesh, that the nation worked tirelessly to erase and to render mute in its legal discourse. The value of the African body and spirit must be “imagined” in terms other than the calculus or grammar of slavery. Imagining grace constitutes a form of instantiation and protection that is unavailable through law, according to Baby Suggs. I disagree



with Danille Taylore Guthrie's reading of Baby Suggs' theology, which, she argues, "comes from the body, not the gospel, and it is this theological point, rock, that Baby Suggs stumbles over" (123). Curiously, Guthrie points out that one of the most successful features of slavery was the stunting of the imagination; however, where Guthrie identifies slavery as having "stunted Baby Suggs' imagination" I see quite the opposite. Baby Suggs does not fail to imagine "properly." Instead, the community fails to hear and grasp the magnitude of the grace that Baby Suggs imagined possible for them. Guthrie is correct to point out the distinctions, via her engagement with Cornel West, between existential freedom and social freedom; the two levels of freedom, as she points out, are inseparable. However, Baby Suggs' response to Halle's understanding of existential freedom suggests that she too understands its significance.

It would seem that the community is less clear, however, about the intersection of these two forms of freedom, which causes them to become resentful and thus allow Schoolteacher to reestablish his legal dominion over Sethe and her family. If we are to read Morrison's engagement with the Bible as oppositional, as I encourage, it requires embracing a view of grace as something that one encounters most fully in action. It seems to me, then, that the disconnect between the community and the contract that they accept in the clearing encourages us to engage Mitchell's notion that *Beloved* asks that its characters, and by extension its readers, analyze freedom. In light of the legal restraints placed on those most immediately impacted by law's force, we would do well in our analysis to extend to them the grace bound up in the imaginative acts of criticism that we as scholars engage. My emphasis on treating

the call as an expression of law and philosophy attempts to encourage a reading of *Beloved* that fully realizes the agency which I believe Morrison sought to give these characters and, by extension, the novel's readers. If we are to take seriously Morrison's claim that it is often only through the critical imagination that we can address that which overwhelms or challenges our ability to comprehend trauma and injury and what that means for our political, economic and cultural practices, it would seem that reading *Beloved* warrants deciphering the novel's connections to the history of ideas that the state continually rewrites to perpetuate its dominance. I want, then, to consider the imagination from another angle using Wheatley's poem, included as an epigraph for this section, to consider the significance of the imagination in relationship to what I identify as Baby Suggs's new law and new contract.

As the excerpt from Phyllis Wheatley's poem "On Imagination" asserts, the imagination grants sovereignty. Baby Suggs's sermon, with its emphasis on the imagination, should be read as "laying down the law." She reminds the community that if they do not imagine it, they will not have it. Her statement carries the same preventive character that laws depend upon, for breaking laws disturbs the general peace and tranquility of the nation. Claiming freedom requires that the individual—"a fraction" of the community or "the whole" of that nation—submit to the imagination as "the sovereign ruler" and "leader of the mental train" whose "works are wrought in a full perfection" previously "unseen." Under this law, reconfiguring the "parts" that are separated and valued individually on the auction block and configuring the "whole" "body" anew (with a new understanding of its merits) enables Africans to protect their property—even if only psychically and for a time.

Read either purely as sermon or as law, the thrust of Baby Suggs's call is, I argue, to repair "the...human element forgotten in the translation of life into law" (Troutt 1). Baby Suggs's contract places the onus on the community to repair their bodies and minds rather than waiting for Divine or legal intervention. At the same time, it points out the flaws inherent to a law that does not fulfill the true purpose of a social contract: to protect the most valuable form of property, human life. Imagining grace is the law and also its transgression. The transgression, as I will argue, is not Sethe's infanticide, but rather the community's failure to imagine grace for themselves and, most importantly, for Sethe. Knowing when to say enough cannot be the only saving grace of a community, because that limitation is arbitrary and reflective of slavery's insistence on granting the least of everything to African Americans. Morrison's emphasis on the imagination as the site of liberation in this text encourages us to revise the "customary way of perceiving the world" and suggests that "transcending dualism is one ideal, imaginable route beyond our culturally ingrained and religiously sanctioned sexism, racism, and other self-narrowing dogmas" such as law (Lepow 364). I would not want to suggest that this imaginative work exists without its challenges, for it should be obvious that the viability of the imagination in this text relies on the cooperation of the community to imagine grace in the most critical of moments.

Sethe's ability to "put [her] babies where they would be safe" is an imaginative act that responds to the community's failure to do so, not only for her but ultimately for themselves (Morrison 164). The community's response highlights the danger that accompanied freedom—the lingering psychic effects of slavery. This danger was not

only manifested in the political and economic practices that sustained the social and class hierarchy, but a power that, although it was less visible, was no less lethal. The community's failure to fulfill its contractual obligation to imagine grace reveals the significance of "the complicated psychic power that one had to exercise to resist devastation" (Morrison, *Rediscovering Black History*, 17). The bodily and psychic injuries that slavery created may resist our best efforts at repair or healing, as Baby Suggs reveals in her decision to retire to her bed after the community rejects her.

*This is a struggle that we cannot lose,  
for in the very making of it we will discover,  
if nothing else, ourselves.*

*The Debt*, Randall Robinson

*Scary things not always on the outside.*

*Paradise*, Toni Morrison

### **Returning Ancient Property: We Our Best Thing**

I have suggested that the community's fugitive existence mirrored their experience of justice in the U.S. For the slave, there was no legal space between free and enslaved, and thus freedom was often indistinguishable and always imperiled, as at any moment he/she could be "moved around like checkers...rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen, or seized" (23). In *Beloved*, grace is understood as the state or experience of being free to lay claim to the self and constituted ancient property. Imagining grace becomes far more complicated than the signifiers; it is the freedom to sing, dance, laugh, express, and claim the gamut of human emotions freely that Baby Suggs uses in her call for grace.

Morrison, Randall, and Yamamoto converge here for me, as they all point out that the process of imagining grace, read here as a form of reparations, becomes challenged by the community's internalization of the protocols of slavery. As Morrison suggests, it is the fear instilled within the slave's body that he/she must work against in order to create a healthy relationship with his/her community. If that does not happen, as Yamamoto suggests, the entire community may in fact become more damaged than before. Imagining grace, despite what the phrasing may suggest with regards to tone and religious connotation, is indeed a struggle that potentially breaks those who attempt it.

Articulated largely in economic terms, the contemporary pursuit of reparations focuses less attention on the psychic and spiritual reparations. In many ways, the pursuit of reparations is quintessentially American, in that it shares the tendency of America to express itself through powerful pecuniary metaphors—streets of gold or land of opportunities. For this reason we cannot dismiss the monetary component of reparations because it does speak to structural changes that need to occur in both the nation and in African American communities today. Reading *Beloved* as a text in conversation with the discussion of monetary reparations suggests that the psychic aspect is perhaps more critical; for, as Morrison reminds us, it is the inside that threatens us most powerfully.

In *Beloved*, Sethe and Baby Suggs perhaps announce most clearly that reparations are not primarily about money. We are challenged to find any suggestion in the text that having more money would allow Sethe to imagine “a better life” that was more than an exercise in “keeping the past at bay” (42). One of the novel's

values lies in its exploration of the often unacknowledged or unspoken psychic needs of African American communities in the twenty-first century that are deeply connected to the history of slavery in the United States. The novel asks that we contemplate in the contemporary moment the status of our freedom in a nation that refuses to acknowledge and claim its culpability in injuring African Americans. Perhaps, then, it is inevitable that some African Americans employ the calculus of slavery to describe their needs.

If anything, contemporary pursuits of reparation reject the logic of “too much” or “knowing when to stop” to which the community in *Beloved* adhered to its detriment. Freedom and/or liberation are fraught pursuits because they demand that the individual, and in this case the community, learn how to merge “the new self and an ancient self” (Robinson 13). Focusing on history makes the merger or reconstruction, which Robinson points out as necessary, possible. In her call, Baby Suggs emphasizes individual body parts, telling the community that they must love the parts, but she also insists that they must reassemble the parts to make a complete body. Equally important, though implicit rather than explicit in her call, is the need to carry out the same reconstruction on the psychic level, as the recently freed or new self carries the scars and residues of slavery while the ancient self exists *a priori* to social/racial contracts; it is a self that naturally exists in a state of equality. The difficulty of merging these two selves constitutes the more challenging work of claiming the self that Sethe expresses when she reflects on her decision to flee Sweet Home. We must, then, turn our attention to the community’s response and to Schoolteacher, rather than to Sethe’s response.

Sethe escapes Sweet Home knowing full well that she will soon deliver the child she carries. Her insistence on enacting her escape even after the original plan was discovered and punished—Sethe is raped and beaten—indicates Sethe’s rejection of slavery’s force. In other words, she was already imagining grace for herself and her children. The infanticide could have occurred without the hacksaw; most often, women simply “threw away” their children during the Middle Passage. I argue against reading the infanticide in the ways that supporters of slavery saw it then, namely, as evidence of Sethe’s inhumanity. Protecting her children through legally and culturally recognized channels was neither a right nor a luxury that Sethe possessed.

As Morrison suggests in Sethe’s response to Paul D, it is moot to insist that there had to be another way for her to free and claim her children from slavery. The celebration that Stamp Paid initiates does more than celebrate Sethe’s escape. The celebration elevates it as a particularly amazing example of imagining grace and enacting grace on one’s own behalf. For this celebration, the community punishes Baby Suggs, for they read the celebration as excessive and “it made them furious... [they] whispered to each other in the yards about fat rats, doom and uncalled-for pride” (137). Their response constitutes the transgression of Baby Suggs’s law, which was designed to protect the community, and it speaks explicitly to Morrison’s suggestion that “scary things not always on the outside, most scary things inside” (39). In *Beloved*, the “outside” operates multivalently: outside is outside of the community that they have created, and outside also signifies the visible attributes of some form that threatens or invokes fear. However, the inside can often be equally

ominous. In *Beloved*, the community's negative response to the celebration enables Schoolteacher to reclaim Sethe. The community's response to Baby Suggs's "pride" indicates that the something scary that lurks inside in effect keeps the community shackled.

The community's complicity in Schoolteacher's attempt to reclaim Sethe suggests that they accept "that he knows the value of everything" (228). We can only speculate that pride does not make the list of human characteristics that Schoolteacher sought to produce in the novel. The celebration is neither excessive nor evidence of having too much pride. It is rather the celebratory expression of imagining grace, an expression that the community initially embraced. It is then, the residues of slavery that leave the community fearful and resentful of any display of pride. They identify Baby Suggs as having too much pride; as the community suggests that she thinks of herself as God, "loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave"(137). The community reneges on their new social contract, which sought to remove racist assumptions about the constitutive elements of personhood and the distribution of rights and privileges. Their response does not diminish Baby Suggs's call, but rather demonstrates their fear and the difficulty of identifying themselves as active agent on their own behalves. The celebration which angers them so profoundly was not the singular work of Baby Suggs but a communal project in which they all participated. Their cooperation with Schoolteacher's return affirms the values in his ledger, values that rob the community of their "ancient properties"—their bodies and their imagination, their agency. Here it is helpful to recall Baby Suggs's initial response to her own freedom—"it scared her."



The community's emphasis on quantifying the joy and pride that comes with freedom evidences the internalization of fear and its power to shape external expressions of affirmation. Thus, it is the community's internalized sense that they are not suppose to have too much pride, if any at all, and not Sethe that reinforces the law's disregard for and violence toward African Americans. Ironically, "the potent pride of mistreatment"—the scary thing that lurks inside the community—is what prohibits them from imagining and practicing a form of pride that would protect them from further mistreatment (96).

Finally, we should look to Sethe's description of purchasing Beloved's headstone, which becomes the ultimate act of sacrifice. Sethe trades her body to inscribe Beloved's name on the headstone, believing "that should be enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust" (5). Baby Suggs's call for the community to imagine grace for itself will not manifest in reparation of the community unless they release themselves from the consequences of having been enslaved. The community's rejection of pride as a valuable and logical response to securing freedom for themselves is a consequence of their having been enslaved and injured in the process. The community itself articulate the success of dehumanizing people, for they do not believe that they are entitled to pride, whether excessive or moderate in its expression.

Sethe's theft of property—her children—and the subsequent destruction of that property, as she makes her most dramatic claim to herself and to motherhood, constitutes a transgression of official law. The more vexing transgression of law occurs because Sethe apparently acts outside of the community's understanding of

what imagining and enacting grace for itself means. Sethe's claims are incommensurate with the community's understanding of freedom. The community must, then, not only account for Sethe's actions but their own culpability in creating an environment in which one of its members believed that the only way to imagine grace for herself and her children was to murder them.

Part of imagining grace requires the community not only to agree that doing so is a valuable endeavor, but also to embrace the irreversibility of their experience of slavery. They cannot undo what has been done to them in the past; they can only promise to each other a shared future where they will, by imagining grace, make sure such transgressions do not reoccur.<sup>35</sup> In other words, mercy and forgiveness are integral parts of what it means to imagine grace. If such imagining is to produce justice for the community, justice that is self-created and upheld "[must] arise from the manifest intention of other persons to act for [the collective] good" (Rawls 494).<sup>36</sup> My reading of the community's response does not intend to blame the victims of slavery, but rather resists indicting Sethe for using the same flawed discourses that justified her enslavement.

Sethe's impulse to protect her children is instructive, not in its violence, but for what that impulse reveals about the significance of memory in the text where the past, present, and future collapse. Sethe's experience of "unslaved life" is only twenty-eight days.<sup>37</sup> The newness of the experience cannot be underestimated, not simply because it indicates a heightened awareness of the potential to be returned to

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<sup>35</sup> See Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*

<sup>36</sup> See Yung-Hsing-Wu's "Doing Things with Ethics: *Beloved* and *Sula*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49.4 (2003) 780-805.

<sup>37</sup> See Sadiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection; Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*.

slavery, but because it alerts us to the challenges of learning how to be free and what freedom actually means. We should extend this consideration to the community that ultimately must confront their own pasts.

The critical mass of women from the community who gather to create a plan to save Sethe reveals more than the decision to reincorporate Sethe into the community. During the meeting and even more powerfully afterwards, various women from the community remember and claim their own experiences with slavery, histories so unspeakable and shameful that they cannot appreciate the significance of self-pride and celebration that Baby Suggs extended to them in the clearing. Ella emerges as a critical figure during this meeting. She, too, is an example of Morrison's old black woman as law and transgression in this instance. Of Ella the narrator says, "nobody loved her and she wouldn't have liked it if they did, for she considered love a serious liability. Ella spent her puberty enslaved by a father and son whom she called "the lowest yet," for they abused her so profoundly that she cannot imagine love (257). She too commits infanticide when she rejects the child that comes from this abuse. The narrative is significant not only for what this memory/incident demonstrates about the horrors to which African American women were subjected under slavery, but also for how that experience seems to shape Ella's perception of love. The narrator suggests that Ella's disdain for love is in fact a disdain for herself and the experiences that she has been forced to endure. Her disdain also highlights the difficulty of "embrac[ing] paradigms of freedom when one is still chained to the old paradigm with its language of bondage" (Mitchell 4). Offered as a representation of the various forms of violence that slavery visited upon females, we can begin to

understand the difficulty of embracing the contract that Suggs offers. Ella is certainly not guilty of having too much pride, but rather of having too little. We learn that Ella's transformation influences the community, particularly the women who gather at her home to discuss the matter. Though she remains convinced that Sethe demonstrated excessive pride, she rejects the "past taking possession of the present" (256). Ella does not forget the past, but insists on relationship with the past that does not constitute an "invasion" of the past into the present (257).

Morrison provides Ella's male counterpart in the character of Stamp Paid, who like Ella also knew "that anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind...dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who were and couldn't think it up anymore" (251). Stamp Paid derives his name from his sense of having paid all possible debts in capitulating to the demands of his wife Vashti. She demands that he not retaliate against their master for repeatedly raping her. His sense of having paid all his debts contributes to his forgetfulness of his own pain and suffering as well as that of Baby Suggs, for whom he professes a great love. It is Stamp Paid who reveals to Paul D that Sethe killed Beloved. Part of this forgetting then manifests itself in petty jealousy, which allows members of the community to place their experiences on a hierarchy of suffering. Because Baby Suggs was purchased out of slavery, some in the community neglected to remember that, like them, she too suffered the brutality of slavery. No one escapes the debts produced by slavery.

It is their lapse in memory or their refusal to remember that allows them to collectively disregard their agreement to imagine grace. Their forgetfulness,

combined with Sethe's refusal to forget the horrors she recently escaped, renders Baby Suggs disinterested "in leaving life or living it...she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color" (4). Baby Suggs, although less adamant about grace, nonetheless engages the problem that challenges the community even after they are "free," color—race.

Sethe then symbolically takes up Baby Suggs's role as the marker of law and its transgression in the community, and thus when women come "for Sethe it was if the clearing had come to her" (261). I read this scene not as being Sethe's reincorporation into the community, as other scholars have, but as the community's belated expression of what they were contractually obligated to do because of the contract "signed" in the clearing. The women who come, singing spirituals, to Sethe embody both the divine and distinctly human potential that is bound up in imagining grace.

### **Beyond Heroes and Gods**

In working toward closure of this chapter, I want to make clear that I am offering Sethe neither as a hero nor as evidence of the success of imagining grace, nor do I fault the community for being cowardly or petty. Instead, I offer that the interaction between signatories, who, as the novel demonstrates, were less than clear about what the new law and contract entailed, marks the difficulty of pursuing the multiple repairs necessary for communities "to generate futures together rather than navigate or survive them" (Brown 4). Sethe and the community do illuminate for themselves and the reader that reparations for injuries and losses sustained in and

through the practice of racist laws may be at the least disturbing and, at the worse, deeply unfulfilling.

It is Paul D and Denver who return Sethe to herself. Sethe's status as a self-claimed woman is left ambiguous as the text ends. She responds to Paul D's insistence that she is her own best thing with uncertainty, asking, "me, me?" as opposed to accepting "me" as fact. I cannot argue that Sethe has been repaired, but rather that she must begin anew the work of imagining grace for herself. Claiming the freed self, as Sethe observes early on in the text, is the more difficult work for her and ultimately the community.

Given that historically the legal standing of African Americans has often been largely unstable, discerning what freedom means is a perennial task and speaks to the significance of the contemporary reparations discourse. Published in 1987, *Beloved* reminds us that slavery's violence [is] ongoing and constitutive of the unfinished project of freedom" (Best and Hartman 2). The difficulty of this project is announced through two characters at the end of the text, Mr. Bodwin and Paul D. Reflecting on his work as an abolitionist, Mr. Bodwin says, "what remains is the sludge of ill will; dashed hopes and difficulties beyond repair. [A] tranquil Republic? [W]ell, not in his lifetime" (260). Morrison, through Bodwin, suggests that slavery and its aftermath will continue to disturb the peace for a long time to come. Mr. Bodwin's reflection on the future of the United States as a multi-racial society becomes eerily salient for the contemporary reader, especially in light of the very public and often vitriolic debate about monetary reparations for slavery. Bodwin's reflection on the future of reparations for racial injury are all the more critical if we take into account that at

least some of the community members believe that the Bodwins hated slavery only slightly more than they hated black people. The community's awareness of this fine distinction speaks to their awareness of the tensions surrounding political struggles for racial equality. Abolishing slavery, as history reveals, does not mean abolishing cultural beliefs about the status of those racially marked as black.

Reparations discourse and demands for justice for slavery in the twenty-first century announce a particularly frustrating political and socio-economic recognition—that the full equality and freedom that allow one to appreciate and exercise to the fullest the social, economic and political opportunities remains elusive for vast numbers of African Americans. Previous legal pursuits of reparations, both explicit and implicit, in the forms of various social programs, laws, and Constitutional amendments, announce in melancholy terms that law has been and will likely continue to be of limited use in ameliorating the African American's hurtful experience. Apparently it will remain up to the injured to repair themselves the best they can.

This discussion/reflection does not negate the advances that African Americans have made because of law, but rather acknowledges the reality of the intersection of culture and law. Culturally, we still depend on race and racial history to understand and justify existing injuries and inequities. Culture and law have a symbiotic relationship, and thus any investment in race, particularly whiteness, as Mills' racial/social contract reveals, extends that investment into other arenas. Indeed, as Paellman's lawsuit and other research reveals, the ledgers of major corporations in the U.S. evidence that slavery was an economic boon.

These revelations have perhaps piqued the national memory, but the resistance encountered to moving beyond remembering and acknowledging slavery's critical role in the formation of the nation and toward repairing the injuries sustained by African Americans is both deliberate and powerful. That resistance reminds us that working for reparations is fundamentally about more than the unjust enrichment of corporations and the national economy through the withholding of slave wages. The legal pursuit of reparations has lost sight of something more in the conversation: the clamor of loss, grief, and the untoward claims that these experiences make on all of us. That thought brings me to Paul D's conversation with Sethe at the end of the novel. He tells her that "we need some kind of tomorrow" and that "[we] are our best thing" (274). The future and its protection sit at the center of Baby Suggs's call/social contract. *Beloved's* ending poses a disturbing question that speaks powerfully to the contemporary pursuit of reparations: "what [makes us] think [our] fingernails could open locks the rain rained on?" (275). The nation's legal arena is locked. It may well be impossible to persuade the law, which ultimately reflects the collective will of the people, to identify itself as the source of injury and to repair itself. As Baby Suggs reminds Denver in a conversation that reiterates what imagining grace ultimately allows one to do:

*Denver:* But you said there was no defense.

*Baby Suggs:* There ain't.

*Denver:* Then what do I do?

*Baby Suggs:* Know it, and go on out...Go on. (244)



*Beloved*, with its older and younger women who are both the law and its transgression, suggests that justice may only come for those whom the nation has historically disavowed, by doing what Baby Suggs directed in the clearing, namely imagining grace anew.

In the chapter that follows, I continue the exploration of the potential that imagining grace carries for fictional communities and how such communities might aid activists and scholars as they work through what meaningful reparations entails outside of purely monetary payments. Gaines and Morrison share a preoccupation with history, particularly the ways that race and its life in the practice of law inflicts violence on African American communities.

## **Chapter 5: Reparative Lessons About Fighting Back: The Death-Bound Subject in Ernest Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying***

*If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying but fighting back!*

“If We Must Die,” Claude McKay

*How can you measure the life of a woman or a man?  
In truths that she learned or in times that he cried  
In bridges he burned or the way that s/he died?*

“Seasons of Love,” Jonathan Larson

*We die... But we do language.  
That may be the measure of our lives.*

Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison

### **Introduction**

Set on a plantation in rural Louisiana in the late 1940s, *A Lesson Before Dying* presents an African American community's response to the law's negative influence on their lives. Jefferson, one of the protagonists, finds himself accused of a murder that he did not commit; however, because of lingering racism, a jury of all white men finds Jefferson guilty of the crime and sentences him to death by execution.

Jefferson's grandmother, Miss Emma, is devastated when, in an effort to save Jefferson's life, the court-appointed attorney calls Jefferson “a hog.” He asks for the

court's mercy in light of Jefferson's non-personhood. In response to this offense and the final verdict, Miss Emma enlists the help of her longtime friend, Tante Lou and her grandson Grant, who is the local "colored" teacher, to teach Jefferson that, despite the law's refusal to acknowledge his personhood, he is a man and must face his execution as a man.

Using her relationship with her former employer, Mr. Pichot, Miss Emma requests that Pichot exercise his influence on his brother-in-law, Sheriff Pichot, to secure visitation rights for Grant. Tasked with transforming Jefferson into a man, Grant must teach the lessons before dying; however Grant's personal ambivalences and frustrations with racism have rendered him an ineffectual teacher for his own pupils. Grant then rejects the task; however, Tante Lou forces him to accept. Ultimately, Jefferson and Grant teach each other lessons about manhood, lessons about their humanity, lessons about living.

Evaluating the life of men and women is both difficult and subjective, as the above epigraph suggests, for there is always the tension between individual and group politics and the responses such politics produce. How one negotiates challenges becomes one way to measure our lives; however, in *A Lesson Before Dying* these negotiations carry more significance as they ultimately impact how the African American community will be measured in the future. Where the actual legal discourse hovers in the background of Morrison's *Beloved*, Gaines makes the presence of law and its violence painfully obvious for both the novel's characters and readers. Law is the inescapable force that continually threatens to injure African American communities. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Gaines identifies the intersection of law as

an official expression of national politics and as a cultural expression of local beliefs and values and the politics they influence; in doing so, Gaines accounts for the historical underpinning of African Americans' adversarial relationship with the law and its cultural influences. The putative lessons, I argue, are less about dying and more about learning how to claim one's life in the face of the overwhelming possibility of dying violently and unjustly. These lessons might then provide a way of avoiding such death or, at the very least, make possible claiming that death as one's own. Like *Beloved*, *A Lesson Before Dying* turns on a community's ability to imagine grace for itself. Such imagining becomes one means of transgressing the law for the African American community in Gaines's novel.

In light of these features of Gaines's text, I continue to explore the challenges that African American communities face as they attempt to image grace for themselves in response to legalist discourse, discourse that repeatedly insists that African Americans are owed neither legal standing nor redress for historical wrongs. Gaines, like Morrison, subordinates the individual interest to the preservation of the community; in doing so, he too insists that reparations cannot be achieved in isolation, but rather must be procured through the communal adoption of strategies and visions that restore and repair the injured spirit and psyche.

I begin by responding to critical treatments of Gaines's novel as one that engages in motivated signifying, an effort to revise Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Gaines has rejected this interpretation. His objection notwithstanding, *A Lesson Before Dying* does invoke the protest tradition in African American literature. Reading Gaines' novel relative to Claude McKay's militant poem "If We Must Die"

helps illuminate the complications that attend to fighting against racism. Gaines, like McKay, urges African Americans to fight back; the difference, however, lies in how one struggles. In *A Lesson*, Tanta Lou, Miss Emma, and Vivian, like Baby Suggs and Sethe from *Beloved*, represent the law and its transgression within their community.

The three women's responses to Jefferson's death sentence and their interest in the way that Jefferson faces his death speak to their understanding of the relationship between race, racism and death. These women apprehend what I identify as the correlation between Mill's racial contract and JanMohamed's death contract. Jefferson's and Grant's response to the verdict reveals their "comportment, attitudes, and actions, [and reflect] the dangers of acquiescing to both contracts' terms (JanMohammed 2). The three women teach Grant so that he can in turn teach more effectively not only the death-bound Jefferson, but his other students as well. Together they help Grant understand that teaching Jefferson is crucial, as it will not only affirm Jefferson's humanity but become a measure of the entire community's humanity. Through this dynamic, in which an initially small group instructs an individual who will then go on to instruct the larger group, Gaines identifies the ways in which lessons and strategies for making reparations of all types might be pursued in fictional and perhaps even "real" African American communities.

### **Writing to "Crack Us Open:" Gaines and Morrison**

In their introduction to Gaines's latest work, *Mozart and Leadbelly*, Marcia Gaudet and Reggie Long note that *A Lesson Before Dying* "became an instant classic and a text that has been adopted and read by dozens of cities across the county" (xiv).

Gaines's interest in history has been noted by critics and others such as the MacArthur Foundation. In 1993 the foundation awarded Gaines a grant in part because of his writings of "rare historical resonance" (Vintage Reading Group). Further evidence of Gaines' interest in history, as well as indication of why I include Morrison and Gaines in this study, comes from Gaines's observation that "we are all naïve about the true history of blacks in this country...we don't have the story of the average black person" (Lowe 253). Gaines's interest in ordinary African Americans and their struggles aims to "crack readers open." Gaines scholar Darrell Bourque offers this image to describe the potential of great art in an interview with Gaines.

Borque's response comes in part from a conversation about Gaines's readers. He shared with Bourque that he has encountered many readers who find reading his fictional treatments of history and its ordinary black folks not only historically illuminating, but also life-altering. These encounters are significant, especially in light of this project's arguments, because these readers feel that their lives have been changed; perhaps such change will shape their future interactions with and decisions about ordinary black folk. Bourque ascribes such response to Gaines's work because, in his words, Gaines illuminates the "sacredness in the everyday life" (140). Here, I believe, Morrison's and Gaines's work intersects productively, for in identifying sacredness, we might also then identify grace in the providence of human endeavor. Writing about history and its impacts on African Americans become one way of pursuing the grace posited in their fiction as reparative beyond the parameters of the novel. The public exchanges between Gaines, Morrison, and their readers seem to counter poststructuralism's declaration that the author is dead. When Oprah poses a

question about his intended audience, Gaines replies, “I create characters with character to improve my own character and the character of the person who might read it” (Gaines 144). Gaines’ candid response speaks to the non-literary and non-musical influences on his work—“watching everyday people” (143). In the case of Gaines and Morrison, we do well to attend to their influence on readers as well as the influences that might influence their literary productions.

*Writing for me is discovery.*

Ernest Gaines

### **Beyond Influence**<sup>38</sup>

*A Lesson Before Dying* has not received the same critical attention as Morrison’s *Beloved*.<sup>39</sup> Existing criticism of Gaines’ novel focuses on masculinity, religion, and, in light of Jefferson’s incarceration and execution, African Americans’ disproportionate representation within the prison industrial complex. Critics consistently read *A Lesson Before Dying* as a revision of Wright’s *Native Son*.

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<sup>38</sup>Many critics have invoked Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, Henry Louis Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey*, or Deborah McDowell’s *The Changing Same* as theoretical texts that shed light on Gaines’ literary relationship to Richard Wright. Of particular interest is Madelyn Jablon’s chapter “Revision, Dialogism, and Intertextuality” in *Black Metafiction: Self Consciousness in African American Literature* (Iowa City: UP Iowa, 1997), 81-111. Jablon adds to the discussion of influence by bringing Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism to bear on Gaines’ text. She argues that Bakhtin’s attention to the social and historical dimensions of language contribute generatively to Gaines’ use of language in the text.

<sup>39</sup>Gaines has been fortunate that his work has been brought to the attention of the American public and placed in the company of other exceptional American writers. In September 1997 Oprah’s Book Club selected *A Lesson Before Dying*. The selection certainly helped bring attention and financial success to the writer; it is hoped that the novel’s exposure will increase the accompanying critical discourse and move the text and author beyond the realm of regional writing and writing that is primarily concerned with the condition of African American men.

Literary critic Keith Clarke argues that the “umbilical cord linking” Ernest Gaines to Richard Wright and Ellison is undeniable.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, *A Lesson Before Dying* does seem to be a re(w)ri(gh)ting of Wright’s *Native Son*; however, Gaines denies this literary affiliation, saying that “*Native Son* would not have had an influence on me, had I read it” (Gaudet and Wooton 36). He remarks that the urban setting of *Native Son* was one with which he was unfamiliar and thus is inauthentic in terms of his own literary imagination.

Responding to Gaines’ disavowal with suspicion, critic Madelyn Jablon argues that it “seems suspect when one examines *A Lesson Before Dying* [, which] reads like a detailed response to the positions set forth by Richard Wright” (88). Though *The Invisible Man* is not technically a protest novel, Gaines also distances his work from Ellison’s work. Gaines complains that “there is too much damn thinking going on all the time. There is thinking in every goddamned sentence” (Gaudet and Wooton 13). Gaines’s text, however, is no less cerebral; as readers and critics we encounter Gaines’s thoughtful and thought-provoking characters through many voices, as opposed to the traditional single African American male voice that defines the traditional African American male protest novel.

Interestingly, Gaines cites Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Gertrude Stein, Jean Toomer and other canonical American writers as an influence. Karen Carmean notes that Gaines’s literary influences “can be traced to the kind of instruction he received” (15). Of particular interest for this project, in light of the

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<sup>40</sup> Clarke includes James Baldwin and August Wilson as part of this family in *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest Gaines and August Wilson*.



challenges that accompany imagining grace, is Gaines' appreciation of Ernest Hemingway. Gaines says of Hemingway,

Hemingway was writing more about blacks than he was really about whites when he was using the grace under pressure theme.... He usually puts his people in a moment where they must have grace under pressure, and I've often looked at black life, not only as a moment of, but more as something constant, everyday (Carmean 15).

Gaines' identification of what Toni Morrison identifies as the Africanist presence in American fiction marks yet another point of intersection between the two authors.

Morrison, however, is perhaps more critical of Hemingway's uses of African Americans, for she observes that traditional treatments of Hemingway's work "see no excitement or meaning in the tropes of darkness, sexuality, and desire...no connection between God's grace and Africanist 'othering'" (Morrison 14). That Gaines and Morrison identify grace and "blackness" in Hemingway, even as they register different readings of that presence, marks a critical continuity and awareness about the ways in which the trope of whiteness/whites finds its meaning in relationship to blackness/African Americans in their work. For Gaines, it also indicates a critical awareness about racial America's discourse and the need to challenge that discourse, an awareness that secures his place, regardless of his disavowal, within the literary patrimony of Wright and Ellison.

