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POLITICAL FICTIONS:
BLACK FEMINIST NOVELS OF SLAVERY AND THE NARRATIVE OF THE AMERICAN
LEFT

by

ELIZABETH A. FOLEY

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Political Fictions: Black Feminist Novels of Slavery and the Narrative of the American Left

by

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African-American women at the turn of the 1970s were the ostensible beneficiaries of the multiple liberation movements that had arisen during the previous decades: the civil rights movement, Black Power, second-wave feminism, and the gay rights movement. But black women's unique vantage point at the crossroads of multiple forms of discrimination – a position that would eventually necessitate the coining of the term *intersectionality* – allowed them to see the failures and shortcomings of each of these movements with a clarity that often escaped their political peers, and brought home to them the necessity of creating their own movement, one that was simultaneously black and feminist. Struggling against political isolation and what the Combahee River Collective termed “feelings of craziness,” black women came together to form at least five significant black feminist organizations between 1968 and 1975, including the National Black Feminist Organization and Combahee. The concerns of these organizations were simultaneously reflected in a new flowering of literature written by black women that would extend well into the 1980s. Among the products of this “black women's literary Renaissance” was a cluster of five novels that took American slavery as their subject and featured escaped or escaping female slaves as protagonists: Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*, Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. This thesis argues that these writers chose slavery as their subject as a vehicle for far more contemporary concerns that had surfaced as a result of black women's unsatisfactory experiences with the black liberation movement, the women's movement, and the gay rights movement. Jones, Butler, Chase-Riboud, Williams and Morrison were particularly concerned with three themes: relations between black women and black men, the political uses of black motherhood, and the complexities of alliances with whites. In addressing these questions, these authors not only demonstrated the ongoing relevance of movement questions to American national life, but acted as literary activists who extended the movements' work during a period of political reaction and backlash.

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Introduction: The Literary Arm of the Black Feminist Movement

The black feminist politics of the twenty years between 1968 and 1988, and the black women's literature of the same period, were interdependent to such a degree that it is not always easy to separate the two. A modern-day "black women's literary Renaissance" (Fulton 102) had initially begun circa 1970, when the first novels of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker were published in the wake of the extraordinary popular and critical success of Maya Angelou's memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Along with subsequent novels by Morrison, Walker, Paule Marshall, Louise Meriwether, and Toni Cade Bambara, among others, the '70s would witness a flowering of poetry by black women, including Sonia Sanchez, June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, and Audre Lorde. At nearly the same time, black women were coming of age politically in the wake of the turbulent 1960s. The pioneering literary critic Barbara Christian wrote that "because of the conjuncture of the black arts movement and the women's movement, I asked questions I probably would not have otherwise thought of" (7) – yet for many black women, such questions eventually led to the painful realization that neither the evolving black liberation movement, nor the mainstream women's movement, nor the nascent gay rights movement fully understood, nor felt compelled to represent, their most pressing struggles. Battling against a political isolation that often felt profound, black women came together between 1968 and 1975 to form at least five significant black feminist organizations, as Kimberly Springer has documented in her foundational book *Living for the Revolution* (2005). One of these groups, the Combahee River Collective, would soon articulate the critical black

feminist notion of intersectionality—the notion that “the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (Moraga 210)¹.

The conundrum of black feminism, caught between the white patriarchal political establishment and the betrayals of its movement allies, was strikingly dramatized by a cluster of five black feminist novels of slavery published by African-American women between the mid-1970s and the mid-‘80s: Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* (1979), Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). This thesis argues that these novels can be read as attempts by black women writers of the ‘70s and ‘80s, who had ostensibly been the subjects and beneficiaries of two major liberation movements, to address the intellectual, literary and political needs that those movements had left unmet. Working mostly independently of one another (with the partial exception of Toni Morrison, who, as an editor at Random House in the 1970s, shepherded both *Corregidora* and *Sally Hemings* to publication²), these writers came to the collective conclusion that many of the most intransigent contemporary problems faced by black women were ultimately rooted in their foremothers’ experience under slavery. What Angela Davis had written in 1971 about the pernicious archetype of the black matriarch—“it had to be refuted at its presumed historical inception” (81)—was also true of black women’s oppression generally, and

¹ The term “intersectionality” was first coined by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 in an article that examined the ways in which domestic violence and rape impact women of color differently from white women. Combahee’s pathbreaking “A Black Feminist Statement” of 1977 had articulated a broader version of the same concept: that the simultaneous experience of multiple kinds of systemic oppression results in a political perspective that is more than, and different from, the sum of these individual experiences of oppression.

² For background on Morrison’s career at Random House and experiences editing *Corregidora*, see Als (par. 25 and 33-34) and Ghansah (par. 10); on her work with *Sally Hemings*, see Chase-Riboud, 356.

these writers chose historical fiction as a field wherein the unresolved social traumas of their own time could be retroactively addressed and, to some degree, worked through.

It's instructive that these five novels were published in relatively quick succession, by writers working across multiple fictional subgenres, during the same period when the overtly activist phases of the civil rights and women's movements were collapsing due to both external factors and internal conflicts. These novels seem to be responding to just such conflicts, whose persistence even among would-be allies might have made them seem insurmountable, by shifting the scene of battle from politics into literature and from the ideological restrictions of activist polemic into the greater imaginative freedom allowed to fiction.

In this thesis I refer to *Corregidora*, *Kindred*, *Sally Hemings*, *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* as black feminist slave novels or black feminist novels of slavery—not because their authors explicitly identify as feminists, but because they are so difficult to imagine in their published form without the previous existence and validating influence of a specifically black feminist movement. I am hardly the first reader to notice meaningful commonalities in this sequence of novels. In fact, there are at least seven extant book-length studies that treat two or more of the five, which suggests the degree to which literature scholars have been struck by both the kinship between these novels and their individual power and resonance as works of fiction.

These seven studies, which I've listed below chronologically by publication date, are as follows. Missy Dehn Kubitschek's *Claiming the Heritage* (1991) examines the ways in which African-American women's fiction responds to the injustices, omissions and achievements of black women's history, in which context it treats *Kindred*, *Corregidora* and *Beloved*. Elizabeth Beaulieu's *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative* (1999) concerns itself

with the neo-slave narrative³ as a form and with black women's particular contribution to it, and covers *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*. The theme of Venetria Patton's *Women in Chains* (2000) is summed up in its subtitle, "The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction"; its fifth chapter jointly analyzes *Kindred*, *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*. Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember* (2002) also takes slavery as its focus, but deals particularly with the liberatory qualities of black women's slavery novels for their protagonists, authors and readers alike; it likewise covers *Kindred*, *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*. Cheryl Wall's *Worrying the Line* (2005) uses its titular blues metaphor to examine the not-necessarily-linear ways in which black women writers have written about lineage; it sees *Beloved* and *Kindred* as instances of worrying the narrative line. Timothy Spaulding's *Re-Forming the Past* (2005) contends that *Kindred* and *Beloved*, among other recent African-American novels, are postmodern responses to slavery in

³ Neo-slave narratives are literary works which "specifically rework accounts of racialized slavery in the Atlantic World from the 15th to the 19th centuries" (Kennon 2017). The term "neoslave narrative" originated with literary critic Bernard W. Bell in 1987 and was carried forward by Elizabeth Beaulieu and Ashraf H.D. Rushdy in their book-length studies (both of 1999) of what, with a slight spelling change, they termed "neo-slave narratives." Angelyn Mitchell (2005) has argued persuasively for the application of the term "liberatory narrative" to the subgroup of these novels written by black women from a feminist perspective, but not to their peer novels written by black men. Meanwhile, Timothy Spaulding (2005) refers to the entire group of novels as "postmodern slave narratives."

As Mitchell rightly points out, "liberatory narrative" highlights the fact that the female-authored novels in this group stress the movement toward liberation rather than the protagonists' experiences of slavery *per se*. But I've chosen to term the five novels that are my focus here "black feminist novels of slavery" or "black feminist slave novels," not because their authors are black women who explicitly or implicitly identify as feminists (Gayl Jones, in particular, might contest the accuracy of any such label) but because I contend that this group of novels would not exist in their published form without the prior existence of a specifically *black feminist* (as opposed to "merely" black, or "merely" feminist) movement. At other times, when referring to a larger group of revisionist novels of slavery that includes works by male authors, I've used the term "neo-slave narratives" in acknowledgment of the scholarly tradition that has grown up around this phrase.

their refusal to accept time as a purely chronological progression. And DoVeanna Fulton's *Speaking Power* (2006), whose fifth chapter covers *Beloved*, *Dessa Rose* and *Kindred*, focuses on oral forms of resistance among slave women.

Though all of these studies demonstrate at least a general awareness of the political context in which their chosen texts were written and first read, and Fulton's subtitle ("Black Feminist Orality in Women's Narratives of Slavery") invokes black feminism in particular, none of them treat their subject novels as literary responses to the movement politics of the '50s and '60s. Three other extant studies do, however, and each of them covers at least one of the five novels in my cluster. Melissa Walker's *Down From the Mountaintop: Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement* (1991) briefly treats *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*. Madhu Dubey's *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994) deeply engages with the implications of black cultural nationalism for black women's literature and considers *Corregidora* in that context, while Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) situates the neo-slave narratives of the 1970s and '80s as responses to revisionist New Left historical scholarship on slavery that itself arose in response to the civil rights and Black Power movements; it includes a chapter on *Dessa Rose*.⁴

None of these studies, interestingly, has treated *Sally Hemings*, although Rushdy has written about it separately in a 1994 article.⁵ Like *Kindred* and *Dessa Rose*, *Sally Hemings* is a

⁴ Walker's book, in my view, suffers from its decision to exclude the Black Power movement from its political lens, since *Dessa Rose* in particular was a conscious response by Sherley Anne Williams to the restrictive prescriptions of black nationalism's aesthetic police (see Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives*, 137). Dubey's and Rushdy's books each have excellent contextualizing chapters that delineate the ripple effects of recent black politics on the intellectual landscapes of the post-nationalist '70s and the Reagan '80s into which *Corregidora* and *Dessa Rose* respectively emerged; their work has been particularly valuable to my own analysis.

⁵ Rushdy's "I Write in Tongues": The Supplement of Voice in Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings*" appeared in *Contemporary Literature* in 1994. He has likewise written separately

“genre” novel—yet, as the above discussion of previous scholarship makes clear, both *Kindred* and *Dessa Rose* have leapt the boundaries of their genres, science fiction and historical fiction, to become the subjects of frequent scholarly analysis in a way that *Sally Hemings*, as yet, has not.⁶ The novel has nevertheless been meaningfully analyzed by several major scholars of black women’s literature, including Barbara Christian and Ann duCille, whose work I have drawn upon here.

Ironically enough, however, given black feminists’ vocal insistence on the indivisibility of a black female identity and these five novelists’ implicit insistence on the same truth, none of the above-mentioned texts have examined these five novels as specific responses to black feminism itself—not the civil rights movement or Black Power only, not the women’s movement only, but black feminism indivisible, as practiced by individual women and groups of women who came together for its sake, like the National Black Feminist Organization and the Combahee River Collective. Furthermore, no previous work, to my knowledge, has argued for the centrality, even the originary nature, of black women’s contributions to the identity politics-centered narrative that has come to be the guiding one for the entire American left. This centrality has been no less potent for being, often, an unacknowledged, almost secret centrality. Part of my intent in this thesis is to help make it a less secret, better acknowledged centrality—to give the

about *Corregidora*, *Kindred* and *Beloved*, making him the only scholar who has, to my knowledge, analyzed all five of my chosen texts.

⁶ Barbara Chase-Riboud’s status as a longtime expatriate writer based in France may have something to do with this, as may the early attacks on *Sally Hemings* by a group of establishment historians who rejected as absurd the novel’s central premise of a sexual and emotional relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Hemings - a premise, however, that was validated in the late 1990s by DNA testing of Jefferson and Hemings’ descendants. For literary analysis that takes in these historians’ attacks and responses to the DNA tests, see the referenced works of Mia Bay, Laura Dawkins, Ann duCille (“Where in the World is William Wells Brown?”), and Cherise Pollard.

work of black women in crafting the leading narrative of the American left the enormous credit that it is due, and due most of all from the rest of the left itself.

The first chapter of this thesis begins by sketching the mood of resurgent patriarchy that accompanied the turn to Black Power. It then relates this change of political mood to Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, exploring how each novel uses the institution of slavery in the Americas, with its gendered division of labor and systematic sexual abuse of female slaves, as a site from which to critique the effects of more contemporary sexism in the black community. My second chapter opens with a contextualization of the politics of motherhood within the Black Power and feminist movements of the late 1960s. I then examine how *Sally Hemings*, *Dessa Rose*, *Beloved*, *Corregidora*, and *Kindred* address motherhood in ways that problematize both black nationalist and feminist views by depicting female protagonists whose motherhood presents existential challenges to entrenched systems of power, or by considering black women protagonists who fail to mother in the biological sense, but arguably achieve some of the effects of procreation through art. In the final chapter, I first consider the ways in which Butler's and Chase-Riboud's depictions of interracial relationships in *Kindred* and *Sally Hemings* suggest that sexual relationships between black women and white men remain fraught with structural potential for exploitation, even in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I then analyze the means by which *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* explore the possibility for nonsexual alliances between black and white women—and suggest, as I argue, that such alliances work best when they are honest about their own limitations. I conclude by positing that just as these five novels problematize pre-intersectional movement politics by insisting upon black female experience as distinctive and indivisible, so too one can read the black feminist works of the 1970s–1980s (fiction and non-

fiction alike) as a central, even foundational, example of the “identity politics” narrative that would come to inform much of twenty-first century progressive discourse.