Gaines' rejection of the literary fraternity initiated by Wright and Ellison constitutes an attempt to resist the protest label and bring visibility to African American men. Thus, Gaines offers a novel in which "protest does not constitute a

ready-made answer” (Fabre 120). Compared to Wright’s *Bigger*, Thomas, Jefferson and Grant might be interpreted as capitulating to the demands of the dominant culture for non-threatening African American men in America. Nowhere is this demand more evident than in legalist discourse, one that Gaines subverts in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Jefferson and Grant, the two African American male protagonists, reflect the protest tradition. Their protest, however, is not militant but rather quietly internal, largely because the court’s verdict transforms the threat of death into a soon-to-be-reality. Nonetheless, their protest carries reparative potential, as I argue later in this chapter.

A careful reading of *A Lesson Before Dying* reveals that protest carried out through life-affirming lessons that reject the state’s education, which is seemingly designed to insure the death of African Americans, should be done stealthily. Gaines’s multiple narrators, then, allow him to “foreground black men’s spiritual and psychic journeys” without sacrificing the input of the communities from which they emerge (Clark 72). In light of these innovations to the protest tradition, the question of whether *A Lesson Before Dying* is in fact a re(w)ri(gh)ting of *Native Son* or a rejection of the protest tradition no longer offers a particularly generative line of inquiry. Instead, attending to the ways that Gaines’s protagonists in *A Lesson Before Dying* embrace the potential of their death promises a fuller appreciation of Gaines’s lessons about dying.

In addition to the debate about the protest tradition as an influence on Gaines, critics have noted geography as a significant influence on Gaines’s fiction. Gaines has been very forthcoming about the influence of his childhood experiences on the ways he conceptualizes community in his novels. Gaines’ ongoing references to growing

up in rural Louisiana on the River Lake Plantation (now simply called River Lake) have placed his work in the restrictive category of regional writing.<sup>41</sup> Limiting Gaines's work to the category of regionalist, however, discourages exploration of his work within the broader African American and American literary canon. The so-called regional nature of Gaines's writing has generated ample critical attention to Gaines's emphasis on folk culture. Gaines's interest in folk traditions, particularly his use of multivocality in his work, reflects what he recalls from his childhood—people sitting on porches telling stories. Additionally, Gaines has suggested that his own impetus for writing, as my epigraph notes, is discovery. He goes on to say, "I want to discover, as you, the reader discover what it is all about" (62). Such discovery work becomes evident, particularly in his male protagonists in *A Gathering of Old Men* and *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Gaines's men do not attempt to inhabit a traditionally white masculinity that Gaines implies is degraded and degrading. His male protagonists do, however, aspire to a humanity that allows them to construct a masculine identity that affirms rather than rejects and violates the community from which they emerge. Gaines's men, like Morrison's Paul D, not only desire to gather the pieces of themselves but also desire to put their stories next to those of other African American men and women. Clark's observation that Gaines's literature resists the boundaries of categories such as naturalism, realism, regionalism, and protest literature is generative. Gaines's appeal for this project is his appropriation of the characteristics of these categories, which he reworks into a narrative that allows readers to identify the complexity of racialized

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<sup>41</sup>See, for example, Gaines' 2003 interview with Rose Anne Brister in *Callaloo*, "The Last Regionalist?"

experience and the residues it leaves on African American communities as the imperative for receiving instruction on fighting race and racism that can be passed on to future generations.

*A Lesson Before Dying*, then, is more than a schematic for reconstructing African American masculinity; the larger lesson of Gaines's text insists that fighting against racism requires African American men and women together, which in light of the longstanding influence of patriarchal black power movements, renders Gaines's call revolutionary. Jeffrey Folks argues that Gaines's metaphor of education, particularly "the teachers who must learn," speaks to a type of dynamic work required to escape the "enslaving myth based on past events" (Folks 71-72). Gaines's novel offers us more than a lesson on the nuances of signifying; in light of this project's interest in contemporary pursuits of reparations, it provides a lesson on the significance of fighting injustice, even when that fight is seemingly futile. Gaines's text suggests that the law's violence toward African Americans complicates their ability to appeal to the nation's courts for reparations.

Accordingly, the novel insists that law continues to create the need for reparations articulated through Jefferson's trial and speaks to, I believe, the current interest in reparations. Given the court's inability to or refusal to identify and treat African Americans as humans, Gaines's novel suggests that African Americans must not depend upon or even expect the nation's courts to respond justly to the types of claims that issue forth from pursuing reparations. In mapping some of the influences on Gaines's literary production, I identify what Jon Christian Suggs reminds us about African American literature: its persistent interest in African Americans' legal status.

My goal here is neither to affirm nor to belabor the intertextual patrimony between *A Lesson Before Dying*, *Native Son*, and *Invisible Man*, as this argument has already been convincingly made in other scholarly treatments of Gaines' novel. Instead, I want to consider another African American text symbolic of the protest tradition, Claude McKay's "If We Must Die." Reading McKay's poem with *A Lesson Before Dying* sheds light on the nuanced meaning of fighting back contemporarily when African Americans remain "pressed to the walls, dying" as McKay's poem powerfully notes. I did not find evidence that suggests that either Gaines or his critics identify an intertextual link to McKay's poem. Such an omission springs from the fact that McKay's work has not been identified as a part of the literary patrimony that links Wright, Ellison, and Gaines in the twentieth century. In fact, it has only been recently, with the resurgence of interest in the Harlem Renaissance as a transnational movement, that McKay's work has been scrutinized more closely.<sup>42</sup> I want, then, to pursue a reading of Gaines's text with McKay's poem as a means of furthering our engagement with Gaines's text through death, which McKay's poem announces as both possible and inevitable in the poem's titular statement. Further, Gaines's novel and McKay's poem do not offer representations of fighting back that result in the deaths of African American women, which is one of the perennial criticisms of *Native Son*.

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42 See for example, Michelle Stephens's article "Black Transnationalism and the Politics of National Identity: West Indian Intellectuals in Harlem in the Age of War and Revolution" in *American Quarterly* 50.3 (1998) 592-608, and John Lowney's article "Haiti and Black Transnationalism: Remapping the Migrant Geography of Home to Harlem" in *African American Review* 34. 3 (2000) 413-429. See also Brent Edwards' *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003.

McKay's poem announces an unabashedly confrontational new Negro male, who will not submit to the types of violence that have permeated African Americans' lives and manifested in treatment that rendered them like hogs or other beasts.<sup>43</sup> Though the poem's "we" is a male we, its tone is communal and it does not provide evidence of misogyny. That the poem emerges in the wake of the summer of 1919, known as Red Summer for the number of lynchings that occurred, strengthens the poem's sense of urgency in its call to fight back like men. In fighting back like men the fighter's deaths will mark them as noble. While Gaines's text distances itself from the explicitly Black nationalist celebration of African American masculinity, he does embrace the idea that fighting back constitutes a viable means for transforming the lives of those destined to die by direct interaction with the nation's legal apparatus. Additionally, Gaines addresses other sources of suffering and death as he identifies the educational systems that undereducate African Americans. As a result, African Americans become little more than beasts of burden. *A Lesson Before Dying*, in the context of this study, constitutes an example of reparations that are self-made, particularly in the arena of education. Such work then leads to the possibility of restoring the individual and the community. In the text, this restoration begins by rejecting the court's designation of Jefferson as a hog and their insistence on executing him with this identity intact.

### **Rethinking Death**

Increasingly, scholars of African American literary and cultural studies are engaging in what Abdul JanMohammed identifies in *The Death-Bound-Subject*:

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<sup>43</sup> See Blount, Marcellus. "Caged Birds: Race and Gender in the Sonnet." *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism*, ed. Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden. New York: Routledge, 1990. 225-238.

*Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (2005), as a "somewhat submerged tradition within African American literature and culture that continually and systematically meditates on the effectivity of the threat of death as a form of coercion" (JanMohammed 12). JanMohammed notes that we all possess the overwhelming knowledge of our own eventual death, but the specific circumstances in which this death is likely to occur for African Americans, namely by violence, make that knowledge all the more troublesome. Karla Holloway in *Passing: African American Mourning Stories, A Memorial* posits that for African American men and women "some notion of racial memory and racial realization is mediated through the veil of death" (5). As victims first of slavery, then of lynching, riots, medical experimentation, malnutrition, segregated medical care, executions, and gang violence, African Americans "haven't had the luxury of thinking we'd die after a good long life" (5). Sharon Patricia Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000) argues for the scholarly rewards that emerge from dwelling in what she theorizes as the space of death. Yet, merely dwelling in this space is insufficient if we are to embrace the subjectivity of death. Holland advances that we must also raise the dead and allow them "to tell the story of a death in life" (4).

Of particular interest for this discussion is Holland's call to raise the dead and what JanMohammed identifies as the death-bound-subject—"the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" and thus is bound by the death-contract. This is a contract that renders African Americans

simultaneously subject; neither role allows one to “own” his or her death” (2).<sup>44</sup> The power bound up in that condition infuses my engagement here with the lessons that Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” and Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying* offer regarding the potential that accompanies the process of actually claiming one’s death.

McKay and Gaines deploy what literary critic, Charles Heglar, identifies as the hog trope. It is a way of speaking to African Americans trapped and dehumanized in urban cities in McKay’s poem, and those trapped in the quarters in Gaines’s novel. In addition to the trope’s usefulness in identifying and connecting the political conditions of African Americans across time and space, the authors also use the trope to incite rebellion—expressed as physical confrontation and fighting in McKay’s poem. For Gaines, the hog trope is signified by it the intersection of the educational system, the penal system, and the plantation culture that persist in rural Louisiana. In both works, the will to fight might be understood as an expression of what imagining grace for the self and the community inspires. Both texts argue against accepting the status quo; not only is it undesirable, but doing so would concede agency to those people who rely on the threat of death to create, retain, practice and extend their power. It is at the latter point where Gaines’s and McKay’s work meets productively. Both authors suggest that by capitulating to the status quo, African Americans embrace the death-contract or accept the “reality” of it that leaves them “like hogs...penned in an inglorious spot” (Gates and McKay 1006).

The reference to African Americans as hogs powerfully articulates the subject/object status assigned to African Americans throughout U.S. history. Here we

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<sup>44</sup> He specifically notes both *Beloved* and *A Lesson Before Dying* as contemporary texts that engage death’s invasion of African American life at multiple junctures.



might think of the hog/farmer relationship; the farmer is an identifiable subject while his hogs constitute objects that are subject to die at the farmer's will. It is precisely this object/subject bind that makes the hog valuable. "If we must die, let it not be like hogs," voiced as both an interrogative and declarative statement, speaks to the urgency of rejecting the object status that the hog represents. The acceptance of death and the freedom it grants to allow one to fight back, futile as it may be, embraces a subject position that is capable of breaking the death-contract and restoring death's role as a natural part of life, in contrast to the omnipresent political/economic/social threat of death that produces the death-bound subject. Further, the freedom that comes with embracing the death-contract extends beyond a single effort to fight back and carries the potential to help others imagine themselves and their lives differently, as Gaines's novel suggests in the relationships between Jefferson and Grant. In that manner, Gaines opens *A Lesson Before Dying* with Grant's explanation for his absence from Jefferson's trial: "I knew all the time what it would be" (4). Grant's intuitive knowledge links him to Jefferson, as both men accept the law's construction of them as hogs.

The eventual verdict makes visible Jefferson's life as simultaneously a man/subject and a hog/object, both of which are subjected to a violent death. Jefferson's confinement to the jail cell is then scarcely different from his life outside of the cell or the hog's life outside his pen because he is unable to claim death on his own terms. His death belongs to the law. How to raise the dead thus becomes one of the lessons that Gaines's novel addresses in tandem with providing beneficial instruction on the emotional significance of being able to choose how one will die.

## **Education as Primer for Death**

Although Holland identifies raising the physically and socially dead as critical work to be carried out in literary studies, she does not treat Gaines's novel. Responding to Miss Emma and Tante Lou's request that he teach Jefferson how to be a man, Grant responds, "Jefferson is already dead. The past twenty-one years we've done all we could for [the socially dead] Jefferson. He's dead now. And I can't raise the dead" (13).<sup>45</sup> Grant's refusal to imagine the possibility that he might help Jefferson reveals the impact of death on the living. It appears that Grant's response to Jefferson references Grant's perception and valuation of his own existence—he too is already socially dead in and before the law.

In light of Grant's response to Jefferson's trial, we might appropriately understand Grant's legal memory as being at least partially constituted by the "compulsive or unconscious legal repetitions of traumatic wounding legal cases" that leave him with no sense that resistance is both possible and necessary (Felman 57). Grant's lack of surprise or interest registers his sense of futility not only in relation to Jefferson, but also in other aspects of his life. Like Jefferson, Grant is penned in by the racism embedded in law. Grant's dispassionate teaching becomes symptomatic of his acceptance of the historical dehumanization and degraded status of African Americans in legal discourse. JanMohammed suggests that the threat of death is so powerful that it "penetrates the capillary structures of subjectivity read as a psychopolitical construct" (2). If we read JanMohammed's claim and Mills'

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<sup>45</sup> See Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Patterson maps the ways in which slavery's violence alienates subjects from their natal communities and ultimately from themselves. This alienation marks them as outside or on the border of a society or nation where they remain until death or until they are freed.

identification of the racial contract concomitantly, we are confronted with an excessively powerful social phenomenon that announces further the arsenal of coercive forces available to the state to maintain its dominance. We can identify the law and racism's intersection as part of a socio-historical project.

Though Gaines does not specifically address this history outside of the separate and unequal life in the quarters in *A*, the *Scott v. Sanford* and *Plessy v. Ferguson* cases exemplify the power of such discourse. Scott's case placed African Americans outside of the Founding Fathers' consideration when they developed their notions of citizen/human rights. Plessy's case made clear that African Americans' "political equality" did not remove the badge of inferiority that earlier decisions such as the Scott case pinned on African Americans. Race and its negative dialectics were facts of life and law, a fact central to Gaines's call for rethinking the education provided by the state. This state-sponsored education does not stand outside of the legal discourse that values the racial contract and its twin, the death-contract. In *A Lesson*, this history manifests in Grant, who has so thoroughly accepted his death that he is unable to identify how he transmits this complicity, with all of its hopelessness, to the students he teaches.

Prior to visiting Jefferson, Grant considers the significance of his work as a teacher. That rumination prompts him to pose two existential questions: "Is it just a vicious cycle?" and "Am I doing anything?" These nagging questions emerge while he watches three of his pupils chopping wood. He says of the scene:

I remembered when it was I who had swung that ax...and I remembered the others...they were gone. Gone to the fields, to the

small towns, to the cities—where they died. There was always news coming back to the quarter about someone who had been killed, or sent to prison for killing someone else...and there were others who did not go anywhere but simply died slower.” (Gaines 62)

Grant’s memory reveals the ways in which teacher and students are already reduced to what Jefferson’s public defender deems Jefferson, “a thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton...to chop your wood to pull your corn” (8). Returning to *Native Son*, in spite of Gaines’s desire to distance himself from that text, provides what I believe to be a compelling description of Grant’s response to his education and law.

Facing his impending trial, Bigger Thomas describes his relationship to a law that is indifferent to humanity.<sup>46</sup> He says that he is “caught up in a vast but delicate machine whose wheel would whirl no matter what was pitted against them” (Wright 370). Bigger’s description might also be understood as the legal process that transformed African Americans into the machinery that became critical to the United States’ economic prosperity. Grant’s acquisition of education and, along with that education, the hope of an escape from the machinery identified in *Native Son*, ultimately fails to protect him from inhabiting the space of social death and even the possibility of experiencing a violent physical death that the legal machinery aims to reproduce. As he notes, on two separate occasions, his education empowers and disempowers him; both states make him dangerous. Gaines focuses on the danger that exists for those who accept the dominant racial discourse.

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<sup>46</sup> In *Native Son*, Bigger accidentally kills his white employer’s daughter, Mary Dalton. Later he kills his girlfriend, Bessie, whom he identifies with his mother, out of anger.

Grant is the formally educated teacher; however, the school board, with its unequal distribution of resources, undermines Grant's ability to teach the students more than "reading, writing, and 'rithmetic" (Gaines 13). We can read Grant's ambivalence about teaching Jefferson what it means to be a man through his own sense of inadequacy. Despite his education, the whites in his community do not regard him with significantly higher esteem than Jefferson. Grant's education produces a different breed of hog, but a hog nonetheless and, as such, subject to slaughter like Jefferson. Grant, who notes that they "call me Professor, but [they] do[n']t mean it ....[they] believe it was just a waste of time and money. What can a hog do with a pencil and paper?" (Gaines 193). Grant is also confined by the same power which reduces Jefferson to a hog; thus, while Jefferson is literally imprisoned, Grant too is imprisoned, or so he believes, by the educational system that dictates the lessons that he delivers to the students in the quarters.

Grant constrains his teaching to "what the white folks around [t]here tell [him] to teach"; as a result he has failed to consider "how to keep a black boy out of a liquor store" (Gaines 13). Gaines dramatizes education's oppressive potential through Grant's exchange with Dr. Joseph, the School Superintendent. During his visit to Grant's classroom, Dr. Joseph observes that the school seems unchanged. Grant's response, "things change slowly around here" is true, not because it has to be but because Grant has not imagined that he should or can change them (53). Except for the annual visit of the Superintendent, Grant's teaching is unsupervised, thus he is not prohibited from teaching the children that their experiences in the quarters are the product of historical racism. More free than he acknowledges, Grant neglects to teach

them dignity, pride, compassion, and love—human “things” that would encourage them to imagine grace for themselves. Grant not only fails to affirm their humanness, he fails to realize their intellectual capabilities.

Grant’s exchange with the Superintendent is as much a reflection on Grant as it is a commentary on the racist educational system to which he submits, as revealed in Grant’s response to the Superintendent that “we’re at your service” (53). Service here invokes slavery, a reference that is reiterated more powerfully later during the superintendent’s visit when he inspects the children’s teeth and gums like “the slave masters that who had done the same when buying new slaves” (56). Grant fails to address the dehumanization that the students endure during the superintendent’s visit, and in doing so he fails to help them learn what is perhaps the most critically important lesson, how to reject racism.

Through Grant’s character, Gaines posits the complexity of what it means to be educated and the responsibilities that knowledge produces. Grant’s struggles, internal and external, reveal that education does not automatically mean that one can imagine and enact the types of fighting that challenge effectively the oppressive forces threatening African Americans’ lives. It is not merely law, education and history’s intersection that continues to produce the death-bound subject, but also the conscious and/or unconscious decision to embrace that subject position. For his part, Grant recoils from his potential power until he is re-educated by Miss Emma, Tante Lou, Jefferson, and even Reverend Ambrose.

### **New Teacher Training**

The teaching that Miss Emma asks of Grant proves to be multidirectional, as Grant receives lessons on why he must fight and what type of fighting offers an escape from the social and physical death presumed for him. As Grant's initial visit with Jefferson reaffirms, his life mirrors Jefferson's. Jefferson, however, will not be as docile as his students. Instead of teaching, Grant witnesses to what he will later come to understand as his complicity with the dominant discourse, a discourse that fails to identify "the common humanity in all of us" (Gaines 192). Unable to claim his humanity, Jefferson not only embraces the lawyer's description of him but encourages Grant to concur with the Court's verdict. Jefferson says that he is nothing more than "an old hog they fattening up to kill for Christmas" (Gaines 83). This is the other half of the moment of consciousness that Grant's memory of the wood chopping invoked.

As a result of this meeting with Jefferson, Grant begins to comprehend why Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Vivian insist that his assignment to teach Jefferson of his manhood is vital. Herman Beavers observes that this constitutes a crucial opportunity to challenge the community's notion of racial pragmatism—"go along to get along." Additionally, the lessons that Grant learns from his exchanges with Jefferson are augmented by lessons from his girlfriend Vivian, also a teacher. After becoming involved in a physical fight intended to defend his and Jefferson's honor as men, Vivian reminds him "that's how you all get yourselves killed" (206). Grant's response wastes death's potential as it does not ultimately displace the death-contract, but rather helps to justify the law's response of imprisoning and slaughtering men—"hogs." The way one fights depends on the context in which one finds him/herself.

Physical violence in Gaines's novel does not receive the same celebratory nod that McKay's poem urges; to die nobly, in Gaines's portrayal, requires more than simply fighting back physically. For Gaines, a noble death is one with the potential to illuminate the possibilities of life lived against the confines of race and the racism that it so often justifies.

The lesson that Gaines offers to readers echoes, I believe, that of Morrison's *Beloved*—that imagining grace is crucial for claiming the self from racist discourses and the violence that hovers and broods under law's penumbra. Gaines and Morrison acknowledge the necessity of faith and seek to articulate "the divinity of the people and the Earth, not just of God and heaven" (Papa 187). Both authors suggest that while the law and its apparatus may not be able or willing to take seriously these claims, they remain nonetheless important to identifying and constructing a new self, which given the legacy of slavery is perhaps always an act of imagining grace.

With Gaines, grace is not left to divine providence; in fact critics have noted in his work "cynicism and the related belief that religion is actually more harmful than beneficial to the African-American community" (Nash 347).<sup>47</sup> In *A Lesson Before Dying*, however, Gaines offers a more nuanced view of religion. Grant apparently does not believe in Christianity or any other religion, a fact that often places him in conflict with Tante Lou and later the local minister, Reverend Ambrose. Gaines, then, proposes a lesson about religion and its relationship to fighting back.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately Gaines suggests that it is neither religion nor secularism, but some

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<sup>47</sup> See Herman Beavers, Keith Byerman, Marcia Gaudet, Audrey Vinson and Frank Shelton for extended considerations of Gaines's use of religion in his novels and short fiction.

<sup>48</sup> See Herman Beavers's *Wrestling Angels into Song: The Fiction of Ernest Gaines and James Alan McPherson* for a detailed discussion of Gaines's treatment of the Civil Rights Movement and the intergenerational tensions it produced.



mediation between both. As Nash points out in his reading of religion in the novel,, “Reverend Ambrose struggles powerfully with Grant over the nature and content of the lesson Jefferson will learn” (348). Ultimately, Reverend Ambrose, like Jefferson, will teach Grant important lessons about what it means to be a man and what it means to resist racism. In fact, it is Reverend Ambrose who confirms the limitation of Grant’s education, because, as he says to Grant, “your own people [or] yourself” (215). Grant cannot teach the pupils in his class to imagine grace for themselves until he embraces that work for himself.

Imagining grace and fighting are not mutually exclusive and as such, do not present a contradiction in the novel; instead, fighting becomes one expression of imagining grace. The tensions between Grant and Reverend Ambrose, then, emerge from dissenting views on how to challenge the forces of oppression that manifest in the community. Grant’s either/or approach to conceptualizing fails to appreciate that there is in fact something beyond human agency, thus the question that Reverend Ambrose asks of Grant—“You think a man can’t kneel and stand?”—answers itself (216). Gaines’s, Morrison’s, and McKay’s texts encourage African Americans, fictional and real, to act affirmatively on their own behalf to create necessary reparations for themselves and their communities. Imagining grace is crucial for claiming a new self; however, as these texts reveal, such imaginative work comes with a host of challenges.

These challenges, then, indicate continuity between *Beloved* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, specifically that grace cannot be conceptualized as a purely divine act, that there is room for human agency. Miss Emma in Gaines’s novel illuminates the

intersection of history, law, religion, commerce, and the institutions which rely on them to articulate and preserve power to define the lives of African Americans. In light of this fact, Gaines seems to suggest that what needs to be heard in law might necessarily need to begin in culture, and that it is through the process of revising preexisting texts and themes that we can begin to reorient our conception of education and its role in the pursuit of reparations.

While the law may affirm its force through legal repetition, as Felman argues, literature is not “bound to play out in the historical [or cultural] arena as the political unconscious of the law” (Felman 57). That is to say that we are encouraged to look to literature and other cultural narratives to gain understanding about the challenges that accompany humanity’s growth and the debts that such development, particularly when predicated on race, create. In *A Lesson Before Dying* then, Grant’s education is not in itself an effective form of fighting back. Grant’s education remains incomplete until he embraces the lessons that Miss Emma, Tante Lou and Jefferson impart.

Collectively, they teach Grant that education without action or reflection does not liberate African Americans from the dominant discourse and that, disturbingly, education may constitute a form of discipline that maintains the status quo. Miss Emma’s refusal to let the law have the final word about Jefferson places her in a unique position to challenge and transgress the law and, in doing so, she demonstrates the power of imagining grace for herself and the community. That is, she “stands and kneels” to imagine and enact grace for Jefferson and the community. I want to return momentarily to the machine imagery that Bigger invoked in *Native Son*, for the law machine’s automation reproduces identical products with minimal adjustment—that

is, it produces verdicts within the parameters of existing legal precedents and jurisprudence. For this reason, Jefferson's defense lawyer's appeal to the court on his behalf by means of animal imagery fails because it does not challenge a judiciary that, as Felman suggests, repeats traumatic wounding legal decisions.

### **The Changing Same**

As Miss Emma and the others observe, the law is not unconscious in its continual designation of African Americans status as non-persons, as Felman argues. Justice for African Americans then appears inconceivable, as the contemporary subject who appeals for justice in the nation's courts is a subject historically unimagined and thus unintelligible, which Jefferson's defense makes clear in Gaines's novel. It is, perhaps, only in literature where theoretical considerations of law, law's limits, and the challenges of pursuing reparations in the so-called real world are most present. This is to suggest that the unimagined human subject is ill-equipped to challenge history, because the subject, unimagined, has always already existed beyond intelligibility in the law's formation.<sup>49</sup> Seemingly then, African Americans' pursuit of reparations will continually, like the history that produced the injuries for which reparations are sought, announce the irretrievability of their abstraction into figures, notations, flesh—"disremembered and unaccounted for—a claim...not claimed" (Morrison 274).

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49 Here I am invoking Derrida's arguments about justice in light of *Deconstruction* and Kandice Chuh's theorization of what that means in terms of Asian Americans in *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique*. In light of the fact that Asian Americans and African Americans share similar legal histories in relationship to their pursuit of citizenship, Chuh's insights are particularly cogent for this project. Further, Chuh's *Imagining Otherwise* argues for the importance of identifying literature as a source of theory. My thinking here also benefited from Maurice Stevens' response to my paper on *Imagining Grace in Beloved* at the 2004 ALA meeting in San Francisco.

As an “unofficial” juror in Jefferson’s trial, Miss Emma realizes well before the defense lawyer turns to racist discourse that justice is impossible because the court is unable or unwilling to see or hear Jefferson as human(e). Miss Emma identifies the changing same of legalist discourse. She apprehends the reoccurring injury attendant to the law’s erasure of African Americans’ humanity. The lawyer’s “defense” speaks not on Jefferson’s behalf; instead, his defense reveals his commitment to uphold legal precedents that validate race and its expression as racism. In the lawyer’s defense of Jefferson he rearticulates the legal reasoning used to arrive at the *Scott v. Sanford* decision. In that decision, Judge Taney insisted that Africans were so inferior that they had no rights the white man was bound to respect and that, moreover, the enslaved African race was not even on the minds of the framers of the Constitution as his means of invalidating Scott’s right to sue for his freedom (Gordon-Reed 27). Additionally, given the spatial dynamics of the novel’s community, in which the African Americans continue to inhabit the former slave quarters, appropriately distanced from the “big house,” the anxiety over racial mixing that underwrites the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case haunts the novel as well.

In Gaines’s novel then, conditions in the living quarters, the school, and employment serve to highlight the impossibility of “separate but equal.” As Suggs argues, the legal conditions of African Americans remain extant in African American literary texts; in *A Lesson Before Dying* the putative lessons before dying anticipate the emergence of another phase of the Civil Rights movement. While Gaines’s novel takes place in the late 1940s, its publication came in the last decade of the twentieth century; read against the proliferation of the prison industrial complex, with its ever-

increasing population of African American men, the opening of the novel, “I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be,” becomes even more disturbing (3). Gaines’s novel recognizes the law’s blindness and its agents’ failure to abolish its own racist assumptions and protocols.

*A Lesson Before Dying* opens precisely where Wright’s 1940 text ended: an incarcerated African American male regarded as an animal faces execution. The guilt or innocence of these men becomes largely inconsequential, given that nation’s legal machinery spits out the same lethal decisions. Indeed as the opening lines of the novel suggest, one did not actually have to be at the trial to know its outcome. The trial is predictable; like the perfected machinery used for mass production, it is well-oiled and exceedingly productive.

With its introduction, Gaines’s novel calls attention to two disturbingly interrelated facts, that “the prevailing social construction of black masculinity in the twentieth century has been predicated on the myth of black inferiority. . . . [and] by default, the prison has become a ritual space in the lives of African American men” (Leak 59). Gaines and Wright not only acknowledge these facts but attempt to illuminate the ways that the so-called myth of black male inferiority becomes cultural and legal truth that threatens to influence African Americans’ self-perception, encouraging them to become complicit in their own erasure. Unlike Wright, however, Gaines explores the impact of these facts an African American community without disempowering and silencing it. Miss Emma and Tante Lou’s response to Jefferson’s trial recognizes the law’s destructive power and perhaps even the impossibility of recalibrating the machinery through legal appeals. The two women do, however,

understand that “we only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made us” (Sartre *supra* Fanon 17). Jefferson and the community from which he emerges can only be hogs if they allow the court’s verdict to go unanswered.

Here I want to turn my attention to the manner in which Miss Emma fights for and ultimately secures Jefferson’s right to appeal the finality of the Court’s verdict. Miss Emma’s fight is not so much an appeal of the death sentence, but of who receives that sentence and how the court’s indifference to Jefferson’s—and the African American community’s—humanity registers and increases a longstanding debt. Then we will return to the significance of those visits.

*His godmother became as immobile as a great stone  
or as one of our great oak or cypress stumps.<sup>50</sup>*

Ernest Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*

*We shall not, we shall not be moved  
Just like a tree that's standing by the water  
We shall not be moved*

“We Shall Not Be Moved”

*We are not afraid today  
Oh—deep in my heart  
I do believe  
We shall overcome someday*

“We Shall Overcome”

### **We Give Hands and Voice to the Struggle: Women, Immobility and Law**

Grant’s comparison of Miss Emma and Tante Lou with stones and trees invokes two African American freedom songs, “We Shall Not Be Moved” and “We

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<sup>50</sup> An image that is also invoked in Gaines’s short story “Just Like A Tree.”

Shall Overcome.” Both songs became staples in the various civil rights and labor protests that punctuated the 1950s and 1960s. Together the songs posit the significance of community iterated through the collective pronoun “we,” a more inclusive “we” than McKay’s “If We Must Die.” These songs also articulate a commitment to their pursuit of social justice. “We Shall Not Be Moved” repeats the titular refrain, changing the end verse to articulate why the singers will not be moved in their fight for justice. The different verses reveal they are fighting for children, fighting to bring black and white together, and fighting for young and old. Gaines’s novel echoes these goals. Both McKay’s poem and Gaines’s novel reject flight as a viable response to social injustice; rather, they address the need to conquer one’s fear in order to fight. In Gaines’s novel Grant must overcome his belief that his best option for living is fleeing the quarters even as he recalls that such flight does not promise safety. McKay calls for a collective response even as he acknowledges the power imbalance, saying, “O kinsmen we must meet the common foe! Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,” Gaines, through the collective work of Tanta Lou, Miss Emma, and Grant, issues a similar call and speaks to both the necessity for and power of collective response to injustice.

Gaines’s critic Herman Beavers reads the novel as “a commentary on the African American odyssey in the South” (Beavers quoted in Nash 347). I agree with Beaver’s assessment because the novel points to the cooperative work that will eventually define the civil rights initiative in the deep South. Gaines stresses the contribution of women to that movement through the characters of Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Vivian. Similarly to Morrison’s trope of the old black woman as the law

and its transgression in her community, Gaines presents the three female protagonists both individually and collectively as embodying “resistance against that which would destroy life and the nurturance of that which would support and develop it” (Wilson 120). They are always already more than biological and surrogate mothers; they are teachers and visionaries who are able to negotiate competing perspectives that attend to secular education and religious education, both tempered by the experience and knowledge that critical race theorist Mari Matsuda argues comes from “living at the bottom.”

In an important revision of the protest tradition, Gaines rejects the popular construction of African American women and men’s relationship as combative; instead, he offers a collaborative relationship. Yet, he does not romanticize that collaboration. The dynamic between Miss Emma, Tante Lou, Reverend Ambrose, Grant, and Jefferson is often fraught with disagreement and disappointment. Nonetheless, the effort to illuminate the potential bound up in Jefferson’s execution withstands these disruptions. Thus, while it is Miss Emma, aided by Tante Lou, who begins the fight, neither is without support. Miss Emma speaks when Grant and Jefferson cannot and they in turn speak when she is unable to do so. Miss Emma’s trip to Pichot’s home, her former place of employment, constitutes more than a mother’s appeal on bended knee; it is a confrontation with the representatives of networks of power responsible for reproducing the death-contract in successive generations of African Americans. Miss Emma’s work might be understood as a project that seeks to retrieve the already dead and grant them the opportunity to speak, which will be an important part of Grant’s education.



Their immobility, then, does not signify their inability to negotiate competing discourses. Like the tree that Grant invokes, their immobility signifies endurance and resourcefulness; they have many roots for getting and giving sustenance or lessons. Their immobility in the trial reveals that they will neither bow to law's force nor allow the court to have the final decision about Jefferson's and, by extension, the community's fate. Importantly, they initiate their challenge to the court's authority in a space, Pichot's home, where they can reveal and indict the court's elision of the historical factors that predetermined Jefferson's fate, thus making the trial a mockery of the justice it proposes to execute. Their confrontation accomplishes two things: it reveals the relationship between culture and law and articulates the necessity of fighting to give voice to "the story that can only be told through an unpaid debt of the decision to the truth, or of the verdict to the facts" (Felman 86). In this sense, then, the women's immobility constitutes a standoff with the law's immobility—its resistance to reparation of itself and the subjects that call upon it for justice. This fictional response to law's tendency toward conservatism—embodied by its reliance on precedent even when those precedents are mired in histories of violence and oppression—constitutes a counternarrative not only to the law but perhaps also to our contemporary investment in law's ability to offer monetary or other forms of reparations.

### **Identifying Debt: Transgressing Brothers-in Law**

Historically, the space of the womb was regulated by law that laid claim to its human products; thus, any other attempt to claim or own what emerged from the

womb was a direct challenge to that law. It is, therefore, not surprising that in *A Lesson Before Dying*, as in *Beloved*, the text that anchors the larger project includes a woman who identifies, but rejects, the power, a power given them to by the law, that the brothers-in-law wield literally and metaphorically. In *Beloved*, Miss Garner's brother-in-law, Schoolteacher, disturbs the carefully cultivated peace of Sweet Home that leads to Sethe's transgression, which that then claims her children and the power of death. Miss Emma in *A Lesson Before Dying* recognizes that the lawyer's designation of Jefferson as a hog is more than a reflection on her parenting. It is rather a reinscription of the claim of African Americans' inhumanity that was used to justify slavery and its aftermath.

Less a plea than the first round in a fight that Jefferson and Grant will carry out for themselves and the community, Miss Emma's journey to Pichot's home launches a rather incredible challenge to the existing laws within the quarters. She requests that Pichot prevail upon his brother-in-law, Sheriff Guidry, to allow Grant to teach Jefferson that he is a man. Her insistence "that a man goes to that chair" transgresses the law on multiple levels, beginning with ignoring the cultural etiquette that governs the spatial distance between the "big house" and the quarters. Miss Emma enters the "big house" uninvited, delivering a thinly veiled demand—ultimately a claim to Jefferson's life—that unequivocally rejects the cultural and legal discourse that pens/pins Jefferson physically and discursively as a hog. Pichot's response reveals the significance of Miss Emma's demand and of his relationship to Guidry. He "advise[s]" Miss Emma to "forget all this foolishness," and also to "let the law have him now" (Gaines 22). His response is the same as Grant's initial

response to Miss Emma's "request." This too will become a lesson about fighting for Grant. Pichot appeals to Grant, asking whether "you think you can change him from a hog to a man in the time he got left" (21). His appeal does not evidence faith in Grant's skill as a teacher as much as it aims to articulate what he believes is an impossibility. Again, Grant capitulates to the dominant racial discourse and the script upon which it depends upon when he answers "I don't know."

Miss Emma, however, refuses the script, perhaps for the first time in her life. She announces her demand in language free of the mask of flattery or supplication. And importantly, she makes clear that she has no intention of "begging for his life no more" (22). In rejecting cultural and legal demands for her subservience, Miss Emma raises the standards of resistance struggles and insists upon a strong role for women in that struggle. She identifies that her service to his family (and in a larger sense the national family) has created an unpaid debt that she intends to collect. "This family owe me...and I want it. I want somebody do something for me one time 'fore I close my eyes" (22). In addition to the debt that she announces, she also inserts herself and Jefferson into Pichot's immediate family and the human family that the death-contract actively works to deny.

The debt that Miss Emma speaks of is multivalent; that is, she speaks to the debt that comes from Jefferson's and other African Americans' enforced muteness and/or displacement in the law. The debt that Miss Emma identifies, then, is inclusive of debt for the labor given to/stolen by Pichot's family, for which we can assume she received very little compensation and even less gratitude, as well as cultural, political and legal debts. In a broader sense, then, the character of Miss Emma speaks to the

history of slavery. The significance of identifying this debt is magnified exponentially when we consider her articulation of service to the family. In the subtle, yet powerful, instruction for Pichot to “tell him what I done done for this family...ask his wife all I done done for this family over the years” (23), her request is double-voiced. Miss Emma requests that the family acknowledge what the family already knows, that she and Miss Emma, Jefferson, and Grant, as well as the other members of the community, have always been a part of their family. Miss Emma served as intimate labor in the Pichot house. There is a striking silence between Miss Emma and Edna, Pichot’s sister, that suggests that Miss Emma is privy to family secrets and that her insistence that she had done a lot for the family suggests more than mere workers’ duties. Miss Emma’s appeal for Jefferson’s tutorials allows her to insert herself into both Pichot’s family and the larger human family. In this instance she responds most directly to the trial because she articulates the injury—“[the law] called him a hog”—and moves on to make a claim—her humanity and the debt that is owed to all humans: respect and dignity. Miss Emma’s request hinges on her understanding of the plantation economy, that is to say that she knows, even if the family is unwilling to acknowledge; that she “done a lot for this family and this place...over the years” (21). Miss Emma is intimately involved in the life of that house; it is literally her labor that sustains the family, as both Pichot and his sister, Edna begrudgingly concede.

Gaines, through Miss Emma, identifies a form of power that African American women held in the domestic sphere during and after slavery. She observes, to borrow from Langston Hughes, the ways of white folk; Miss Emma attains

knowledge and power from her work in the big house through “stealth and an innate sense of things around [her]” (Gaines 41). Though friendship is always developed within the confines of the racial hierarchy, it should not be discounted. Miss Emma’s appeal, though immediately issued to Pichot, also invokes her relationship with his sister, Edna. Edna asks Grant to bring Tante Lou to her house so that can “sit down and talk” (45).<sup>51</sup> In the grammar of the plantation economy, her statement registers the paternalistic plantation tradition, in which the masters describe their African American slaves and free persons as “just like family.”

Given the widespread anxiety over miscegenation and the laws designed to preserve white familial and economic sanguinity (i.e. laws that regulate the status of unborn children and laws that ban interracial marriage), Miss Emma’s claim is even more compelling. Despite such restrictions, we know that interracial children were relatively common in the families/national family made by masters and slaves. The distinction between being “just like family” and actually being family is muddy. Miss Emma must appeal to the relationship between Mr. Pichot and his brother-in-law, Sheriff Guidry, precisely because most African Americans were afforded only a liminal relationship with the law, thus “the idea of an “in-law” made no sense...[because historically they had] no basis in the law” (Patterson 35). Pichot and Guidry are, in effect, Miss Emma’s brothers-in law. Moreover, the phrase “just like family” is a simile modified by the “just.” “Just,” then, announces what the nation’s legal discourse abstracts, our common humanity.

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<sup>51</sup> See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Gender and American Culture).

The partial or “almost” status of African Americans in the human and national familial construct is reified in the Constitutional formula that apportions them as three-fifths of a family member and substantiates their designation as “just like family.” In this mathematical equation the Constitution reinscribes African Americans’ function as self-perpetuating property—human capital that grants their owners influence in the political realm—a dynamic which we see in the gathering of men in Pichot’s home. Pichot’s response to Miss Emma’s observation of an unfulfilled debt—to forget it—though fictional, speaks to the current legal and popular response to those pursuing reparations: that it is too late to prosecute the organizations that benefited from slavery and that the ancestors of those immediately harmed do not have legal standing in the contemporary moment to negotiate a settlement for past debts. Thus they should “forget” all this foolishness of lawsuits, boycotts, and congressional investigations. Forgetting, it would seem, is an American coping mechanism preferable to accepting the debt that Miss Emma identifies in Gaines’s novel and upon which contemporary pursuits of reparations focus.

In addition to responding directly to Pichot’s call for forgetfulness and his assertion of Jefferson’s guilt, Miss Emma’s response, “I know what they say he did,” registers her understanding that law is not always invested in justice or the truth. It also speaks to a larger understanding of the racial/social contract that operates with immunity in the quarters. Jefferson’s innocence, in light of the circumstances—a white man has been murdered—is irrelevant because “killing whites has always been ...singled out as a crime...not merely because of the greater value of white life but because of its larger symbolic significance as a challenge to the racial polity” (Mills

85). Miss Emma's request for the teacher to see Jefferson, then, is equally challenging because education constitutes a threat to the racial polity, as is evidenced by the various statutes that emerged in colonial America forbidding the education of slaves. This history, too, constitutes the debt that Miss Emma articulates, and because Grant's teaching will ultimately impact the entire community, her request might be understood as a request for reparation, cleverly pursued and won for the entire community. In reality, she knows that the debt is greater than gaining permission for Grant to teach Jefferson; thus her assertion of unpaid debt in the former master/employer's house is quite audacious. Here Gaines revises the racial scripting of the sassy black female servant who came to be known as "Mammy." Given her presentation in the novel and the shock with which Pichot and Edna respond to her, it would seem that Miss Emma has been too quiet and too obedient.

In Gaines's novel Pichot's home constitutes a literary representation of the titular "house that race built" referenced in Wahneema Lubiano's edited collection of essays on race. In the racial house, as Gaines illuminates it, whiteness depends on African Americans as "other" and as non-person for its supremacy. Gaines refuses to allow race and its expression as racism to be confined to the privacy of the domestic space; note the company present at Pichot's home when Miss Emma argues her claim and, later, when Grant returns to hear the verdict. The bank owner Louis Rougon's presence at the side of Pichot is also crucial to this scene, as it emphasizes that Miss Emma's request is not limited to an individual, but speaks to the larger system of commerce that depends on the acceptance of those like Jefferson of their status as "hogs" for its vitality. Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Grant are, after all, former

employees of Pichot. Thus, Miss Emma's claim threatens the existing dynamics because it carries the potential to incite others to identify their own claims. Despite the threat, however, the depth of Rougon's belief in Jefferson's non-personhood allows Rougon to wager a bet with Pichot about the (im)possibility of Jefferson becoming a man. Pichot does not wager on either side of the bet, suggesting that he not only recognizes Miss Emma's claim about the familial debt, but the larger national debt as well.

Gaines reemphasizes the relationship between the men as brothers-in law when Grant returns without Miss Emma and Tante Lou. Essentially, Pichot's house becomes the site of the legal appeal unavailable through official legal channels. In this meeting, Pichot and Rougon are joined by Sheriff Guidry. Together, the landowner, the banker, and the law become one as they articulate their discomfort with Miss Emma's demand. Speaking for all three parties and their interests, Guidry says, "I don't like it...I think the only thing that you can do is just aggravate him, trying to put something in the head against his will...I'd rather see a contented hog go to the chair than an aggravated hog. It would be better for everybody concerned" (49). Guidry's emphasis on "everybody concerned" foreshadows an exchange with Jefferson the night before his execution, in which he will again attempt to protect the law's power and its image under the guise of being concerned for the well-being of the community.

Although the men honor Miss Emma's request, it does not signal their belief that Jefferson is either teachable or a man. Gaines makes clear that the decision to grant Miss Emma's request is less about settling a debt than about silencing her.



When Miss Emma makes the initial request, she warns Pichot that she will return “again tomorrow, I’ll be on my knees” (23). In this gesture, Miss Emma embodies the pursuit of reparations: despite the nation’s efforts to dismiss and forget the claims issued forth from these pursuits the seekers persist precisely because they remain largely unaddressed. Recall Edna’s response to Miss Emma: “Lord I’ll be glad when all of this is over” and Guidry’s response to Miss Emma’s request, made through a visit to his wife: “Women, always coming up with something new...the things they come up with” (133 and 132). It would seem that these small concessions are nothing more than an attempt to buy silence and provide the appearance of a serious recognition of debt.

Nonetheless, Pichot’s “positive decision” is crucial for what it teaches Grant. Because Jefferson’s transformation exists as an unimaginable possibility (*aporia*) for the men, Grant’s teaching, secured in Miss Emma’s transgression, has the potential to renegotiate the death- contract not only for Jefferson, but for himself and his students. Arguably, this potentiality constitutes a variety of reparations, as the novel’s ending suggests: Jefferson’s articulation of self in his diary, Grant’s (re)birth as teacher, and the possibility of different social relations between African Americans and whites, signified by the friendship that develops between Paul and Grant and Jefferson’s discussion of Paul in his diary.

### **Speaking and Writing the Dead Back to Life**

Although *A Lesson Before Dying* never allows its readers to escape the ubiquity of death, Gaines rejects confining Jefferson to the same cell that confines

Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. As Clarke observes, Gaines “reevaluates the discursive relationship between...subjects and their environment” (15). In *A Lesson Before Dying*, that cell becomes something more than the legally sanctioned liminal/subliminal space between life and death because, following Miss Emma’s instruction, Jefferson and Grant reject it as such and instead carry out their own transgression. In doing so, they transform the space of the cell into a “nurturing, nascent habitat that is conducive to the curative, ritual activity of finding one’s voice—and simultaneously that of other black men” (Clarke 27). The transformation is depicted without diminishing the egregiousness of Jefferson’s unjust imprisonment and the difficulty that Miss Emma and Grant endure as they try to make Jefferson’s final days meaningful. Jefferson and Grant’s experiences and reflections and ultimately the knowledge they produce invokes King’s “Letter from A Birmingham Jail.” Gaines’s novel, like King’s letter, might serve as a productive reminder to readers and activist that “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”<sup>52</sup> s result of this mutuality that King and Gaines identify, we must not simply accept death but seek to harness the potentiality bound up in each human being in both life and death. Efforts to silence King’s work fail because his imprisonment produces a usable text, by which I mean a text that can be given to the community and ultimately placed in the service of anti-racist work. In the closing of his letter King asks, “what else is one to do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?”(Linder).<sup>52</sup> King’s letter, like Jefferson’s

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<sup>52</sup> Jefferson’s transformation in prison and its impact on Grant also invokes Malcolm X’s biography, particularly the chapters entitled “Satan” and “Saved,” in which Malcolm X discusses his

diary in Gaines's novel, reveals that imprisonment does not in fact lend itself to silence of any type and that, despite legal efforts to erase personhood during imprisonment, it often liberates precisely what the law has sought to repress: subjectivity, voice, and agency.

Gaines, then, refuses to document the correlation between racial oppression as inevitably producing a subject who is constrained by the death-contract. Instead, he identifies with what Holland and JanMohammed have only recently theorized as the significance of dwelling in the space of death to allow its subjects not only to speak, as Jefferson ultimately does through the diary, but importantly, to exercise the agency to “negotiate, renegotiate and envision the terms of [Jefferson and Grant's] subjection” and perhaps even our own (Clarke 32). The diary, the written product of Grant and Jefferson's confinement, thus insures that Jefferson will speak from the dead.

The novel suggests that Grant will use this text to teach his students critical lessons about avoiding social and physical death, a death that the dominant culture seems to require and expect. Although the diary does not compensate for the state's failure to provide adequate textbooks, it is, nonetheless, crucial as both evidence of the state's non-investment in the education of African Americans and a lesson about the necessity of developing voice and agency. These are the tools that will enable the students to challenge—“fight”—the dominant culture's disregard for their personhood. Jefferson's indictment of the law adds to the diary's significance; his testimony identifies and analyzes the attempt of the law, embodied in the novel by Sheriff Guidry, to obscure its complicity in producing the death-contract and more

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transformation in terms of gaining literacy.

nefariously, to invite those like Jefferson and Grant to become accomplices in that project.

One of Grant's early visits to the jail indicates that Jefferson submitted to the law's construction of him: "he knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag and started eating, without his hands. He even sounded like a hog," Grant reports (83). Ultimately, Grant's instruction helps Jefferson to claim his human identity despite his imprisonment. Jefferson's diary reveals that, though under surveillance, he sees and articulates far more than Sheriff Guidry can imagine. The diary allows Jefferson to invert the logics that undergird the modern prison; thus Jefferson rejects the sheriff's attempt to render him "the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 203). Jefferson sees precisely what the law intends to veil, which is its own injustice and violence. His diary is at once a testament to his own humanity and a counterstory to the law's story of his inhumanity. Moreover, the communal efforts to claim his impending death help Jefferson to rearticulate the social debt that Miss Emma identifies so brilliantly in her confrontation with the brothers-in-law Pichot, Rougon, and Guidry.

### **Unpaid Debts**

Ironically, the law that denies Jefferson's voice in the courtroom by rendering him a hog expects that he will immortalize the agents of that silence in flattering and blatantly dishonest prose. Jefferson's diary reveals Sheriff Guidry's investment in such a representation, noting that Guidry:

Ax what all I been ritin and I tol him just things an he say aint he done tret me rite...he say aint his deptis done tret me fair...he say is you gon put that in your tablet ...good put that down in you tablet I tret yo good all the time you been yer (233).

Jefferson, like Miss Emma, resists the law's effort to silence him by refusing to produce an account of his experience that is complicit with ongoing racist legal practice. Jefferson understands that, because the law is unwilling to grant his voice real legal standing that it is also unwilling to acknowledge its national debts to those like Jefferson and Miss Emma. Jefferson refuses perjury when he does not corroborate Guidry's fictional narrative; thus, Guidry's attempt to manage the presentation of law as fair and on the side of justice fails. Here Gaines's presentation of Jefferson invites comparison to what Foucault identifies as those who, unjustly persecuted, but "under the protection of imminent death, could say everything, rules were inverted, authority mocked, and "criminals" transformed into heroes. The shame was turned around; the courage, like the tears and the cries of the condemned, caused offense only to the law" (60-61; my quotations). Jefferson delivers his testimony about his imprisonment fairly, as he distinguishes the differences between Guidry and Paul's treatment of him.

Although Paul tries to act "hard," as Jefferson observes, Jefferson knows Paul is different from Sheriff Guidry: "Paul...is the only one rond yer kno how to talk like a youman." Jefferson's language here is deliberate and demonstrates his cognizance of the distinction between human/e and inhuman/e behavior, as well as the contradiction that has shaped his life. He asserts that Guidry and also Pichot and Rougon are inhuman/e. He says of the three, "I kno you too shef guiry and you mr

picho and mr.mogan and all the rest of yall...I jus never say non of this befor but I know ever las one of yall” (230). Importantly, Jefferson understands the significance of his knowledge as evidenced by his request that the diary be delivered to Grant. Here too is evidence that Jefferson comprehends the potential that comes with claiming his death on his own terms. Speaking from the dead, Jefferson will remind the diary’s readers that “justice for the [unjustly] dead resides in a remembrance (by the living) of the injustice and the outrage done to them” (Felman 15). As a story that will be passed on, the diary affirms a conversation that Grant and Jefferson have shortly before the execution.

Grant tells Jefferson that “he has the chance of being bigger than anyone who ever lived on this plantation or come from this little town” (Gaines 193). Curiously, Gaines’s language suggests that he hopes for Grant/Jefferson to displace Bigger Thomas as the reigning representative of protest in African American literature. Jefferson’s diary, in its contents and future uses, also invokes Antonio Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* and thus constitute another example of the potential of imprisonment, other than simply dying, that I explored earlier in my discussion of King’s “Letter from A Birmingham Jail.” Jefferson’s diary, notebook, or tablet, as it is called by the various people who interact with Jefferson during his imprisonment, can be read as the work of an organic intellectual. As Gramsci notes, all men and women are intellectuals even if the culture they exist within does not treat them as such; therefore the major challenge in any attempt to recreate existing social relationships rests upon finding a way to harness the contributions of the organic intellectual. Arguably, Miss Emma and Tante Lou are also organic intellectuals. They

recognize the significance of Jefferson's voice and thus their insistence that Grant, as the trained intellectual, work with Jefferson to help him articulate his insights.

Although Pichot, Rougon, and Guidry allow Grant to teach Jefferson that he is not a hog, they are not absolved of the debt they owe to Miss Emma and the community. The powers that be have yet to acknowledge that Jefferson and the community that he belongs to is comprised not of hogs, but of humans. As a subversive or insurgent text, the diary stands as a story/parable about our debt to other human beings across and within racial boundaries.

### **The way that s/he died**

To return again to the quotations that framed this chapter, it would seem that Gaines's novel answers the question of how we measure a man's life with an affirmation of Morrison's claims—that language marks the space between life and death. Accordingly, its language deserves our most deliberate and broadly conceived efforts to claim its power to give meaning to death and to fight for those like Jefferson and Miss Emma. In light of the novel's rethinking of both the literary and political lives of African Americans and what is owed to them, we might read Gaines's novel as not only participating, albeit in a revised fashion, in the call for African Americans to fight back that McKay's "If We Must Die" urges, but also as a lesson that reminds readers and critics of African American literature that "theorizing often [comes] in narrative forms, in the stories [and poems] we (re)create" (Christian 281). Holland and JanMohammed developed their theories and analyses of death and its significance from cultural narratives. Like Gaines's novel and McKay's poem, they

also remind us that the fighting carried out in fiction is vital for a healthy imagination and is at least equally, if not more, crucial than the fighting that takes place in the nation's courts. The trial is not always invested in "the truth," but rather bringing closure and determining commensurability, both of which threaten to leave other debts unacknowledged and unpaid.

Grant refuses to attend the trial because he is no longer able to deny his attachment to Jefferson and the larger community. Grant and Jefferson are transformed by their exchange of lessons, and so Grant cannot stand to witness Jefferson's execution. Jefferson stands as the strongest (hu)man in the room, according to Officer Paul Bonin, and Reverend Ambrose stands in for Grant. Knowing that nothing will be the same after the execution prompts Grant to ask, "what will happen tomorrow?"(249). Grant's question, of course, recognizes that the debt that Miss Emma identified has increased because of Jefferson's wrongful execution. Gaines answers with a quiet hope—Grant faces his class crying, a gesture that suggests that after the emotional impact of Jefferson settles, Grant's own education will be more complete, and that he is now able to teach the children to fight like the men and women, who have gone before them. This may be the only way of conquering the debt that racial history has accrued. As Mills argues, "one has to fight an internal battle before even advancing onto the ground of external combat," by which I interpret him to refer to the ability to engage in political activism designed to identify the injuries that race and racism have created (Mills 118).

Grant, as both teacher and student in relationship to Miss Emma, Tante, Lou, Vivian, and Jefferson, begins the process of overcoming his own internalization of



sub- or non-person status that both the racial contract and the death-contract write for African American life. Grant, I believe, is ready to pass on to his students what may be the most important lesson, that they too, in light of the law's inability or refusal to see their injuries and hear their human voices, will have to claim and imagine grace for themselves. If we are to believe Morrison and Gaines's literary lessons, the students are their "own best thing" in the fight for reparations.

In the next section of this project I turn my attention to what is traditionally treated as popular culture. In separate chapters, I examine two popular films, *The Wiz* (1978) and *Monster's Ball* (2001). I draw on Wahneema Lubiano's arguments for the significance of popular culture in relationship to Black nationalism. Lubiano defines Black nationalism broadly as "a sign, an analytic that describes a range of historically manifested ideas about black American possibilities that include any or all of the following: racial solidarity, cultural specificity, religious, economic, and political separatism" (234). Less concerned with political, religious, or even economic separatism, *The Wiz* and *Monster's Ball* pose controversial questions about the desirability of racial solidarity and cultural specificity.

These concerns are most forcefully articulated through the sign of the African American family. Lubiano insists that "we not only make the state in the forms that cohere as the judicial system or Congress, but we encounter it in our public imaginings about the nature of our world" (235). Given that the African American family is a source of perpetual concern for the nation, examining these films allows me to consider the ways in which these popular cultural narratives illuminate the complicated and often contested relationship between desire and politics. Of

particular relevance in these films is the question of possibility, that is, what do reparations look like for African American men and women individually and in partnerships? In the case of *Monster's Ball*, is it possible to love across racial lines when the love interest marks the immediate present and invokes the historical past with racial injury?

Though the next section of this project focuses on two popular films, there is continuity, I believe, in their thematic concerns—the imaginative space that Baby Suggs identifies in *Beloved* might be read as similar to the dreamscape that *The Wiz* presents in Oz. The centrality of women as mothers also appears as a significant feature of the film. In *Monster's Ball*, the significance of interracial relationships developing in light of one of the participant's relationship to law emerges as a continuity between the film and *A Lesson Before Dying*. These recurrent themes and locations suggest that both features are especially useful cultural narratives that seek to imagine alternatives to existing racial and gender discourses. I move away from a strictly literary reading of the films—though I do offer a fair amount of close reading—to consider the films in light of cultural discourse that demand particular roles of African American men and women and how such roles complicate our notions of the racially injured subject.

## Chapter 6: When Somewhere Over the Rainbow Is Not Enuf: *The Wiz* and Reparations<sup>53</sup>

*The Wiz is a massive pop-cultural coda to the black civil rights movement. It feels like the celebratory hurrah of Hollywood late-coming role in a “Sesame Street” style of affirmative action and it moves to the last few beats of funky R&B before Spike Lee and the hip-hop revolution takes over.*

Hank Stuever, “Michael Jackson on Film: No Fizz After The Wiz”

*one thing i dont need  
is any more apologies  
i got sorry greetin me at my front door  
you can keep yrs  
i dont know what to do wit em*

*Ntozake Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is not enuf*

*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), commonly referred to as the Moynihan Report, helped to initiate a discussion of the so-called “perennial crisis of black masculinity whose imagined solution is a proper affirmation of black male authority” (Harper x). Depending on where one sits on the racial pole, African American men have subsequently come to be represented as simultaneously endangered and endangering—as victims of and menaces to U.S. society. These warnings bolster the popular cultural narrative that African American men lead “sorry” lives. I identify *The Wiz* (1978) as a cultural narrative invested in the reparation of African American men; it is one that can be read as a response to the

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<sup>53</sup> An early version of this chapter was delivered at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture/American Culture Association in New Orleans.

Moynihan Report through its explicit engagement with the condition of African American men. Ultimately, Dorothy's journey is not primarily about self-affirmation, but rather, learning to become a mother and to repair spiritually and physically injured African American men by restoring their masculinity and dignity. The Moynihan Report and *The Wiz* remind us that we should be cautious about making cosmetic repairs without substantive changes to our thinking and political goals. Moynihan's suggestion offers cheap repairs, and *The Wiz* illuminates why this is the case.

*The Wiz* seemingly concurs with the Moynihan Report that, without such repairs, the African American family will remain the site of a dangerous pathology that threatens to destroy not only itself but also the fabric of American culture. This eminent threat, according to Moynihan, constituted "a case for national action. Ultimately, then, the Moynihan Report, though treated as a template for repairing African American men, suggests that it was not African American men who were responsible for their alleged failures, but African American women who did not know how to be women.

In Chapters One and Two, I identified, with the aid of Morrison's Nobel lecture, the trope of African American women who function as the law and its transgression in Morrison's and Gaines' work. This transgression is productive as it restores and affirmed African Americans' sense of self and community. In this chapter, African American women remain the source of the law and its transgression; however, their transgressions are viewed as detrimental to African American men. In the Moynihan Report, which I read *The Wiz* with and against, African American

women become symbols of transgression against natural laws. Their strength becomes both a terrible indictment and a detriment because they (re)produce men who do not know how to be men, sons or fathers. *The Wiz*, then, an African American retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, suggests that home is the site of complicated negotiations of power. I then take an imaginative leap in order to read the analogs of African American men who disappear at the end of *The Wiz* as potentially some of the men represented in Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus*. I treat Spike Lee's film as both a discrete counternarrative and part of the counternarrative that the 1995 Million Man March sought to offer the nation.

### **“Where Problems Melt Like Lemon Drops”**

My title references both the classic song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and Ntozake Shange's 1975 choreopoem “for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is not enuf.” Dorothy, played by Judy Garland in the 1939 film adaptation of L. Frank Baum's novel *The Wizard of Oz*, delivered the song with such power and passion that it became an American classic. Artists working in various genres have since recorded “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” The song resonates with diverse audiences because it voices a universal desire for a place where “dreams really do come true.” These dreams are both individual and collective, and in light of this project's focus on African Americans and reparations, we should envision this paradise as a place free of racism and the oppressions that it often engenders.

Shange's choreopoem “for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is not enuf” was performed off-Broadway in 1975 and on Broadway a

year later. It alerts us to the possibility that neither the rainbow nor “somewhere” over it will make dreams (or for my purposes, reparation) come true. Shange’s choreopoem insists that collaborative work between women will help them to escape — or at least negotiate—oppression in lieu of suicide, a theme that resonates in both Gaines’s and Morrison’s texts, though their focus is not exclusively on women. When juxtaposed, Shange’s choreopoem and “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” illuminate the inevitable tension between the longing for the freedom and fulfillment that paradise promises and the limitations of that imagining without self-affirmation and action. Though a lovely sentiment, “somewhere over the rainbow” and all that it promises, to borrow from Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, must also be imagined and pursued “here in this place” (88).

Shange’s choreopoem, like Morrison’s and Gaines’ novels, posits that the reparation of individual African Americans depends on the spiritual, physical, and emotional reparation of the community. Shange’s choreopoem, with its emphasis on a group of African American women, soon reveals that their relationships with African American men are a source of injury. Importantly, the lady in blue’s soliloquy, referenced in the epigraph, constitutes more than a complaint against African American men even as it articulates their sorry performance. It resonates—not because at first glance it might be read as an attack on African American men—but, more importantly, because it identifies the possibility and need for something more than apologies. It suggests also that African American men, like Shange’s colored girls, will find that life over the rainbow is not ‘enuf’; reparation begins by looking inward, as Dorothy and her male comrades learn in *The Wiz*. African American

playwright Keith Antar Mason's choreopoem "for black boys who have considered homicide when the streets were too much" buttresses Shange's message. Like Shange, Mason urges introspection as a critical path toward rejecting dominant representations of gender and race which become the source of racial injury; accordingly, rejecting popular discourses about black masculinity and femininity pave the road toward self-discovery. This is the proverbial road that Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tinman, Cowardly Lion, and the Wiz must travel. Thus the load that they are urged to not carry as they journey or "ease on down" the road is, contrary to the up-tempo song, anything but easy for the group.

### **They Forgot It Like A Bad Dream**

Contrary to the celebratory applause that my first epigraph offers, *The Wiz* was not received as a popular cultural coda for the 1970s when it was released; nor has it been regarded as such in African American film criticism. Even as African American film theory and criticism proliferate—in particular, regarding the significance of the city to African American film—*The Wiz* remains largely unaccounted for in African American film history. Produced by Motown Productions and released by Universal Pictures, *The Wiz* cost \$24 million to make and brought in only \$13 million during its original theatrical release; the film, like its titular character, is generally regarded as a flop. Many African Americans rejected the film because they felt that it lacked authenticity, acting as a type of "blacks in blackface" that pandered to the Blaxploitation films that defined the 1970s. Additionally, African American audiences were disturbed by Diana Ross's replacing of Stephanie Mills in

the lead role. Ross was unable to propel the film into the same crossover success that she and Gordy enjoyed with their musical collaboration. Audiences responded to Ross's singing with less enthusiasm than Mills's, as it was generally conceded that Ross's singing was neither as strong as Mills's nor as compelling. Ross was too old to convincingly portray a young girl. Ellis Cashmore in *Black Culture Industry* argues that Ross's and the film project's failure revealed both Gordy's "flawed judgment" and the beginning of larger troubles for his Motown empire (106). Barry's inability to sell African American culture to white audiences also registers a cultural shift in response, perhaps due to the changing economic outlook and to integration.

White audiences' response to *The Wiz* were colored by race and perhaps evidence of anxiety over integration; according to reviews, white audiences were disturbed that the film had been "blackened." Seemingly, the original film constitutes "sacred" white property and as a result, becomes subject to the same efforts to protect it from theft and degradation as white identity. Richard Dyer identifies such responses as evidence that "whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then, it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it" (Dyer 9). Given the film's release in the late 1970s, particularly coming after two highly successful mini-series, *Roots* (1976) and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974), perhaps the response to *The Wiz*, particularly on the part of white audiences, marks a decline of interest in engaging (African) American history in the nation's popular culture sphere.

To be clear, I am not blaming *The Wiz*'s failure on whiteness, for the film's politics challenged African American audience's tolerance as well. Yet, it is necessary to consider the impact of African Americans' increased presence in filmic



and televisual space in the 1970s, particularly in roles that challenged dominant representations of African Americans as subservient. The nation, perhaps more than at any other time in media history, was asked, even forced, to remember slavery and its injustices not only by the aforementioned mini-series, but also by television shows such as *Good Times* (1974-79), *Sanford & Son* (1972-77) and *What's Happening Now* (1976-1979), which, despite their oddly happy characters, revealed that widespread poverty plagued urban African America.<sup>54</sup> In light of this historical context, *The Wiz* could not be embraced as an affirmation of America's celebration of home and family; instead, as in other cultural narratives, the legal, economic and political status of African American resists being forgotten even in a dreamscape setting.