Chapter 1: The World the Slave Masters Made: Gender Relations and Sexism in the Black Community

The black nationalism of the late 1960s arose out of deep frustration with the slow pace and limited scope of the nonviolent civil rights movement – a frustration shared by both sexes (Evans 88-98, Giddings 292-297, Echols 36-37). Yet the faces and voices of the most prominent spokespeople for this new direction in the movement – whether those of the Black Panthers in street activism or of the Black Arts Movement in the cultural realm – were noticeably more male, and more masculinist, than in the earlier nonviolent era (*Black Macho* 5-12, Giddings 314-32). The rhetoric of figures like Eldridge Cleaver and Amiri Baraka seemed to posit the prototypical victim of American racism as a black man whose seizure of the power previously denied him would suffice to uplift the entire race; the goals of such spokesmen appeared to center on the adoption of the prerogatives of the same powerful white men who oppressed them, a process which would at best sideline black women and at worst exploit them. Though it often meant being tarred with the brush of association with the nascent women’s movement, which black women had their own reasons to view with skepticism, activists and writers like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Frances Beal and Mary Ann Weathers, UCLA philosophy professor Angela Davis, and the National Black Feminist Organization’s Michele Wallace publicly rebuked this masculinist posturing in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. By 1975, with a surge in the visibility and popularity of black women’s literature well under way, a perceptible, if not always explicit, critique of black nationalist patriarchal attitudes had spilled over into black women’s fiction as well.

This chapter first establishes the climate of politicized and racialized patriarchy to which *Corregidora*, *Dessa Rose*, and *Beloved* responded and examines how each novel deploys the institution of slavery in the Americas, which first systematized and legitimized the sexual abuse of female slaves, as a means of historicizing and critiquing the effects of the more contemporary sexism espoused by some black nationalist figures. *Corregidora*, by demonstrating the traumatic impact of patriarchal sexual codes on black women and men, suggests that rigid adherence to traditional gender roles tends to perpetuate the sexual abuses and violence of slavery in the present day and to damage the black community, undermining the stability of heterosexual relations and even threatening reproduction itself. *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*, appearing in the wake of a long series of public battles between black female and black male intellectuals during the 1970s and '80s, instead imagine the potential of empathetic and equitable love between black men and black women for the healing of racial trauma.

“Going Down That Low”: The Perils of Seeking Equality on White Men’s Terms

The legendary civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer was asked by a reporter in 1964 whether she was “seeking equality with the white man.” Hamer emphatically responded, “No. What would I look like fighting for equality with the white man? I don’t want to go down that low. I want the true democracy that’ll raise me *and* the white man up...raise America up” (King xxi, italics in original). Hamer’s comment gets at one of the central questions of the ‘60s liberation movements: should activists seek power on existing terms which people outside the movements would readily recognize as legitimate, or seek to redefine what power itself meant? The nationalist strand of the black liberation movement and the mainstream feminist movement each struggled with the temptation to accept a version of power that was defined and practiced

by white men with class privilege – a temptation made stronger by the fact that black men and white middle-class women each partially fit the profile of power already via their gender, race or class status. Black women, who generally fell outside the matrix of these privileges entirely, had little choice but to conceive of power, and power politics, differently from their would-be allies in these peer movements – which was a large part of what made a distinct black feminist movement necessary in the first place.

Internal tensions and power struggles will be part of any political movement, but the women’s movement of the late ‘60s was born out of a particularly difficult irony: female activists in civil rights organizations like SNCC and student-left organizations like Students for a Democratic Society, hemmed in by the limitations placed on them by the sexism of their male peers in these groups, were forced to the realization that women needed their own liberation movement. One clear fork in the road that led women away from the larger left of the period was “SNCC Position Paper, Nov. 1964,” a document in which Mary King and Casey Hayden, two white female SNCC workers, laid out a list of complaints about the patronizing and discriminatory treatment that women SNCC activists had received at the hands of their male compatriots. The derisive male reaction to the paper was exemplified by SNCC’s Stokely Carmichael, who responded to it with a knowingly self-incriminating private joke that became less funny as Carmichael repeated it in public settings: “The only position for women in SNCC is prone” (Evans 87).

As SNCC began to make the turn from nonviolence toward Black Power nationalism two years later, it became clear that for some black men in the movement, the overtly masculinist posturing of Black Power was not merely an aesthetic about-face after the strategically passive (some would say, feminized) tactics and imagery of nonviolence. Rather, a nationalist utopia,

some key figures suggested, would be one in which black men had access to the full range of political and sexual prerogatives that had been traditionally enjoyed by white men, while black women would be asked to support black men's political struggles unreservedly on the grounds that the benefits gained by black men would naturally trickle down to benefit black women and children (*Invisibility* 19) . One of the prerogatives in question was sexual access to white women, a historically loaded topic that wove questions of sexual freedom and sexual exploitation together so tightly that it was difficult to untangle them. In 1968's *Soul on Ice*, future Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver had written at length about being "indoctrinated, to see the white woman as more beautiful and desirable than my own black woman" (29) and of "[flying] into a rage at myself, at America, at white women, at the history that had placed those tensions of lust and desire in my chest" (30). Cleaver, by his own confession, had attempted to resolve those tensions through rape—first of black women who were locally available to him, as "practice"; then of white women, as an "insurrectionary act" (33). What were black women to make of being cast as secondhand victims in Cleaver's insurrectionary psychodrama?

Meanwhile, the impact of black nationalism was simultaneously being felt in the cultural world, where the Black Arts Movement had begun to channel Black Power's insurgent Afrocentricity into literary and visual art. The poet and playwright LeRoi Jones, who had founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School in 1965 as an artistic response to the assassination of Malcolm X, would soon change his name to Amiri Baraka and become perhaps the most visible face of the black nationalist movement in the arts, but his prescriptive ideas extended well beyond the realms of theater and literature. Writing in *Black World* in 1970, Baraka recommended patriarchy as the cure for the alienation he perceived between black men and women:

...we must erase the separateness by providing ourselves with healthy African identities. By embracing a value system that knows of no separation but only of the divine complement the black woman is for her man. For instance we do not believe in the “equality” of men and women. We cannot understand what the devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals...nature has not provided thus. (hooks 95)

Baraka here advocated for a brand of chauvinism that conflated “revolutionary” nationalism with the free exercise of black male sexual prerogatives and the corresponding retreat of black women into submissiveness.

It’s perhaps not surprising that *Black Fire*, the 1968 anthology and quintessential Black Arts Movement text that Baraka co-edited with Larry Neal, counted only eight women among its eighty-one contributors; the 1970 publication of Toni Cade’s *The Black Woman*, now remembered as the first collection of specifically black feminist writings, can also be seen as a corrective to *Black Fire* in its inclusion of black women’s poetry and fiction alongside polemical essays. In 1971, another key anthology edited by Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic*, sought to append contemporary black nationalist writers to a much longer black literary tradition that included W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes and Alain Locke. In the process, however, Gayle’s posse of younger, mostly male writers laid down a set of rigid, yet often self-contradictory, rules for defining and policing notions of revolutionary merit in the art, politics and lives of black people. This purportedly new aesthetic managed to maintain patriarchal continuity even as it strove to uproot racist oppression, with the result that in Gayle’s pages, “the black woman, as an offensive reminder of the slave past, was often represented as an obstacle between black men and their revolutionary future” (Dubey 19).

Meanwhile, black women who might otherwise have found common cause with the nascent women's movement were put off by the racial attitudes of many of its white adherents, which ranged from ignorance and complacency about the unique problems faced by black women to an expedient willingness to exploit black women's participation for political gain. As Paula Giddings wrote later,

[The women's movement's] rise coincided with the deterioration of the Black movement. By the early seventies, assassination, subversion by domestic intelligence, and internal squabbles had left virtually every Black group in disarray. Now it appeared that the predominantly White women's movement was going to reap the benefits that the Black women [in these movements] had sown. (308)

Toni Morrison, in a 1971 *New York Times* article on the attitudes of black women toward the women's movement, suggested that "reaping the benefits" in such a way would likely mean restricting black activists, especially women, to a laboring political underclass :

Too many movements and organizations have made deliberate overtures to enroll Blacks and have ended up by rolling them. [Blacks] don't want to be used again to help somebody gain power – a power that is carefully kept out of their hands. ("How" par. 6)

Distrustful of the uses to which they might be put by the women's movement, many black female activists felt caught between political loyalty to their male counterparts and festering discontent with the sexism to which black nationalism had given new visibility and sanction.

The resulting conflict would play itself out for the rest of the '70s and beyond, not only in an increasingly harassed and fragmented black liberation movement but in the other arenas where black nationalist ideas were now being expressed, including the arts, the popular media and academia. Michele Wallace, writing of history's disciplinary imperative to "[take] into

account contradictory voices and interpretations,” observes that “literature had always probably been better at doing this than ‘history,’ which generally likes to hold on to its status as a Master Narrative” (*Black Macho* xxxi). In the novels of slavery that black women authored in the 1970s and ‘80s, they would take advantage of the greater intimacy and flexibility afforded by literature to make their case for a model of black heterosexual relations that could acknowledge the patriarchal brutalities imposed on black women and men from slavery onward, and by acknowledging them begin to transcend them.

Patriarchy and Gender Roles in *Corregidora*

Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* is a devastating critique of patriarchal gender roles and practices that never announces itself as such; it shows rather than tells the damage that both white and black patriarchy have inflicted on black people’s intimate lives. *Corregidora* would not at first glance appear to be any kind of commentary on the politics of the 1960s; it takes place mostly in the late 1940s, though the novel’s chronology leaps over the political turbulence of the civil rights years to land, for the final two chapters, in June 1969. *Corregidora* scarcely acknowledges cultural currents outside the immediate world of its characters: at no point does its action leave the confines of small-town eastern Kentucky, a part of the South not closely associated in the popular mind with the activities of the civil rights movement. It’s also important to note here that Jones’ own relationship to the politics of her era is a determinedly unstraightforward one. Cheryl Wall has observed in Jones’ interviews her desire to ensure that her work is “less vulnerable to being read as if it mirrored social—or worse, the author’s personal—reality” (127). As Wall also suggests, Jones’ decision to give Ursa *Corregidora* Brazilian slaveholding forebears, rather than American ones, simultaneously sidesteps the U.S.’s

history of slavery and throws it into comparative relief. The novel's deep engagement with slavery in the Americas and its psychological effects, however, means that it already occupies a political space by definition, even as it refuses any stance that could be termed polemic.

Whether or not Jones would have accepted the categorization of *Corregidora* as a black feminist text, its central concerns about gender and sexual relations between black women and black men are inarguably ones that also preoccupied the contemporaneous black feminist movement. This chapter section demonstrates these overlaps between the driving concerns of Jones' novel and those of the black feminist activism that was simultaneously taking place in the world outside *Corregidora*'s pages. I argue that *Corregidora* implicitly critiques white and black patriarchy by showing the lingering echoes that the patriarchal legacy of slavemasters continues to carry for black women and men of the twentieth century.

Corregidora engages with questions of black masculinity and patriarchy in a modern context through its presentation of Ursa Corregidora's two husbands, Mutt and Tadpole. However, it should not be overlooked that the ur-patriarch in Ursa's life is a long-dead ancestor—the white nineteenth-century Brazilian slaveholder, Simon Corregidora, who incestuously fathered Ursa's grandmother and mother. Ursa's introduction of him is as blunt and raw as the man himself:

Corregidora. Old man Corregidora, the Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger...He fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed. They did the fucking and had to bring him the money they made. My grandmama was his daughter, but he was fucking her too. She said when they did away with slavery down there they burned all the slavery papers so it would be like they never had it...(8-9)

Hatred of the patriarch Corregidora unites the three generations of Ursa's female elders who have filled her ears with tales of his wrongdoing from her childhood onwards and have shaped her understanding of all men, including the black men whom she eventually marries. Mutt, her first husband, is sexist in a classical, immediately recognizable mode: he disapproves of Ursa's career, is jealous and sexually possessive, and physically abuses Ursa in an attempt to maintain dominance over her. Tadpole, whom Ursa marries hard on the heels of the hysterectomy necessitated by Mutt's violence, initially appears less rigid and more progressive than Mutt; however, Tadpole's sexual expectations and behavior soon reveal that he too operates within a patriarchal framework. Mutt and Tadpole can be seen as competing sexual and political archetypes (an unreconstructed sexist and a reconstructed one) with parallels in the larger contemporary culture.

Through Mutt, *Corregidora* demonstrates the perils of unreconstructed patriarchalism. Ursa is singing in a local blues club, Happy's Café, at the time she marries him, and has begun to attract a following and establish a public presence in the community. But Mutt is uncomfortable with her career: "He didn't like for me to sing after we were married because he said that's why he married me so he could support me" (3). He polices Ursa professionally and sexually; it is Ursa's subjecting herself to the gaze of other men as she performs that spurs Mutt to the physical confrontation that ends in her fall down the club stairs, and her subsequent miscarriage and hysterectomy. Having heard all her life about the powerful white ancestor who literally owned and violently abused his women, Ursa has been well prepared to expect echoes of such behavior in all men, even this black man whom she freely chose to marry. If Mutt suggests the continuity between white patriarchal slaveholders and twentieth-century black men who unconsciously emulate white patriarchal models, he ironically undercuts one of the cherished aims of patriarchs

through the ages when he destroys his own wife's childbearing capacity. In the years immediately preceding *Corregidora's* publication, meanwhile, patriarchal elements within black nationalism were issuing renewed calls for women to adhere to traditional gender roles, eschew political leadership, and avoid a broadly defined group of behaviors that might undermine the attempts of black nationalist men to claim political and sexual perks that had historically been reserved for white men (hooks 94-95). Even if Jones did not intend a commentary on the real-world patriarchal dynamics of black nationalism, *Corregidora's* treatment of Mutt, whose determination to keep Ursa contained in a traditional feminine role results in her inability to bear children, hints at the ways in which patriarchal demands can turn in upon themselves, producing results opposite to those they sought.