*The Wiz's* emphasis on urban African Americans reveals that economic stagnation and political discourses about the failures of African Americans preclude proclamations of "there's no place like home" for many urban dwellers. In *Race Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America*, Manning Marable argues that Second Reconstruction (1954-1968), or the modern civil-rights movement, ended legal segregation and restored voting rights, but also hid larger systemic problems produced by race. He observes that the black middle class and elites benefited while lower-income blacks "remained trapped in the urban ghettos of America's decaying inner cities plagued with higher unemployment rates, disease, bad housing, poor public schools, and inadequate social services" (173). In short, many urban African Americans found themselves, to borrow from the *Good Times*

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<sup>54</sup> See Herman Gray's *Watching Race*. Gray argues that these shows, along with *Roots*, reaffirmed a normative white construction of family, love and happiness that affirmed a commonsense belief that such ideals and the values they promote are the rewards of individual sacrifice and hard work.

theme song, “scratchin’ and surviving” and also, from Stevie Wonder, “living just enough for the city.”<sup>55</sup> In their attempt to re-present African Americans in positions of power and as actively resisting white racism and its political and economic ramifications, the popular Blaxploitation films that define the era must also be read as a testament to the challenges facing urban African Americans that these two popular cultural texts identify.

The 1970s, then, register a paradox:

African Americans find themselves more highly integrated into American life than ever before, and yet in many ways, as thoroughly segregated as at any time during this century, wealthier than at any time in our history, yet increasingly economically isolated and impoverished; more visible in public life, yet more alienated and angry (Holt 325).

The paradox that Holt identifies runs counter to the hopefulness of a “Brand New Day,” a song that is unmistakably spiritual in its lyrics and its melody. I will return to the significance of this song in a later section. The force that propels Dorothy into Oz and the journey she takes subvert both the mythic and pastoral conceptions of a “somewhere over the racial rainbow” where the American Dream really does come true.

Far from being what one review called *The Wiz*, “a flashy treatise on self-assertiveness,” *The Wiz*, I contend, explores what getting ahead and its attendant

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<sup>55</sup> “Good Times” (co-written by William Grusin and Andrew Bergman, 1974 CBS); “Living for the City” (Stevie Wonder, 1974 for the Innervisions Album).

angst entails for African American men and women (Earle 161).<sup>56</sup> These anxieties are articulated not only through Dorothy's longing for the comforts of a familiar home, but also the valences of home expressed by her comrades, Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion: home in the African American body and the Wiz—home in the political and economic arenas. Their individual quests for a brain, a heart, and courage are physical or psychic components which render the collective request signified by *The Wiz* into a narrative about multiple forms of reparations.

*i had come into the city carrying life in my eyes...  
we held out our eyes delirious with grace.*

“Stay On the Battlefield,” Poem for Sweet Honey in the Rock, Sonia Sanchez

### **“We’re Not in Kansas Anymore”<sup>57</sup>**

*The Wiz* relocates Dorothy's home from Kansas to Harlem. We should read this revision as both an act of motivated signification on Baum's work and as acknowledgement of the significance of urban migration in African American cultural narratives and other discursive forms. In the African American literary and filmic imagination, “Harlem has been a metonymic projection into the dimension of meaning articulated in the vocabulary of place...a cultural text for continual retelling and exegesis, palimpsest or scriptural field for literary figuration” (DeJongh 210).

The relocation from Kansas to Harlem, then, also seeks to debunk the myth of the

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<sup>56</sup> Earle highlights several other reviews with similar responses, including *Mademoiselle*, which called it “drippy spiritual uplift,” and *Ladies' Home Journal*, which offered that “The Wiz is a fizz.”

<sup>57</sup> See Jacqueline Stewart's *Migrations to the Movies: Black Cinema and Urban Modernity*, Paula J. Massood's *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experiences in Film*, and Farah Jasmine Griffith's *Who Set You Flowin': The African American Migration Narrative*. Stewart's and Massood's work documents the emergence and importance of the city in African American film. Griffith's work treats the significance of migration in African American literary tradition. Griffith's “safe spaces” are open to both men and women and can be both healing and injurious as they function as retreats or encourage complacency.

urban north as more promising than the agrarian South, from which African Americans had migrated en masse in the early twentieth century and again in the late 1940s.

As Sonia Sanchez's poem suggests, the mass migration of African Americans to urban centers soon devolved from an act of imagining grace for themselves—and the joyful delirium that accompanied such imagining—into a struggle to survive. This perhaps accounts for the lure and appeal of Oz. In *The Wiz*, Oz—the “over the rainbow” respite from Harlem—is less a safe space that allows affirmation, or claiming the self, than a space that imprisons those such as Tinman, Cowardly Lion, Scarecrow and The Wiz. Just as *The Wizard of Oz* calls for a reexamination of what the American Dream means for Midwestern agrarians, *The Wiz* asks what the American Dream and its pursuit entails for urban African Americans. The film suggests that African Americans carry the scars and the idea of racism in their bodies. Oz, then, constitutes an attempt to imagine a home space where racism does not exist; the revision of the classic American story using an all-African American cast seems to suggest that it is possible to inhabit such a space. Removing white racism from the landscape does not, however, fully address the repairing of African Americans, for they must also attend to the residue of racism, particularly as it intersects with gender in light of the differential experiences of subjection in African American history.

While Oz—the road to the American Dream— appears to be managed by The Wiz, it is actually an elaborate illusion that relies upon tricks, obfuscation, poses and distraction to inspire awe and reverence. Beneath the surface, The Wiz is in competition with Evillene—the ugly but powerful and successful entrepreneur. It is a

contest The Wiz knows he will lose, and with it, the power to rule Oz. Unbeknownst to Dorothy, she and Evillene are locked in an adversarial relationship. The Wiz's conflict with Evillene reflects the concerns issued in Moynihan's report that implicates African American women's strength as one that enervates African American men. Moynihan's report should be treated delicately, for beneath what appears to be an indictment against African American women, concerns about the cyclical effects of poverty on African American families emerge from a source somewhere between myth and reality. The emphasis on African American women's interminable strength is as much a disservice to them as it is to African American men. In the film, Dorothy's ambivalence about pursuing an opportunity that will take her away from Harlem, combined with her trepidation about making a life—creating a home and family of her own—also reflects Moynihan's sense that African American families are a cause for national concern.

The film, then, mirrors public policy discussions of African American families and their domestic lives. These discussions are aimed at repairing the so-called tangled web of black pathology—the outcome of emasculating African American women like Evillene. Significantly, Dorothy's success with repairing injured African American men is only eclipsed by her ability to displace Evillene. Though audiences rejected Ross's portrayal of Dorothy, Ross's age is perhaps more appropriate in light of the work that the film asks of the character: teaching men to be men. A woman, not a young girl, more convincingly possess the necessary experience for this task.

As scripted, the film demands that audiences embrace Dorothy as the good daughter, mother, and sista'—that is, the strong black woman who supports African

American men's ascent into the role of patriarchy, a role they have been historically denied by white men and are currently denied by women like Evillene. Shrewdly, Moynihan enlists evidence to support his own concerns about African American gender relationships from Dorothy Height's *Report of Consultation of Problems of Negro Women* from the President's Commission on the Status of Women, April 19, 1963. Moynihan quotes from the report:

If the Negro woman has a major underlying concern, it is the status of the Negro man and his position in the community and his need for feeling himself an important person, free and able to make his contribution in the whole society in order that he may strengthen his home" (35).

Ostensibly, Moynihan's report gives voice to concerns shared by African American women; this, then the report colludes with Black nationalist rhetoric in insisting that reparations and restoration of African American masculinity promises to repair other ills. However, Height's report does not advocate that African American men exercise power over African American women even as she insists that men are important. We can, I believe, also locate in Height's report the frustrations voiced in the lady in blue's soliloquy, though Height's articulation of those concerns is gentler. That Dorothy's ability to embrace and construct a safe and nurturing home will ultimately produce healthy African American men becomes the key to solving the "perennial crisis" of African American masculinity. Her own reparation, then, is directly correlated to the reparation of the men she teaches in Oz.

### **“Home is Not a Little Thing”**<sup>58</sup>

Home and the preservation of family are universal themes; they are, however, particularized by the historical realities of race in the United States. The significance and complexity of home and family are points of contrast between *The Wizard of Oz* and its revision as *The Wiz*. Dorothy’s quest in *The Wizard of Oz* emerges from her desire to return to the safety of her home. Navigating Oz instills in the Dorothy of *The Wizard of Oz* a firm belief that leaving home is unnecessary, unfulfilling, and dangerous. Dorothy’s journey reaffirms the value of family, the individual home, and the larger home of the United States. At the film’s end, surrounded by her family, Dorothy proclaims that “I am not going to leave here ever again; there’s no place like home.”

“Vexed” best describes Dorothy’s relationship to her own home and the idea of home more generally in *The Wiz*. The importance of the African American family’s survival becomes evident at the outset of the film with its opening sequence focused on the preparation of a meal. The extended family gathers to celebrate the birth of Aunt Em’s granddaughter. Aunt Em’s song, “The Feeling that We Have” reaffirms African American family values. Delivered tenderly and soulfully, Aunt Em (re)affirms that family is a haven, a source of strength and support, for all present. She encourages them to value “the feeling that we have, when you know that you can come running to me whenever times are bad. Don’t lose the feeling that we have” (Smalls). Her message functions similarly to Baby Suggs’s call in *Beloved* and Miss Emma and Tante Lou’s lessons in *A Lesson Before Dying*— both biological family

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<sup>58</sup> Patricia Best’s defense of Ruby in [Paradise](#).

and family as a metaphor for community constitute spaces where grace is both imagined and experienced.

Yet, Dorothy expresses doubt about Aunt Em's idealized vision of family. She retreats to the kitchen, a safe space, where she considers her ambivalence, saying, "I don't even know the first thing about what they're feeling....feeling[,] something tells me that it's more than I can deal with" (Smalls). For Dorothy, Aunt Em's conception of family feels not only foreign but also horrifyingly inflexible. As the celebratory context suggests, reproduction defines the ideal family. Aunt Em's confrontation with Dorothy after the family celebration further illuminates this idea and links reproduction with economic opportunities

Dorothy's lack of self-confidence, combined with her bewilderment about family feeling, suggests that she is emotionally stunted. As the opening of the film reveals, Dorothy, despite being an adult, is quite child-like in demeanor and behavior. We do not know why Dorothy lives with her Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. Dorothy's work as a kindergarten teacher, then, reinforces her delayed psychic and sexual maturation. Aunt Em questions Dorothy's reluctance to seek upward mobility by teaching at a high school, which would offer Dorothy an opportunity to interact with older children at an important time in their development. Her advice, however, is double-edged, as Dorothy's emotional development is subordinated to the concern about her financial security. Aunt Em reminds her that the opportunity promises "[a] new neighborhood and more money...[and that] its time for [her] to get out in that world. Time to make a home of her own....you've never been south of 125th Street"—i.e., out of Harlem (Schumacher).



Creating home and creating family are inseparable in Aunt Em's mind. For Dorothy, however, "making generations"<sup>59</sup> burdens Dorothy with a task that she is unprepared for and thus disinclined to embrace. Dorothy's response to Aunt Em's push for her to leave home also announces her anxiety about leaving the safety of her communal home, Harlem. She argues, "I can't see how living south of 125th Street ever made anyone's life better" (Schumacher). Dorothy's concern about leaving Harlem suggests that she might be concerned about the racial dynamics beyond her black working-class neighborhood. The snow cyclone, which operates as metaphor for whiteness, launches Dorothy's journey through Oz. Dorothy's ambivalence and suspicions about the benefits of working and moving downtown remind us that, in light of the ever present threat of white racism, the meanings of home have to be redefined for many African Americans; thus, creating "home is not a little thing" for African Americans. In this regard, then, Moynihan's attention to the status of African American families might be treated less as an assault on African Americans and their families and more as a project that lacks nuance, despite its attempt to identify and engage the historical underpinnings of the problems particular to (African) American families living in poverty. I read the Moynihan Report in the same way that I read the popular conversation about reparations: as one that needs to take seriously the psychic, spiritual, institutional, and economic factors that shape our understanding of African American family.

Visible white characters do not appear in *The Wiz*. There is, however, evidence of racism. The mythic roads paved with gold (yellow in the film) are indeed

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<sup>59</sup> I borrow this phrase from Gayle Jones's novel *Corregidora*. In Jones' novel, the protagonist, Ursa, struggles with the legacy of making generations when it is physically impossible to do so.

a myth; living in the land of opportunity provides no guarantee for success for African Americans. The film retreats from the optimism embodied in the early 1970s and the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Traveling the yellow brick road, Dorothy and company are unable to hail a taxi. Even the subway attacks the group, as trash receptacles and other fixtures transform into monsters. These misfortunes are the work of Evillene, though they are carried out by an odd African American man. Here we might think of this violence as evidence of the ways in which internalized racism manifests in so-called black-on-black violence. Evillene's pursuit of Dorothy's shoes anticipates upcoming decades, in which it was not uncommon to hear reports of African Americans attacked and injured at the hands of other African Americans seeking popular and expensive shoes, coats, and other apparel. Ultimately, the subway traps and delivers them to Evillene's flying monkeys. The success of these references emerges from African American folkloric discourse about urban life and suggests an attempt at realism, one that strengthens the significance of relocating Dorothy's home in *The Wiz* to Harlem and depicting Oz/The Emerald City as downtown.

Indeed, integration in the form of equal employment opportunities and even affirmative action granted African Americans inroads to pursue upward mobility. Yet, these repairs did not erase powerful cultural responses to African Americans' progress. It would seem that *The Wiz* was prescient in its suggestion that racism, masked as colorblindness, would make the dreams of the 1970s challenging to fulfill. The film actively engages and subtly invokes the juridical realities of African American life in the 1970s. Laws and political movements do not

immediately or permanently displace the racial contract, as the Wiz (the character) attests. I will elaborate on this point further in my upcoming discussion of the Wiz's persona. Initiated by Aunt Em's question and propelled by the snowstorm, Dorothy's journey promises to involve much more than affirming her self and deciding to accept a job outside of Harlem. In fact, the film quickly turns its attention to the condition of African American men. It does so in the context of the 1970s, with the Moynihan Report shaping political and cultural discourse about the African American family. The film, like the Moynihan Report, called for African American men and women to accept and affirm their "natural" gender roles.

*The very essence of the male animal,  
from the bantam rooster to the four star general, is to strut.*

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*

### **If Only I Could Be A Rooster**

Though ridiculously reductive and essentialist in its construction of male gender identity, Moynihan's identification of the bantam rooster provides a useful lens through which to consider Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion's sense of incompleteness. Importantly, the rooster conception of the American male reveals the ways in which the film, as I read it, at least attempts to problematize this model of masculinity. Moynihan argues that it was during Jim Crow, with its extralegal violence, that African American men lost their rooster "privileges;" however, as a group, African American men never enjoyed many so-called privileges. Importantly, Moynihan acknowledges that the period of injury extends beyond slavery. He does not, however, recognize the intersecting relationship between his medical metaphors

of disease and pathology, evidence that “the racist virus in the American blood stream still afflicts [the U.S.]” and his avian metaphors for masculinity. Identifying racism while simultaneously advocating traditional patriarchy in the context of the U.S. history with which he frames the report does not, in fact, offer a viable solution for the object of his concern, family. Suspended between the non-human and the militaristic, the ability to claim rooster status hardly seems hardly a substantive repair for historical injustice and its attendant violence. We should consider carefully the implications of the report’s symbols. In relationship to reparations discourse, the ability to claim these symbols of masculinity are largely symbolic gestures that are, as I read them, similar to issuing apologies and erecting commemorative markers for slavery. Without substantive changes to the political and economic practices, masculinity is reduced to proud boasting—colorful displays of “biological” male behavior or the ability to accept and execute potentially lethal orders. If we read American culture’s continued adoration of the African American man’s body in sports, urban music, and as emblems of sexual prowess, then perhaps we can concede that the culture has allowed African American men to claim, quite successfully, their lives as Moynihan’s celebrated Bantam roosters. Further, in light of the barnyard imagery that the rooster invokes, might we also not identify the ways in which the proliferation of the prison industrial complex allows these “roosters” the greatest “freedom” to strut? The prison, managed like a military operation, providing strict rules and regulations and severe punishments for infractions as well as providing basic human needs, food, clothing, shelter, becomes a place where men compete against each other individually and collectively for dominance within the confines of

the prison. Such competition turns on the ability to maintain and display one's (hyper-)masculinity against other males seeking to establish and maintain the same identity. Ironically, the HBO series, *Oz* (1997-2003), which focused on Emerald City, an experimental prison within Oswald State Prison ("Oz" for short and named after Russell Oswald, the Corrections Commissioner at the time of the Attica Uprising in 1971) brings this point into sharp relief. In the series, we see a variety of roosters fighting for dominance.

Like *The Wiz*, *Oz* attempts to examine the social and economic troubles and tensions that "real" people face; *Oz*, however is multiracial and pays a great deal of attention to the ways in which race plays out in the overlapping political, cultural, and economic arenas that define prison life, which is a microcosm of the "real world." I reference this series because it addresses the proliferation of the prison industrial complex in the United States and the ways in which race and poverty among other factors collide. In *The Wiz*, Scarecrow's character, with its relationship to the Crows, explores this linkage. Scarecrow, according to the Crows, exists in a state-sponsored prison, though there are no visible bars. The urban decay that surrounds them, as the film suggests, constitutes a different, though no less destructive, form of imprisonment.

### **A Mind is a Terrible Thing To Waste**

Surrounded by abandoned tenement buildings, trash and a gang—the Crows—Scarecrow appears ensnared in a seemingly hopeless situation. He repeatedly asks the Crows if today is the day they will release him from bondage. They ignore his requests and mock the western philosophy that Scarecrow espouses as rationale for

why they should free him from the pole that holds him hostage. The scene invokes African American southern roots and the ritual lynching of African American men. The Crows, however, have no intention of doing bodily harm to the Scarecrow. Theirs is a more insidious violence, as they reject Scarecrow's pleas for intellectual development. The gang forces him to repeat "The Crow Commandments":

Thou shall honor all Crows.

Thou shall stop reading all bits of paper.

Thou shall never get down off the pole. (Smalls)

The Crow Commandments register the significance of religion to slavery's development and colonial laws that forbade educating slaves. Scarecrow's desire for knowledge—a brain—links to the origins of African American literary history, the slave narrative.

With its emphasis on literacy and freedom, the slave narratives reveal that, for African Americans, education limned the road from slavery to freedom. Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* revealed powerfully the rationale behind criminalizing the education of slaves. In his narrative he shared that his master rebuffed the mistress for teaching Douglass, warning her that, "it is unlawful as well as unsafe to teach a slave to read" (275). Free of the actual chains of slavery that bound Douglass, *The Wiz* asks in its opening exchange between Scarecrow and the Crows: "Who are the other 'masters' from which we [should] flee?" (Connor 2). The Crows reinforce their reference to colonial law with a song whose refrain is "you can't win child, you can't get out of the game," suggesting the permanence of his bondage.

Their insistence that “reading is stupid” suggests that a Eurocentric education does not promise liberation from “the game” that race and racism create. When Scarecrow quotes Bacon and Cicero, the Crows respond with, “Bacon once over lightly please” and “Cicero row row your boat” (Schumacher). The Crow’s critique of education and Western thought, however, is diminished by their failure to offer Scarecrow an alternative that will intellectually or literally emancipate him. The Crows might, then, be linked to Grant’s hopelessness and the negativity that he passes on to his students in *A Lesson Before Dying*. The lyrics reveal the colonization of the Crows’ minds, as they provide the chorus for Scarecrow’s recitation:

People keep sayin’ things are gonna change but they look just like  
they’re stayin’ the same you can’t win the world keeps movin’ and  
you’re standin’ far behind people keep sayin’ things’ll get better just  
to ease your state of mind you can’t win no way if your story stays the  
same. (Smalls)

Arguably, the Crow Commandments reflect their own disillusionment with their inability to make progress. They are suspicious, and perhaps justifiably so, of optimistic political discourse that promises substantive change. Here the imagination becomes critical, for the Crows’ failure to imagine other possible results in their nihilistic view of life as evidenced in their Commandments.

Unrelenting in their demand that Scarecrow abandon his hope and embrace their nihilism, the Crows attempt to discipline Scarecrow with what they perceive to be real knowledge—street smarts. The difference between the Crows’ logic and Moynihan’s rooster logic seems destined to fail at producing African American Four

Star Generals; instead, it will produce more Crows trapped by the game. Cornel West insists that understanding nihilism we must move beyond traditional philosophical understandings of the term; instead, nihilism is best understood as “the lived experience with a coping with life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness” (23). The Crows, then, become symbolic of a negative family dynamic, one that does not or cannot imagine grace; the Crows become the new masters of subjugation. Amidst this despair, the Scarecrow, surrounded by sunflowers, signifies possibility and hope. Importantly, Scarecrow gives no indication that he intends to abort his efforts to liberate himself physically and intellectually. Dorothy’s relationship with Scarecrow demonstrates her probable success with her kindergarteners and points to why she will be a positive influence on the older children that her new opportunity offers.

### **You Make Me Feel Like A Natural...**

Tinman and his wife Teenie lose their jobs at the Midway. Tinman says he “quickly made plans for the future, but alas I was felled by my fourth wife, Teenie...crushed in my prime!” With her head wrapped in the familiar red scarf and accompanied by a broad grin on her dark face, Teenie summons the popular representations of the Mammy stereotype. Her grin in this instance seems to indicate the pleasure she gains from triumphing over the Tinman. Importantly, Teenie does not speak, unlike the Crows who tormented Scarecrow. Her silence gives Tinman’s assertion that his position is “under” Teenie, as a seat cushion, “one that he assumed all too often,” greater poignancy (Schumacher). Though silent in this scene, Teenie



emerges fully, vocal and domineering, in the character of Evillene. Tinman's and Teenie's actual jobs at the carnival are unclear, but it is probable that they were displayed as oddities, their difference placing them outside of the human family. Tinman's resting place under Teenie perhaps conveys the unnaturalness of African Americans in light of Moynihan's rooster theory, for it is she who stands and struts triumphantly. Tinman's description of Teenie shares the same language as the Moynihan Report's description of the pathology that emerges from matriarchal family structures and its impact on African American men: "a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well." Following this logic, Dorothy's trepidation about family and Tinman's life under Teenie make their meeting and subsequent journey for home and freedom not simply fortuitous, but inevitable.

Tinman's song reveals that such experiences have left him devoid of feeling for even himself. He wants to restore these feelings:

What would I do if I could reach inside of me  
And know how it feels to say I like what I see?....  
And if tears should fall from my eyes just think of all the wounds  
They could mend and just think of all the time  
I could spend just being vuln'erable again

Tinman also shares Scarecrow's desire for knowledge. Tinman's song not only voices his desire to be vulnerable—i.e., human—but suggests that such vulnerability constitutes a form of restoration. Beneath the tin exterior, there exists an interiority that remains unrecognized per the demands of his maker, which we should read as the

dominant narrative about African American men. His insistence that it was his maker who neglected to give him a heart speaks to the historical stereotyping of African American men as predatory, ruthless, hypersexual, and violent beasts. The wished-for vulnerability of the Tinman is the opposite of Moynihan's strut. Cultural narratives that inscribe African American men as subhuman and inhumane have imprisoned both Tinman and Scarecrow. Tinman's metallic body and Scarecrow's underdeveloped mind articulate the legacy of slavery and the bodily and psychic injuries it produced.

Tinman's encore song, "Slide Some Oil to Me," reveals his desire not only for mobility but, as with Scarecrow, for knowledge to "lubricate [his] mind." Unlike Moynihan's insistence on the strutting rooster model of manhood, Tinman desires an identity that does not limit him to colorful, but largely symbolic, displays of power. His desire for the mobility that will allow him to pursue a heart stands in stark contrast to the "rolling stone" description so often used to describe African American men as husbands and fathers.

### **To Be King**

Tinman's shame links him to Cowardly Lion, who carries a terrible secret. He has been "exiled in disgrace" from the jungle because he is Incapable of Being King (IOBK). Just as Tinman's position under Teenie speaks to the failures of the African American family (according to Moynihan), so does the Lion's punishment. Stymied in his "natural" expression of superiority and privilege, Lion is the outcome of men who are denied their natural right to strut; the king of the jungle is banished because

he is not manly enough to perform his kingly duties. Lion does not reveal who, if anyone, replaces him as King. The film, however, suggests that it is Evillene who replaces him.

Banished, perhaps by Evillene, for his weakness, Cowardly Lion takes refuge in one of the several lion statues. Lion, too, shares his commitment to the pursuit of knowledge. Discovered, Lion does not mark his territory with a ferocious roar, but rather breaks into a song, “I’m a Mean Ole Lion,” as he prances and swishes his tail while he looks into a mirror. Toto further emasculates Lion by nipping his tail, which sends him into hysterics and tears. His response then reiterates the unnaturalness of African American masculinity.

Like Tinman squashed under Teenie, that which he should “naturally” dominate subdues Lion. His behavior is less an indication of cowardice than it is an indication of his overtly effeminate persona. In *The Wizard of Oz*, the Cowardly Lion says of himself, “life is sad...when you’re born to be a sissy” (Arlen and Harburg). The connotation of “sissy” changes across time and community—“sissy” does not indicate punk, but rather homosexuality, in the African American parlance of the 1970s. “Punk,” though it sometimes carries homosexual connotations, would have signified more “sissy” in the contemporary moment. Arguably, then, Lion is incapable of being king (IOBK), because he is gay or at least perceived as gay, a perception that disturbs the already fragile construction of African American masculinity.<sup>60</sup> My reading of Lion is not intended to suggest that, if in fact he is gay,

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60 For a variety of engagements with the issues of homosexuality in African American communities see the following: Simms-Constantine, Delroy *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*. New York: Alyson Books, 2001. Roscoe, Will and Murray, Stephan *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African-American Homosexualities*, New York: Palgrave: 2006. Boykin, Keith *Beyond the Down Low: Sex Lies and Denial in Black America*. New York: Avalon Publishing Company, 2005.

it invalidates his masculinity, but rather to acknowledge that African American gay men are stigmatized as especially deformed or aberrant subjects and thus often ridiculed with a greater degree of scorn than one identified as cowardly.

After calming Lion, the group extends an invitation to him to join their quest for the Wiz. During conversations, we learn that Lion's real name is Fleetwood Coupe de Ville—Fleet for short. Importantly, these names come from two different models of Cadillac automobiles. They signify both a particular sense of style and economic status. Lion's preening and prancing suggests that he is heavily invested in being perceived as stylish. In light of the legacy of slavery, style became one of the ways in which African Americans could exercise some control over their bodies and their presentation.<sup>61</sup> Being stylish, then, does not inherently mark a compromised masculine identity. Cowardly Lion might be read as a dandy, one who possesses style but lacks the social capital to make such style meaningful beyond vanity. Historically, the dandy is a negative description of African American men who attempt, with disastrous effects, to imitate white behavior associated with the upper classes. However, in light of Moynihan's fears and what seems to be the film's response, Cowardly Lion's subsequent discussion with the group offers insight about why he is IOBK and thus stripped of his patriarchal claim. Cowardly Lion tells the group that his "mama would be so proud of him" but never mentions his father—implying that he is the product of a single parent home, another putative source of pathology within the African American family.

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<sup>61</sup> See Shane and Graham *White's Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suits*.

Moynihan's report, though it articulates concern about the dysfunction of the African American family, is ultimately about African American men, for it is within the institution of the nuclear family with its strong fathers that young men "learn...their biologically given maleness" (Moynihan 16). Apparently, the "biological maleness" that Moynihan reports as normative is not powerful enough to emerge on its own; thus, the absence of the father exposes the male child to the threat of 'biologically given femaleness.'" Ostensibly, it is because Lion lacks the appropriate male influence or education that, when it is time for him to be the king, he is unable to fulfill his manly/kingly duties. We are led to believe that his mother's childrearing accounts for Lion's effeminate characteristics and possibly gay identity. Thus he is representative of and iterates yet another concern about African American men's unfitness for power and authority. Independently, the three male characters are deficient; it is Dorothy who is most capable of guiding them on their journey to bridge the mind/body split. Dorothy becomes their surrogate mother, encouraging them, soothing them, and empowering them. With the help of the ultimate patriarch, The Wiz, Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion should be transformed into what they are supposed to be, men who strut like Moynihan's bantam roosters.

### **Disease-Free Reparation**

Citing the intersections between African American history and literature, Trudier Harris asserts that portrayals of African American women's strength becomes a weakness as it "frequently perpetuates dysfunction in literary families, where the strong characters and actions of black women become malignant growths upon the

lives of their relatives” (Harris 110). Despite her effort to displace stereotypical representations of African American women that deny the complexity of their actual lives, Harris’s analysis remains troublesome. Harris, I believe, would not agree with Moynihan’s description of African American families, though her literary criticism echoes his diagnosis of the African American family’s decline.

Her analysis reveals that our theorizations of African American gender relations can unwittingly rearticulate the dominant discourses. Literary and filmic representations of African American women as sources of immense and enviable strength does not “displac[e] the reality of black women’s experiences of racism and sexism as peripheral to the trajectory of black liberation...politics” (Clarke 199). Instead, African American women become perennial threats that account for the degraded status of African Americans. Situating Dorothy, Aunt Em, and Evillene in *The Wiz* in relationship to Harris and Moynihan’s arguments sheds light on the complicated role of African American women in reparations discourses — particularly those that equate the repair of African American men with the repair of African American communities and families.

We might, then, see Aunt Em’s insistence that Dorothy create her own family as evidence of the “paradox of finding a way out of traditional stereotypes by reinvigorating an old one whose myriad shades do not ultimately overcome the basic problem of limitation” (Harris 110). Dorothy’s identity as woman is not only tied to motherhood, it is endangered by her inability to share “the feeling” that Aunt Em celebrates. Until Dorothy understands and claims this elusive feeling, she, like her companions, will be in a state of disrepair. Dorothy’s journey then is not simply about

returning home, but returning to the domestic sphere prepared to accept the traditional role of wife and mother as nurturer.

Dorothy must learn to fulfill this demand without becoming a malignant force in the lives of African American men. That is to say that Dorothy must be appropriately subjugated by expressions and rituals of “biological masculinity.” Dorothy is safe in learning how to become the idealized mother precisely because Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion are incapable of exercising their masculine privilege. Dorothy’s interaction with Scarecrow, Tinman, Cowardly Lion, and the Wiz constitutes a rehearsal for and ultimately the mastery of appropriate mothering skills. Unlike Teenie, whose oppression renders Tinman physically and emotionally numb, Dorothy acquiesces to his request that she “slide some oil to him.” Dorothy liberates Scarecrow from the pole that holds him in bondage and lifts him from the ground, where he falls after he attempts to stand and walk independently. She tells Scarecrow that he is the “product of negative thinking” and encourages him to forget the Crows’ miseducation (Schumacher). Dorothy’s willingness to envision Lion as a “different kind of Lion” encourages him and opens the possibility that he will be able to reclaim his rightful position as King. The film contrasts Dorothy’s mothering against Evillene’s, which is a source of pathology that undermines African American men and, by extension, African American families.

As the antithesis of Dorothy’s employment as a kindergarten teacher (surrogate mother), Evillene’s business stands in for the extended family. As the owner, she does not treat her employees like family but rather as slaves. She denies them lunch breaks and compensation for overtime. They toil under the constant threat

of both her whip and violent termination. Evillene's textile factory, a sweatshop, replaces plantation slavery and the abusive white master. Her workers/family appears stooped and disfigured. Their faces, like Evillene's, are distorted and unattractive, monstrous. We might identify this representation with Fanon's theory of a black skin/white mask, in which the subjected embrace the behavior and values of the oppressor to such a degree that he/she loses a sense of him/herself and therefore unconsciously contributes to his or her condition as the subjected other. Unlike Dorothy, Evillene emerges as the quintessential mammy—large, dark, asexual, and domineering. Magnified by her rejection of the traditional “good” maternal figure, Evillene has a place in neither Aunt Em's nor the nation's vision of a healthy family. She is an aberration. Evillene's relationship to and with the Crows suggests a correlation between matriarchal power and negative thinking in African American men. Evillene's power might be understood as doubly injurious because she threatens to destroy African American women, like Dorothy, whose strength does not subdue African American men. Not only does Dorothy not subdue African American men, she supports and saves them. Further, with The Flying Monkeys under her control, Evillene occupies the throne that the ill-prepared Lion left—she is the King and Queen. Evillene's power constitutes an anomaly that threatens to destroy African American families. The film introduces audiences to Evillene while she is in a fit of anger. Her anger stems from her workers'/slaves' (represented as male) failure to capture Dorothy's prized silver slippers.

Evillene pursues Dorothy relentlessly until she finally captures Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tinman and Lion. She mutilates them. She cuts Scarecrow in half,



crushes Tinman like a can and hangs Lion by his tail—an act that further links her with slavery and the violence of lynching. She promises to kill them unless Dorothy relinquishes the slippers. Importantly, none of her companions expect her to give up her power; rather, they tell her emphatically, “don’t do it, Dorothy.” Dorothy and Evillene’s confrontation, then, becomes a battle to establish the appropriate relationship between African American men and women. Clearly the group recognizes their collective demise should Evillene win. Victorious, Dorothy again saves her companions and liberates the workers from Evillene’s tyranny. Dorothy’s confrontation with and ultimate destruction of Evillene, who is flushed down her own elaborate toilet/throne, does more than secure her safety and the possibility of returning home; it signals a “Brand New Day.” Marked by establishing the appropriate or “natural” boundary between strength as disease and strength as resource, Dorothy deepens her sense of maternal responsibility. Unlike Dorothy’s accidental liberation of the imprisoned children when she arrives in Oz, the disposal of Evillene is deliberate and thus marks another step toward her embrace of a mature maternal identity.

Significantly, Dorothy’s emancipation of Evillene’s workers/slaves produces the only rainbow that appears in *The Wiz*. This rainbow and the worker’s freedom lead them to sing in chorus: “Everybody’s glad. Our silent fear and dread is gone/...freedom...has our hearts singing joyfully/ We always knew that we’d be free somehow and show the world that we’ve got liberty/ It’s such a change for us to live so independently” (Smalls and Vandross). The lyrics accentuate the gospel tones of the song, strengthening the representation of their deliverance and transformation.

The workers break free of their monstrous shells, revealing that they are strong, proud and beautiful African American men and women. That the workers are of both sexes suggests that the natural tendency to strut is not inherently about masculinity but rather, a signifier of freedom. The workers' response to Evillene's death suggests that she is the sole source of oppression in Oz.

The film does not reveal Evillene's educational background. Unlike Dorothy, she does not seem to possess the cultural capital that accompanies education; nonetheless, both women are powerful and enjoy resources that none of the men in the film can claim. The difference, then, between the two women lies in the fact that Dorothy does not lord her resources over her adopted family, but rather shares them to uplift African American men. The film suggests that these African American men have been injured or wounded by their mothers and wives and by the negative thinking that strong African American women like Evillene engender in African American communities. The emancipation of Evillene's family of workers/slaves transfers reproductive power from the diseased African American woman/mother independently identified in Moynihan and in Harris's "strength as disease" argument. Additionally, this emancipation serves to resituate Dorothy, not Evillene or even Aunt Em, as the law and its transgression in relationship to the (re)production of African American families.

### **Beyond Apologies**

Dorothy does not encounter the urban "sexually and socially virile" men such as Shaft that populate the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s, nor does she engage with the "safe and comfortable" males that Harry Belafonte and Sydney Portier portrayed

in the previous decades. Dorothy's men are ordinary or "'round the way brothas'" that the lady in blue from Shange's choreopoem addresses. She declares:

...just don't give it to me I can't use another sorry next time you  
should admit you're mean/ low-down/trifilin/& no count straight out  
steada being sorry all the time. (52-54)

Yet, given Scarecrow, Tinman and Lion's pursuit of repair, we should specify that these are neither the African American men who are the objects of scorn and frustration in the lady in blue's soliloquy nor those in Moynihan's report. It is the Wiz who emerges as both the object of African American women's displeasure and the men that Moynihan's report identifies as particularly problematic.

The Wiz enters into a contract with Dorothy and her companions. In exchange for securing his position as the "king" of Oz and his sovereignty over Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tinman and Cowardly Lion, the Wiz promises to fulfill their wishes. The terms of that contract are agreeable to the group because they do not know that the Wiz, like Cowardly Lion, is all style and does not possess the power or resources to uphold their agreement. Like Dorothy's companions, the Wiz is in a state of disrepair; despite the Civil Rights movement, the Wiz has not yet become a signatory on what is supposed to be a new social contract, one in which the exclusion of non-whites has been amended. Thus when Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tinman and Lion return to Oz expecting to have their contract honored, they discover instead the "great and powerful" Wiz in his bed cowering under the covers. He is, as Dorothy proclaims, "nothing but a phony" (Schumacher). The Wiz offers the dreaded apology exclaiming "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, everything they say about me is true. I got no

powers.” The Wiz is Herman Smith—an ordinary black man from Atlantic City, New Jersey. The Wiz suggests, then, that being an ordinary black man means existing in a pathetic state. He recounts that his failure to be elected to any office, including that of dogcatcher, had landed him in Oz. As an ordinary African American man, Smith’s/the Wiz’s inability to ascend the political ladder suggests that meaningful strutting—biological maleness—power eludes most African American men. In Oz, his spectacular style gave the appearance that he was a real Bantam rooster.<sup>62</sup>

Bogle argues that as the Wiz, Richard Pryor gives one of his “least effective and least funny performances” (265). The performance is arguably not humorous because the film ceases being a celebratory musical; instead, *The Wiz*, both as film and as character, become a disturbing portrait of African American men that reflects, perhaps too accurately, the condition of some African American men. The Wiz has all of the flaws of the other three male characters; he lacks self-awareness or compassion and he is obsessed with style. Although a charlatan, the Wiz is not a villain, but rather an ineffectual leader. While Dorothy rejects the Wiz’s apologies and pleas for them to stay because he “lives there all alone in terror that someone will find out [that he’s] a fraud,” she does not, as Evillene would have, belittle him or destroy him.

Instead, Dorothy offers all of the men a final lesson, one that displays her pedagogical skills and anticipates her future success with high school students. Significantly, these are the same skills necessary for “good” or effective mothering. Dorothy informs Scarecrow, Tinman, and Lion that they already possess what they

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<sup>62</sup> The emphasis on style, particularly as an activity that trumps real political engagement and power, is reinforced in the film by a scene that shows a group of people, ostensibly some of the same people who work for Evillene, outside who respond to the Wiz’s fickle demands for changing the fashionable colors. The colors change from red, to green, to gold finally. The color scheme here suggests the faddishness of African dress and perhaps even interest in Africa as a particular expression of African American style in the 1970s.

had sought from the Wiz. Their problems, it would seem, stem from domineering African American women, negative/colonized thinking, and limited conceptions of masculinity—all of which circulate in the prevailing discourse about African American men. Their intellect, courage, and emotional potential have simply been imprisoned by negative thinking about both race and its conflation with gender; ultimately, they must find the resources to become the men that they always already were despite the negative circumstances that framed their lives. Tinman, free from overbearing women such as Teenie, will have the emotional space and physical freedom needed to develop into a man who is strong and sensitive.

In her serenade to Lion, Dorothy instructs Lion to be a “lion in his own way.” Her compassionate teaching allows the Lion to reclaim his birthright. Here, the film calls upon audiences to embrace all masculinities, including those that have traditionally been deemed unacceptable for African American men. Adding their voices to the song, Scarecrow and Tinman affirm that he is a lion. In the final chorus the Lion embraces himself as he declares triumphantly that, “I am a lion.” Dorothy’s comrades are compassionate, brave, strong, African American men. Damaged, yes, but not destroyed or beyond reparation, particularly when they imagine grace and other African American women and men affirm and enact that imagining in their lives.

For Dorothy, a man’s ability to admit his state of disrepair, combined with his willingness to pursue remedies, is preferable to wearing the mask that “grins and lies” with the empty apologies which issue forth from such choices. The Wiz, however, refuses this path; instead, he takes refuge behind “an imposing array of masks, acts,

and facades” that allow him to perform African American masculinity, the super macho (Majors and Billson 4).<sup>63</sup> Without the symbolic comb of the rooster, the silver Afro-studded head symbolic for the 1970s macho African American male, Herman Smith is truly sorry.<sup>64</sup> Unmasked and faced with the prospect of being an outcast in Emerald City, the Wiz asks Dorothy if she can do anything for him. Her reply is simple and powerful. “I don’t know what is in your heart...begin with letting people see who you are.” The exchange reiterates the value of vulnerability first identified with Tinman.

After granting Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion’s wishes, Dorothy launches into “If You Believe,” in which she both reaffirms her own power and transfers the power to achieve self-affirmation to the men. She tells them: “Believe in yourself right from the start/You’ll have brains, You’ll have a heart/ You’ll have courage” (Smalls).

In essence, “somewhere over the rainbow cannot be enuf,” as the Wiz reveals. His life, lived in perpetual fear and isolation, is anything but a “dream come true” paradise. Dorothy’s insistence that her companions do not need a wizard to make them men retains the spirit of *The Wizard of Oz*, which at its core articulates Baum’s belief in ordinary people. Herman Smith, the Wiz, devalues his own agency because he was unsuccessful in his attempt to gain political office and the fame and power that supposedly accompany such positions. Ultimately, *The Wiz* suggests that African American men and women must be attentive to the ways in which they construct

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63 See Robin Kelley’s *Yo’ Mama’s Dysfunktional!: Fighting Culture Wars in Urban America*. New York: Beacon Press, 1998, especially the introduction and Chapter One for an extended conversation about the cool pose and its limitations as a theory for understanding African American Masculinity.

64 I am indebted to my co-panelist, Carmen Gillespie, at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture/American Culture Association in New Orleans for the astute observation about the significance of the silver Afro-clad head.

gender identity and the American Dream. Evillene and the Wiz fail to provide desirable models of African American masculinity and femininity and thus exemplify Moynihan's gloomy predictions about African American families.

### **Home Again**

"Home" replaces "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" as the signature song in *The Wiz*. Audience displeasure over Diana Ross's portrayal of Dorothy was not limited to her age, for it not only challenged the character's believability but also the delivery of the play's sacred song, "Home." Described as "the little girl with the big voice," the fifteen-year-old Stephanie Mills conveyed the song's depth powerfully for Broadway audiences. The multivalent meanings of home that the song conjures are not lost on African American audiences; arguably, the song resonates so powerfully because it honors the challenges that have accompanied and/or stymied African Americans' pursuit of home in the United States. The desire for a home "where there's love overflowing [and] with the things I've been knowing" articulates the positive attributes that allow Dorothy finally to embrace Aunt Em's vision of home and family.

Home, however, is also a space from which many African Americans must escape if they are to "have some direction" and "grow up" with knowledge that will allow them to "know if [they] should believe the things that [they] see, . . . stay or run away or . . . just let things be" (Smalls). For these African Americans, home is not a safe space that liberates. Dorothy's concern about the feelings that Aunt Em glorifies in the film's opening sequence are not evidence of youthful naiveté. Dorothy, I

believe, articulates a legitimate and mature anxiety about the complexities of being a member of and/or reproducing the African American family. As Glinda the Good Witch of the South tells Dorothy, home means knowing your mind, heart, and courage. We can map parallels between Glinda's advice; Miss Emma, Tante Lou and Vivian's lessons; and Baby Suggs's call. Each of the women insists on the importance of claiming the self as the first step in reparations. Dorothy must begin her journey to her self—home by imagining the same grace that she granted to her companions in Oz for herself.

To read accurately Dorothy's involvement with Scarecrow, Tinman, and Lion and especially to understand the closing scene as an indication of what home will mean for Dorothy in the future, we must also attend to Glinda's reprise of "If You Believe" before Dorothy returns home. As Glinda sings, the camera falls back to reveal the faces of babies—little angels adorned with star-shaped bonnets. Glinda tells her, "If you believe within your heart, You'll know that no one can change the path that you must go." Suffused with maternal imagery, Dorothy's return home has little to do with self-affirmation; ultimately she is encouraged to commit to motherhood, whether as a teacher, surrogate communal mother, or as the mother of her own family. Lucille Clifton's poem "After Oz" from her collection, *Mercy*, (2004) contemplates this possibility. I want to use the poem to consider Dorothy's post-Oz existence.

Clifton's poem reveals that women like Dorothy must be "weighted down so that storms cannot move her." Dorothy's original encounter with the snow cyclone proved instructive; Clifton suggests that such a storm could provide a welcome



escape. We are left to wonder why she seeks escape—perhaps Dorothy’s ambivalence about home and family returns. Clifton says of the home space, “we have lost her, perhaps home is no longer comfort or comfort no longer home.” In the final stanza of the poem, Clifton describes women’s apprehension: “evenings we sit awake in our disenchanting kitchen listening to the dog whine to Dorothy clicking her heels” (32). If Dorothy remains less than fulfilled and in search of a new home, as “After Oz” considers, the fate of her companions is similarly uncertain.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy’s companions, including the witches and the wizard, are people that she knows. They return home with her; this is not the case in *The Wiz* as Dorothy’s companions literally vanish. Are we to believe, then, that they have been repaired and are, as a result, ready to claim their so-called biological maleness, to inhabit homes as the King, to be husbands and fathers? The Million Man March of 1995 suggests that the answer is no. And in response, Farrakhan proposes precisely what the Shange’s lady in blue rejects—apologies. Under the guise of offering reparations, Farrakhan invites African American men to atone for their sorry state of being and dedicate themselves to being men.

*Calling all black people  
Calling all black people, man woman child  
Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in  
Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent calling  
you, calling all black people*

“S.O.S,” Amiri Baraka

*I pledge that from this day forward  
I will strive to love my brother as  
I love myself. I, from this day forward,*

*will strive to improve myself spiritually,  
morally, mentally, socially, politically  
and economically for the benefit of  
My family, my people and myself.*

Excerpt from the pledge that Louis Farrakhan asked black men to take on  
October 16, 1995, at the Million Man March

### **Reparations, Calling All Black Men**

I agree with Robert Reid-Pharr's identification that "the rhetoric of the march organizers echoed Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous 1965 report...with its diagnosis of pathologies plaguing black families and communities" (164). Thus it is more than ironic that Farrakhan argues that the proposed Contract with America, largely a restatement of Ronald Reagan's State of the Union Address in 1984, "is turning back the hand of time, depriving the Black community of many gains made through the suffering and sacrifice of our fellow advocates of change in the '50s and '60s" (Farrakhan).<sup>65</sup> The Million Man March, initiated by Minister Louis Farrakhan, responds directly to the Reagan/Bush era's emphasis on African American men in relationship to criminality and the demonization of African American women. Reagan's "welfare queen" ultimately constitutes an indictment of African American men who have failed in their moral and financial responsibility for their children.

In the shadow of the Capitol, Farrakhan said, "we believe that as men we must recognize and unconditionally atone for absences, in too many cases, of African American men." Farrakhan asked hundreds of thousands of African American men to publicly apologize for being absent, abusive, irresponsible—"sorry"—in the nation's capital. Ironically, the Moynihan Report registers the ways in which Farrakhan and The Nation of Islam's ideology mirrors the dominant culture, describing it as "a

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<sup>65</sup> See Lou Cannon's impressive array of biographical writing on Ronald Reagan.

movement based on total rejection of white society, even though it emulates whites more.” The description appears incomplete as it fails to offer a comparative frame—more than what or who remains open. However, Moynihan also identifies The Nation of Islam: “the only religious movement that appears to have enlisted a considerable number of lower class Negro males in Northern cities of late is that of the Black Muslims.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Farrakhan marks a complicated negotiation of pursuing and resisting America’s construction of African Americans and, more generally, of American cultural, economic, and political practice. The Million Man March, then, marks a moment in which such complexities announce themselves publicly. Farrakhan’s call was suited to the political landscape of the nation’s capital, where presidential candidates won public support by using African American men as scapegoats for the nation's problems.

In stark contrast to Martin Luther King’s 1963 declaration “that there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights,” Farrakhan, thirty-two years afterward, declares that African American men must recognize their failure as husbands, fathers, and citizens and ask the nation for forgiveness. In *Get on the Bus*, one of the men says, “Farrakhan has been at the forefront of the struggle to clean up black people for forty years.” His assertion begs critical attention, as “cleaning up” shifts the discussion toward blaming African Americans. I find Farrakhan’s premise specious and dangerous. His requests of African American men seeks to assure the nation that African Americans neither want nor need government favor; put differently, the request offers a contract between African American men and the nation that is appealing because it does not require the

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66 See <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm> for the full report minus the charts and graphs included in the original.

majority to cede power or privilege. The Million Man March, “under the guise of a civil rights rally, presented a national platform for socio-economic ideas and economic philosophies of the very people it meant to protest against” (Kelleter 36).

The politics of Farrakhan’s address buttresses the public backlash against affirmative action in legal and popular discourse that suggests that African Americans have gained too much at the expense of others, particularly white men. Robin Kelley notes that Farrakhan argued that the problem plaguing black America was “over-reliance on government and its failure to take personal responsibility [a theme] that let the government off the hook” (Kelley 80). We might read Kelley’s indictment of the march in relationship to the nation’s disinterest in even considering reparations and encouragement of (African) Americans to forget the past. Such collusion is troubling enough; however, in addition to replicating racist ideologies, Farrakhan also offers a lesson on the dangers of emulating white patriarchy. Rolland Murray notes that, while “feminist cultural commentators, creative writers, and male studies critics are making some of the most incisive critiques of black patriarchy...that project is being constantly undermined by grandiose affirmations of black patriarchy like The Million Man March” (131). Farrakhan becomes both the location and occasion that promises reparation of African American men and by extension the African American family and the nation.

The Million Man March, then, becomes an example of Farrakhan’s/the Wizard’s power. The individual voices of the men in attendance at the march were subsumed under Farrakhan’s voice. Farrakhan’s call, however, was not for all African Americans or the more diasporic call “for all black people” that Baraka’s poem

“S.O.S.” used as an epigraph for this section, issued forth. Arguably, Farrakhan spoke less to the gathering and more to those who responded to his “call for all black men.”

We can identify the Wiz and Farrakhan as, respectively, fictional and real representations of African American male leaders, treated less as political leaders than as demagogues. Paul Gilroy argues that Farrakhan “produces a steady stream of miracle seekers eager to receive their solutions for the “crisis” of African American masculinity” (Gilroy 262). In the context of *The Wiz*, with its focus on Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion, Gilroy’s description becomes applicable to the fictional Wiz as well. Both Farrakhan and the Wiz supposedly possess “fantastic powers at [their] command.... [and will] fix you...and in a flash you will be home” (Smalls). That is to say that both ‘characters’ rely upon rhetorical acrobatics that appeal to African Americans in search of reparation and, at least tacitly in the Million Man March, atonement, while masking their limited power to offer substantive reparations.

In instructing the men who answered his call to leave their wives at home, he precluded a real communal discourse about the internal and external conflicts that complicate black masculinity. African American men stand in for race as in the idea of patriarchy. As a result, it is African American women who are subdued and silenced. African American women apparently do not need reparations because they can take of themselves. However, such displays of self-sufficiency and strength become evidence of and rationales for African American men’s state of disrepair. Michael Awkward, echoing a similar sentiment to Murray, notes that the success of black feminism in “illuminat[ing] aspects of black women’s situatedness in America and elsewhere, [suggest that] certain versions of black feminism might profitably

begin to interrogate the nuances of black masculinity” (42). I am deliberate in my choice of African American male scholars who articulate their embrace of African American feminist discourse and what it potentially brings to the conversation about the so-called crisis of African American masculinity.

Farrakhan’s conception of reparations are deeply rooted in Black nationalism, predicated on a essential blackness in which “the black dreamed-of, autonomous subject is inevitably male, heterosexual, and in training to be a powerful patriarch-only in and on "black" terms, terms that are both separate from and continuous with those of the hegemonic culture” (Lubiano 38). Lubiano’s definition of Black nationalism articulates how it is possible to identify the reparation of African American men with white patriarchal constructions of masculinity and the family. That is to say that African American patriarchy is simply better than white patriarchy, because blackness, contrary to popular mythology, is superior to whiteness. The terms of the binary are simply inverted and fail to illuminate the more complicated relationship between so-called black power and white weakness. Such a move does not become evidence of strategic essentialism, as there is nothing to be gained from the erasure of complexity and dissent within African American political discourse and its representation in a variety of cultural narratives.

My reading of the March, then, does not minimize the possibility of resistance to Farrakhan’s platform and speech. I am not suggesting that all of the African American men who attended the March agreed with Farrakhan’s rationale for the exclusion of women. I am, however, arguing that the media, for all of its coverage, did not and could not give voice to the diversity of reasons for which African

American men and others participated in the march. My recollection of the coverage is of speculations and projections about the actual turnout, coupled with surprise and seeming disappointment about the lack of violence and mayhem.

As mediated, The Million Man March was not a call for the progressive pursuit of reparations, particularly in light of how the nation's racial history has impacted African American intra-racial gender relationships; instead, the call produced a spectacle, one which Farrakhan and the media co-produced. In this spectacle African American men vanish, leaving only the ill-conceived notion that black patriarchy constitutes reparations for both African American men and the African American family. The three years between the Broadway and Hollywood versions of *The Wiz* were not without economic and political struggles. Thus, if we read the characters of that cultural production as composites of "real" African American men, the possibility that Scarecrow, Tinman, Cowardly Lion, and the Wiz fade into oblivion does not suggest that they were either repaired or lived happily after. It is possible for us to imagine that these characters, presented in *The Wiz* as realistic portraits of African American men traveling the yellow brick road, which the film suggested was anything but easy, might also be some of the men who boarded Spike Lee's bus.

### **Abandoning the Yellow Brick Road**

My goal here is not to critique The Million Man March, as that work has already been done by many scholars; instead, I offer the above gloss as a way of framing my interest in what has received less critical attention, Spike Lee's filmic

commemoration of the cultural-historical moment that Farrakhan initiated. More specifically, I want to examine the imaginative journey to the Million Man March that Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus* aims not only to commemorate the possibilities that the march created but also to complement those possibilities with a counternarrative, one that decenters Farrakhan in the economy of representations in which film circulates and (re)produces. While ordinary African American men disappear from the screen with no consequences, this is not so in popular public discourse. In these discourses African American men regularly disappear to prison. This reality accounts for why *The Wiz*, particularly its ending, disturbs me. *Get on the Bus* possesses its own flaws and reinscription of Black nationalism's embrace of patriarchy. As I read Lee's film, it attempts to recuperate Dorothy's companions and "real" ordinary African American men by placing them in the space usually reserved for representations of African American men—in relationship to some criminal offense or as the "success story" of an entertainer or sports figure. Importantly, these stories also place African American women on the periphery, if they are even acknowledged, as these "success stories" are often non-domestic and bear no relationship to women. In fact, often the success in these stories depends on thriving in spite of an African American mother or wife.

Although Lee's film uses Farrakhan's call for The Million Man March as a departure point, it does place African American men in "the privileged victim status of African American men in anti-racist discourse" (Carbado 337). Lee's film renders what The Million Man March could not: the multiplicity of African American men's voices and stories. *Get On the Bus* succeeds precisely because the travelers provide audiences with conversations launched from a diversity of experiences and



perspectives. *Get on the Bus* offers representations of African American men who are not sorry but rather “resourceful co-creators and subversive regenerators...agents of their own jubilation and pain” (Dyson 211). These narratives displace the dominant representation of and discourse about African American men without the hype and spectacle of wizardry, real or metaphorical. In Lee’s film the bus, like the yellow brick road in *The Wiz*, invokes what Orlando Patterson identifies as the “ordeal of integration.” These references, however, seem less about integrating corporations and schools than about the pursuit of an integrated self that develops through the acquisition of self-knowledge and communal knowledge.

### **All they do is Talk, Talk, Talk**

Filled with fifteen African American men, Lee’s bus embraces the dialogic exchange necessary to conceptualize reparations that are meaningful. The dialogues initiated by the various men during the cross-country journey to The Million Man March reveal that the actual march—and, to a large extent, Farrakhan himself—are insignificant. In fact, the film is ambivalent about Farrakhan, as the conversation reveals. One of the men insists that, “this is not just Farrakhan’s March.” Another man asks who else but Farrakhan could have brought a million men to the nation’s capital. The film gives voice to the characters’ anxiety, and perhaps a larger anxiety about African American leadership at the turn of the century.

Importantly, the journey begins in South Central Los Angeles, a geography that has become synonymous with so-called black-on-black violence, an image largely perpetrated by warring gangs in popular films. The film engages the

complexity of the gang problem through two of the riders, one a police officer bitter about his father's death as the result of gang violence and one a reformed gang member who currently works to dismantle gangs. Lee's film seems to comment on Hollywood's embrace of the "hood" movie; as one of the riders points out, "Hollywood thinks they've got us [black men] figured out" (Blythewood). The film rejects Hollywood's essentialist representations of African American men and, in doing so, urges us to identify African Americans and African American masculinity as the site of complex intersections of race, class and gender histories.

The men's conversations also reveal that Farrakhan's celebrity overshadows the reparative work that the march proposes. The Spotted Owl, the name of the bus that transports the men to the march, acknowledges the discourse of African American men as endangered species in popular cultural discourse; however, the men on the bus reject this all-encompassing treatment of African American men, suggesting that they—African American men—are not only indeed alive, but well. The film, however, does not succumb to a romantic celebration of African American men. Throughout the journey, the men encounter face challenges, including mechanical troubles and a confrontation with the law. These mishaps during the cross-country trek and the dialogues that emerge in their wake draw attention to what the televised speeches could not: self-analysis and affirmation.

Instead of the silver afro-studded mask behind which the Wiz hides, the men who have chosen to get on the bus are, like Tinman, vulnerable. Their stories reveal both the sources of this vulnerability and their various responses. The young film maker, seemingly a representation of Lee, persuades the men to capture these

dialogues. He asks each of the men why they have chosen to make the pilgrimage to Washington. The individual stories do not always garner uncritical sympathy, but they become a part of the discourse about African Americans' individual and collective struggle for self-affirmation, a repair which Dorothy identifies as critical in her conversation with the Wiz. Thus the talking that disturbs the reviewer's analysis of *Get on The Bus*, used here to title this section, articulates, though unintentionally, exactly what I find most compelling about Lee's film. Yet, the film recognizes that, as significant as talking or oral culture is within African American communities, there must also be other ways of disseminating cultural narratives. Jamal, the aspiring filmmaker who is perhaps a reflection of a young Spike Lee, films the journey. Like Jefferson's diary in *A Lesson Before Dying*, the fictional documentary that Jamal produces and the film that Spike Lee creates are stories about the importance of stories, particularly those in which African Americans pursue self-awareness and affirmation, in assuring that the men's voices, real and fictional, will not simply vanish.

*If a human chain can be formed  
Around missile sites, then surely  
Black men can form human chains*

Essex Hemphill, *Ceremonies*

### **Protesting Protest**

The narratives in *Get on the Bus* defy the tradition of protest in African American discourse, which has been characterized by “a tendency among black male writers to use their characters in the thematic illustrations of problems in [American

Culture]” (Harris 192). While Harris specifically references the African American literary tradition, her assessment is equally valid for African American film history. One need only consider the ways in which the “ghettocentric” film embraces the elements of violence, flight, and death that characterized Wright’s *Native Son*, which is the blueprint for contemporary protest writing. In this tradition, both in literature and film, the victimized/endangered black male discourse constitutes the critical element of the form. In *Get on the Bus*, however, the men do not shout out in protest of the various ills that plague them individually and collectively as African American men; instead, their calls identify and affirm them as complex beings. The roll call, which I identify as sharing the same function and importance in the film as Baby Suggs’s call; Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Vivian’s instruction; and Dorothy’s affirmation, speaks to the generative potential that comes with “deconstructing ideas about the terms of black manhood” in a communal setting (Clark 207).

During the roll call, each of the men proclaims his name to and for the others, creating a communal voice that displaces the monolithic construction of African American men. This oral ceremony makes it possible for the men to “ease on down the road” despite the challenges they encounter. Acknowledging the adversity that African American men face without condescending to the victimization trope, the film reminds the men, and by extension the audience, “if [African American men] are to survive as individuals, the collective known as men must share a resurrection and reconciliation as surely as they share the possibility of extermination” (380). The roll call is best treated as an example of pursuing self-made repairs in and through community.

That call, like the call that brings the men to the bus, intends to bridge the space between the divine (resurrection) and the human (reconciliation) that gives meaning to imagining grace for individuals and communities in struggle. The naming ceremony solidifies the bond that initiated with the men's decision to board the bus and opens the door to more substantive and personal revelations. Like the community in *Beloved* and *A Lesson Before Dying*, the community is not monolithic; *Get on the Bus* offers a diverse community of African American men that include men whose identities are in tension with popular representations of authentic African American identity, and specifically African American masculinity. Gays, Republicans, college students, homeless, middle-class, bi-racial, black Muslims, and former gang members—all ordinary African American men—are able to board the bus. The film does not offer a utopian community in which difference and the contention it generates are erased. Instead, the film engages the complications that attend competing notions of African American masculinity and, more generally, community-building; the film does this work without suggesting that the latter is impossible. I will focus on two conversations that illuminate the challenges generated by competing political, class, and sexual identities generate within African American communities. These challenges reveal the binarism embedded in identity expressed as political affiliation; the two scenes treated point to the ways in which pursuits of reparations—signaled here as “getting on the bus”—are predicated on both identifying as a black man or not identifying as a black man and having those expression interrogated.

Wendell, the Republican, refers to African Americans as “niggas”, except when talking about himself. Not only does he disaffiliate from the other African American men on the bus, his interest in the march is strictly financial. He takes Farrakhan’s emphasis on self-promotion and building African American business while rejecting his emphasis on self-respect and respect for the community. He makes this clear in a joke,

Niggas and cars, cars and niggas. Niggas need cars like cars need niggas. I gotta make me some money. I got a joke for ya, nigga:  
What do you get when you cross a million lesbians and the million man march? Two million mother-fuckers who don't do dick  
(Blythewood).

Though the men are troubled by his self-interest, they eject him from the bus not because he is a Republican, but rather for his lack of self-respect. Wendell is, then, another representation of the “rooster masculinity”—all strut with little regard or awareness of what his strutting means in the context of the community. While it may seem that this representation links ruthless capitalist pursuit with Republicanism, Wendell is not the lone Republican on the bus. Upon learning that one half of the couple, Randall and Kyle, is a gay and Republican, Flip responds, “Oh my God, a gay black Republican. Now I've seen everything!” (Blythewood). The other riders on the bus have various responses to Randall and Kyle’s sexual identities. Kyle’s identity as a homosexual remains questionable in the film as we learn that, prior to his relationship with Randall he identified as heterosexual. The film, then, suggests that the gay Republican Randall seduced Kyle and transformed him into a homosexual.

Again, sexual identity trumps political affiliation in questions of identity.<sup>67</sup> Some of the men are disturbed and cite religious beliefs for their feelings; others insist that being gay does not make one less of a man; and still others remain silent. Flip, however, harasses the couple, saying “we got a couple of faggots on the bus” until Kyle (the butch half of the couple) challenges Flip to a fight.<sup>68</sup>

*Sometimes our first instinct is  
to want to hit a homosexual  
in the mouth and want a woman to be quiet.  
we're afraid we might be homosexual;  
and we want to hit the woman or  
shut her up because we're afraid that she might castrate us.*

Huey P. Newton, from “A Letter From Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters About The Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation”

### **A Cock Fight**

Sadly, the other men encourage this behavior; in doing so, they articulate the particularly virulent anxiety around homosexuality in African American communities. The quotation above from Huey Newton reminds us that, within Black nationalism, the call for solidarity excluded gays and women; more disturbing, that desire to exclude emerged from or was accompanied by violence. In *Get On the Bus*, the call to fight is a call to capitulate to the homophobic anxiety that has plagued Black nationalist projects, particularly those identified with Black nationalism of the 1960s. It is a tradition that Farrakhan’s call for a million men and the contract that he

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67 If there is a critique of Republicanism, marked by Randall and Wendell, in the film it argues that Republican values and beliefs are seductive and masks the ways in which they damage African Americans who embrace them.

68 The couple’s sexual roles seem to be marked by their skin color differences. With dark skin and dreadlocks, Kyle is offered seems to be represented as the butch half of the couple. Randall’s light skin seems to reflect nationalist discourse in which racial tampering is responsible for producing black homosexuals. Randall’s light skin becomes evidence of the weakness associated with white men. See Amiri Baraka’s “American Sexual Reference.” Additionally, Randall’s “perfect” English seems to be evidence of being feminine or a weak man as Flip mocks Randall’s speech. See Phillip Brian Harper’s *See Are We Not Men Yet*, particularly Chapter 1.

offers reaffirms. Here, Lee's film retreats from its progressive politics; the film suggests that men solve differences through violence. Kyle, and by extension Randall, will become "acceptable" or tolerable, as the film suggests later, if Kyle proves his masculinity.

We learn that Kyle is a military veteran, a fact which fails to impress the other men or to diminish their expectations that Flip will demonstrate what a "real man" is by soundly whipping Kyle. In fact the men are oddly excited by the impending fight between Flip and Kyle. The fight—a battle between rooster and the general, to use Moynihan's identification of authentic masculinity—also emerges as African American male bonding that simultaneously reaffirms homophobia. That Kyle is victorious in the duel does not effectively address African American homophobia as much as it reaffirms what is perceived to be "biologically male" behavior. Xavier, the young student, responds to the group's homophobia by asking whether the group is saying that "gays don't have a place in the black community" (Blythewood). As the one who will record the journey, Xavier's question speaks to his character's significance in the film.

Though the conversation and the confrontation to which it leads are problematic; it will not be erased. At the actual march, there was a small contingent of gay African American men present; they were not silent, as many chanted slogans and carried placards announcing both their gayness and their intention to be heard.<sup>69</sup> Xavier's film not only records the journey, but also provides the historical context necessary for understanding, in part, why the call for a The Million Man March receives such an overwhelming response in Lee's film and in reality. *Get on the Bus*

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<sup>69</sup> See Keith Boykin's website. [http://www.keithboykin.com/arch/1995/10/23/gays\\_and\\_the\\_mi](http://www.keithboykin.com/arch/1995/10/23/gays_and_the_mi)



replaces the hegemonic gaze on Farrakhan with the invitation to turn one's gaze inward.