In Tadpole, *Corregidora* offers a male character who reflects the ways in which patriarchy shapes the expectations even of more "enlightened" men. Tadpole, the owner of Happy's, is at first an attractive contrast to Mutt; he believes in Ursa's talent and understands that the responsibility for managing Mutt's paternalistic jealousy, and the sexual interest in Ursa that emanates from Happy's male patrons (which Mutt has exaggerated but not imagined), properly lies with the men themselves, not with Ursa. But as Ursa's chief employer, Tadpole also has a clear economic stake in his performer's career, and it soon becomes clear that as a man, he feels he has a sexual stake in her as well. Tadpole bars Mutt from Happy's, puts Ursa up at his own apartment so that she will not have to return to her rooms with Mutt, solicitously checks in on her as she convalesces, and, when she wonders aloud what men will make of her inability to bear children, tells her that "If I were the man it wouldn't matter" (6). This last remark, as Ursa quickly recognizes, is a double-edged sword, simultaneously denoting that Tadpole's interest in her transcends her reproductive abilities and that it is nonetheless sexual. Fearing that she is

leading Tadpole on, Ursa leaves his place to stay with a female neighbor, Cat, but her stay there subjects her to a new set of uncomfortable sexual questions. Cat's other guest and sometime charge, a local teenage girl named Jeffy, makes sexual advances on Ursa which Ursa forcefully rejects, and it soon becomes clear that Jeffy and Cat are themselves involved in a sexual relationship. A disturbed Ursa returns to Tadpole's place; in quick succession, she and Tadpole consummate their relationship, Tadpole asks her to marry him, and she passively accepts. But she can neither love him nor respond to him sexually as he wishes, and when Ursa takes a second job singing at another café (which Tadpole readily agrees to, saying "You your own woman" [85]), Tadpole cheats on Ursa with Vivian, the underaged singer he has hired as Ursa's substitute.

Mutt and Tadpole in this sense represent competing choices for heterosexual black women -- sexual choices certainly, and perhaps political ones too. Jones' depictions of them suggests the contradictions that exist within each choice. Mutt is traditionally masculine, sexist, and potentially violent, but he also struggles with suppressed insecurities and vulnerabilities, and is not incapable of assuming a "feminine" role from time to time. For instance, Mutt can assume the traditionally feminine role of sexual gatekeeper: Ursa, who finds herself frequently in the position of refusing or reluctantly submitting to sex with Tadpole, is haunted by the parallel memory or an endless night when she was in Tadpole's position, badly wanting sex with Mutt but being strategically and deliberately denied it (64). Tadpole, more thoughtful and considerate in his courtship style than Mutt and more capable of acknowledging women as actors in the world outside the domestic context, is nevertheless unable to give up the male prerogatives of sex on demand, extramarital sex and sex with malleable younger women who are not his peers or equals.

The analogous experiences in politics would have been all too fresh in the minds of many leftist women by the mid-70s, by which time their sexual choices sometimes seemed to be entirely hemmed in by political expectations and demands, including rhetoric from leftist men that dovetailed suspiciously with the paternalism and veiled misogyny of far more traditionalist commentators. Mary Ann Weathers, observing in 1969 that “Black men are still parroting the master’s prattle about male superiority,” exclaimed, “It is really disgusting to hear Black women talk about giving Black men their manhood – or allowing them to get it. This is degrading to other Black women and thoroughly insulting to Black men (or at least it should be)” (1). In her 1975 essay “Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood,” Michele Wallace wrote of the confusion and distress that nationalist prohibitions against black women’s “destruction of the black man’s masculinity” caused her as a young woman:

The message of the black movement was that I was being watched, on probation as a black woman, that any signs of aggressiveness, intelligence, or independence would mean I’d be denied even the one role still left open to me as ‘my man’s woman,’ keeper of house, children, and incense burners. I grew increasingly desperate about slipping up – they, black men, were threatening me with being deserted, with being *alone*. (*Invisibility* 20; italics in original)

It was easy for black women hearing such rhetoric to conclude that the same political zeitgeist that was freeing black men to act upon a wider range of sexual impulses was limiting their own sexual options to partners who required them to compromise ideologically, to lesbianism (the choice Ursa had rejected and that Wallace omitted from consideration entirely), or to long-term abstinence.

At the close of *Corregidora*, Ursa finally becomes, again, 'her man's woman' by reuniting with Mutt after twenty-two years; Jones' ambiguous presentation of this reunion, however, has left readers divided. When Mutt appears at the club where Ursa is singing, and tells her, "I want you to come back," her ambivalence remains: "I knew that I still hated him. Not as bad as then, not with that first feeling, but an after feeling, an aftertaste..." (183). She knows that "He'd demand different kinds of things. But there'd still be demands" (183). Yet she tells Mutt yes, without hesitation or qualification. Ursa, who is still visited by the unresolved stories of her foremothers, has recently been preoccupied with thoughts of her grandmother's escape to the United States from Simon Corregidora's plantation in Brazil:

Mama ran off cause he would've killed her. I don't know what she did. She never would tell me what she did...What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next? (172-3)

The question seems to be part of what drives Ursa to go home with Mutt, where she voluntarily performs on him the fellatio she had always refused him when they were married. She thinks about the way her act teeters between submission and revenge, between sexual service and the threat of castration, and she links the act to her grandmother's break with Corregidora, concluding that her foremother must have performed a similar act on her master: "A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin: 'I could kill you'" (184). Mutt climaxes, but he has felt the threat: "I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you," he tells Ursa three times, and three times she replies "Then you don't want me," before finally amending her response: "I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither" (185). The novel

concludes with the words “He held me tight” (185). Ursa’s reunion with Mutt thus marries tenderness with the threat of violence.

Scholars have disagreed about the implications this suggestion of violence carries for Ursa and Mutt’s future. Ashraf Rushdy agrees with Jones’ own interpretation of the novel’s conclusion as moving “toward a kind of redemption” (“Relate” 279). Elizabeth Beaulieu claims that “when she agrees to return to Mutt’s room with him, we are as confident as Ursa is in her independence” (117), which may itself be an overconfident reading. Ann duCille’s more nuanced and ambivalent analysis suggests that Ursa’s performance of fellatio on Mutt (if not the resumption of their larger relationship) contains elements of both “revenge and empowerment” on the one hand, and “female submission and surrender” on the other (“Phallus(ies)” 568). Cheryl Wall’s verdict is that “Ursa does not achieve transcendence. She makes a strategic peace with her history and asserts her selfhood in the privacy of the bed she once again shares with Mutt” (137).

A strictly feminist reading might hold that the reunion signals regression or surrender on Ursa’s part, or that she has claimed oral sex as an instrument of revenge in a manner that merely co-opts patriarchal patterns of sexual domination and violence. But it is also possible to read *Corregidora*’s ending as an acknowledgment of the legacy of sexual violence under slavery that has haunted sexual relations between black men and women—to say nothing of Ursa’s own sexual life—ever since, and to conclude that such an acknowledgment is a necessary precursor to the exorcising of such demons. If Ursa’s seizure of the power to inflict sexual harm on Mutt squares uneasily with feminist notions of sexual equality and empowerment, the parallel declarations of vulnerability between herself and Mutt may nevertheless represent a quasi-feminist brand of black solidarity.

Transcending Patriarchy?: *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*

Where *Corregidora* implicitly critiques white and black patriarchy by tracing the links between Simon Corregidora's abuse and the brutal effects that the patriarchal legacy of slavemasters continues to carry for black women and men of the twentieth century, *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* strive to present alternative models of male conduct and feeling by depicting men who are, if not self-consciously feminist, at least more emotionally attuned to the validity of women's experiences. Though *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* are not typically thought of as byproducts of the "gender wars" between black male and female intellectuals that took place in the late '70s and early '80s, including a backlash against *Corregidora* and other literary works by black women in this period, I submit that this historical context is nevertheless relevant to a consideration of these novels' male characters. After describing the main events of these "gender wars," this chapter considers Harker and Paul D, the respective male love interests of the protagonists of *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*. I argue that Paul D and Harker illustrate the kind of approach to relationships that can allow black men to meet the black women in their lives on a meaningfully equal footing, and that *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* suggest that the shared experience of racial trauma can deepen and enrich, rather than poison or warp, black heterosexual relationships. The novels offer a model of black male empowerment that uses black history, rather than white male precedent, as its touchstone—and, crucially, calls upon a version of black history that incorporates both female and male perspectives.

After *Corregidora*, no black feminist slave novel would take the sexual relationship between a black woman and a black man as a central subject until *Dessa Rose* eleven years later. There may be good reason for this: the intervening decade saw an escalation of intellectual

hostilities between black women writers who insisted on the need for stories centered on black female self-definition, and black male writers who saw in these women's work a disloyal airing of the race's dirty romantic and sexual laundry that doubled as a public attack on black men. Gayl Jones' first two novels themselves had provided early fodder for the debate. *Corregidora's* unflinching treatment of male-female sexual relations had been praised by no less a luminary than James Baldwin, who called it "the most brutally honest and painful revelation of what has occurred, and is occurring, in the souls of Black men and women."⁷ As a self-identified gay man, however, Baldwin's stake in such a project would necessarily have been different from those of heterosexual black male intellectuals, a number of whom were unnerved by Jones' raw depictions of coercive sexuality under slavery and its echoes in the twentieth century. Her second novel, 1976's *Eva's Man*, took the notion of sexual crime and punishment to even more disturbing lengths by pursuing *Corregidora's* fellatio/castration motif into the narrative terrain of literal castration—a development many reviewers found too pathological or politically indefensible to seriously engage with.⁸

⁷ This quotation appears on the back cover of the 1986 Beacon paperback edition of *Corregidora*. I have been unable to locate the original source in any of Baldwin's collected essays; but Baldwin published a great many book reviews during his lifetime, and the quotation may come from one that is as yet uncollected.

⁸ In her chapter on *Eva's Man* in *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*, Madhu Dubey excerpts a selection of negative critical judgments of the novel, not all of them by antifeminist reviewers. Loyle Hairston dismissed *Eva's Man* as "a study in male hostility" (90) that placated reactionaries by treating sexism at the expense of racism. Poet and essayist June Jordan identified an element of "sinister misinformation" in the novel and criticized its universe as one of "Black people limited to animal dynamics" (94). Addison Gayle, the chief popularizer of the Black Aesthetic, accused Jones of writing the novel as "a personal release from pain, a private catharsis, which could be achieved only when the Black man had been rendered impotent" (101).

The audience for Jones' novels was nevertheless limited in comparison with that of Ntozake Shange, a 28-year-old playwright whose choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* debuted on Broadway in 1976 after becoming a grass-roots phenomenon in California and New York. The production promptly drew fire from male critics who claimed that it elevated an idealized black sisterhood at the expense of black men, whom, they alleged, the production cast into a shadow world of negative stereotypes.⁹ In 1978 another young writer, 28-year-old Michele Wallace, entered the national intellectual fray with *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, a pair of extended essays in book form that looked back on the Black Power movement in feminist anger and resentment. The controversy generated by Shange's and Wallace's work was such that the academic journal *The Black Scholar* devoted an entire issue to it in 1979, the most notorious outcome of which was sociologist Robert Staples' article "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists." In this rejoinder, Staples redirected much of the blame for black men's sexist behavior onto racism and capitalism, implied that Shange's and Wallace's middle-class backgrounds made them unfit spokeswomen for the race, and offered up the retaliatory stereotype of a bitter and undesirable black female intellectual abandoned by black men in favor of her more "feminine" white and black sisters. The hurt, anger and defensiveness aroused by

⁹ Duchess Harris cites, for instance, the *Guardian*'s John Cunningham, "who claimed that people like Shange, Michele Wallace, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou all owed their fame and fortune to Black men, since it was through bashing men that these authors gained the reading public's attention" (43); Ishmael Reed, "who suggested that Black feminists were conspiring behind Black men's backs with White conservatives in order to further marginalize and demonize Black men" (43); and Robert Staples, who "justified the behavior of Black men that Shange...criticized by arguing that Black men were socialized to behave in such a manner by the country's capitalist system," and that "Black men did not have the institutional power to oppress Black women except in two areas, the church and the family, as if either of these institutions is a negligible aspect of Black women's lives" (43-44).

these vitriolic exchanges lingered with their participants for years afterward, and was often palpable in their later writings.¹⁰ Though it was not necessarily apparent in the heat of the moment, such exchanges also testified to the deep desires for agency, authority and justice that the black liberation and feminist movements had aroused in their constituent communities, and to the emotional stake those communities now felt themselves to have in a newly transformed, but still fiercely contested, American cultural landscape.

The debate over black male sexism and literary representation was reignited three years later with the publication of Alice Walker's third novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), whose heroine Celie suffers sexual abuse as a child and domestic abuse in her marriage. A number of black male critics, including journalist Courtland Milloy, PBS television host Tony Brown, film director Spike Lee, and novelist Ishmael Reed, attacked Walker, the novel and its 1985 film adaptation for foregrounding abusive black male characters at the expense of decent ones and thereby exploiting white appetites for such stereotypes¹¹. The furor over the novel and movie

¹⁰ In addition to Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing* and Walker's *The Same River Twice*, both of which I read as attempts to process the intense emotions generated by the "gender wars," Michele Wallace wrote a new introduction for the 1999 edition of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, "How I Saw It Then, How I See it Now," that suggested the deep impact that the controversy surrounding *Black Macho* had had on her emotional outlook and personal life.

¹¹ Milloy, who had also been a vocal critic of Shange's *for colored girls*, complained that he "got tired a long time ago of white men publishing books by black women about how screwed up black men are. Those same white men get intimidated when a black man writes a book saying that the real problem is the white man" (Harris 50). Tony Brown described Steven Spielberg's film version of *The Color Purple* as "the most racist depiction of black men since *The Birth of a Nation* and the most anti-Black family film of the modern film era" (Bobo par. 1). Spike Lee contrasted his own contemporaneous film, *She's Gotta Have It*, with Spielberg's, suggesting that the latter had been "done with hate" and that the Mister character was a "one-note animal." Ishmael Reed called *The Color Purple* "a Nazi conspiracy," and suggested that both the novel and the film owed their cultural prominence to their negative portrayals of black men (Bond par. 4). Less audible in the debate was the fact that some black women critics also took issue with the novel and film; see, for instance, Michele Wallace's "Blues for Mr. Spielberg" (in *Invisibility Blues*, 67-76) and Trudier Harris' 1994 article "On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes and Silence."

was so intense that Walker later published an entire book, *The Same River Twice*, in response to it. By the mid-'80s, the battles within the black intellectual community over these issues had covered the same ground so repeatedly, and had culminated in such a stalemate, that Ishmael Reed sought to defuse, or perhaps squelch, the debate with satire in his 1986 novel *Reckless Eyeballing*. Hardly a disinterested observer, Reed (whose own sexism had come under frequent fire from black women in previous years) directed his most mocking commentary at the theory and practice of black female artistic production.

It was into this cultural climate that *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* emerged in the late 1980s, so it is perhaps not coincidental that both novels feature central male characters, the love interests (among other things) for their female protagonists, whom no reasonable reader could accuse of representing their race or gender negatively. Even more interestingly, *Dessa Rose*'s Harker and *Beloved*'s Paul D are not presented as rarefied exceptions to an inauspicious male norm, but as second chances at love after the novels' heroines, Dessa and Sethe, have lost similarly good husbands to the brutal vagaries of the slave system. In *Dessa Rose*, Dessa's husband Kaine is murdered after he retaliates against the slavemaster who destroyed his prized banjo; Dessa herself, in turn, is sold to the coffle as punishment for her attempt to avenge Kaine. In *Beloved*, Sethe's husband Halle goes mad after helplessly witnessing the brutal whipping and sexual humiliation of his pregnant wife. Both Kaine and Halle are treated with unequivocal respect by their creators. "Love suffused her; she had to touch him or smile" is the way Williams describes Dessa's feelings for Kaine. Halle Suggs, in *Beloved*, is "the nicest" (23) of the small circle of slave men at the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky, themselves a uniformly decent group; moreover, Halle has amply demonstrated the depth of his family loyalty by working Sundays for five years in order to buy his mother Baby Suggs' freedom.

Kaine and Halle's successors, Paul D and Harker, are likewise kind, intelligent, morally attractive men. What makes Paul D and Harker's circumstances different from those of their predecessors is that they enter Sethe and Dessa's lives at a point when the heroines have been shaped, and in both cases literally scarred, by their earlier traumas and losses. Paul D and Harker must exercise their faculties of patience, empathy and understanding to meet Sethe and Dessa on the less innocent plane of life that they now inhabit. Both men meet this challenge, albeit with more significant obstacles to overcome in Paul D's case, since the latter must incorporate himself into a well-established household that includes not only human tensions and frictions, but the presence of a troublemaking spirit that seems to represent Sethe's dead daughter. In *Dessa Rose*, Harker, "whom she hadn't known" (86) previously, joins with Nathan and Cully, two of her companions from the coffle, to free Dessa from prison. Later, he tells her why:

I always did admire the way you-all [the slaves from the coffle] was about each other.

That's why I went back with them to get you. At first I thought you was [Nathan's] woman, some kind of relation to him or Cully, they talked about you so. And I admired it even more when I found out you wasn't. (188)

Harker walks ahead of Dessa as the four of them escape on foot, "holding back low branches and vines, his voice whispering the presence of obstacles on the path so she could avoid them" (87).

Later, he supports the pregnant Dessa on horseback, controlling the horse that rears when Dessa's water breaks; finally he helps her through the birth itself. After some time on Rufel Sutton's farm, Harker tells Dessa, "I'm glad you ain't liking on Nathan cause I think you great myself," causing her to marvel, "...he said it like he knew just the way I wanted to be great and so was qualified to judge" (189).

In *Beloved*, Morrison introduces Paul D as a man whom women of all ages respond to – not sexually, but emotionally:

Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. There was something blessed in his manner. Women saw him and wanted to weep... Strong women and wise saw him and told him things they only told each other... Young girls sidled up to him to confess...(17)

Reappearing in Sethe's life after 18 years, he immediately banishes the haint – the spirit who will later take human form as Beloved – that has been plaguing Sethe's household. With their shared history to build upon, it isn't long before Paul D and Sethe become lovers, and though his presence in the household alienates Sethe's daughter Denver, his maturity, stability, good sense and decency are a boon to Sethe in the period before Beloved's return. Sensing him as a threat to her own bond with Sethe, Beloved entraps Paul D in an unhappy seduction, and Sethe banishes him in favor of Beloved, but after the disastrous denouement of that relationship, which ends with a near-reenactment of Sethe's original murder, Beloved vanishes and Paul D is restored to his place, seemingly the harbinger of a new era of peace in the life of Sethe's family and community.

A critical trait that unites Harker and Paul D is their response to Dessa and Sethe's scars, the physical manifestations of their sufferings under slavery. Before they first make love, Harker tells Dessa, "You know I know how they whipped you...It ain't impaired you none at all. It only increase your value" (191). And Morrison describes Paul D and Sethe's initial lovemaking thus:

Behind her, bending down, his body an arc of kindness, he held her breasts in the palms of his hands. He rubbed his cheek on her back and learned that way her sorrow, the roots

of it; its wide trunk and intricate branches....And when the top of her dress was around her hips and he saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, "Aw, Lord, girl." And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. What she knew was that the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands.

(17-18)

Both Harker and Paul D understand their lovers' scars as the physical manifestation of the emotions the women's experiences provoked in them. Those emotions, properly tapped, constitute a resource that makes Dessa and Sethe more desirable to them, rather than less.

Williams and Morrison suggest not only that such recognitions of shared trauma and common humanity across gender can help heal individuals, but that these private relationships can feed back into larger political struggles, since they generate, in Farah Jasmine Griffin's words, "acts of nurturing and sustenance that become resources for resistance" (529). To black male readers, *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* provide an illustration of the kind of thought and effort that are likely to be necessary to meet the black women in their lives on terms of mutual respect, understanding and equity. In his analysis of romance in the post-1960s neo-slave narratives, including *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*, Angelo Rich Robinson concludes, "It is not coincidental that this revisitation and reclamation of black romance would emerge at a time when African Americans were calling for equal rights and complete recognition of their humanity during the Civil Rights Movement" (45). It's equally true that a continuing dialogue on the evergreen subject of love between oppressed people can constitute a form of intellectual activism in reactionary eras like the Reagan years, which appeared so inhospitable to progressive activism

on an institutional level. Williams and Morrison, in response to both the black community's ongoing intellectual battle of the sexes and the backlash of the (white, male) power structure, provided support for exactly that form of intellectual struggle.

Chapter 2: Fightsoldiers for Whose Revolution?: The Political Uses of Black Motherhood

Any discussion of male-female relations in the black community will sooner or later lead to a consideration of the most obvious fruit of heterosexual relationship: childbirth and parenthood. The slave system, with its reduction of black women to the status of breeders, its commodification-at-birth of black children as future slave workers with monetary value, and its ruthless indifference to parent-child bonds that stood in the way of slavery's economic transactions, made motherhood a frequently excruciating experience for slave women. Bell hooks states flatly that "Breeding was oppressive to all fertile black slave women" (4). So central are these questions of parental trauma to the slave experience of women as mothers and daughters, and men as fathers and sons, that like the original slave narratives of the nineteenth century, the black feminist slave novels of the '70s and '80s could hardly avoid grappling with them. But the black nationalist and feminist movements had each added new anxieties and a new urgency to the consideration of black women as mothers. Black Power's male leaders implied that the revolutionary potential of black motherhood in fact outstripped black women's capacity for concrete leadership within the movement (Dubey 18-19). Meanwhile, the feminist movement's demand that women be taken seriously in roles *outside* motherhood sometimes led it to discount the political power of motherhood as such¹² — and to ignore the fact that black

¹² Marxist feminists like Shulamith Firestone argued that women's reproductive ability had been used to restrict them to an oppressed laboring class within the family -- which, as "the vinculum through which the psychology of power can always be smuggled," needed to be eliminated if the "tapeworm of exploitation" were ever to be destroyed (12). Some radical feminists, such as

mothers had never at any time enjoyed that place on the pedestal of cultural valorization from which white women were now trying to step down.

The echoes of these political conundra for black women can be seen in the work of Jones, Butler, Chase-Riboud, Williams and Morrison. Black nationalism's backhanded nod to the power of motherhood had located its revolutionary potential chiefly in the production of future ideologues and activists, while the women's movement sought to make motherhood less singular and exclusive as a source of female power. The black feminist writers discussed here explore ideas about motherhood and power that fit into neither view. This chapter opens with a contextualization of the politics of motherhood within the Black Power and feminist movements of the 1960s, then examines how *Sally Hemings*, *Dessa Rose*, *Beloved*, *Corregidora*, and *Kindred* address motherhood in ways that problematize both black nationalist and feminist views. I argue that the novels do this by depicting female protagonists whose motherhood poses fundamental threats to entrenched systems of power, and by considering black women protagonists who do not bear biological children, but nevertheless make a contribution to posterity for themselves and their race through their art.

Motherhood Messages in the Black Power and Feminist Movements

With Black Power came a new rhetorical insistence, not heard during the earlier incarnations of the civil rights movement, that the most important role black women could have henceforward was as childbearers, as producers of "footsoldiers for the revolution." In *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver had paid dubious homage to the black woman as "the womb that nurtured

the members of the Cell 16 collective, argued that motherhood implied "[in]sufficient maturity and autonomy" in women who chose it (Echols 161).

Toussaint L'Ouverture, that warmed Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey" (240). "From her womb have come the revolutionary warriors of our time," concurred sociologist Robert Staples (Dubey 18-19). Madhu Dubey, in juxtaposing these similarly worded paeans to the revolutionary potential of black women's wombs, makes it clear that by the early '70s, such rhetoric had become currency among activists and academics alike.

It could not have been accidental that this rhetoric arose at the same moment when white feminists were focused on securing the right to abortion (i.e., the right to opt out of motherhood) through repeal of the state and federal laws that outlawed it. Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman elected to Congress, fielded complaints from black constituents about government plots to reduce the number of black babies being born as she collaborated with the National Abortion Rights Action League in the effort to repeal New York's abortion law. Though Chisholm derided such notions as "male rhetoric, for male ears" (Guy-Sheftall 391), they were the tip of a larger iceberg. Stephanie Athey points out that "Accusations of genocide appeared regularly in letters to the black press and in the publications of black nationalist organizations" in this period, and that at the First National Conference on Black Power, held in 1967, the delegates passed a resolution against birth control as a genocidal practice (179).¹³

The twofold tactical usefulness for male Black Power leaders of such a glorification of childbearing was obvious: black women who took it seriously could be simultaneously deterred from seeking leadership roles in the movement and from joining forces with the feminist movement. The women's movement's emphasis on the oppressiveness of mandatory motherhood, meanwhile, led it to champion access to birth control and abortion as a universal

¹³ Athey cites the Black Panther Party as the major exception to this tendency, noting that the Panthers were "the only nationalist organization to speak in support of contraceptives and free abortions on demand" (179).

good in a manner that discounted the very real American history of attempted control of the black population through slave breeding, the early twentieth-century eugenics movement, and coercive sterilization. And feminist complaints about alienation among middle-class suburban mothers struck many black working-class mothers as the height of first-world privilege.¹⁴

Writing in *The Black Scholar* in 1970, Linda La Rue asked, “Is there any logical comparison between the oppression of the black woman on welfare who has difficulty feeding her children and the discontent of the suburban mother who has the luxury to protest the washing of the dishes on which her family’s full meal was consumed?” (36).