I have not lost sight of the fact that Lee's film is fiction; however, even as a fictional narrative, the film enters into the public record as part of the "real" event. That is, the film becomes a counterstory to the media spectacle that the Million Man March generated as well as part of the counterstory that the march itself provided. I want to suggest that the hope that prompted Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion to embark on a journey is the same hope that moved Lee's characters to get on the bus. This hope, I argue, is a form of self-repair. Because the Wiz fails to fulfill the former group's hopes, they come to realize that the journey itself constitutes evidence of their ability to be repaired and their agency in that process.

In recounting his experience of the Million Man March, literary critic Robert Reid Pharr urges us to remember that "the reality of all public spectacles is that the outcome is never certain; no one can confidently predict what its attendees will take away from it, what meaning its many participants attribute to it" (175). Within *Get on the Bus*, Xavier's documentary impulse to emphasize African American men as opposed to Farrakhan—the wizard or demagogue—helps to point to "countless improvisational moments of transcendence" embedded in cultural narratives of all types, whether it be the spectacle of the Million Man March or the private embrace of a novel's urging a reader toward rethinking history and its injuries. With that in mind, I want to turn to Xavier's interaction with Jeremiah, the elder, who gets on the bus knowing full well that it will likely be his last earthly journey.

## **Home Again**

For Jeremiah, getting on the bus is a calculated attempt to order the pieces of his life and restore his spiritual health. He shares with Xavier that he was a “yes man” who played it safe in his quest for the American Dream. Though initially successful, Jeremiah endures economic setbacks and encounters with institutional racism that transform his dream into a nightmare. “I lost everything—house, cars, wife, children—all because I turned to drinking” (Blythewood). Jeremiah’s narrative articulates the ways in which embracing uncritically the American Dream, a dream imagined and pursued through the Racial/Social contract, can also be a death contract. Though Jeremiah does not die immediately at the hands of a master, over time various injuries that accrue while living under the Racial Contract, as revised per the civil rights movement, lead Jeremiah and many African Americans to spiritual death. Jeremiah cannot escape the physical consequences of his youthful decisions. He can only reclaim his spiritual self; this reclamation becomes the means to claiming ownership over his death.

Jeremiah dies before the bus arrives at the March. Lee refuses to sum up African American men’s experience into what would have been a trite image, by offering the death of the fallen black patriarch Jeremiah—his name suggests the prophetic counternarrative genre known as a jeremiad—as the most compelling moment in the film. Rather, the death replaces Farrakhan’s call for atonement and public apology with a more substantive narrative about choice. The other travelers are unaware of Jeremiah’s narrative; Xavier keeps Jeremiah’s narrative in confidence partly out of respect and partly because he cannot fully comprehend Jeremiah’s

demise. He does, however, begin to understand the fragility of his own future and that of other African American men. Jeremiah, in the end, offers a more significant source of reparation for Xavier than the actual march. When Jeremiah dies before the community reaches the march, they are faced with the very issues that Farrakhan's call propounds, personal and communal responsibility. Faced with the decision to attend the march or stay with Jeremiah in the hospital, some of the men initially choose to attend the march but later return to the hospital. For them, returning constitutes doing the right thing.

Although Spike Lee's *Get On the Bus* focuses on the Million Man March, it may be better than the actual event, for Lee recognizes and uses the limitations of the March. Lee's film serves as a welcome, though unmotivated, signification on Shange's lady in blue, transforming the "I" that speaks for African American women into a collective response that "[We] don't need any more apologies." Our language defines not only our conditions but our possibilities. *The Wiz*, along with *Get on The Bus* as a complementary counterstory to the actual march, both constitute a genealogy of cultural productions that call for not only imagining grace but importantly, enacting that grace within communities in which difference disallows singular definitions of blackness and masculinity. Read as an engagement with the continuous pursuit of reparations for slavery and its residues, *Beloved*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, *The Wiz*, and *Get on the Bus* insist that reparations are work that may ultimately be carried out by those injured. This recognition does not, however, discharge debts that have accrued over time; rather, it embraces reparations as a multifaceted project that is best engaged in multiple arenas.

Here and in the previous chapters that comprise this study I have focused on African American communities and their responses either to various injurious experiences or to the remnants of historical injuries linked to race and racism as it became part of the nation's constitutive legal, political and economic narratives about itself. In the final chapter the narrative under investigation, *Monster's Ball*, lacks an identifiable African American or an identifiable white community. The film focuses on the domestic space to investigate the ways in which race and racism are learned and practiced. I read this focus as a way to encourage us to consider seriously the toll that racism takes on its perpetrators and its victims and, even more troublesome, the (im)possibility of love between those who mark the poles of privilege and subjection: white men and African American women.

This narrative pursuit is at once rewarding and disturbing, as the film's reception confirms. Whatever talent and skill I have as a cultural critic has been tested repeatedly in my reading of *Monster's Ball* as an important text that engages the messy and complicated work attendant to asking what it means to live and love in difference. The film challenges this project's premise that the intersection of the imagination and grace—imagining grace—becomes the most important reparation, as it opens the possibility of pursuing and claiming individual and communal reparations. *Monster's Ball* reminds us that love and hope as human expressions are terribly complex.

I have argued not only for the value of cultural narrative, but for the necessity of these texts as a way to repair or restore various facets of the human experience. I hope, then, that you will understand why I insert my own narratives as a bridge to the

final chapter as a way of framing what has proven to be a challenging and often disheartening engagement with *Monster's Ball* in relationship to reparations.

## Chapter 7: “Keeping It Real” in Black and White: Monster’s Ball as Requiem for Racial History

Can a linguistic event that is a nonevent i be/play a negra-nigger-nigga-  
newnegro=oldnegro-coon-Black-Blackcolored-notwhiteofcolor-AfroAmerican-  
AfricanAmerican-dawg-boi-thugnigga-tooblacktoostrong- and Look At This and still  
Keepit real- a-realblackbuck- academic-homie-uncletom, seriously Can i be all these  
thingsandmorethan an abstraction ghostahuantingtheperimeterof-a binary in a bind  
thatissotight-iam-Africanistpresencewaitingforthebodyofmysubhuman-therefore-  
notintendedintheframersmindsnothing morenothing  
lessmythsusansmithwaitingtoforthareal I she we he it they us you me have claim  
but its,unaccounted4b4law and in more ways than one I am a linguistic event  
inscribed and erased in violence—a monster without proper ceremony, no ball, only a  
stage where I strut and fret, like rooster and four-star general signifying what has  
claim but cannot be remembered...

### In-between narratives

After my first viewing of the *Monster’s Ball*, I remember telling my friend who had accompanied me to the theater that “this film is about reparations.” I knew then that this film would be at the center of the final chapter for this project. Annoyed, my friend responded that, “everything is about reparations.” Exhilarated by the film, I did not bother to probe deeper into what he meant by his response; that failure haunts me. Did his comment mean that suddenly everything was about reparations for me in light of this project, which I was at that point in the earliest

stages of thinking through, or did his comments mean exactly that—that everything is about reparations? I suppose that I find some bit of comfort in knowing that indeed we both were right in all the ways that matter. What follows here is personal; however, in sharing these personal narratives, I hope to better illuminate the arguments that I pursue in my treatment of *Monster's Ball*.

I do not remember the occasion on which my grandmother first told the story that I retell here. It is a story that she told many times. Unlike many of her other stories, this one never changed, either in its details of the story or in its tone. My retelling will not do the story justice, as my grandmother's inflections and gesticulations made it powerful, but the undeniable sadness resting just beneath her animated retelling of a pivotal moment in her life will, I hope, become palpable nonetheless.

### **Some Ol' Poor White Man**

I can remember this as clear as yesterday. Mamma was in the kitchen making biscuits for dinner. Since I was the only one around to help her, she promised that I could have one hot from the oven. We were sitting at the kitchen table waiting for the biscuits to be done. Mamma was drinking tea.

(That's where your mamma and me get our love of tea from—old folks used to sit around the table drink tea and talk about who died.)

There was knock on the door and she sent me to answer. Just as I got to the door, Mamma called out "who is it?" I looked up and told her exactly what I saw, "Some ol' poor white man," I said. I stood at the door looking at the man waiting for

Mamma to come. On second thought, I assumed it was a new insurance man coming to collect premiums. When mamma reached the door she asked “Where are your manners, gal?” Before I could answer her, the ol white man said, “Vera, taint’ no need to chastise her, you should have done told her who I was.” As Mamma opened the screen door to let him in he said “I’m your granddaddy.”

“Say it ain’t so! You ain’t none of my kinfolks,” I said, looking at that ol’ white man directly in his face. He had gray eyes. My mamma sent me to my room. I remember muttering under my breath, “he ain’t no kin to me.” I didn’t get any biscuits that night. When Mamma came in to tell me more about her daddy, I listened but kept saying that he wasn’t any kinfolk of mine. Later, when one of my Mamma’s sisters died over on the Eastern Shore, in a little town called Painter, VA, Mamma took me to the funeral. I swear, ain’t never seen so many white folks at a black funeral in all my life.

All these white folks came up hugging on Mamma saying how they hadn’t seen Vera since she left with Richard so he could find work at the shipyard. Then they got around to me, asking her if I was her daughter. She introduced all of them white people as Cousin, Uncle, Aunt So and So. I couldn’t believe it. They were nice enough. Still, I couldn’t believe they were any kin to me.

Later, my mother would tell me that my great grandmother, Vera, was “light as she could be” and that people always joked to my great-granddaddy about going over to the Eastern Shore and getting him a white woman. My mother says that she had always heard that he was jealous over her. It wasn’t until my great granddaddy



died that my great-grandmother lived her life. My mother says “she started smoking cigarettes and would even drink a beer every now and then.”

As I think about this story now, I can only wonder if my grandmother was unwilling to accept her white grandfather because she could not imagine that a white man could have loved a black woman. Or perhaps her experience of whiteness, even at her very young age, had made it possible only to reject white people. I never thought about my grandmother’s complexion until I was older. She was just my grandmother and she loved me fiercely. When I was nineteen I found a picture of my grandmother and me standing in front of her house. I remember the house well, for in the spring the row of “snowball bushes” bloomed and bathed the house with the sweetest smell. “1974” was scribbled in black ink on the back of that photograph. I was three years old.

Older and much more aware of the significance of hair and skin in African American culture, I was struck by my grandmother’s complexion—she looked like a white woman in the picture. I remembered that she said that the sea air turned her mother darker as she aged. I understood then, her resistance to claiming her white grandfather, a fact that was so clearly evident in her hair, skin and bone, that it must have taken a great deal of psychic effort to disidentify with that part of herself. I know, too, that my grandmother often endured African Americans mistreating her. She hated that she was called an uppity Negro or worse, simply because she was light and had “good hair,” hair that she hated on slightly less than her light skin.

### **The Lynch Mob Gonna Ride Tonight**

I.

In the eleventh grade I became friends with a white girl, Angie. After overhearing me complain about the inconvenience of having to type my research paper, Angie offered to type it for me. She would not accept cash or anything else as payment. Her gesture was stunning to me at the time, as we had never really acknowledged each other more than in a cursory sharing of complaints about our homework assignments.

Her offer transformed two high school students who knew very little of each other outside of English class into friends. We soon began talking on the phone endlessly. When summer came we spent quite a bit of time together. I ended up getting her a job at the store where I worked in the mall. For me, that was payment for typing the research paper. In the summer of 1988, Angie and I gave a lot of our hard-earned money to the GAP that was just down the way from our shop.

Angie had what every teenage boy wanted: a car! Together, we enjoyed the freedom that only comes with a car when you grow up near the beach. We spent hours driving around Hampton and Virginia Beach. We sat at Buckroe Beach at night talking about college and how much we hated our classmates. We talked endlessly about R.E.M and sang, in very warbly voices, about “Shiny Happy People” and “losing our religion.” In that summer before senior year, we were indeed happy and very much free of religion. None of my friends asked about my overnight friendship with a white girl, who did not have a “black pass.”

Angie was neither impressed nor surprised that we liked the same music. She recalled that in junior high I sported green spiked hair, purple and blue Mohawks,

combat boots and an assortment of rubber bracelets. She swore that I had once shared my Commander Salamander catalog with her during homeroom. She even recalled that I had worn a “throwback” suit when, as she said, “it wasn’t Halloween.” In short, what had been a source of much confusion for my black friends and my father—me being me, with the help of our recently installed cable TV—did not strike her as odd.

Our friendship continued into college. After freshman year, which for both of us had been sadly lacking in romantic partnerships, we joked that if this trend continued we’d have to get married. I cannot remember which of us said it first, but eventually the idea of producing ‘beige babies’ became an imaginable part of our shared future. Mind you, to date our relationship had been platonic. Ultimately, it would remain so. I do recall, however, being nervous the first time I went to Angie’s house, but only because Angie had described her dad as a hateful and foul man. As it turns out, he was unpleasant. Yet, I never sensed that his rudeness was because I was black and that he disapproved of our friendship. Instead, it was as Angie had said, he was simply unhappy. I think he even grew to like me on some level; I came to know that I was the only person to whom he was not rude when I called Angie past her phone curfew.

II.

Somewhere in me I knew that inviting Angie into my grandmother’s house might cause discomfort for at least one of us. I don’t remember now the reason why I stopped trying to avoid having them meet. Maybe it was as simple as a belief that I was being silly in my assumptions about my grandmother. She certainly made clear

all the reasons why she, as she put it, didn't particularly care for white people, but those reasons seemed a response to historical circumstances and the racist environments that they created. There were no more white children spitting in her face. She no longer watched as the family dog ate steak while she had peanut butter sandwiches. She was no longer at the mercy of white employers who found reasons to pay her less than white workers; thus, I reasoned, her experience of white people had to be both less offensive and less threatening. I was wrong.

When Angie finally met my grandmother it was awkward, but only in a way that I could notice. My grandmother loved meeting my friends and though she would excuse herself quickly when friends came over, it was not uncommon to hear her chuckling from afar about some joke that my friends and I shared. Eventually, I would tell my grandmother that we knew she was eavesdropping, so she might as well join us. My grandmother often became the center of visits with my friends, enthraling them with stories and easy laughter. She was praised for being "cool," a designation that she wore like a tiara. When she met Angie, however, she did not excuse herself. She simply went into the kitchen and made herself tea after a brief hello. She asked only if Angie had gone to school with me, though she of course already knew the answer. Angie and I didn't linger long, not so much because of my grandmother's response, which was to a stranger polite and even warm, but because we were trying to get to the beach before traffic became intolerable. We said goodbye to my grandmother. She smiled and said, "y'all be careful."

I often had to return to the house to retrieve my wallet or sunglasses. That day was not unusual in that respect. When I entered the house, my grandmother was

seated with her tea in one hand and a Viceroy in another. “What you forget this time?” she said with a trail of smoke slinking from the side of her mouth. Before I could answer, she started singing, “The lynch mob gonna ride tonight, the lynch mob gonna ride tonight.” She stopped singing and said, “Boy, the lynch mob gonna string you up, running around with white girls.” I laughed at her and said good-bye. She did not laugh and it was one of the few times I ever felt that my grandmother was angry with me.

My grandmother and I only talked about the lynch mob incident once. It was clear to me that she was not making a joke but was very serious about her concerns. In fact, she was angry with me because she thought that I was being naïve. I never bothered to tell my grandmother about my marriage pact with Angie and the possibilities of beige great-grandbabies. Such a union would have produced a reality that would have brought my family history full circle. At the time, I had no knowledge of Charles Chesnutt’s notion of the future American, where racial intermingling would wipe away the oppressive and illogical conceptions of black, white, red, and brown. Beige babies, then, were simply an alliterative way of describing imaginary children in a future to which we hoped not to be obligated by our youthful contract.

As it turned out, Angie and I did find partners, lots of them, and for a good while after freshman year we called each other on a regular basis and even visited. The beige babies became more serious as our relationships were decidedly unsatisfying. Ultimately, Angie and I lost contact with each other after finishing our undergraduate degrees. She went to Romania to do missionary work with babies born

with A.I.D.S., and I went to graduate school to study popular culture. Like the lynch mob that my grandmother prophesized, our beige babies never materialized.

*The past is never dead. It's not even past.*

William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

*If it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies.*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

### **Back to the Future**

My grandmother remained unable, even with visual confirmation that attending the funeral provided, to imagine or locate herself in the maternal side of her family. For her, the interracial family was both unimaginable and untenable even as her own body marked the reality of a shared black and white genealogy. I cannot begin to imagine the psychic work and the suffering that her heritage caused. My grandmother exposes the complexity of reparations in the United States. Her response to her own history—denial and secrecy, practiced in its forgetfulness—is quite American. And in making this very public consideration of the meanings of her response, I am again, perhaps, transgressing her laws, the rules that allowed her to make sense of race. History, personal and public, had seared fear and disdain for black and white together in her mind and heart. Even as she was at least in part a product of such racial mixture, she could not image loving across racial boundaries. This time however, I do just that, not by riding in cars with whitegirls, but by invoking her body as part of the theoretical geography from which I explore my own complicated relationship with the national family. I share these stories as a precursor

to engaging *Monster's Ball*, perhaps in search of some kind of authenticity that cannot come from the academy. Perhaps I am trying, as I have been for some time now, to understand what “keepin’ it real,” a popular phrase in the African American vernacular and cultural practice, means, especially when we are retaining as “real” is largely negative.

I invoke my grandmother and her relationship to the politics that haunt and animate *Monster's Ball*. I invoke my grandmother because her rejection of her white grandfather and disapproval of interracial relationships helps to make present the history bound up in the 1632 colonial statute that discloses Hugh Davis’s punishment for “abusing himself” with a black woman. That statute rests at the center of *Monster's Ball*. It is precisely because of these personal, historical and cultural narratives that I am able to approach the film with my gaze, rather than because I am in denial about the complicated ways in which race, racial identity, and their politics play out in the nation’s televisual and cinematic representations of itself.

My grandmother, it seems to me, was trapped in and by history, to borrow from James Baldwin. This is not a negative assessment of my grandmother; it is a condition that prevails throughout the United States and across generations and racial lines. For my grandmother, whiteness and white men especially were the enemy. I have no pictures of the man and the family that my grandmother disavowed, just stories, linguistic events, about nameless whitemen and whitewomen—family erased. I share these stories because they speak to my understanding of the difficulty of loving, or even simply befriending, “the enemy” and of the difficulty of claiming “the enemy” who embodies in some measure that which forever exists beyond tidy

equations and quantifications, “the enemy” who calls to mind the historical injury and suffering that emanates from America’s racial past. Wahneema Lubiano suggests that

whatever other understandings we have about black identity, and despite our quite necessary awareness that race is not a given but an explanation fought over across a specific history, black identity is also a sign for remembering our specificity and aestheticizing our resistance to racist trauma. (238)

Lubiano’s attention to shifting meanings of black identity across time, combined with my grandmother’s responses to her own complicated racial identity, remind me that as Americans, particularly African Americans and white Americans, we exist in a liminal space that both divides and connects us to one another. What follows, then, is my effort to consider Lubiano’s claim in light of the legacy of slavery and its residues in the present—what, according to the quotations from Faulkner and Morrison, constitutes a history that never dies. I would not want to end this project by leaving readers with a sense that I am not profoundly and personally aware of the challenges of pursuing grace—an imaginative act that perhaps resists adequate pinning down for a project such as this—or extending grace to those who have injured and continue to injure, consciously and unconsciously, by clinging to racist cultural narratives and practices in the contemporary moment. I am in no way suggesting that interracial love and the children that emerge from such unions constitute a form of reparations. I am not advocating the erasure of race. Rather, I am asking what it means to resituate our understanding of what is and is not permissible in light of the United States’ racial history.



This chapter, then, considers whether one can look at the racial history of U.S. as an African American when it is so deeply connected to the forms of violence and degradation that were ordinary for so many who endured both slavery and the immediate and longterm impact of that historical moment. I do not know the answer to that question. What I do know, however, is that as challenging and disturbing as *Monster's Ball's* racial imagery is, and as unsettling as the implications that such imagery carries for contemporary audiences are, it is important that we do more than look. It is also crucial that we imagine other possibilities for the social relationships between the historical perpetrators of racial injury and their victims. The film suggests that these perpetrators are victims, too; while that may be difficult to accept, that is precisely why imagining grace as a pursuit and form of reparations outside the purview of the law strikes me as profoundly important and well worth considering.

*Studying trends in interracial sexual relationships is important because intimate relationships between different racial groups are viewed as an indicator of the social and geographic distance between racial groups, and a barometer of race relations.*

Kara Joyner and Grace Cao, "Interracial Relationships and the Transition to Adulthood"

*People are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them.*

James Baldwin

### **Monstrosity in White and Black**

*Monster's Ball* (2001) opens on the day that Leticia Musgrove's (Halle Berry) husband Lawrence (Sean Puffy/P-Diddy Combs) is to be executed. Leticia and Lawrence have one son, Tyrell (Coronji Calhoun). As a result of Lawrence's absence,

Leticia finds herself a struggling, working-class mother facing financial ruin. Hank Grotowski (Billy Bob Thornton) and his son, Sonny (Heath Ledger), are second- and third-generation corrections officers in a unit responsible for shepherding death-row inmates to and through their executions. Buck (Peter Boyle), the rabidly racist father/grandfather of Hank and Sonny, expects both son and grandson to maintain the old racial order. Lawrence's execution will be Hank's last before he passes the job to Sonny. After Lawrence's execution, Leticia and Hank each lose their only sons, to a hit-and-run accident and a suicide, respectively. The loss of their sons brings Hank and Leticia together. Initially, neither of them is aware of their connections; however, Hank, the executioner, discovers the connection but does not reveal this to Leticia. Their relationship is threatened by two experiences: when Buck, Hank's father, attacks Leticia; and again when Leticia learns that Hank participated in Lawrence's execution.

*Monster's Ball* withholds even the most basic biographical facts about Leticia, Lawrence, and Tyrell Musgrove, and the three generations of death row guards: Buck, Hank, and Sonny Grotowski. It relies, unwisely as it turns out, on the audiences' ability and willingness to fill in the film's many gaps and silences with cultural knowledge gleaned from relatively sparse dialogue and from living in a culture where race has and continues to matter. In light of the film's narrative, the viewer often does not have the necessary space to recover from the graphic images and offensive conversations to attend to the physical nuances of the characters. It is a film that demands especially close scrutiny of gestures, expressions, and details. It moves from the documentary-like presentation of Lawrence's execution to

unresolved dramatic episodes brought to closure by fading to black. Arguably, the film's most difficult moments are connected to the interracial relationship that develops between Hank and Leticia; despite invalidating laws that forbid such relationships, cultural taboos continue to make interracial relationships controversial. *Monster's Ball*, then, dramatizes the challenges and politics that often accompany interracial relationships.

In this chapter, I consider the interracial relationship in *Monster's Ball* and its connection to historical prohibitions against such relationships. Though I began this project with a reference to Hugh Davis and the unnamed African American woman whose body marks the corporeal and legal site of transgression in colonial Virginia, it is actually another legal case that brings this history and its life in the present into greater focus. The ironically named 1967 case *Loving v. Virginia* speaks to the historical criminalization of interracial loving in Virginia, which is only one of many states that banned interracial marriage. Ultimately, this case became a test of Virginia's interpretation of the 14th Amendment. Virginia argued that its laws prohibiting interracial marriages affected blacks and whites equally and thus were not discriminatory. That is, the laws extended the "separate but equal" precedent established in *Plessy v. Ferguson* into the private lives of citizens. In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court declared Virginia's age-old law unconstitutional; however, as with all laws designed to speak to the way the nation encourages and conducts social relationships, legal equality does not necessarily translate into actual equality. Thus, cultural taboos against interracial marriage persist, and we are largely unable to disavow the power of this particular facet of racial history. *Monster's Ball*,

then, constitutes an example of a counternarrative that challenges the prevailing discomfort with loving across the colorline.

Cultural narratives take on an especially powerful role in negotiating the interracial relationship. Robyn Wiegman reminds us that “mass-mediated visual technologies increasingly became the primary locus for race’s rhetorical (or performative) deployment, binding together the historical production of the body as a visible geography” (116). It is both in and on in this visible geography that *Monster’s Ball* delivers its most challenging imagery: the detailed rehearsal of execution and the actual execution of an African American male; the murder of a grotesquely overweight African American child and the presentation of graphic sexual intercourse between an African American’s life/mother and her husband’s executioner. Figuratively, the characters in this film are imprisoned by the historical legacy of slavery in which the expenditure of African American bodies is normative; the film announces the way in which such images always have been constitutive of America’s history. The (im)possibility of interracial intimacy and love under the penumbra of law, and the violence carried out against African Americans under the law, makes for a complicated film that demands new ways of seeing.

I treat the interracial relationship in *Monster’s Ball* as a trope for racial injury and the difficulty of coming to terms with and moving beyond a racial past that enslaves all Americans. I agree, at least partially, with Aimee Carillo Rowe’s argument in her treatment of the film, “Feeling in the Dark: Empathy, Whiteness, and Miscege-nation in *Monster’s Ball*” that

reading the multicultural and reparations discourses intertextually allows [scholars] to trace converging themes across these texts, such as redemption, empathy, healing, accountability, and memory...the interracial love story *Monster's Ball* depicts functions metonymically to stand in for colorblind race relations in the U.S., displacing the cultural work of racial healing from history and politics, placing it squarely within the realm of interpersonal contact. (122-23)

I quote Rowe's argument at length because it recognizes the ways in which multiculturalism—which at least in theory aimed at performing various types of reparations in a number of institutions—and reparations should be complementary discourses. If I understand her claims correctly, it is her suggestion that the cultural work of racial healing loses its import and its power because it occurs on the interpersonal level. Rowe separates the personal from the political; frankly, this is a separation that I have yet to be convinced is possible. Rowe discounts the exigency of the political work that occurs in interpersonal relationships across all types of borders. It is not simply a resistance to dominant cultural narratives about race and racial purity, but also the exercise of personal freedom that potentially carries economic, social, and familial ramifications. While these three areas are not equivalent, they overlap precisely because race and its expression as racism are not confined to the private sphere of individual's lives. I would argue that the interpersonal is where reparations take place, and where conversation about what reparations are needed and how they might be pursued comes into its sharpest focus. I treat *Monster's Ball* as a

cultural narrative that engages the difficulty of such conversations in interpersonal relationships.

### *Keeping It Real*

--A philosophy and identity concept that arose in [hip-hop](#) culture, and followed primarily by African-Americans.

--To be true to oneself; to rep for one's own hood.

--v. The involuntary act of living a day-to-day struggle to survive. Living life with an eye toward survival with no pretension. Promoting or adopting a realist view toward day-to-day interactions with others

-- n. Keeping "the game" honest, whatever the game may be.

-- n. When staying true to your "roots"(i.e.; Real") or your priorities or principles as a person and applying to a certain type of a event or Situation.

-- v. Being able to hold it down in the professional world and at home

--adv. The action of being true to the code of ethics of one's self, culture, and environment. i.e.: [keep it real](#)

--n: An enhanced, extreme, version of reality that usually alludes to a violent existence.

*from the Urban Dictionary-- <http://www.urbandictionary.com>*

### **The Real/Reel Politics of Looking**

The titular question of Elizabeth Alexander's essay, "Can You Be Black and Look at This: Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," announces the difficulty that

African Americans encounter with mediated images that evoke the long violent relationship between African Americans and the law. Such violence is complicated further, as her title suggests, by the nature and meaning of racial identity and identification. Alexander and other scholars working in the area of African American cultural studies must contend with the challenges, and there are many, of discussing “African American group identification, which is more expansive than the inevitable biological reductions of race and artifactual constraints of culture” (Alexander 82). Though Alexander takes a ‘real’ event, the challenges that accompany racial identification present similar questions when the object of inquiry is a fictional representation of reality.

Representations of African Americans as both subject of, and subjected to, particular kinds of violence and/or as subjecting others to these forms of violence, has been offered up as a spectacle for public consumption so consistently that it has become a normative part of our cultural imagination. Or, as Wiegman puts it, “the conformation of the body to a racial script that proceeds and instantiates the subject in a relation of subjection does not depend, in any uncomplicated way, on what the eyes see” (41). As the epigraph from the *Urban Dictionary* conveys, there are multiple valences of keeping it real, and many African Americans have an appreciation of and expectation that cultural behavior and representations of African American cultural responses to race conform to an identifiable—read acceptable—script in life and its artistic representation. I should make clear that my aim in reading the film here is not intended to be interpolative but speculative; that is to say that I am working to

account for the almost universally negative response of film critics and scholars to the interracial relationship in the film.

African American actors, screenwriters, producers, and directors are evaluated on the authenticity of their work and, not least, critical reception to their artistic decisions. Given the significance of the representational economy in which blackness orbits, cultural producers' aesthetics are already always politicized. They are subject to cultural and political scrutiny that issues forth from the demand for authentic scripts that are called upon simultaneously to validate, resist, and protest existing representations of African Americans. The question of an authentic African American film summons up discussions about other cultural productions by African Americans. That is the politics of "keepin' it real" limit the field of cultural productions that explore the richness and diversity of African American experience and, in doing so, leave us with a distorted view of what real African American life entails. Scholars and other cultural critics alike have long recognized the danger of such scripts. Spike Lee brings this history and its contemporary significance into sharp relief in *Bamboozled*. More recently, Dave Chappelle, an astute cultural critic, particularly around matters of race and racial identity, has commented on this cultural phenomenon.

In a recurring skit on *The Chappelle Show*, "When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong," Chappelle, through parody, chronicles how the demand for "realness" produces shortsighted and simplistic responses to complicated social interactions, both interracially and intra-racially. Though a popular African American idiom, the demand for representation of social interactions that are "authentic" or plausible



means that “keepin’ it real” is not exclusive to African Americans; it is important for white Americans as well. Recall reviews that identified audiences as disturbed by *The Wizard of Oz* being “blackened” by *The Wiz*. Collectively, we encounter or look across racial boundaries under the duress produced by racial identifications that have emerged in U.S. history. *Monster’s Ball* does not attempt to elide “the ways in which interracial contact in American society has been over-determined—over-determined by hundreds of years of exploitation, mythology, and pseudoscience” (Gates 178). Sex, then, particularly interracial sex, becomes subject to Alexander’s question and to demands that representations of this historically taboo interaction “keep it real.”

These representations often invoke gendered responses; interracial relationships with white women and black men are likely to disturb white men. The converse might be said about white men and African American women. Halle Berry’s ‘real’ or private life dramatizes this tension. In an interview titled “Halle Berry’s Out-of-Body Sex Scene,” Berry reveals that she “was more terrified about watching the scene than actually being in it,” as it turns out that these fears issue forth from her concern about her then-husband Eric Benet. She demanded that the studio give a private screening to the couple—“out of respect for him [Benet]”—before the film’s release. Berry says that “honestly, he really didn’t like it too much. It’s hard to watch. He’s a red-blooded man and I don’t think any red-blooded man wants to see his wife like that...I sat behind him. After the scene he did excuse himself for five minutes—probably to throw up. He was far from excited” (Irvin). Berry’s suggestion that her husband vomited is all the more disturbing given that in the film, Hank vomits after he has sex with Leticia and then realizes that she is Lawrence’s wife.

Berry's personal experience speaks to the discomfort that many reviewers iterated about the film's interracial pairing—"execute the black man and get his girl. What a dream!" (Dreher 65). Indeed, if this was the point of the movie it would be cause for the type of reparations that I advocate in this project. I will return to the film's reception and explore it in greater detail in the section that follows. Displeasure about interracial relationships does not restrict itself to men, African American or white. African American women, too, are disturbed by what is perceived as white women being the companion *du jour* for successful African American men. Here, private concerns intersect with public discourse over the status of African American men, as I addressed in my treatment of *The Wiz* and The Million Man March. The proliferation of interracial relationships—particularly those between white men and African American women and African American men and white women—in the contemporary moment often begets a contentious discussion about the availability of socio-economically and emotionally healthy African American men. This conversation, as I noted in the previous chapter, emerged powerfully in the 1970s and has become a persistent and popular conversation in (African) American cultural discourse.

Against this complex web of historical realities and contemporary discourses, including cultural obsession with celebrities' private lives, audiences are asked to consider the possibility of love between Hank Growski and Leticia Musgrove in *Monster's Ball*. Thus, much of the discussion of the film centers on the implausibility or the "realness" of Hank and Leticia's relationship, particularly as it relates to the politics of African American sexuality, the historical prohibitions against interracial

sex, and the legally sanctioned violence that often emerged when it was discovered or imagined. Encapsulating all of these underlying historical references and the discomfiture they produce is the fact that the sexual interaction between Leticia and Hank comes at Leticia's request for him to "make [her] feel good." The history of African American men being routinely lynched at the mere suggestion that they had acted inappropriately toward white women was not complemented by the same vigilance toward the honor, sanctity, and accessibility of African American women. African Americans were not empowered by the law to respond to these offenses. The plausibility of their relationship is complicated further by Hank's and Leticia's relationship to law, adding additional fodder for debating the "realness" quotient of Berry and Thornton's onscreen relationship, already informed by Berry's biracial heritage and perceptions of Thornton as a redneck that helped to shape the critical and cultural response to the film.