The presentation of motherhood in the black feminist slave novels can be read as a reminder of the age-old traumas that black mothers have endured in the United States, as scholars such as DoVeanna Fulton, Angelyn Mitchell, Venetria Patton, Cheryl Wall and Ashraf Rushdy have noted. However, I argue that these novels’ explorations of the plight of slave mothers are also responses to the messages (or silences) about black motherhood emanating from the supposedly enlightened American left, as represented by the Black Power and feminist movements, in the years just prior to the novels’ publication. Leftist political rhetoric of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, whether encouraging procreation as a substitute for direct activism or

¹⁴ The mainstream women’s movement’s narrow focus on legalizing abortion, the chief reproductive right to which white middle-class women lacked access, often meant that it overlooked the broader spectrum of reproductive abuses that plagued women of color, including coercive sterilization and being used as test subjects for new and imperfect birth control technologies like the birth control pill. Frances Beal’s 1969 essay “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” one of the key early texts of black feminism, condemned these abusive practices along with the lack of safe abortion access for women of color and poor women (171-4), and though Beal primarily blamed the U.S. government and capitalism for these policies, the comparative silence of mainstream feminist organizations on these points was telling. The long history of reproductive exploitation of women of color by the American medical establishment would not receive comprehensive book-length treatment until law professor Dorothy Roberts published *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* in 1997.

ignoring legitimate concerns about the U.S. government's efforts to control the fertility of poor women of color, were only the latest ways of dictating the terms on which black women should bear children—pressures which, “far from being new, [were themselves] reminiscent of slavery” (Dubey 19). The novels contest both the political appropriation of black motherhood and its devaluation. *Sally Hemings*, *Dessa Rose*, and *Beloved* do so by considering characters whose motherhood acts to subvert entrenched systems of power; *Corregidora* and *Kindred*, by contrast, comment skeptically on the political meanings assigned to black motherhood by depicting protagonists who fail to mother at all, instead choosing to leave a legacy in the form of art.

All-Too-Revolutionary Motherhood: *Sally Hemings*, *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*

Sally Hemings, *Dessa Rose*, and *Beloved* problematize politically self-interested valorizations and dismissals of black mothers by presenting black female protagonists whose motherhood directly challenges established structures of power. Sally Hemings, in life and in Barbara Chase-Riboud's namesake novel, offered a test case that put an extreme strain on the formulation of American citizenship as dependent upon birth to an unenslaved mother. *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*, meanwhile, present black women whose motherhood becomes the impetus for them to kill, thus rupturing such powerful systems of order as the law, the slave economy and (in *Beloved*'s case) the time-space continuum.

In *Sally Hemings*, black motherhood becomes a site for nation-challenging debates about both black and white citizenship. The six children that Hemings bore to Thomas Jefferson, before and during his tenure as president of the United States, were contested ground racially and, by extension, legally. In an 1815 letter to Francis C. Gray, whose text Chase-Riboud reproduces in the novel (17-18), Jefferson infamously committed to paper a mathematical

equation demonstrating how, over the course of several generations, blackness could be bred out of a slave's descendants; such children, he suggested, would meet a technical or legal definition of whiteness that ought to override any lingering cultural perception of them as black. Jefferson wrote:

But observe, that this does not re-establish freedom, which depends on the condition of the mother, the principle of the civil law, *partus sequitur ventrem*, being adopted here. But if...emancipated, [a child descended from a slave mother] becomes a free white man, and a citizen of the United States to all intents and purposes. So much for this trifle by way of correction. (Chase-Riboud 18)

Jefferson did not, then, seek to stretch his equation to include his own children, despite Sally Hemings' status as a mixed-race slave with more white blood than black and despite circumstantial evidence suggesting that Jefferson did, in fact, feel the kind of attachment to Hemings and their children that might have led to a wish to bend the law for their benefit.¹⁵ Slave status on Hemings' part thus overmatched the patriarchal power to bestow citizenship, even for its ultimate American representative, the president of the United States.

Ironically, in *Sally Hemings* it is a far more lowly white man and government representative who succeeds in bestowing citizenship where the president could not. The novel's turn-of-the-nineteenth-century action is interspersed with vignettes from the 1830s that center on the interactions of Sally, by that time Jefferson's middle-aged "widow," with another representative of the state: Nathan Langdon, a young census taker for the state of Virginia.

¹⁵ See, for instance, Fawn Brodie's 1974 biography *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* and Annette Gordon-Reed's 1998 study *Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy*, both of which helped to establish the factual likelihood of the Jefferson-Hemings relationship in the first place.

Sally's status as a black slave and mother of Jefferson's children, though well understood by her community, is so confounding to Langdon that at their first meeting, he is scarcely able to interact with her: "How did one address a creature who did not exist, who was the negation of everything he had been taught to believe?" (8). The problem of speech once overcome, however, Langdon's attitude toward Sally is sympathetic and gentlemanlike. Initially intending to protect Jefferson ("there was one thing he, Nathan Langdon, was determined that Thomas Jefferson would not be guilty of: the crime of miscegenation" [16]), he records Sally and her children, for census purposes, as white. He continues to visit her periodically well after he has confirmed the number and status of the people in her household, and gradually falls in love with her. Sally, for her part, has "impulsively" decided to regard Langdon as an individual "rather than as a representative of the class and power that governed her life," due to "a strength and warmth she sensed in him" (37). As Langdon repeatedly visits her, she begins to talk to him about a forbidden subject: the history of her internal life.

In the long afternoons of recounting her past, she had discovered that she had indeed had a life; a life full of deep and complex feelings. When he had questioned her, she had answered him in the only manner she was capable of: truthfully...A sort of conspiracy had developed between them. (38)

Her listener, for his part, is "awed at the intricacy of the information he was receiving. He was also well aware that it was compromising him both politically and emotionally" (39).

Sally's reaction to Langdon's conversations suggests that he is the first outsider she has met in decades, or perhaps ever, who considers her inner life more compelling than the external circumstances that have defined her in the eyes of the world; he cares less about the fact that she was Jefferson's mistress and the mother of his children than about what she, an individual of

intelligence and sensitivity, has made of the exceptional circumstances and experiences that shaped her. In the company of Langdon, she ceases to be defined by her scandalous maternal and sexual history and attains a status that was categorically withheld from slave women – that of full, complex humanity. For a time, the same aspirations that were fomented in a thousand late-twentieth century feminist consciousness-raising groups seem miraculously realizable for a formerly enslaved woman. But Sally subconsciously knows better all along – she knows that what might, in rare cases, be possible for a white woman, even a white mother, will finally be impossible for her because she is black. Langdon, in seeking to legally remake Sally as the white mother of white children, demonstrates that he, too, sees her blackness as an obstacle not merely to her happiness, but to his own ability to publicly realize an intimate relationship with her. Chase-Riboud’s project of retroactively endowing Hemings with something like a black feminist consciousness, though it can still succeed on its own terms, will thus require the sacrifice of Langdon as Hemings affirms her status as the black mother of black children.

Sally’s discovery of Langdon’s attempted erasure of her family’s black identity enrages her and leads her to end her relationship with him. Langdon, stung by her reaction, points out, “After all, by Thomas Jefferson’s definition, you are white”; Sally retorts, “By Thomas Jefferson’s life, I’m a slave” (50). Chase-Riboud thus juxtaposes the different reactions of two white men, both torn between feeling for Sally and obligations to the government they represent, with the racial quandary presented by Sally’s illegitimate children. The novel’s Jefferson, who loves Sally and has more power than almost any other white man to shape the American legal state to his will, refuses even to act locally, in the state of Virginia, to grant her or her children freedom during his lifetime—to give them a legal status equivalent to that of his white family. Langdon, whose feeling is not precisely for Sally herself but for an identity he projects onto her,

expresses the favoritism Jefferson withheld by attempting to legally render Sally and her children white, and thereby destroys the possibility of Sally's ever loving him.

Who, the novel asks, has the authority to define Sally and her children as black or white, and what would constitute the difference in the eyes of the state? Are black children who cannot be freed more politically valuable than free "white" children who are really black, and whose freedom is legally tenuous? These were questions with relevance for the black liberation movement also. If black women produce "soldiers for the revolution," what is to guarantee that those children will grow up into revolutionary actors, as opposed to adults who are indubitably black, but opposed or indifferent to revolution? If the revolution, however it is defined, succeeds, and black men and women come to occupy the halls of power, what then will blackness mean, and which children will be able to claim that status? Sally's case likewise contains a lesson for the white women's movement about the dangers of submerging race in a feminist political analysis: attempts to read black mothers as if they were white falsifies their political status, injecting alienation into their relations with whites and with their own psyches.

If Sally Hemings' experience of motherhood poses a challenge to the American state's self-contradictory notions of citizenship, *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* feature protagonists whose motherhood drives them to achieve freedom for themselves or their children through murder, rendering them outlaws, disruptors of the slave economy, and (in the case of Sethe) fracturers of chronological time and reversers of mortality. In *Dessa Rose*, Dessa's pregnancy is a vehicle through which Williams can explore a shifting series of issues connected to slavery, race relations and history. Upon learning of her pregnancy, Kaine, the baby's father, strongly urges Dessa to go the slave midwives for an abortifacient rather than bear a child who will immediately become property with the potential to enrich their master. "Maybe a place without no whites,

nigga can be free,” says Kaine; Dessa explains to the reader, “But [Kaine] don’t know where that is. He find it, he say we have us babies then” (50). Kaine’s recommendation is thus an attempt to head off at the pass the crisis of slave parenthood that will later provoke *Beloved*’s Sethe to kill her born daughter. But Dessa feels differently about the prospect of abortion, and Kaine is killed before they can resolve the question. It’s noteworthy nonetheless that once she is captured after the coffle uprising and the murder of five of the white coffle guards, Dessa has Sethe-like thoughts of killing her baby likewise, rather than surrendering it to the traders: “She would ask [fellow slave] Jemima for a knife...She would take the cord and loop it around the baby’s neck” (63).

As it turns out, Dessa’s pregnancy (which is well advanced by the time she joins the coffle) saves her life once she is captured, since the local authorities postpone her execution until she can be delivered of the valuable piece of future property she carries. But Dessa’s son Desmond, born into the provisional freedom of Rufel Sutton’s farm, does not only upend the slave system’s location of Dessa’s redeeming value in her reproductive power; the story of his birth and life also acts as a rejoinder to William Styron and the male rhetoricians of Black Power. Against William Styron’s compromised and compromising portrayal of Nat Turner in his Pulitzer Prize-winning 1968 novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*¹⁶, Williams presents the polar opposite: Dessa the coffle rebellion leader is Nat Turner as a pregnant female slave who turns the tables on the novel’s Styron figure, Adam Nehemiah, an author of slave-management manuals who would use her story for his own ends. Does the pregnant Dessa conform to the commandments of Black Power by birthing a soldier for the revolution? Ironically, she does –

¹⁶ Styron’s novel inspired sufficient outrage among the black American intelligentsia that a disciplinary cross-section of its members (who were nonetheless all male) soon joined forces to produce a rebuttal volume, *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968).

but the revolutionary she gives birth to is herself, and the birth process is only complete when Dessa has secured the right to control her story and thereby her legacy, a process in which Desmond provides a quietly revolutionary assist by acting as her scribe after Rufel's former slaves have reached the free territories of the west.

Beloved represents perhaps the most elemental confrontation between the values of an oppressive power structure and those of motherhood that can be found anywhere in American literature; it is a slave mother's enactment of Patrick Henry's revolutionary edict "Give me liberty or give me death." Against the collective agonies of two centuries of slave mothers who saw their children sold out of their lives or destroyed by the physical and mental violences of the slave system, *Beloved* positions a tenuously free slave mother who seizes the powers of life and death which an apparently indifferent God has abandoned, and attempts to negate the implacable claims of slavery by removing her own child from the world. The novel forces the reader to imagine a motherly love and protective drive so strong that they become inverted as infanticide, and then demonstrates the ways in which time, space and material reality themselves prove unable to contain an act of ultimate justice that is simultaneously the ultimate crime. *Beloved* illustrates in its starkest form the impossibility of the situation that has always confronted black mothers: in continuing one's line, the race, and oneself, with all the ideas of chronological progress that continuance implies, one also consigned one's children to a world that, even after Emancipation, still sought to destroy them, symbolically and often literally.

The impact of these destructive energies on black daughters has often been given short shrift compared with the better-publicized ordeals that have confronted black boys and men; it therefore fell to black feminists to correct this oversight. The founding literature of black feminism, both fictional and nonfictional, is filled with statements and restatements of what it

means to black girls and women to feel the world's contempt directed at them from childhood onwards, from Morrison's own *The Bluest Eye* to Audre Lorde's excavatory meditation on the origins of black female anger, "Eye to Eye," to bell hooks' essay "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood."¹⁷ It means something important that the infant Sethe protectively kills is a girl—the kind of slave child who could later be exploited both as beast of burden and reproductive machine, but who is nevertheless doubly devalued and doubly expendable in the eyes of the world. *Beloved* is not only a protest against the entrapment of black women, slave and free, by the contesting demands of black motherhood and the systems of racist patriarchy in which they bear children; it is an insistent statement that the life of a black girl is worth bringing the moral machinery of the universe to a halt for.

Beloved asserts the agency and transformative power of both Sethe and her daughter Beloved. Even though only one of them is a mother in the literal sense, Beloved certainly gives birth to a radically distinct new era in the life of Sethe's family and community when she appears to return from the dead. Beloved's power, in fact, turns regressive and destructive as the novel wears on; as Sethe's emotional dependency on Beloved intensifies, Sethe becomes infantilized while Beloved encroaches upon Sethe's adult privileges, including sexual relations with Sethe's lover Paul D. Beloved is a revolutionary of sorts, but surely not the kind that Stokely Carmichael or Robert Staples had in mind—and Sethe, who had willfully taken Beloved's life not long after she had bestowed it, has failed to stay in her appointed place as a mere conduit for new

¹⁷ In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the longing to fulfill white standards of feminine beauty becomes entangled in eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove's mind with the incest and pregnancy she endures at the hands of her father. Lorde's "Eye to Eye," included in her 1984 essay collection *Sister Outsider*, examines the anger that black women direct at one another as a phenomenon with origins in white hatred of black women and girls. Hooks' "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood," from her 1981 book *Ain't I a Woman*, traces the evolution of white animosity toward black women from the days of slavery to the present.

revolutionary generations. In the end, it is Denver, the daughter whom Sethe tried but failed to kill, who seeks the forgiveness and assistance from the world outside Sethe's family that finally restores balance between Sethe's household and the community.

In *Beloved*, then, motherhood unleashes powerful, unpredictable forces with the potential for transformations both redemptive and destructive. The novel suggests that attempts to bend motherhood to a male-directed political agenda, be it the continuance of slavery or the production of a new generation of ideologues, are foolhardy and doomed. And while Sethe's living daughter, Denver, does embody the hope of a succeeding generation, she is neither a slave, nor a mother, nor even particularly revolutionary. Like the most effective activists, she identifies a problem, applies herself to solving it with the modest means that are available to her, and ultimately achieves an important, if local, success.

Failure to Mother: *Corregidora* and *Kindred*

Both *Corregidora* and *Kindred* address the failure or absence of black motherhood: *Corregidora* by depicting a protagonist who is rendered infertile through physical violence, and *Kindred* through its conspicuous silence on the topic of motherhood. *Corregidora* explores how childlessness threatens Ursa's connection to her foremothers and race; *Kindred* shows Dana figuratively "mothering" (i.e. nurturing) Rufus Weylin and Alice Greenwood, yet leaves ambiguous Dana's feelings about both this involuntary process and her own potential biological motherhood. Additionally, both novels suggest that art may be equal to or superior to motherhood as a means for black women to realize their personal and racial identities¹⁸.

¹⁸ This sentiment was borne out in the lives of Jones and Butler, neither of whom became mothers themselves.

Corregidora interrogates the real and perceived value of black motherhood by presenting a protagonist who has been told all her life of the overwhelming importance of producing offspring as witnesses to the wrongs done to the family's women by the slavemaster

Corregidora:

My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama the part they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget. Even though they'd burned everything to play like it didn't never happen. (8-9)

The Corregidora women, then, are a stand-in for the entire race, and their struggle is part of the larger struggle to preserve black history – its injustices and the resistance to them – in the face of attempted erasure. Ursa's primary job in life is to continue this tradition: "What my mama always told me is Ursa, you got to make generations. Something I've always grown up with" (10). Now that this capacity has been ripped from her by the violence of her own mate—and perhaps by the depredations of the white medical establishment as well¹⁹ -- Ursa is forced to confront the question of what value she can provide to her new husband Tadpole, to her female ancestors, and to her race in the absence of childbearing ability.

One of the noteworthy aspects of *Kindred*, meanwhile, is Dana's *absence* of expressed interest in the question of her own potential future motherhood – a consideration that might be

¹⁹ Stephanie Athey notes: "The publicity surrounding coercive sterilization in the 1970s would make a contemporary reader think twice about the medical explanation for Ursa's hysterectomy. Given the number of women of color who were subjected to involuntary sterilization through hysterectomy and tubal ligation, Ursa's chilly 'the doctors said...my womb would have to come out' is not so simply an indictment of Mutt's battery; the hysterectomy is written over with many possible medical, social, and racial lines of interpretation" (178).

expected to be on the mind of a young woman newly married, as Dana is. But Dana the narrator, forcibly preoccupied though she is with issues of ancestral continuance, never raises the question of what impact her travels to Maryland slave society may be having on her feelings about twentieth-century motherhood.²⁰ Have her experiences in the American past foreclosed any desire for children of her own, or reinforced an existing desire not to have them?

Elizabeth Beaulieu and Angelyn Mitchell, among others, have made the case for the childless Dana as a mother *figure* who provides nurturance and education to both Rufus and Alice. Beaulieu notes that “Dana functions as a surrogate mother to Rufus, a role that ultimately allows her to give birth to herself and, more specifically, to the whole person she has become as a result of her experiences in antebellum Maryland” (120). She adds that “[Dana] also serves, in a lesser capacity, as a mother figure to Alice Greenwood” (127-8), whom she nurses back to health after a severe beating and advises – conflictedly, due to her own interest in the outcome – when Alice is faced with the prospect of becoming Rufus’ concubine. Nevertheless, “[Dana] excels in the patience, the self-sacrifice, and the love that the job demands” (131).

Be that as it may, it’s nonetheless interesting that Dana’s performance of motherhood in the novel remains a symbolic one and is never described or acknowledged as such by Dana herself. And Nadine Fligel vigorously rebuts Mitchell and Beaulieu’s interpretations, arguing that “Dana’s repeated gestures toward mothering are important because they are immediately aborted” (222). Butler’s crowning statement to this effect, says Fligel, is the novel’s conclusion: “Dana finds control, not in nurture...but in *murder* [italics Fligel’s]...She puts forward her own

²⁰ Before she weds Kevin in the knowledge that her aunt will not be enthusiastic about their interracial marriage, Dana does make the observation that “any children we have will be light” (111). But this is more a reference to Dana’s aunt’s feelings about Dana’s motherhood than Dana’s own.

inviolable definition of contemporary black womanhood by finally dismissing any effort to nurture” (223).

Butler’s silence on the question of Dana’s own potential motherhood may be an acknowledgment that even in 1976, black motherhood remained so fraught a prospect that a black woman of intelligence and political sensitivity might choose to duck the question of having children. Alternately – a real possibility for a writer as quietly radical as Butler – she may be refusing the narrative obligation to consider such questions as itself sexist. Why, after all, should Dana’s potentiality as a mother outstrip, or even compete in importance with, her desire to write? *Corregidora* and *Kindred* both pose the question of the value of black women as artists, for themselves and their audiences, in comparison to their traditional or racial value as mothers or what Patricia Hill Collins terms “othermothers” (female family and community members who act as substitute or supplemental mothers to black children) (192). Neither novel pretends that art will be an easy vocation for its protagonist or an automatic form of racial uplift; in fact, one thing that qualifies both Ursa and Dana for careers as artists is that they are driven to sing and write despite their full knowledge of the frustrations of their chosen paths. Almost the first thing that we learn about Ursa is that she “sang because it was something I had to do” (3), not because it is a means of independent financial support. Dana describes being “fully awake, fully alive” (53) as she works on her novel-in-progress in the early morning hours after coming home from her temp jobs, and it is their shared understanding of the urge to write that initially draws Dana and Kevin together: having heard from a fellow temp worker that she writes, Kevin presses her to talk about it, while Dana experiences “a terrible mix of envy and frustration” (53) upon hearing that Kevin has just sold his first book.

Ursa is a compelling performer to whom her listeners respond. “Something powerful about you. Something real powerful,” (93) says one club booker. Cat, who is not exactly a friend of Ursa’s, nonetheless reassures her that her singing has only deepened after her hysterectomy: “If I hadn’t heard you before, I wouldn’t notice anything. I’d still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful too, but you sound like you been through more now” (44). Ursa’s mother, however, disapproves of her career in the blues: “Songs are devils. It’s your own destruction you’re singing. The voice is a devil,” she tells Ursa (53). Ursa nevertheless sees her singing as a means of continuing her foremothers’ testimony about Corregidora: “But still I’ll sing as you talked it, your voice humming, sing about the Portuguese who fingered your genitals...Slapped you across the cunt till it was bluer than black” (53-54). Ursa’s mother asks, “Where did you get those songs?” and Ursa replies, “I got them from you” – that is, her mother’s tales of Corregidora have been absorbed into Ursa’s songwriting and singing. Ursa concludes ambiguously,

Then let me give witness the only way I can. I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it’s time to give witness, I’ll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I’ll stain their hands. (54)

The site of Simon Corregidora’s abuses was his Brazilian coffee plantation. Though she can no longer produce literal fetuses herself, Ursa retains visions of her foremothers’ fetuses – so shaped by Corregidora’s demands that, like the other products of their labor, they became babies who took the color of coffee. Out of the feeling that this knowledge produces in her, Ursa can write and sing music that will stand as an accusation of her ancestors – that will “stain their hands” for all to see.

After being forced to leave Kevin in the past during one of her visits to Maryland, Dana tries and fails to write about what has happened – “made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away. Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it” (116). If the enormity of slavery experienced through time travel seems to defy being written about, Dana’s experience nevertheless includes brushes with already-published novels that seem to offer themselves up as commentary. At one point Dana attempts to improve Rufus’ poor reading skills by guiding him through Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Dana says of the book, “I had read it when I was little, and I could remember not really liking it, but not quite being able to put it down. Crusoe had, after all, been on a slave-trading voyage when he was shipwrecked” (86-87). In revisiting the book, however, she feels differently: “I began to get into *Robinson Crusoe*. As a kind of castaway myself, I was happy to escape into the fictional world of someone else’s trouble” (87). Later, back in 1976 without Kevin, Dana seeks out other reading material to shed light on her predicament: “I read books about slavery, fiction and nonfiction. I read everything I had in the house that was even distantly related to the subject – even *Gone With the Wind*, or part of it. But its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage was more than I could stand” (116). Despite her earlier failures, Dana does not give up hope that she will eventually be able to write about her experiences: after one of her last visits to Maryland, “I was looking over some journal pages I had managed to bring home in my bag, wondering whether I could weave them into a story” (244) – a possibility that seems all the more compelling given the limitations of perspective and morality that Dana has already encountered in Daniel Defoe’s and Margaret Mitchell’s literary treatment of slavery.

Like Gayl Jones, Butler suggests that her protagonist may indeed be able to correct the historical record of her race through the stories she tells. And unsurprisingly, given Jones’ and

Butler's commitment to their own vocation, both of their novels suggest that art may be at least as valid as motherhood as a means for black women to realize their personal and racial identities, despite the trials of an artist's life. The black women novelists of the '70s and '80s clearly concurred, deploying their art as a form of activism that paralleled the polemical writings of black feminist activists like Michele Wallace and the women of the Combahee River Collective. Convinced by both historical and recent events that neither black men nor white allies could be relied upon to tell black women's stories accurately, they insisted upon the indivisibility of black womanhood as an identity around which stories could and must be told, and stepped into a longstanding literary breach to tell such stories themselves.

Chapter 3: Unsteady Alliances: Black-White Relationships in the Post-Movement Era

With the exception of *Corregidora*, whose only white character is the paradigmatically abusive and incestuous slavemaster in Ursa's ancestral flashbacks, each of these novels examines the relationship between an enslaved or formerly enslaved black female protagonist and a white man or woman who seems to have the potential to relate to the protagonist on a footing of mutually acknowledged humanity, respect, and something akin to equality. In *Kindred* and *Sally Hemings*, these are committed sexual relationships with white men, while in *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* they are alliances with white women. In considering the two types of interracial relationships that black women were most likely to have forged in the tumult of movement politics – whether as activists or beneficiaries of the new social climate created by movement activism – Butler, Chase-Riboud, Williams and Morrison are commenting not merely on the possibilities for interracial alliances in the slavery era, but on those in their own day. Their collective attitude is one of hope tempered by realism, and in all cases their forecast for the

success of such alliances is more optimistic in cases where the white participants are willing to do the necessary work of understanding and resisting their own privilege over the long term.

In this chapter, I first examine the interracial relationships (both sexual and otherwise) portrayed in *Kindred* and *Sally Hemings*. I argue that these portrayals suggest that sexual relationships between black women and white men remain fraught with structural potential for exploitation, even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I then consider *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*, which present white female characters who offer critical assistance to protagonists Dessa and Sethe when the latter two are pregnant fugitive slaves. These two novels explore the short- and long-term possibilities for alliances between black and white women—and suggest, I argue, that such alliances work best when they are not weighed down with the baggage of romantic expectations about sisterhood.

Plus ça change: The Limitations of White Men in Kindred and Sally Hemings

In *Kindred* and *Sally Hemings*, the central interracial relationships are between the black female protagonists and white men to whom they have made lasting emotional and sexual commitments: Dana's marriage to Kevin in *Kindred*, and Sally Hemings' forty-year quasi-marriage to Thomas Jefferson in *Sally Hemings*. In each case, the protagonist is also given, as a foil, a relationship with a second white male character that is not sexual, but threatens to become so: Dana's ancestor Rufus and Sally's friendship with census taker Nathan Langdon after Jefferson's death. This doubling-up allows the authors to consider comparatively, across time and space, whether cross-racial sexual relationships of equals can truly exist. In each case, the authors find cause for wariness, even if the white male in a given couple is "liberal" (in the twentieth-century political usage of the word) or seeks to be an ally to the cause of black

liberation. *Kindred*'s Kevin, despite being a reasonably liberal-minded twentieth-century man, still enjoys privileges of race and gender in comparison to Dana that are thrown into even greater relief during their joint time travels to slaveholding nineteenth-century Maryland. Thomas Jefferson, widely regarded as one of the great liberal thinkers of his age and an ardent defender of what the French revolutionists termed "the rights of man," had, in the words of Chase-Riboud's John Quincy Adams, "deceived himself into believing he could love a woman he held in slavery," and had "deceived Sally Hemings into believing a man that held her in such servitude could love her" (160). This section analyzes the interracial unions in *Kindred* and *Sally Hemings*, and argues that Butler and Chase-Riboud view sexual relationships between black women and white men, whatever the parties' intentions, as constantly subject to the destructive influence of external inequalities and in need of equally constant monitoring against it by their participants.