### **Reception**

Grossing \$32.1 million total, *Monster's Ball* was a surprise box-office hit, especially given that the film cost only \$10 million to produce. Initially, the film was released on a limited number of screens; however, it was released more widely and drew larger audiences after Halle Berry won the Oscar for Best Actress at the 74th Annual Academy Awards in 2002. Despite her winning the Academy Award, Halle Berry's performance remained contested in (African) American popular cultural discourse. Such strident criticism reflects the public's inability or unwillingness to separate Berry's professional life as an actor from her private life as an African American woman. We should, I believe, read this difficulty as evidence of our

cultural investments in race and its popular representation, Aside from the consistent critique of the quality and limitations of her acting, the criticism took on a rather obsessive concern with the plausibility of the Berry and Thornton onscreen relationship and the continuation of stereotypical representations of African Americans in Hollywood. Many reviewers have suggested that the actors' "real lives" challenged audiences' ability to suspend disbelief, observing that:

the prime danger today is mismatching the actor to the role.

Suspension of disbelief becomes particularly difficult with media hounds like Billy Bob (a.k.a. Mr. Angelina Jolie), Halle Berry, and, especially, Puff Daddy, who may be better known for their expensively publicized private lives than for their performances.

(Schwartz)

Another reviewer argues that *Monster's Ball* "is a machine, designed to make Billy Bob Thornton think and behave just as [we] believe he should" (Klawans 35). In light of the film's reception, the machine that Klawans identifies was successful. Many reviewers highlight the conflation of geography and race as the challenge, observing that: "Halle Berry, the well-known African-American beauty icon, must engage in sexual activity with a White actor who bears the surface features that are associated stereotypically in the public mind with rural racism" (Beck 24); and also noting that Hank embodies "clichés of a Gothic swamp brimming with sexual repression, raging racists, and ignorant mountain folk" (Bowles 08b). Berry's racial identity and her family history have been too easily summoned in the evaluation of the film's realism. Even more egregious, some audiences have questioned Halle

Berry's "blackness," commenting on her physiological features such as her "café au lait" complexion and dismissing her blackness because she has a white mother.

These responses are an inversion of the traditional notion that a single drop of black blood makes one black.

Yet, it is Erin Kaplan's *L.A. Weekly* article that sums up the racial discourse surrounding the film's praise by the Academy. She writes that "the academy made history by giving the big awards to Black actors who between them played a gangster (Denzel Washington) and a 'ho' (Halle Berry)." She continues by saying that the film offers a "bridge and older history of stereotypical images with a new investment in the penal system—the primary arena of racial contestation today" (Kaplan 3). If the Academy Awards sought to repair its record of ignoring African American cinematic performances, many believed that it failed. Critics, audiences, and many scholars were aligned in their critical response to the "success" of African American actors and actresses at the 74th Academy Awards, and with Sidney Poitier receiving a lifetime achievement award, it was, indeed, an evening that encouraged reflection on the history of African Americans in motion pictures.

The sexual relationship between Hank and Leticia prompted displeasure for many who believed that the film trafficked in the most disturbing African American stereotypes. One reviewer likened the film to Harriet Beecher Stowe's epic novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, accusing the film of "racially motivated sexual leering...that unfolds like something that was written by Simon Legree, the slave owner in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," invoking the history of slavery and stereotypes of black sexuality (Wickham 15a). Such identifications inform my consideration of the film. Scholars

and critics alike were attentive to the film's representations of law/law enforcement, arguing that the film reflects and continues a cinematic history in which "white law is absolved, forgiven, and humanized at the expense of fully realized black characters" (Murch 26).

The emphasis on the so-called underdevelopment of the African American characters is debatable; after all, the film encourages us to focus on Hank and Leticia as they negotiate the injuries and traumas that race produces across racial lines. Had the characters of Lawrence Musgrove or her son Tyrell been further developed and still made to suffer the same violent deaths, our knowledge of them would not have illuminated why the Musgrove-Growtowski relationship develops. Such criticism about underdevelopment of characters speaks to larger cultural concerns about the endangered/endangering African American man discussed in the previous chapter. Ultimately, the absence of African American men in proximity to Leticia speaks to the anxiety over her interracial sexual relationship with Hank—a relationship complicated by the fact that he supervised her husband's execution.

Reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*, two lovers from warring families, the monstrosity of *Monster's Ball* comes from its insistence that audiences visually engage historically-forbidden interracial desire and its fulfillment against the backdrop of violent and repressive legal practice in the United States. It revises the familiar Shakespearian narrative by killing the family members of the two lovers, instead of the lovers themselves; therefore, we are challenged to imagine what happens if forbidden desire and love are given the opportunity to develop despite

existing racial protocols that would deny that such desire and love is plausible and sanctioned.

In *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and The Fictions of White Supremacy*, Mason Stokes calls our attention to the fact that racial theory has historically been motivated, if not obsessed, with interracial sex by way of quoting Robert J.C. Young. Young asserts that:

Nineteenth-century theories of race did not just consist of essentializing differentiations between self and other: they were also about the fascination with people having sex—interminable, adulterating, aleatory, illicit, interracial sex. (Johnson quoted in Stokes 180)

Stokes's argument sheds light on the film's reception: while interracial relationships are no longer legally prohibited between African Americans and white Americans, they continue to constitute a cultural transgression. These relationships announce desire that has always resisted law's attempts to stifle, manage, and erase, even making looking a cultural crime. The latter reality prompts Alexander's question: "Can one be black and look?" all the more appropriate given its subject, the beating of Rodney King by the LAPD officers.

Throughout American history, the African American male gaze has always been rendered as threatening and licentious, and thus policed by deep suspicion and anxiety. There is a well-documented history of African American men being accused of rape merely because of "reckless eyeballing." Interestingly, *Monster's Ball* seems to suffer from an inversion of this culturally-sanctioned policing; critical reception

has attempted to police what the film asks viewers to look at: the possibility of interracial love between white men and African American women that is not regulated by the legal history.

The critical reception of the film seems only to be capable of “seeing” Hank and Leticia’s relationship through Buck’s prurient and violent vision, and thus accounts for the insistence that Hank’s transformation and Leticia’s involvement with him is impossible because of race and racism—the very ideologies that Buck aims to defend. In other words, the movie’s critical reception reveals much about the way contemporary audiences conceptualize history’s impact on the boundaries that manage and authorize social relationships in the present. Berry has offered a number of responses to the criticism of the film, particularly Hank and Leticia’s relationship. Berry says in an interview that she “loved her [Leticia] because although she was angry, she was still vulnerable.” And of the relationship between Leticia and Hank, she says that “love is colorblind, love is love” (Morales). Berry’s comments here might be taken as an indication that she fails to understand the implications of her usage of the term “colorblind;” as Rowe reminds us, “colorblindness is a way of seeing that deprives us of a vision, for it occludes and eclipses power relations that constitute the processes of (de)racialization, white supremacy, and racism” (225). At this juncture in the project, it should be clear that I am not advocating colorblindness as way of pursuing justice. I reconcile Berry’s usage of this term with her personal history; Berry is the product of an interracial relationship—her mother is white and her father is black. Berry reiterates her attraction to vulnerability in yet another



interview in which she responds to her feelings about the prolific criticism of the film, insisting that

criticism didn't diminish my spirit because I more than liked the script; I loved it. Rarely do I read a screenplay where a female is portrayed with such richness. In choosing roles, my criteria are simple: Am I drawn to the character? Am I passionate about her dilemma? Am I intrigued by her complexity? It's no secret that tortured women, women in pain, women who want love but don't know how to get it, fascinate me. (Ritz 129)

It is no secret that Berry's romantic relationships have been unsuccessful; it is perhaps, then, her own struggle with love, combined with her biracial identity, that allows her to identify love as colorblind. Berry's fascination with vulnerable women and reviewers' disappointment with the film intersect on the matter of vulnerability. So how do we account for the disjuncture between Berry's vision and the critical response—could it be that suffering and complexity for African American women characters must fit somehow into the problematic stereotype of the strong black woman?

In the film, Leticia loses both her husband and her child in ways that invoke the ordinary and simultaneously unpredictable violence that permeated slavery. These losses are exacerbated by the loss of her home shortly thereafter. If, as Trudier Harris argues, strength is a disease for black women, Leticia Musgrove does not suffer from this disease. Far from being Harris's paragon of strength that threatens the demise of African American families, Leticia is essentially alone in the world;

however, her isolation renders her unbelievably weak. Seemingly, she cannot be either too strong or too weak, lest she incur our critical wrath for failing to “keep it real.”

The film’s original casting plan adds to the already complicated demands to keep it real in light of Hollywood’s history of deploying racial stereotypes in its films. Rapper-turned-actress Queen Latifah (Dana Owens) “was slated to play the lead in the acclaimed 2001 movie—opposite Robert De Niro and Sean Penn—until Halle Berry convinced director Marc Forster that she could play a struggling single mother, and Billy Bob Thornton and Heath Ledger took over the De Niro and Penn father and son roles”(Irwin). Ironically, Lee Daniels, the producer of *Monster’s Ball*, invokes a “keeping it real” posture in his responses to criticism of the film and his other work.

Daniels says that “the way I see it, we’re all a generation away from the projects....I also think that most people didn’t know a black man was behind the movie...I want to impress my mother, who would rather watch a Tyler Perry movie than one of mine” (Hill). Though problematic in its erasure of class differences, I understand Daniels’s attempt to establish his work as “authentically black” and as speaking to the complexities of the African American experience. In other interviews, Daniels emphasizes the fact that he has resisted moving to Hollywood, choosing instead to remain in Harlem, with its mix of social classes. Daniels proudly announces that his production company employs a ninety percent African American film crew. For Daniels, it seems that the opportunity to make film and the opportunity to employ African Americans in an industry in which they are not well-represented constitutes a form of reparations. However, Daniels does not announce his

contributions to pursuing reparations through representation and expanded notions of African American life and history in the same way that Spike Lee autographs his work through his Forty Acres and a Mule production company.

Daniels, I believe, identifies himself as working against the Hollywood system and its demands for particular types of profitable “black films” (Janet). His reference to the currently popular Tyler Perry films, lucrative “chitlin circuit” dramas about African American life speak to his sense that what is offered as authentic is bound up with what is profitable. *Monster’s Ball* disrupts what is perceived as “real” but is really “a socially-constructed (re)presentation of this truth—a myth promulgated through the collective cultural unconscious of the nation’s past transgressions” (Cal 147). These transgressions again indicate the significance of African American women as the law and its transgression, perceived negatively in this narrative, that speaks to our discomfort at looking at the complexity that surrounds these cultural and legal violations. I will elaborate on the ways in which we might realign our gaze to consider the film’s presentation of the relationship between Leticia and Hank later; however, before doing so, we should consider the significance of Leticia as a marker of racial law in the film.

### **Leticia’s Law**

Like the other female characters in this study, Halle Berry, as Leticia Musgrove in *Monster’s Ball*, becomes an another example of African American women as both the law and its transgression. Sharon Holland identifies *Monster’s Ball* as “a southern drama of racism, death, and desire,” and argues that “we must

attend to the deep history that connects these terms” (Holland 2). Leticia, then, articulates the historical interplay among the racism, death, and desire that Holland identifies as significant to the film. Leticia holds the film together as both its boundaries and its center. She is linked to current legal discourse, particularly that which identifies the prison industrial complex as a contemporary vestige of slavery’s efforts to regulate African Americans, and particularly African American men. Also, Leticia assumes the historical position of many African American women at the bottom of the social hierarchy and thus vulnerable to particular forms of violence.

At the film’s center is “a poor black woman who is not supposed to figure in....there are no lawyers in *Monster’s Ball* and few police officers, just prison guards...who narrate this story” (5). Musgrove’s relationship, specifically her sexual relationship, with Hank, mark both the historical pain of slavery with its documented testimony of African American women raped and abused by white masters and the legislation, from the colonial period to the 1960s, that sought to police interracial desire and outlaw interracial marriage. These prohibitions should, I believe, be read as an effort to protect whiteness as property and preserve the significance and value of the racial contract that Mills identifies. Leticia does not escape the death-contract either, as evidenced by her existence. Estranged from the African American community, tethered to a husband whose death is imminent, impoverished and overwhelmed by her maternal duty, Leticia Musgrove is dead on multiple levels; as such, the death of her son Tyrell leaves her on the precipice of what might be her own death. Leticia is caught between three choices that are all influenced by the loss of her

son: dying, living, and loving. Arguably, Leticia embraces all three choices to varying degrees.

The film speaks to the fossils of colonial history and the racism that it fueled. Leticia and Hank's relationship stands in for the multiple historical conflicts that the film references. In her analysis of the film, Holland registers that besides better acting from Berry, audiences perhaps needed from Leticia's character "a more sanitized version of poverty and subjection" (8). Leticia's poverty and its attendant emotional turmoil invoke the intersection between race, gender, and class in the film. Like Dorothy in *The Wiz*, Leticia functions as a surrogate, though differently figured, as she stands in for "multiple levels of substitution in representations—white bodies standing in for black ones, romantic relationships standing in for social conflicts, or even the past standing in for the present—that trouble the identities and subjects they depict as well as those they indirectly invoke" (Paulin 417-18). *Monster's Ball* is complicated in part because it is largely absent of women, and Leticia is the only African American woman or woman of color in the film. In a very real sense, Leticia is the mythical everywoman—"I'm every woman It's all in me" that Chaka Khan and Whitney Houston invoke in their popular song/remake "I'm Every Woman."

There are three other women in the film, a prostitute, a prison guard, and a waitress, all of whom are white and play minor roles. Here, the film again inverts the historical narrative around white women, in which they embody everything worth protecting and reproducing for white America. Leticia simultaneously operates as the embodiment and antithesis of the cult of true domesticity in the national house. In light of these absences, Leticia articulates not only the pain that emanates from being

a poor African American woman living in the South, but also the perils of being a white female in any class stratification, though the film suggests that Hank's background is middle class.

Hank's mother and wife are dead—all that the audience sees of them is their headstones. In light of Hank's racist and misogynistic father, we are encouraged to identify these women with Leticia. Though differently raced and classed, they too have been oppressed and have died as a result. Buck tells Hank that his wife, Hank's mother, "wasn't shit, that woman failed me...she quit on me," and later Hank will tell Sonny that his weakness reminds him of his wife. We do not learn what trespasses occur that lead both men to espouse these negative pronouncements; however, given Buck's rabid racism and violent misogyny, we can imagine that in the white supremacist script that Buck honors, these women were "fundamentally useless in the project of racial belonging" (Holland 7). Historically, then, this representation of Leticia is as the "figurative site in which the black female body rearticulates white femininity [that] serves and expands the recuperative function vis-a-vis white masculinity" (Rowe 225). The desire is for a contemporary representation that dehistoricizes African American women's role in the national family narrative.

Leticia is, in fact, suspended in a historical abyss in which African American women mark and transgress cultural laws. I am not sure how to retrieve her from this liminal space, and perhaps that is one of the flaws of the film's narrative—it fails to offer Leticia an alternative to her tragedies other than a white American man who may or may not be capable of completing the anti-racist journey that he begins with her. Thus, while Leticia works as a waitress and is introduced to Hank as a server, she

is no mammy or “ho,” but rather the female character who reveals that it is not, in fact, men and the law they are charged to uphold that are the ultimate sites of power, but that it is in the domestic sphere that the locus of power resides. Leticia replaces both Buck and Hank as representatives of the law—cultural or official—when she enters Hank’s home as a trespasser (she enters the home after Buck fails to answer the door).

Leticia’s trespass is quite by accident, and thus never intended to violate or disrupt the domestic space. Here, we might think of Miss Emma’s intrusion into the “big house.” Leticia enters Hank’s home bearing a gift, a Stetson. Leticia pawns her wedding ring to acquire money for the hat. The hat replaces the one damaged, or more accurately, in light of Buck’s sense of racial superiority, contaminated by Tyrell’s blood when Hank drives him and Leticia to the hospital. The Stetson, a symbol for all that is good, true, rugged, and male, articulates an important cleavage that began when Hank retired from the prison and commences his involvement with Leticia.<sup>70</sup> The new hat that enters Buck’s home by Leticia’s trespass then announces that Hank is in fact a new man, one who does not subscribe to, or at least actively works against, affirming white racial supremacy and misogyny. Defined by his father’s racism and limited sense of masculinity, Hank’s purchase of the service station indicates a new direction in his life. In a reversal of his previous role, Hank will now provide the fuel to move people forward. The service station component of the shop will make repairs so that customers can move forward, as opposed to his role

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<sup>70</sup> Stetson’s web page says of its products that it offers “authentic style that telegraphs who you are without saying a word. And confidence that comes from knowing that there’s nothing you can’t handle. See, the real true west isn’t a place at all; it’s a state of mind.” <http://www.stetson.com/index.php?sectionId=8>

as the final stop in the penal system. Additionally, Hank hopes to employ Ryrus, the father of the two African American boys that he scares earlier in the film. These are reparations performed out of a need to redeem himself, and also an acknowledgement that he has acted injuriously when he carried out the racial contract that his father embraced.

Together the historical symbol of racial and sexual dominance sanctioned in and through law, Hank (as the putative white man) and Leticia (as the putative black woman, perhaps the most vulnerable body, physically and economically, through which that dominance is articulated) are both transgressing the law and its life in culture, historically and contemporarily. The film, then, with its focus on the gray areas of life produced by the nation's racial history, calls upon audiences and critics to imagine not only that such transgression is possible, but perhaps also that whites can be repaired. Leticia's presence in Hank's life serves to reiterate Buck's frustration about the erasure of the rigid boundaries of race, with its production of people, white and African American, who not only knew but accepted their space within the national racial hierarchy. As the Africanist presence that Morrison identifies in *Playing In the Dark*, Leticia makes visible the disfigured body of America's racial imagining and inscriptions—inscriptions that created the need for reparations.

In light of my reading of *The Wiz* and *Get on the Bus*, it is revealing that the reviews generally treated Lawrence as the victim of a racist legal system. Few reviewers bothered to speculate on the circumstances surrounding his death sentence. He immediately becomes a victim, largely because of his wife. Her poverty and suffering become the basis for extending to Lawrence sympathy that may be



undeserved. Leticia is visibly angry with Lawrence, who by his own admission is a “bad man”; are we to read this statement as coerced or as him accepting responsibility for the disruption that his imprisonment causes? All of that is to say that the criticisms of Leticia’s character have almost unfailingly identified her or alluded to her as being intolerably and unbelievably weak. Yet, when the film opens, we meet Leticia driving to the prison, where she tells Lawrence, “I’ve been coming here for eleven years” (Addica and Rokos). Leticia has made certain that Tyrell has had as much of a relationship as possible with his father, despite his imprisonment and the emotional toll that it takes on both mother and son. Despite all of this, or perhaps because of these circumstances, she does not receive or ask for support. When she loses her job, she immediately takes another. Her car dies, so she walks to work. Seemingly, she works the night shift in order to be available to her son. Tyrell dies walking home with her because she does not leave him home alone. Yet, her character is assailed for not possessing “the disease called strength.” The critical response to Leticia Musgrove, I believe, reveals the tension between competing representations about what keeping it real masks in this particular film.

If a character such as Leticia inhabits the role of African American superwoman, either her strength enervates the African American male and the family more generally, or she is not a “real” African American woman because she accepts help from “the enemy.” Both of these positions place African American women in a complicated space, negotiating, or perhaps more accurately being policed and policing, the boundaries of multiple cultural transgressions. As the putative marker of racial law and its transgression in the film, Leticia’s character “resonates in the

collective memory of a culture wrought with anger, resentment, and fear hovering over the racial divide” (Cal 17). This anger does not belong singularly to the rabidly racist whites that Buck represents in the film, as the reviews of the film reveal. Leticia, then, sits at the center of a complicated familial discourse in which the potentialities of sex as both desire and potential reproduction disrupt the racial scripts that both whites and African Americans seek to protect or “keep real.”

Here, I am drawing on the *Loving v. Virginia* (1957) case, with its prolonged debate about the decency and desirability of interracial marriage, during which time the Lovings “lived as defendants, felons, exiles, fugitives, litigants, and even as prisoners” (Gordon-Reed 179). We can read *Monster’s Ball*, with its controversial interracial relationship, through this description of the Lovings’ contested relationship. *Monster’s Ball* invites us to consider not only what happens when keeping it real goes wrong, as Chapelle’s skit poses, but also the nature of that wrong. Arguably, the question surrounding *Monster’s Ball* is not, as Alexander suggests, found only in our ability to look, but more generatively, in how we can look at race as it appears in films that challenge the politics of keepin’ it real. This is to say that we must move beyond the tired debate about authentic and/or positive or negative representations of African Americans.

*In American culture, and in the imaginative representations of that culture in literature [and film], our compromised environments often allow publicly constructed racial and sexual identities that supersede private consciousness. The result may be a negative dialectic that dangerously rehearses the dynamics of racism and sexism.*

**“No Clamor For A Touch?”**

I take the subheading for this section from the end of *Beloved*. The narrator describes the community’s response to Beloved’s disappearance as “certainly no clamor for a kiss” (275). Morrison revealed that her word, kiss, was a last-minute change per the advice of her editor. Sharon Patricia Holland speculates that the word “hovers somewhere between fuck and touch” in her essay, “The Last Word on Racism: New Directions in Critical Race Theory.” Holland describes her essay as “an experimental exploration of the intimacy that everyday racism relies upon...the kind created by a simple touch or word uttered between strangers” (406). I find Holland’s engagement with the possibilities of what that word is in the context of *Monster’s Ball*, for it seems also the central question that emerges from Hank and Leticia’s relationship.

Leticia has apparently been abstinent for eleven years, as the film offers no evidence of other romantic or sexual relationships. Meanwhile, Hank has sex with the same prostitute that Sonny sees. Sex is transactional and mechanical; however, Hank is no longer able to execute this transaction after Sonny’s suicide. Hank and Leticia’s sexual interaction emerges from this history. Whether Hank and Leticia clamor for a fuck or touch is critical to understanding the film and engaging the complexities with whatever answer we arrive at privately. I agree with Holland’s claim that “touch appears as an appropriate meta-narrative for racism because it articulates similar dangers—touch both engenders outrage and identifies the connection in past, present, and future”(406). In light of Holland’s argument, I want to consider that Hank and

Leticia's sex embodies both the outrage and the possibility bound up in Holland's notion of the touch.

Hank and Leticia's sexual interaction is overwhelmed by the past and the immediate present—Hank and Leticia truly are 'fucked' by the past. The question then becomes whether they can redefine Holland's metonym in spite of history. The sex that disturbed critics and viewers, then, is only one side of the act; the other side that appeals to me, for it is far more transgressive, is the possibility that they may be able to "touch the inside parts" (Morrison 117)<sup>71</sup> of each other. By this, I mean to suggest finding a way to pursue a relationship that is not about replicating the racial history that their touch/fuck immediately summons, but that is it possible for a fuck to open imaginative spaces that give way to a more intimate touch that does not immediately invoke the racial past. Thus, the emphasis on "the fuck" in *Monster's Ball* misses the larger point of the film, which is to consider the possibility that comes when difference meets itself.

A more productive examination of Leticia and Hank's relationship, then, encourages us to consider the rigid boundaries that protect race and racism and, in turn, discipline our imaginative impulse. As I read this film, it does not offer romantic love as the solution for racial injury; instead, the film asks whether love expressed as "the political will to liberate humankind from race thinking" is possible (Gilroy 12). In short, love is serious work that must be embraced in the overlapping arenas that mark interpersonal and political life. For this reason, Alexander's question—"Can

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<sup>71</sup> Beloved tells Paul D that he must touch her on the inside part and call her name. This request takes place after Paul D exorcises Beloved's presence as a haunting spirit at 124 Bluestone. As flesh, Beloved requires Paul D's embrace so that they may both be more whole—that is, Beloved as unclaimed memory and Paul D as one who refuses to claim that memory.

you be black and look at this?”—and Chapelle’s critique of cultural demands for “keeping it real” are significant to understanding the critical response to this film, for the film asks us to rethink our own relationship to the traditions and conditions that race and racism have engendered in our interpersonal, political, cultural, and economic lives. We must ask ourselves whether we will allow history to fuck us or to reclaim the possibility of touching others in ways that are not racist, oppressive, sexist—and violent.

Gilroy argues that “when ideas of racial particularity are inverted in the defensive manner so that they provide sources of pride rather than shame and humiliation, they become difficult to relinquish”; thus, audiences of *Monster’s Ball* are placed in the uncomfortable and perhaps unconscious position of determining whether they can in fact look at Hank and Leticia’s relationship and, further, if they can engage it through a lens other than Buck’s, lest audiences, too, embrace Buck’s desire for African Americans and whites to know their place. This is the negative dialectic that Karla Holloway warns against in the epigraphic reference above. Her observation speaks to the dangers of keeping it real and also to the possibility of a resounding and emphatic “no” to Alexander’s question. Holloway’s argument and the film remind us that reparations not only are an uncomfortable topic of discussion, but also call for a challenging intervention in the ways that we think about the social worlds we shape and our tacit approvals of historically troublesome ideas that limit the way social interactions evolve.

When Buck discovers Leticia and Hank’s relationship, he can only comprehend it through the dynamics of racism and sexism that have defined his

personal and private interactions. In perhaps the film's most painful scene, Buck looks squarely into Leticia's eyes and says, "In my prime, I had a thing for nigger juice myself....Hank ain't a man until he split dark oak" (Addica and Rokos). Not only are Buck's words deliberately chosen to wound, but it also establishes that the rape of an African American girl (presumably a virgin) is a white male's rite of passage. That he was an officer of the law makes it impossible to ignore the historical reality that racial and sexual violence not only was protected but was encouraged under the law.<sup>72</sup> Buck's attack brings the full force of race and law's intersection on the geography of African American bodies. The white penis as ax, then, is perhaps a more disturbing phallic symbol than the gun, as Buck reveals that it has been the real badge of law enforcement.

With its unavoidable imagery of splitting, splaying, and killing the flesh that it conquers, the axe that Buck invokes reminds us of Spillers's description of slavery as one that reduced human beings to flesh. *Monster's Ball* inverts the stereotype of the black buck used to signify the sexual threat of African American men, particularly to white women, for it is Buck, we learn, who has a rapacious appetite for African American women. Buck equates authentic masculinity with sexual exploitation of African American women and, as such, he also articulates both the desire and disgust for the black body. However, in conquering the black female body, Buck has a particularly fulfilling exercise of power, one that seems to allow him to, at least for a brief time, metaphysically inhabit African American masculinity and its perceived

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<sup>72</sup> Buck's character invokes, I believe, Jesse from James Baldwin's titular short story in his collection *Going to Meet the Man*. In that story, the protagonist confesses the same abuses of African American girls/women. He is unable to perform sexually with his wife Grace, and when he does he says that he is going to do her like a nigger. Baldwin reveals the sexual anxieties that circulate within race and racism and its management by institutions such as law.

power. We are to understand that Buck experiences the same sense of erotic power with the execution of African American men, which he documents with pornographic precision.

The object of audiences' disgust, I believe, is Buck. Buck, however, is literally at death's door, as he is unable to attend to his most basic needs or breathe on his own. Buck simply stands in for a rabid racist past that is, if we are to believe the popular idea that Buck's racism is aberrant, a thing of the past. It is Hank, though gangly and sickly, whom we focus on in our condemnation of race and racism. Hank carries out his father's beliefs because he is expected to do so, and though the film alludes to his discomfort with this tradition, he also is uncomfortable with Sonny's rejection of that tradition. Hank is not an abject subject; he may indeed be injured by whiteness, but like Buck, Hank benefits from his affiliation with whiteness and the traditions that mark that racial identity. The film suggests that those traditions are grounded in the most racist and violent expression of law enforcement. Buck's acceptance and repetition of its racism is not uncritical, but his robotic demeanor suggests otherwise. Hank's bodily responses become crucial, for they reveal the ways that race literally sickens and threatens to kill him.

Buck's insistence that African Americans be reminded of their subordinate position through violence encompasses American racial history from the colonial statutes to Jim Crow segregation. The subordination that Buck symbolizes, then, remains suspended between identifying and apprehending African American men as threats, indicative of Buck's response to Sonny's two young African American friends and, later, his response to Leticia and Hank's relationship as a marker of

Hank's maturation as a white man by violating an African American woman. If these two examples mark the extremes of racial subjugation, injury, and death, all of which are linked to violence, an unaccounted-for space exists. It is in this in-between space that *Monster's Ball* invites audiences to dwell. The film calls upon viewers and critics to reject the deceptive transparency that such binaries rely upon to understand how and why it is possible that opposites in the American racial signifying system literally attract.

*Opposites attract it's physical*

*only logical*

*You must try to ignore that it means more than that*

Tina Turner, "What's Love Got to Do With It"

### **What's Love Got to Do With It?**

Hank and Leticia's initial sexual interaction does not "overwrite the dire death-row plot" that opens *Monster's Ball* (Rowe 124). Both Hank and Leticia seemingly have dwelled in the space/presence of death for much of their lives. It is too simplified a reading to see Lawrence and Tyrell's death as evidence of a conspiracy to annihilate African American men, so that African American women become more accessible to white American men. Lawrence's execution is unintelligible, Tyrell's senseless death overwhelms logic, and Sonny's suicide is no less overwhelming. All three men rest in the same grave, dug by a culture in which all manner of violent disregard for human life is the norm. That is to say, vehicular homicide, suicide, and electrocution are not markers of a specifically directed plot to annihilate African American men and boys, but rather evidence of a sickness that threatens through attrition to envelope the nation.



The temptation is to place these deaths and the various types of ruptures they produce on a hierarchy in the realm of acceptance of the culture's existing racial dynamics. Life is valuable, not because but in spite of the racial affiliations that human beings embrace. The audience hangs suspended between race as an explanation for all of the violence and death in the film or perceiving death's source as some aspect of the culture that is even more ominous: the lack of "real" love.

By "real love," I mean to say the capacity and willingness to embrace the complexity of human beings that makes us human and unique. Such a love requires living in the midst of struggles against the vices that humans know how to produce. Here I am guided by Avery Gordon's concept of complex personhood. Gordon notes "that those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents" (4).

As a cultural narrative, *Monster's Ball* proposes that we consider what it means to embrace the contradictory subject positions that our embrace of race and its subsequent expression as racism produces. Whiteness and Blackness are perhaps irretrievably bound by the violence embedded in our very embrace of race; so much so that perhaps there is no escape from this bounded/bonded relationship, but only the opportunity to work against it actively in all areas of our lives. It is impossible for Hank to erase his racial identity by "simply" severing his attachment to those who have injured people like Leticia and Lawrence. It is impossible to lock the past away, for history is always already present. The antiracist project and the pursuit of reparations do not cohere around rehabilitating Whiteness or celebrating Blackness,

but rather recuperating what has been abstracted or erased by slavery: our shared humanity.

Historically, U.S. jurisprudence has propagated a legalist discourse that has made it possible to name and use race while simultaneously obscuring that operation and its impact on American lives. It, perhaps more than any other discursive formation in the nation, has inscribed identification beyond human differences as impossible and undesirable, and in so doing, race and racism ultimately have become projects that rename and replace human beings. Holland suggests that racism is a “project of belonging [which] signifies two sets of relations” (405). These dual sets of relations establish two goals, goals which this project has explored throughout: being able to place raced bodies in two locations—biological belonging and communal belonging—where both are ultimately carried in relation to the nation’s laws and its courtrooms. For whiteness these two projects are carried out simultaneously, as Mills traces in his rereading of the social contract.

*Monster’s Ball*, like the other cultural narratives treated in this project, lets race and racism be ferociously present from the film’s opening moments to its closing scenes. We cannot escape from participating personally in the cinematic staging of the project of belonging. That is to say, the crisis of the film, announced through Hank and Leticia’s sexual relationship, emerges to negotiate for us where our energies will be spent—on human belonging or communal belonging—especially in light of our shared racial history that has so often defined these goals as being mutually exclusive of one other. Indeed, we have been called upon repeatedly in contemporary America to ignore/address the reality that our legalist discourse and its

life in legal venues means more than establishing commensurability. We have been pressed into service to police—to keep real—the boundaries that define the project of belonging, a project that ultimately reveals that “real” love has very little to with most of our public and private discourse and decisions.

**“I Think That We are Going to be All Right.”**

After Buck violates Leticia, it appears that her relationship with Hank will end. Leticia rejects Hank’s pleas for her to disidentify him from his father’s racism (“that’s not me”). The aftermath of the confrontation between Buck and Leticia may be the only moment in the film when both Hank and Leticia share the same emotional space; they are trapped, angered, frustrated, and injured by Buck’s articulation of their shared racial history.