Dana, in *Kindred*, simultaneously negotiates a fledgling twentieth-century marriage to a white husband, Kevin, and an extremely delicate nineteenth-century balance of power between herself and her white great-grandfather, Rufus Weylin. Kevin unsurprisingly compares well ideologically and in his personal behavior to Rufus, a nineteenth-century slaveholder. Rufus, who despite some decent impulses ends the novel as a rapist of black women, demonstrates what wholesale surrender to a social system of institutionalized oppression looks like. Kevin is initially presented as an essentially liberal-minded "ally"—a white man of Butler's own era who marries a black woman and (mostly) respects her need for independence and agency. However, when Kevin is forced to time-travel to the antebellum era with Dana, he must actively struggle against the blandishments of a social order that privileges his race and gender whether he seeks that privilege or not. Kevin attempts to counter the pernicious psychic effects of the slave system

by traveling to the North and working (as Butler hints) with the Underground Railroad. But his efforts are nevertheless encroached upon by the American normalization of white power and black inferiority. Kevin's privilege is less glaring in the 1970s, where Dana's decision to marry him despite the twelve-year difference in their ages clearly signals her hope that his attitudes toward race and gender align more with her end of their generation than with his. But Butler's juxtaposition of Kevin's and Rufus's struggles with the temptations of slavery suggests that Kevin's attitudes are partly a function of the social pressures and expectations of his own time, and thus may be subject to erosion, for instance, if the social gains of the '60s liberation movements should ebb away in the face of backlash.

In 1976, Kevin is a flawed if basically well-intentioned white man who is attempting, with some missteps, to forge an equitable marriage with Dana, his black wife. Like many men of his age and era, Kevin is balancing support for Dana's independence and efforts at self-realization with vestigial flashes of sexism, as when he half-jokingly suggests that Dana should type up the manuscript of Kevin's novel even as she is attempting to write her own, and even after his prior history of such high-handed requests:

He really had asked me to do some typing for him three times. I'd done it the first time, grudgingly, not telling him how much I hated typing, how I did all but the final drafts of my stories in longhand... The second time he asked, though, I told him, and I refused. He was annoyed. The third time when I refused again, he was angry. He said if I couldn't do him a little favor when he asked, I could leave. So I went home. (109)

Kevin is both surprised and displeased by Dana's departures from the helpmeet role he expects women to play in relation to his writing career, yet her continuing refusal of that role (she never again acquiesces to his requests for typing assistance) does not prevent his asking her to marry

him. Even the form of his proposal suggests a willingness to leave patriarchal forms and attitudes behind for greater sexual equity: His question to Dana is not “Will you marry me?” but “How would you feel about getting married?” (109). It’s likewise to his credit that Kevin is quick to take Dana’s account of her first time-traveling episode seriously, and immediately joins her in her attempts to respond constructively to the demands of her new reality.

When Kevin is eventually pulled back to antebellum Maryland along with Dana, the different levels of power bestowed upon them by their racial and gender identities become starkly clear. As a white man, Kevin can move about freely in this historical context, while Dana must decide which aspects of her twentieth-century identity she can safely make use of in a social milieu where women of any race cannot wear trousers in public without arousing curiosity and outrage. When Kevin first meets Rufus, the latter asks him, “Does Dana belong to you now?” (60) – expecting, in accordance with the laws and customs Rufus knows, that the white Kevin and the black Dana can have no other relationship than that of master and slave. And when Kevin responds, “In a way – she’s my wife” (60), his words are a reminder that slavery and patriarchal marriage are not without overlaps: both systems vested an overwhelming preponderance of power in a prototypical authority figure who was both male and white. Dana herself concludes, “Kevin, I think we’d better demote me” (60) and “we’re going to have to play the roles [Rufus] gave us “ (65) – meaning that everyone they meet in Maryland apart from Rufus will understand Dana to be the slave of her own husband.

If Kevin’s patriarchal privilege is magnified by being in antebellum Maryland, so too is his resistance to the slave system; behavior on his part that would register as a publicly acceptable species of antiracist activism in 1976 constitutes a genuine subversion of the American state and its laws in 1815. At the end of one of their joint journeys to Maryland, Dana

is transported back to the present day alone, leaving Kevin stranded in the antebellum South for what turns out to be a matter of years until Dana next returns. During that time, Kevin travels up the East Coast and becomes involved in what may be a part of the Underground Railroad, providing shelter to runaway slaves en route to their next destination. “Were you helping slaves to escape?” Dana asks him when they have returned to 1976. “Of course I was!” says Kevin. “I fed them, hid them during the day, and when night came, I pointed them toward a free black family who would feed and hide them the next day” (193). Yet it also seems that during those wandering years, slavery had begun to exert a normalizing influence over him; even in the act of revealing his antislavery activity to Dana, she observes, “He sounded angry, almost defensive, about what he had done” (193). And once restored to their twentieth-century reality, Kevin has noticeably more difficulty readjusting. He reacts with frustration and violence toward the ordinary domestic objects in his and Dana’s house, including his own typewriter; after this episode, Dana describes Kevin’s expression as “something I was used to seeing in [Rufus’ father] Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly” (194). Kevin’s extended experience of living with slavery, even in opposition to it, has on some level domesticated the institution for him. He describes returning from the North to the Weylins’ plantation in Maryland: “I’ve got no love at all for that place, but so help me, when I saw it again, it was so much like home that it scared me” (192). Butler shows here the ease with which an apparently long-dead system of racial oppression can rear its head to contaminate a supposedly more enlightened present; reading this scene, and observing how quickly Kevin’s alienation and anger find vent in low-level violence, one worries for the future of Kevin and Dana’s relationship in the event that they are not able to process their experiences and manage the lingering emotions stirred up by their exposure to the American slave system.

Butler also deploys Dana and Kevin's marriage – and its broader impact on their families – to comment on black-white relations in the late twentieth century at large. Dana and Kevin have married in California, a state where legalized slavery had never existed and a place marking the western limit of the continent toward which Americans have historically moved when they wished to shed past lives and reinvent themselves. Nevertheless, Dana and Kevin's marriage has alienated their relatives, suggesting that their evasion of the American racial past is not even a generation old and thus highly provisional. Some scholars have read Dana and Kevin's marriage, and their families' reactions to it, as commentaries on the evolving state of black-white relations in the U.S. more broadly. For instance, Philip Militec believes that Butler has strategically centered this interracial marriage in order to comment on “the relationship between black and white Americans in general, as dominant white cultural attitudes toward slavery and the resistant ahistorical impulse within the Black Arts/Black Power movements [would, in Butler's view,] only continue to create conflict and perpetuate racism and ignorance of American history” (265).

Butler's presentation of Dana and Kevin's relationship implicitly critiques black nationalism in other ways as well. In a reading of black women's texts from the late '60s and early '70s that did not include *Kindred*, Shane Trudell Verge nevertheless made a point relevant to Butler's novel in noting that interracial unions in general alienated black nationalists – at least when such unions produced children or suggested that black women were rejecting sexual partners of their own race. Verge points out the hypocrisy of male black nationalists who claimed that “relations with white men would inhibit black women's ability to produce revolutionaries,” yet simultaneously “justified their own individual desires in terms of the nation such as when they encouraged each other to have sexual relations, even through force, with white women” (104). Timothy Spaulding offers the additional insight that “[Dana's] relative silence about

specific racial or political issues suggests that she places herself outside the political discourse of black nationalism and supports an integrationist view of American culture” (46). Militec concurs, writing that “Butler problematizes the cultural wholeness of an *African* black identity that [Amiri] Baraka and the Black Arts/Black Power movements promoted, arguing that an *American* black identity is significantly tangled with black and white genealogies” (267, italics in original). If, as Militec suggests, Butler intended *Kindred*’s critique to take in the historical shortsightedness of black nationalism along with the limitations of 1960s-era mainstream scholarship on slavery, then the novel can be read as a postmortem of the 1960s broadly that warns both centrists and leftists against the dangers of discounting slavery as a continuing influence on American life. It should be noted, too, that Butler sees patriarchal impulses as having the potential to derail racial progress, whether the context is sexist rhetoric emanating from the Black Power movement or the chauvinistic attitudes that white men like Kevin may import into “progressive” interracial relationships. Butler’s treatment of Dana and Kevin’s marriage thus evinces skepticism in two directions: toward the black nationalist prohibition against interracial unions and toward anti-separatist leftists who might champion such relationships as a means to black-white unity that vaults over the still-extant fractures and power imbalances they tend to unwittingly preserve.

The figure of Nathan Langdon, in *Sally Hemings*, offers another perspective on the potential for political or racial enlightenment among white men. Langdon, like Kevin, is initially presented as a more liberal-minded (for his time) white man who attempts to forge a romantic relationship with a black woman; like *Kindred*, however, *Sally Hemings* exposes the differences of power and privilege inherent in almost any interracial relationship, no matter the political sympathies of the participants. After Thomas Jefferson’s death, Sally Hemings believes she has

come to terms with the limitations of her decades-long relationship with him. When she develops an intimacy with census taker Langdon, however, her new companion does her the “favor” of erasing her and her children’s racial identity on the next census and thereby forces her to reconsider the entire meaning of her life as a black female slave who bore children for a U.S. president.

Hemings’ relationships with both men take place under slavery, roughly forty years apart, but her treatment by Langdon suggests that the attitudes of white men toward black women in those decades may have evolved in erratic ways. If Jefferson’s relationship with Hemings is loving in substance but abusive in form, Langdon’s subsequent friendship-cum-courtship of her can be seen as loving in form but abusive in substance. Jefferson insulted Sally and her children by withholding the legal acknowledgment of their full humanity on the basis of their blackness; Langdon’s case illustrates that it is also deeply insulting to extend legal freedoms to slaves based on denial of their blackness. And the decisions of the two men are similarly colored by sexual self-interest: Sally’s being free would complicate, for Jefferson, the terms of their sexual relationship, while her being rendered legally white would clear the way for the sexual relationship Langdon envisions as possible between himself and Sally. Their shared arrogance takes Sally’s breath away: “*You* decided!” she exclaims to Langdon after learning he has made her legally white. “For fifty-four years I’ve been Thomas Jefferson’s creature, and now...now *you* decide it's time for me to be yours” (50, italics in original). If Langdon represents the ways in which white Southern men were evolving (and failing to evolve) as the era of slavery slowly moved toward its closure, his example suggests that even well-intentioned white men are likely to be dangerous companions for black women. The meaningful evolution in this case is less

Langdon's than Sally's: she now has the power to refuse the relationship with Langdon that she lacked with Jefferson, and she exercises it with resolution and finality.

The combined impression of the prospect for interracial sexual relationships that one takes away from the cases of Jefferson, Langdon and Kevin is that white male enlightenment on matters of race and gender is tentative and constantly subject to societal subversion; that regressive attitudes can wear the face of progress; and that equitable sexual relationships between black women and white men are possible only if both parties are willing to exercise vigilance in keeping the ghosts of past exploitation at bay.

Sisterhood is Problematic: *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose*

In *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*, Williams and Morrison consider the possibility for alliances between black and white women by presenting white female characters who, at some risk to themselves, offer critical aid to protagonists Dessa and Sethe when each is forced to give birth while a fugitive from slavery. In *Beloved*, Amy Denver, a white former indentured servant who is likewise (though legally) traveling north, helps Sethe through a dangerous birth and in so doing, probably saves her life. In *Dessa Rose*, Ruth Elizabeth ("Rufel") Sutton shelters Dessa, an escaped slave and convict who has been sentenced to death, on her isolated farm among a community of former slaves, and nurses her son Desmond when Dessa is unable to. In each case, the black and white characters are brought together by a combination of common experiences (former servitude and flight for Sethe and Amy Denver, lawbreaking and motherhood for Dessa and Rufel) and random chance. Neither these common experiences nor subsequent personal growth on the participants' part are finally enough to sustain these relationships over the long term – a lesson that may also have ramifications for interracial sisterhood in the world outside

the novels, which Williams and Morrison suggest works best when it is unforced, clear-eyed, and not romanticized.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's encounter with Amy Denver is brief and unsentimental, but so successful in its outcome that Sethe names her daughter Denver after this woman whom she is only destined to know briefly and in a limited capacity. Amy, the white runaway indentured servant who provides life-saving childbirth assistance to Sethe while the latter is in flight from her former plantation Sweet Home, illustrates the difference between rhetorically correct sisterhood and genuine, tangible support. Like Sethe, Amy has suffered motherlessness along with physical violence at the hands of her former master, Mr. Buddy, but after being briefly silenced by the sight of Sethe's freshly whipped back, Amy ungrudgingly acknowledges Sethe's greater degree of hardship: "Whoever planted that tree beat Mr. Buddy by a mile. Glad I ain't you" (79). Amy is brusque and mocking toward Sethe even as she cares for her: "You the dumbest thing on this here earth," she tells Sethe after the latter's water inconveniently breaks in the boat they have stolen to cross the Ohio River (83).