Although it is Buck who attacks Leticia, he is too old to receive such anger, by which I mean to say that Buck lacks the power to do anything other than dramatize the ugliness of America’s racial history. Leticia’s anger, now redirected at Hank, is legitimate in light of the fact that, despite his protestations otherwise, Hank is his father. Not only did he embrace (however tacitly) and carry out his father’s traditions, he also attempted to pass those traditions to his son, Sonny. Critically, these racist traditions have given Hank financial stability, as evidenced by his ability to purchase the service station and his inheritance of the family home. We can, then, recognize Hank and Leticia’s relationship as representative of the tensions often produced by contemporary pursuits of reparations. Hank comes from a long of American citizens who, because they are white and male, have benefited from being signatories to the racial/social contract. Moreover, as a line of executioners, they have literally enforced

the law and more specifically, executed numerous African American men. Buck's personal collection of photographs and news clippings reveals that he is profoundly invested in maintaining the "natural" racial hierarchy. Hank, like the nation which he represents, is indebted to African Americans.

Hank disavows owning the sins and debts produced by his (fore)father's racism. Leticia's race and her poverty serve as reminders that deep-seated racism has impacted many African Americans negatively in the past and continues to do so in the present. Leticia's material suffering is not only the result of Lawrence's imprisonment but also of systemic racism. Though the film does not indicate her educational background, it seems reasonable to assume that she is the product of separate and unequal educational opportunities. Buck's confinement to the domestic sphere and finally to the nursing home reminds us that while public expressions of rabid racism may erupt less frequently today, such expressions unfortunately continue to shape both private and public social relations in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Thus Hank's prediction, "I think that we are going to be all right" is perhaps overly optimistic.

As part of his apology to Leticia, Hank tells her that "I want to take care of you." She accepts that offer because she seems to have no other choice. Ultimately, Leticia accepts Hank's apology and his help because she has no other options. The film's tagline, "A lifetime of change can happen in a single moment," is an unfortunate simplification of what the film attempts to narrate and dramatize. The moment of crisis in the film, namely, Hank's and Leticia's chance encounters and mutual loss of a son do not produce a lifetime of change, but rather mark the

beginning of a struggle to reconcile what precedes their meeting and the subsequent epiphanies it produces. Hank and Leticia are already connected in and through a lengthy history.

Love is not an uncomplicated response to the crisis of racial history; it is, however, a response requiring a certain type of work that resists the optimism that both Sonny and Hank express. That is to say, in taking Leticia into his home and naming “their” service station Leticia’s, Hank is not demonstrating anything other than the simplest acts of reparation for the execution of Lawrence and, more generally, his guilt by association with rabid racism. Hank’s acts do not “cut temporal and genetic ties” that produce the familial ruptures “necessary for Hank’s redemption” (Rowe 128). Contrary to other scholars’ reading of the film, I do not identify Hank as being redeemed or as the Great White Savior. These descriptions are not only too easy and almost simplistic, but also disregard the film’s ending. The end of *Monster’s Ball* returns us to Alexander’s question and the demand for keeping representations of race real. Leticia will decide not only whether she “can look,” at, but whether she can love the man who executed her husband. This work will become more challenging when Leticia learns that Hank hoped to lock away the intimate details that connect their “old” lives. This is the moment when we, too, must decide what keeping it real means, and if on this occasion keeping it real constitutes the wrong choice. Hank and Leticia’s relationship becomes emblematic of the work that the pursuit of reparations calls upon citizens to undertake: to step out of the safety of forgetfulness, the comfort of denial, and the anger over rights denied and encounters

with prejudice, all of which have become patterns that shaped and continue to influence the public imagination.

As a representation of Lubiano's house, the house that race built, Hank's home and Leticia's presence in that space is not simply a "moment," as the tagline suggests, but rather a precipitous disruption, for in "their" house, they will attempt to renegotiate the terms of the racial contract. In this way, the film speaks to the consequences of seriously engaging racial history, as the contemporary pursuit of reparations demands. Hank may well take care of Leticia; however, it is clear that in doing so, neither will transcend the history and violence about which Buck mutters and about which Tyrell, Lawrence, and Sonny clamor about from the space of the dead. The film does not allow either extreme to prevail; Buck's rabid racism is largely untenable in public, and his isolation in the domestic sphere shields his racism. As a representative of the anti-racist or even post-race future, Sonny dies because he embraces love/kindness/compassion as an escape from the racism that harms him as well as African Americans. Sonny does not interact with Buck during the entire film, and at the funeral, Buck reveals that he has no love for Sonny; he simply says of his grandson that he was "weak." Love that does not embrace the complications of life cannot sustain itself in spaces where personal and communal histories are forged by racial antipathy. Linked with his mother, Sonny's weakness, as Buck and Hank identify it, renders him feminine, but more problematic for their patriarchal tradition, it renders him incapable of executing the "correct" relationship with African Americans. Hank, then, is the mediator between the two representations of race—as violence and the past—both of which produce various injuries in the

present. Hank does not disarticulate the racial past for which reparations are sought; rather, he announces continually why such a pursuit still exists and why it is both a “black and white thing.”

### **Speaking From the Dead**

Speaking from the dead, Lawrence, Tyrell, and Sonny trouble Hank’s assertion that they (Leticia and Hank) “will be all right.” Hank, as it turns out, might be more like his dead son and his father than he would have us believe. Reading Hank in this way allows me to comprehend more clearly Hank’s rabid, irrational hatred of his own flesh and blood. Sonny’s death appears to be a direct consequence of his embrace of an anti-racist or post-racist ideology, evidenced by his relationship with Lawrence and the two African American boys he befriends. Like the rest of the characters in the film, we know very little of Sonny’s life. Sonny spends his time with African Americans, ostensibly because he finds whiteness alienating and discomforting.

We see this philosophy clearly at the Monster’s Ball, the party that occurs the night before the execution of a prisoner. Sonny sits alone at the bar rather than with his co-workers and his father. Here law enforcement tradition and whiteness merge and seem to place Sonny outside its bounds. The so-called Monster’s Ball, though intended as a last feast for the prisoner, reveals that those who carry out executions are perhaps as monstrous as the offender. Ironically, Sonny’s distance from whiteness renders him more monstrous than his co-workers and his father. His interaction with Vera, the white prostitute, is only mechanical; she rejects his attempt to create a more meaningful connection. These two experiences of isolation are juxtaposed with the

ease of Sonny's conversation between the two African American boys, in which Lawrence reveals that Sonny is not only unfulfilled but made melancholy by his racial affiliation.<sup>73</sup>

Sonny's relationship with African Americans marks and announces the violence that race often produces, as well as the ways in which such violence impacts both victim and perpetrator in different and overlapping ways. Here I am guided by Anne Cheng's suggestion that "melancholia gets more potent at the notion of constitutive loss that expresses itself in both violent and muted ways, producing confirmation as well as crisis, knowledge as well as *aporia*"(12). Sonny suffers both because he is and is not Buck and Hank. Sonny and Lawrence's relationship illuminates this connection. Their relationship exceeds the confines that the state imposes on it. In my reading of this film, their relationship neither erases the impending horror of the coming execution nor serves merely to demonstrate Sonny's essential goodness, as evidenced by his inability to carry out his inherited duties. Instead, as a prisoner, Lawrence is not supposed to impart knowledge to others. As a prisoner, Lawrence doubly marks the degraded status of the prisoner, for not only has he allegedly broken the law, but his race announces his propensity for inhuman behavior. Thus prison is not so much about rehabilitating Lawrence and those like him, but instead holding on to them until the state can exercise the most forceful articulation of its power, execution. Here we might identify the ways in which Lawrence and Jefferson are connected in an intertextual narrative about African American men and their relationship to the nation's penal system. Their

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<sup>73</sup> See Anne Anglin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*.



imprisonment aims to make them less human, more docile subjects who will not resist the state's power. The rehearsal of the execution serves as a reminder of this truth. The stand-in for Lawrence is one of two African American prison guards at the prison. Here the film acknowledges the history of the disproportionate number of African Americans being executed in the U.S.

The film, however, attempts to distance the execution from any celebratory feelings on the part of the execution team. The Monster's Ball is instead a somber affair for all involved. Hank, we are encouraged to believe, carries out his job in the most respectful manner possible. However, unlike Sonny, Hank can maintain an emotional distance from Lawrence, while unlike his father he does not keep a scrapbook of the executions. Hank's emotional distance from his work, however, is not limited to his job; he is emotionally removed from Sonny as well. Sonny, without a father, and Lawrence, without his son, develop a surrogate relationship. It is through this relationship that we gain greater insight into Lawrence and glean a clearer, though brief, sense of Lawrence's temperament in his relationship with Tyrell.

Lawrence's engagement with his son is gentle, and they bond over their shared talent as artists. The opening sequence of the film reveals that Tyrell has won an award for his drawing. Using the theme of solitude, he draws a portrait of his father. His portrait retrieves Lawrence from the no-space where his prison cell confines him and reveals that Tyrell experiences his father quite viscerally. If, as Lawrence tells Sonny, it takes one human being to see another, then it would seem that Tyrell has inherited the gift of insight into the human condition, which he is also able to share through drawing.

Lawrence draws a portrait of Sonny and tells him that it takes a human being to see another human being freely and clearly. Their exchange is a lesson before dying shared between two men marching toward the same fate. Further evidence of the paternal nature of the relationship comes when Lawrence is denied his final phone call, and in lieu of having a last conversation with his own son, he talks with Sonny. The two men's emotional attachment is palpable, so much so that when Lawrence begins to cry, Sonny reaches for him, only to be upbraided by Hank. Hank restores the "appropriate" distance between the executioner and the subject who is death-bound.

Hank, however, is not able to resist the pull of Lawrence's humanity. Lawrence's ability to see is evidence of his humanity, for Hank, too, receives a portrait. Lawrence's portraits of the two white men are not about redeeming white men, as some reviewers and critics have suggested. Rather, the portraits become like Jefferson's diary in *A Lesson Before Dying*—inscription of the self not only on paper but also in the memories of those who experience another's articulation of their humanity. Here the film is successful in marking and exploring the psychic dimensions of racial injury. By withholding the details of Lawrence's crime, we experience only Lawrence's elocution of his humanity and his ability to see the humanity of others. His humanity overpowers the law's attempt to abstract him as animal, flesh, to be executed.

It is these portraits that haunt Hank and Leticia's relationship from the space of the dead. Leticia decorates her home with Lawrence and Tyrell's portraits. Hank reencounters Lawrence through his portraits after his first sexual encounter with

Leticia, yet he chooses to conceal from Leticia his involvement in Lawrence's death. Lawrence, speaking from the dead, refuses to be erased. Later, in Hank's eagerness for a future with Leticia in which their racial differences do not matter, he literally locks away the portraits of both Sonny and himself along with the box of drawings forwarded to Tyrell after Lawrence's execution. There Lawrence and Tyrell are rejoined and accompanied by the surrogate son, Sonny, and will disturb the peace. Lawrence, Tyrell, and Sonny remind us that "history is above all else a haunting claim that the dead have on the living, whose responsibility it is not only to remember but to protect the dead from being misappropriated" (Felman 15). In locking his father away in the nursing home, Hank establishes a pattern that appears once again in his decision to "store" the portraits that announce his past. For Hank, the new racial house can only be inhabited peacefully with Leticia if their joint history is forgotten.

While Hank's decision to place the three men together might be viewed as a fitting burial, considering the tragedies that produced their deaths, the padlock on the attic door registers a more troubling remainder of Hank's professional life. In that life, locking away what is deemed dangerous and unruly carries material benefits. In his new life with Leticia, Hank will be paying out benefits in an effort to atone for upholding the racial contract. Perhaps Hank's impulse to lock away the portraits reveals his twofold guilt—his responsibility for his son's death and his participation in Lawrence's death. The latter death is complicated because it was related to work, work from which he tried to detach himself unsuccessfully. Importantly, the locked attic is also the final resting place of both boys, who were unable to meet cultural

expectations of masculinity—Sonny, according to his father, is a “pussy,” and according to his grandfather, he is “weak.” According to Leticia, Tyrell “cannot be a black man in America and be like that” (grotesquely obese and seemingly feminized) (Addica and Rothko). Both boys are thus the unfulfilled desires and expectations of their parents.

These expectations of normative masculinity, of course, also articulate popular perceptions of both African American and White American gender identity and offer evidence of the injury that race and racism inflict on (African) Americans. It is only in death that Leticia and Hank speak with pride about their children and admit their own parental shortcomings. This singular recognition of their parental failings and the larger failings of the culture they have lived in do not constitute enough of value to discount the misappropriation of their deaths that Hank’s padlock symbolizes. Like the ghost that haunts 124 Bluestone Road in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the memory/history and the residue of race and violence announced by that history, Tyrell, Lawrence and Sonny will neither die nor be locked away.

I do not believe, as Kwakiutl Dreher argues in his article, “A Eulogy for Tyrell” that Leticia “is a Black mother who hates her child” and that “there is no burial... no eulogy” and thus Tyrell is “disremembered” (66). The lack of burial and an official eulogy stands in stark contrast to what Sonny’s family attempts to do—erase the failure of White masculinity to exercise dominance. Hank, I believe, regrets Sonny’s burial and his father’s anti-eulogy that “he was weak.” Unlike Hank, Leticia talks about Tyrell and eulogizes him before her relationship with Hank begins. His drawings decorate her home before she is evicted, and the box in which Leticia places

Tyrell's belongings is handled delicately. The fact that Leticia is evicted from her home speaks to her dire condition and is enough explanation for the lack of an elaborate funeral for Tyrell. Dreher's reading is that Leticia's responses to Tyrell's death "do not reflect the rituals and traditions Black communities perform in the remembrance of Black children" (67). Grieving, like loving in this film, apparently fails to "keep it real" because it does not conform to essentialized notions of African American cultural practice. Plagued by several omissions in his critique of the film's absence of authentic mourning, Dreher's analysis negates the possibility that Tyrell will receive an "authentic" elaborate funeral at a later date. Moreover, he dismisses the reality that there are "real" African Americans who cannot afford to participate in this ritual, and importantly, still others who do not value the elaborate traditions he identifies. Had Leticia possessed the resources to provide Tyrell with a grand funeral, we should ask why she would not use those monies to secure their home. The here-and-now is perhaps more important than visions of a post-life and the manner in which we travel and arrive as that destination. As for Tyrell being disremembered, it is precisely Leticia's memory of and sadness about Tyrell that draws her to the mausoleum where Hank has entombed Tyrell. She rejects the "funeral" that Hank gives Tyrell. She refuses to acquiesce to the demands that the dead be forgotten. In this sense Leticia defines the very nature of reparations—the refusal to forget those who were injured and murdered by the nation's embrace of race and racism in its economic, political, and social relations.

Exploring her new home, after the consummation of Hank's and Leticia's new life, it is as if Tyrell draws his mother to him. She unearths the sketches drawn by

Lawrence of Hank and Sonny. This discovery literally silences her, leaving the audience to imagine Leticia's feelings and to experience both the pain that prompts her tears and the anger that leaves her body via her fists as she beats upon the furniture. This new level of trauma resists all forms of language; Leticia's silence is so spectacular that we are left only with our imaginative abilities to make her experience "real." In this moment we, like Leticia, must decide how we feel about this discovery, and what the portraits unearth about Hank. Is Hank ultimately beyond repair, real repair beyond simply the gestures that he has offered Leticia so far? The meaning of their relationship and the historical circumstances surrounding their relationship are unavoidable. Their relationship invokes the violence of law, the violence of Lawrence's death, the violence of Leticia's introduction to Buck, and the violence of Tyrell's death. Tyrell's and Lawrence's portraits speak "the unspeakable things left unspoken" by Hank. These lessons from the dead call on Leticia not only to remember, I would argue, but also to consider carefully the implications and possibilities that her relationship with Hank holds for their individual and collective future. Not only do Hank and Leticia inhabit the house that race built, they are the children of men like Hugh Davis and his nameless African American female lover, the kinfolk of the Lovings and their struggle to love across racial differences protected in law. It seems to me that we do violence to this moment when we demand a display of mourning that conforms to a racial script. Leticia's lack of anger speaks to the greater significance of her discovery and announces, like a Faulkner tale, that the "the past is not dead. It is not even past" (Faulkner). Leticia must answer the question of who she is in relationship to Hank, Tyrell, Lawrence, Buck, and Sonny

and the intersecting histories that each of them represent. Leticia's failure to answer immediately the questions that those portraits expose challenges our ability to identify Leticia as keeping it real. I suspect we desire a type of response that is undeniably angry. Yet, her trauma in this moment seems to be beyond words. For me it is precisely this sort of trauma that is beyond the potential for law to settle—what legal calculus retrieves and makes intelligible this type of horror?

To return to the film's tagline once again, a lifetime of change can happen in a moment. That phrase best describes not Hank's and Leticia's sexual encounter, but the moment when Leticia receives the terrible knowledge of Hank's politics. Exceedingly difficult to watch, this scene brings the full weight of Alexander's question to bear on my analysis—what does blackness/African Americanness permit the viewer to feel or desire when Leticia fails to provide us with verbal and visual cues? We seem to return to the same shadowy darkness that opens the film, and while Leticia does not become physically ill, it is safe to assume that she is morally sick from being in a house haunted by race and racism. Hank is not redeemed, and Leticia is not saved.

Brooding, rather than romanticism, best captures the mood of the final scene. The film's ending leaves open a silence and darkness that perhaps reflects Hank's and Leticia's individual and collective future. Hank returns from his nightly ritual of buying chocolate ice cream. He shares it with Leticia, who remains silent. As the couple sits on the back porch silently, Leticia's eyes search the sky—for God, I believe. Hank later joins her in that gaze. I say gaze because I am not convinced that Hank understands the magnitude of the relationship that he enters with Leticia.

Having severed his ties with law enforcement and the cultural law embodied by his father, Hank's declaration that "I think we'll be all right" strikes me as a question more than an affirmative statement. It is powerful, but also announces the couple's vulnerability to succumbing to the project of racial belonging that Holland identifies as the project of race. Leticia's silence does not signal tacit acceptance of Hank's promise to take care of her. Despite Hank's desire to take care of Leticia, he may be incapable of the love and the work necessary to achieve that end. Importantly for me, in light of readings of the film that identify Leticia as abject, the ending does not promise that she will allow him to care for her or, even more significantly, that she will comfort and support him. Leticia, better than anyone else in the film, apprehends and comprehends the instability of their relationship. Neither may be prepared for the work that comes with freeing the self from the trap of history.

Like the close of *Beloved*, we must ponder the quality or longevity of their future, what Paul D calls "some kind of tomorrow." Leticia's ability to imagine grace for Hank is suspended between the two goals of the task of belonging, the ongoing tightrope of American history. And because of this racial history, *Monster's Ball* strikes me as particularly disturbing, not for its failure to adhere to racial protocols, but for its suggestion that repairing the injuries that emanated from American history may in fact be beyond our public and private imaginations and desires.

Keeping it real, then, is about maintaining the formation of social power that transforms the symbolic boundary, in this case black woman/ white man, black man/white man and white man/white man, embedded in our social institutions. That is *Monster's Ball* attempts not simply to mark the boundaries of race and gender but



the ways in which these boundaries are susceptible to destroying the very lives they were imagined and materialized to protect or instantiate with power and privilege. The very impulse to ‘keep it real’ reflects the history of reoccurring conflicts over the material and social realities that race and racism have created in the United States. In light of this cycle we are all called upon to be particularly mindful of the ways in which we encounter interracial relationships. If we fail to do so, we run the risk of erasing the agency and autonomy of the individuals engaged in these relationships. The film calls upon us to engage Hank and Leticia’s interaction and history outside of the rape narrative without reducing it to mere personal liberation. Theirs is a relationship that exists in a space that we have yet to articulate. Neither Hank nor Leticia escapes their racial identities in the relationship; in fact, in many ways the significances of their racial identities become more pronounced in light of the dominant racial imagery at work in the United States. The silence that pervades the final scene of *Monster’s Ball* strikes me as a compelling articulation of the liminal space in which Hank’s and Leticia’s relationship exists and, by extension, of the liminal space that the pursuit of reparations seeks to transgress. In this way, the film’s ending strikes me as similar to the ending of *Beloved*. There is, at least as I read it, real question about whether Sethe and Paul D will be able to have the “some kind of tomorrow” that Paul D identifies as desirable and necessary. Similarly, the ending of *Monster’s Ball* seems to suggest that neither Hank nor Leticia will be able to make each other “feel good” for the long haul. What these relationships reiterate or “keep real,” then, is the necessity of imagining the possibility and embracing the

difficult work of repairing social and cultural institutions that have relied on race and its expression as racism for power.

## Chapter 8: It Is In Our Hands

*To bring this hope to fruition, we are compelled daily to turn more and more to a conscientious study of the phenomena of race-contact,—to a study frank and fair, and not falsified and colored by our wishes or our fears.*

W.E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

I return again to Morrison's Nobel Lecture as a way of reflecting on the work that I hope this project has accomplished, directing our attention to rethinking the meanings of reparations and the manifestations of pursuing such reparations. Already you know that Morrison situates an old African American woman as the law and its transgressions, but what I have withheld is the fact that she is blind. Her blindness, however, does not constitute a disability, though she is challenged by a group of children who believe that her difference constitutes a handicap and undermines her authority. They come to her with a bird in their hand and ask the old woman if it is living or dead. Suspicious of the children's motivations, the old woman does not immediately answer her visitors. Finally, the woman responds to her visitors, saying, "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands" (17). Morrison chooses to read the bird as language and the old woman as a practiced writer who is worried about what she identifies as the (mis)uses of language. Her emphasis on language, and particularly her emphasis on the instrument in which cultural narratives, such as her own texts, reiterate that narrative, is not merely a form of entertainment. For this reason, I have insisted upon reading a variety of cultural narratives as instructive for illuminating both political and cultural issues, which are at their root linguistic.

As I noted at the outset of this project, the arc of my inquiry into the nature and meaning of reparations for African American slavery leans distinctively toward the literary in both its texts and its emphasis of close readings of those texts aided by a variety of theoretical and disciplinary approaches. Ultimately, I have placed the cultural narratives investigated here under tremendous pressure, as they have been called upon to represent the imaginative freedom and possibility that such narratives offer. As narratives, they not only reflect the socio-political struggles attendant to America's particular struggles with race and racism, but potentially intervene in the ways in which we might conceptualize and pursue reparations for the panoply of injuries that race and racism have produced in the U.S. Such an approach has made clear to me what Matt Wray acknowledges at the outset of recent work, *Not Quite White: White Trash and The Boundaries of Whiteness*. Identifying the challenges of conducting interdisciplinary research, Wray observes that "truly interdisciplinary work satisfies almost no one" (x). I concur with what amounts to Wray's confession about the pull and attractiveness of disciplinary expectations about productive or even "appropriate" ways of engaging questions of culture, philosophy, literature, gender and law.

Despite these challenges, however, reparations as I understand it require the discomfort that accompanies disciplinary boundary crossings. I hope, then, that "Disturbing the Peace" has illuminated some of the benefits of embracing the uncomfortable spaces that are particularly critical to extending our understanding of both the history that produced contemporary calls for reparations and the widespread resistance to exploring the influence of that history in all facets of our lives. I have

insisted that law is of little value to African Americans in conceptualizing and pursuing reparations because in many ways the jurisprudence which legal discourse and practice emanates from remains in need of repair; by this I mean that we require an honest assessment of law's investments in preserving the status quo of deploying the fictions of race and the violence of racism as one of the primary means of constructing and legislating our everyday lives. In light of this seemingly impossible reparation to law, I have advocated culture, specifically as expressed within communities of aggrieved African Americans, as the location where meaningful reparations can be imagined and pursued most fruitfully. In particular, I have advanced the attractiveness and potential power of embracing "an outlaw agency that puts into crisis the law [and its impact on the history] of the land and the judgment of the witnessing jury of readers" (Grewal 1). Such an embrace answers both the question "why" and explains the significance of what I believe are the two most compelling quotations from cultural narratives identified in this project, Boy Willie's suggestion in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* that law itself is raced white and thus not geared toward African Americans' pursuit of justice; and Milkman's statement from Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, in which the question of the court's availability to African American interests receives an resounding "no" as the answer in that text and more generally in cultural narratives by and about African Americans' relationship to law in the United States. I have also linked African American women, particularly older women, as the source of communal law and its breach, drawing on Morrison's trope of the old black woman as law and its transgression, which she uses throughout her literary canon but deploys explicitly in

her Nobel acceptance speech. I hope that my analysis of this figure in relationship to reparations does not simply elevate and/or lock her into the role of caretaker or (surrogate) mother expressed in any of the traditional forms—nurse, wife, teacher, mistress, etc. These women engage in cultural work within their communities, work that carries important political implications for imagining and pursuing change both internally and materially. The cultural work that these women engage encourages self-awareness and activism within and on behalf of the communities in which they exist. They are not simply the paragons of strength that Trudier Harris finds objectionable and “malignant” in fiction and real life. The distinction between the real and the imagined constitutes an important field of consideration within this project largely because so many of the narratives, though fictional, read as fictive explorations of (f)actual lives lived in a nation where race continues to matter because it defines and delimits material accumulation or security. The cultural work often initiated and carried forth by African American women begins with the recognition that rethinking history and its force on life in the present must be explored and in many cases redirected.

Collectively, these women mark the experience of history as a lived and living entity that rejects temporal boundaries created and policed in order to maintain a distance between the constant spectacle of legal and political failures that have made justice and democracy privileges for some at the expense of others. By mapping the relationship between culture, history, law, and gender I have attempted to make present, in the selected cultural narratives, the ways in which we might go about revising our social imaginary and its influence on our collective cultural and political

lives. In every sense of the phrase, then, “Disturbing the Peace” has sought to identify how “we the people” create and live through community. Race entangles us all and, as much as the law has sought to demarcate and defend whiteness and the fictions of race on which it depends, we remain intimately bound together and thus injured together—perhaps differently, though I think that is up for debate as well.

Entanglement, then, also expresses why I have brought together cultural narratives—fiction, no matter the degree to which it accurately reflects the real experiences of race and racial injuries—with real political struggle and the discursive formations that issue forth from such struggle. In essence, the disturbance that hovers at the center of this project exists as a question: At what moment can we bifurcate tidily the line between art and politics? It is largely the collision of art and politics and their attendant and overlapping discursive lives that structure and render

the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions of and images that underlie these expectations....that makes possible common practices and a widely shared, [though often contested] sense of legitimacy. (Taylor 23)

Understood in this light, imagining grace does not exist as a fanciful but largely untenable political and theoretical step for pursuing reparations, as I have argued throughout the preceding chapters. Rather, imagining grace recognizes that our lives are always already entangled and that the daily entanglements they are built upon are lived largely in response to the failure to imagine otherwise, to borrow from

sociologist Avery Gordon. Our world is a product of this individual and collective activity as much as it is a product of our modern theorizations about our nature and tendencies as they manifest in variety of locations. Reparation to our world, then, neither begins nor rests solely in our courts but rather, in our hands. For this reason, I am drawn to Tavis Smiley's *The Covenant* and want to offer it as an example of a pursuit of the myriad types of reparations that I have explored in this project.

Cornel West identifies *The Covenant* as not only “a call to action but...also itself a form of action... that is neither a “contract nor a compact; a contract is too selfish and compact too seasonal” (239-40). In short, West identifies the ways in which contracts have been used to pursue and retain power for some at the expense of others. For his part, Tavis Smiley reveals his awareness of the significance of cultural stories in African American communities through his choice of the black publishing institution Third World Press. Haki Madhubuti, a product of the Black Arts Movement and founder and managing editor of the Third World Press, applauds Smiley's decision to go with the press noting that Smiley's actions evidence what “all people who are in control of their own cultural imperatives do: control their own liberating narratives; that is write their own liberating prescriptions and stories” (236). In Madhubuti's assessment of Smiley's choice and more generally his nod toward the power of cultural narratives as a form of liberation and healing, we link him to the other authors of this narrative, Morrison and Gaines, and even to Oprah Winfrey's sense that fiction holds liberatory and transformative power for its readers—perhaps especially so for those who have been traumatized and injured.



Smiley's communal text, one that aims to acknowledge and address the network of social, political, and economic outcomes of historic and contemporary racism, does not only lists the laundry list of problems that challenge African Americans. Smiley's text includes, at the end of each chapter, a list of examples in which the identified problem or challenge is being addressed by various African American communities around the nation. In this way, the text strengthens its call for African Americans to make politicians, local and national, more attentive and accountable to African Americans' needs, needs that ultimately impact the general health and well-being of African Americans communities across the nation. Smiley's project, then, epitomizes the cultural work that I identify in the cultural narratives and the authors of those narratives investigated in this project. Further, in light of recent political and legal discourse around race and efforts to "fix" the problems that issues forth from race's continuing significance in the United States, Smiley's approach might prove to be instructive.

### **Continuing to Disturb the Peace**

Recent judicial and legislative responses to questions that are essentially grounded in race—immigration and school integration—reminds me why Washington's reference to African Americans and race more generally as a source of disturbing the peace in the United States resonated with me. The immigration bill that had not only attained bi-partisan sponsorship—rare in this political climate—but also the support of President George Bush Jr., dies on the Senate floor. According to the popular media, Americans are outraged at the prospect of granting amnesty to some twelve million "illegal" aliens already working and living in the country. Undeniably,

the conversation about immigration is a conversation about race. It is, then, not only African Americans and the racial history they encompass that disturb the peace, but also the historical confrontation with racial difference and the geo-political boundaries drawn as a result. That is to say that Mexicans and African Americans both announce the ways in which race has mattered and continues to matter significantly in cultural, economic, legal, and political discourse. Ironically, on this same day in which these two historic events transpired, the American Bald Eagle, America's symbol of strength, power, and freedom, was removed from the endangered species list.

As a cultural and literary critic, I cannot help but identify these three events as marking the triumph of a particular vision of the United States. Beneath the lofty ideas of freedom and equality that we celebrate, we can identify the ways in which Mills' argument for treating the social contract and the philosophical and theoretical discourses that underwrite that contract are intimately tied to the construction and management of race. Ultimately, it was the conservatives who articulated the most compelling reason for the immigration bill's failure, as they noted "the demise of the bill as a fitting death of an effort that had thwarted the public's will" (Davis). The conservative response reminds us that indeed we the people, despite various powerful ideological forces and economic practices, have a great deal of power in our hands. One wonders whether, if the will of the people about the need for reparations were as powerfully articulated, Representative Conyer's proposal (H.R.42) to study the effects of slavery would finally receive approval. The recent Supreme Court decisions on the use of race remind us that indeed that ordinary people possess power, for it

was a small group of citizens who secured the decision that race as deployed by the Seattle School system constituted a form of injury. The court argued that the Seattle school system was never segregated; race, therefore, cannot be used to create racially diverse schools. The court argued that the Seattle School System failed to “carry the heavy burden of showing that the interest that they seek to achieve justifies the extreme means they have chosen... relying on racial classifications in making school assignments” and chastises the system’s use of a “limited notion of race—viewing race exclusively in terms of white/non-white and black/“other.” In other words, the court found a way to both acknowledge and discount historical uses of race to render its decision, which Justice Stephen Breyer asserted emanated from a “cruel and ironic reading of *Brown v. Topeka* case.”

Justice Breyer’s assessment of the decision observes the court’s disinterest in or inability to engage with a more complex appraisal of U.S. racial formation. More than another example of what Shoshana Felman identifies as juridical blindness and the attendant series of decisions that keep wounds from past legal decisions open, this most recent decision around race marks the ways in which the Supreme Court shapes public memory about (African) Americans’s struggles for racial justice in the United States. The Supreme Court denied that the white/black/“other” trinary has been and continues to be the primary way in which we conceptualize and enact race in political discourse, either forthrightly or through coded language—that is, it has denied that the insistence on colorblindness does not insure justice or fairness, but simply changes the terms of the conversation so that the historical dynamic of white/black, and the logics that undergird that dynamic, remain intact. If in fact the nation is

serious about colorblindness as a way to move beyond race, it would remove race as category from the census; instead, the most recent arguments have called for expanding available racial categories. Arguably the census, like the slave ledgers, provides a contemporary narrative about U.S. racial formation. Combined with legal challenges that contest the logics of that formation, challenges embodied by African American pursuits for reparations and contemporary legal cases in which racial history rest at the center speak to the ways in which race continues to inscribe our national memory—our history—largely because race and racial identity continue to be linked to the pursuit and distribution of cultural and economic capital. Race continues to matter, and despite legal efforts to imagine and adjudicate otherwise, race will remain a permanent feature of the political, legal, and cultural discourses that influence the social relations of the citizens of the United States and in a broader global context as our anxiety over our borders intensifies. Our efforts to police who enters the nation and, ultimately, who becomes a citizen, evidence our reliance on race and racial identity. African Americans' pursuit of reparations, then, speaks not only to the specific history of African American experience, but also to the larger struggle for the United States to embrace its philosophical principles and political identity as a democratic nation. Indeed, then, the quest for reparations is an American struggle. As such, it is an endeavor that rests in our hands.

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