Soon, however, it becomes evident that Amy's bluntly pragmatic approach to Sethe's predicament has resolved the situation more efficiently and more meaningfully than deferential gentleness could have. Sethe and Amy are, in a sense, ships that pass in the night, with divergent destinations and goals: "They never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn't care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something together appropriately and well" (84). Amy soon passes out of the novel on her way to Boston, whose abolitionist activism and Puritan heritage she knows nothing of and would likely be unmoved by even if she did; instead, Boston is to Amy the city that produces velvet, a fabric symbolic, for her, of all the beauty, pleasure and luxury that the world can offer. Amy is

uninterested in Sethe's gratitude or in holding her to any obligation for the favor Amy has done her, beyond telling the new baby "who brought her into this here world" (85); she has no idea as she parts ways with Sethe that the latter will name the new baby Denver in Amy's honor, which may in fact be one of the reasons it seems suitable to Sethe to do this.

The two women's relationship, unlike many real-world interracial political alliances, creates no dependencies, answers to no extraneous and unconscious emotional needs, and actually solves the problem that brought it into being in the first place. It's precisely this limited scope and lack of romanticism that conspire to make the connection a successful one. The reader is left to conclude that this instance of sisterhood works precisely because it knows its limitations and abides by them. This dynamic was also borne out in the context of real-world feminist activism. "What do white women have to complain about?" Barbara Smith, one of the founders of the Combahee River Collective, had wondered in the late '60s. "Their status...was the absolute opposite of what our status was as Black women" (Taylor 37). Yet with the crucial precondition that by the late '70s, "[w]hite women had begun to take responsibility for dealing with their racism, which in turn lightened the load of Black feminists" (Harris 22), white and black feminists proved able to work together effectively in specific contexts. Smith cites the feminist protest following the murders of twelve black women in Boston in 1979 as an example, commenting, "I must say, the larger White feminist community was incredibly supportive" (Harris 32).

In *Dessa Rose*, the relationship between Dessa and Rufel is a longer one that involves growth on both women's parts: Rufel is forced to admit that her "positive" relationships with slaves are not freely chosen by the slaves in question and are colored by self-interest on her own part, while Dessa realizes, after Rufel's near-rape by a male plantation owner, that white

slaveholding women are not always protected by their race and class status. By novel's end, their relationship has become one of respect and understanding if not full equality, but their paths ultimately diverge when Dessa and her fellow slaves travel west and Rufel chooses to go north instead. Williams and Morrison are alike in suggesting that black and white women, shaped by different social experiences, may finally end at different destinations, and that relationships between them that accept these differences and limitations are likely to be the most successful instances of black-white cooperation.

Like Amy Denver, Rufel is already a marginalized woman with little stake in propping up the structures of authority that have marginalized her, a circumstance which makes it possible for her to offer help to a black woman in the first place. Unlike Amy, however, Rufel had once enjoyed the protection of respectability and the privileges of slaveholding before her husband Bertie drained the household's fortune and went off to seek new income on an extended journey that has become a *de facto* abandonment. Though physical segregation between Rufel and the slaves is already a thing of the past – she has begun a sexual relationship with a fugitive slave, Nathan, and she only considers the taboo against white women nursing black babies after she has instinctively taken Dessa's infant to breast – she retains a mental mythology about slaves and slavery that proves more difficult to dismantle. Rufel and Dessa come into conflict over Rufel's self-serving verbal tribute to the black woman who raised her, Dorcas, whom Rufel refers to generically as "Mammy," with no apparent awareness that "Mammy" is a white-imposed slave role as opposed to an individual's name. Dessa, in revealing that she called her own mother "Mammy," "destroys the static quality required to sustain [the 'Mammy' role] as a stereotype" (Rushdy 100). Though the awakening is painful and disorienting for her, Rufel does begin to recognize the extent to which her view of Dorcas and her other slaves has been warped by self-

interest, and to see that the relationship was “never premised on love freely given” (Rushdy 155). Rufel’s more accurate perception of slaves’ individuality, and of her own relations with individual slaves, is a necessary precursor to the moneymaking scheme she eventually enters into with Dessa, Harker, Nathan, Castor, Ned and Flora, in which Rufel and the runaway slaves masquerade as mistress and property in order to repeatedly fake the slaves’ sale to new owners from whom they will later escape and return to the group, with Rufel having pocketed the sale money in the meantime. Rufel cannot successfully play the role of slaveholding mistress until she understands the degree to which it has always been exactly that – a role, and one which no longer fundamentally shapes her perception of the world or structures her relationships with the runaways who are now her fellow outlaws.

Dessa and Rufel’s alliance achieves another level of maturity when Dessa has a rencontre with Adam Nehemiah, who has her detained in a local jail and threatens to expose the fact that she is a runaway slave by forcing an examination that will reveal Dessa’s telltale pubic scarring. Rufel intervenes, expertly playing the role of a slaveholding mistress whose womanhood and property rights are equally offended by Nehemiah’s claim that Dessa is anyone other than Rufel’s own slave. Though she receives critical assistance from a local black woman, Aunt Chole, who is clearly accustomed to performing bodily examinations on accused slave women that protectively exonerate them, “it is Rufel’s word, as a Southern Lady, even in the form of a disguise, that helps to free Dessa for the last time, underscoring Rufel’s power over Dessa’s life, her body, her story” (McDowell 153). Rufel nevertheless manages here to put her racial privilege to genuinely good use on Dessa’s behalf – the kind of action that proved easier for real-world white feminists to pay lip service to than to perform, in part because wielding one’s privilege in such a way requires one to be conscious of its existence and to understand in what that privilege

consists.²¹ In the wake of this incident, Rufel and Dessa formally acknowledge that their relationship has now become, though not one of equals, something closer to it than in the past and a good deal closer than was generally possible for a runaway slave and a white woman of the slaveholding class to achieve.

Dessa's perception of Rufel's place in the world also shifts when the two women are overnight guests at a plantation whose owner enters their guest bedroom in the middle of the night and tries to force himself on Rufel. Dessa and Rufel join forces to thwart the attempt, but Dessa is shaken by the realization that there are evils in the world from which Rufel's race and class status cannot protect her: "The white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me; this was the thought that kept me awake. I hadn't knowed white mens could use a white woman like that, just take her by force same as they could with us" (201). She understands for the first time that even though Rufel's female vulnerability manifests itself in different ways than Dessa's does as a fugitive slave, it is a circumstance they share, and a potential basis for an alliance.

In the same way, the women's movement of the late '60s and early '70s offered black women, if nothing else, a clarifying point of comparison. Black women were especially well-positioned to observe that mainstream feminism's claims regarding women's universal oppression were often derived from an overly white sample group, and thus unnuanced or misplaced. As bell hooks wrote in 1981,

The group of college-educated white middle- and upper-class women who came together to organize a women's movement...demanded a transformation of society, a revolution, a

²¹ Bell hooks writes, "If women committed to feminist revolution, be they black or white, are to achieve any understanding of the 'charged connections' between white women and black women, we must first be willing to examine woman's relationship to society, to race, and to American culture as it is and not as we would ideally have it be. That means confronting the reality of white female racism" (124).

change in the American social structure. Yet as they attempted to take feminism beyond the realm of radical rhetoric and into the realm of American life, they revealed that they had not changed, had not undone the sexist and racist brainwashing that had taught them to regard women unlike themselves as Others. (121)

Black women were therefore equally suspicious of the mainstream movement's rhetoric of universal sisterhood, which papered over very real differences in the conditions of women and allowed white women's ignorance of their "sisters'" particular problems to remain unaddressed (Giddings 307-309). By the same token, however, the very fact that some manifestations of patriarchy – rape being a signal example – were demonstrably oppressive even for white women with class privilege served to isolate gender-based discrimination as a real and legitimate grievance unto itself. Any kind of discrimination or vulnerability stemming from the possession of a female body, including rape, lack of access to birth control and abortion, poor prenatal care, and mistreatment by the medical establishment, was a potentially unifying issue across races. Yet even in such cases, white feminists were often unaware of the ways in which women of color tended to be impacted differently from themselves.²² Thus a specific black feminist analysis and activism became necessary in connection with these issues.

Dessa's relationship with Rufel in *Dessa Rose* closely parallels the conditions and tensions of an ongoing political alliance: as Angelyn Mitchell notes, "Williams presents to her readers her feminist engagement with race, so that we can imaginatively consider what might have been in terms of interracial feminist coalitions during slavery as well as what should be in terms of interracial feminist coalitions now" (65). Mitchell later suggests that *Dessa Rose* also

²² See, for instance, Angela Davis on rape as a tool of social control of slave women (96-97) and Frances Beal on the sterilization abuse of women of color (172-174).

owes its existence, or at least its particular form, to the women's movement: "Could this narrative have been written before the feminist movement of the 1970s? Probably not...it was during this time that the disparate agendas of those on both sides of the color line became more prominent" (78). It's significant, however, that Dessa's and Rufel's paths eventually diverge. Rufel might have chosen to go west and continue her relationship with Nathan in a community where her black co-conspirators would be free by law, and where social norms, including racial ones, would be more newly minted and perhaps less rigid. Rather than doing so, "Ruth went East, not back to Charleston; she went on to...Philly-me-York – some city didn't allow no slaves" (236). Elizabeth Beaulieu observes that "Dessa's full appreciation of Ruth as a person, and not as a white person, comes only after they have parted permanently" (53). Dessa's recollection of Rufel in the novel's epilogue, decades later, nonetheless suggests that her connection with the whole group was real:

I guess we all have regretted her leaving, one time or another. She couldn't've caused us no more trouble than what the white folks gived us without her...Miss her in and out of trouble--(Do she call my name to [Rufel's daughter] Clara?) (236).

But the connection may still be "a friendship more in the remembrance than in the experience" (Rushdy 149), requiring distance to clarify its nature and meaning. Rufel's decision suggests that even in the presence of genuine friendship between them, the paths of black and white women may ultimately diverge – in some cases, perhaps, due to white women's turning out to be less comfortable with the practice of interracial sisterhood than the theory of it, but in others, simply due to legitimately different political or personal goals.

Where black-white relationships are concerned, Butler, Chase-Riboud, Williams and Morrison are in agreement on one fundamental point: those who ignore the history of

exploitation that white people of any gender have brought to relationships with black people are likely to repeat that history. White men who commit to equitable long-term sexual relationships with black women with some hope of success, as Kevin does with Dana in *Kindred*, must be aware that their own greater experience of social power, and the self-interest that results from it, may blind them to crucial aspects of their mates' experience. White women who seek to forge meaningful alliances with black women, as Rufel Sutton does for a time with Dessa in *Dessa Rose*, must be aware of their own simultaneous potential to oppress and be oppressed. They need not understand these dynamics in explicitly political terms, but they must accept them as legitimate on an emotional level. Even with such awareness, these sexual unions or periods of comradery may have natural limitations, as real-world activists have been learning since the height of '60s movement politics. What may matter more than longevity is the fact of shared experience and the emotional impact it leaves – Dessa's "[missing Rufel] in and out of trouble," or Kevin's hope at the end of *Kindred* that "now that [Rufus] is dead, we have some chance of staying [sane]" (264). The collective message of these novels about interracial alliances is one of hope tempered by experience and realism.

Conclusion: Black Feminism, Black Women's Literature, and the American Narrative

Corregidora, *Kindred*, *Sally Hemings*, *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* are not polemical novels; like all literature of high caliber, they present flawed, idiosyncratic characters responding erratically and sometimes tragically to their circumstances, which in the case of these five novels happen to be shaped by the impositions of an oppressive system of enslaved labor and racial hierarchy. This thesis has argued that these novels link black women's struggles under slavery to their contemporary fight to be seen and acknowledged as legitimate political actors with unique

experiences and needs. In doing so, these novels performed political work at a historical moment when opportunities for overt leftist activism in the United States appeared to be narrowing.

If these works formed part of “the literary arm of black feminism,” as I termed it in the introduction to this thesis, then they accomplished even more than the simple representation of black women’s stories in the pages of serious novels, critical though that achievement was. With the passage of decades and the aid of hindsight, it has become increasingly clear that in insisting upon the indivisibility of their own identities, in refusing to prioritize race over gender or vice versa, black feminists were also establishing a prototypical narrative for the entire American left. The notion of intersectionality, and the corresponding habit of thinking on behalf of more than one political constituency at a time, were concepts that black feminists forged under duress and out of necessity. However, they are also behaviors that can be taught and used to build alliances between disparate groups like those that comprise the contemporary American left. Additionally, when applied to art, the idea of intersectionality can impact both form and content. It can expand notions of who artists are, who audiences are, what artistic subjects are, what constitutes artistic achievement, and what constitutes an artistic canon. It can also expand the lenses through which artists see the real and the imagined world, informing and enriching their notions of characterization and conflict, the motors that do so much to power art in the first place.

Toni Morrison, who died while this thesis was being written, is a singular figure in literature: in many senses the Shakespeare of the black women’s literary renaissance, she is the first black woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature and the first to achieve a fairly uncontested canonization (to the extent that uncontested canonization is ever possible) during her lifetime. But Morrison is also the tip of a larger iceberg of achievement that includes the modern black feminist movement and a host of lesser-known black women writers who built upon the

insights and gains of black feminism to begin to answer the questions of what an “American narrative” that legitimized black women’s stories might look like, and how such an expanded narrative would impact those who absorbed it. The centrality of black women’s contributions to the more expansive American narratives of politics and art of the current moment is as yet incompletely recognized, and should be the subject of further analysis and amplification. In the meantime, the black feminist novels of slavery I’ve examined here stand as compelling evidence that work produced at the crossroads of politics and art can have powerful and ongoing ripple effects in both worlds.

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