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by

Deborah L. Uzurin

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

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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

Representations of Hustling Women: The Figure of the Black Sex Worker in Ann Petry's *The Street* and Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner*

by

Deborah L. Uzurin

Advisor: Christopher Schmidt

This thesis provides a close reading of Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) and Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (1970) by analyzing how these two black women authors wrote about sex work and black women sex workers in their novels. Black women writers in the mid-twentieth century were reluctant to write about black women's sexuality as a result of discourses of racial uplift that rejected the white supremacist stereotype of the hypersexual black woman. While not the focus of their novels, the inclusion of sex workers in their fictional narratives provide a complicated representation of a particular form of black women's labor experience within the segregated urban environments of 1930s and 1940s Harlem. Black women's participation in the urban sexual economy during the twentieth century is often ignored and rejected because of the history of forced sexual exploitation and violence inflicted on enslaved black women during slavery. These two novels reveal the impact that institutionalized racism, segregation and discrimination had on the economic opportunities of urban black communities, focusing on black women whose options lay within domestic labor and sex work. This analysis reveals the nuances behind black women's paid sexual labor and its importance in academic literary criticism.

Keywords: black women, sex work, prostitution, African American literature, black feminism, racial stereotypes, sexual labor, Ann Petry, Louise Meriwether, Curtis Lucas

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I dedicate my thesis to sex workers of the past and present. Their labor, experiences and lives have significant value. Sex worker rights are human rights.

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Introduction

“There is no question that representation is central to power. The real struggle is over the power to control the images.”

-Thelma Golden

The black sex worker is a stigmatized and unwanted feminist figure in African American literature. Considered a social pariah, her participation in the sex labor economy is deemed as non-aspirational because of her experience in the sale of paid sexual services. Sex for women has been traditionally and socially designed to exist within the confines of marriage which are private and monogamous. During slavery black women's bodies were sold for labor and sexual exploitation. They were used as breeders to continue birthing new slaves on plantations. Enslaved black women were stripped of their sexual and bodily autonomy.

Rationalizations in the form of racialized stereotypes were invented by whites in order to justify black women's subjugation, sexual assault and exploitation in slavery. After slavery ended, racial stereotypes such as the jezebel, mammy and pickaninny persisted in the American imagination as a method of to continue the oppression and subjugation of black women and girls in society. I will examine how the racial stereotypes of black women that were developed during slavery to justify their subjugation and sexual exploitation by whites followed black women into the 20th century, affecting how black women sex workers are represented in African American literature, focusing on Ann Petry's *The Street* and Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner*.

The transatlantic slave trade brought enslaved Africans to the Americas in the fifteenth century followed by a system of chattel slavery where blacks were enslaved from birth and held as property by white slave owners until their deaths. The auction block, where enslaved black

men, women and children were sold and traded by white men, served as a space that reduced human lives to objects, where unwanted hands grabbed and prodded their bodies without compassion. The body for sale has resounding historical weight as a consequence of slavery, evoking discomforts in discussing 20th century sex work because forced sexual labor and sexual exploitation of black women were central to the system of slavery for perpetuating white male supremacy by subjecting black women to white male control and dominance as well as using their bodies for pregnancies to add their children to the plantations economic labor pool.

Two forms of labor that were the most immediately available to poor working-class black women at the beginning of the mid-twentieth century were domestic labor and sex work, in all its variants, from street-based sex work to independent sex work in tenements, apartment dwellings and brothels. The experience of black women sex worker's is nuanced, complicated and filled with contradictions. Amy L. Huang defines sex work as "the act of engaging in sexual services, performances, or products for the purpose of gaining financial remuneration" (Huang 84). Sex work in the literary imagination brings to mind the auction block where the fabricated racialized tropes of hyper-sexualization and de-sexualization of black women were used to justify their bondage in slavery and their continued violence and oppression by white supremacists under a system of institutionalized racism. Black women sex workers are viewed as poor fallen women, as whores met with hostility, pity and indifference. Engaging with the intersections of race, class, gender and sex, the black sex worker's presence as a literary figure provides a look into how the role of the sex worker is representative of a distinct and important experience of black women in African American literature. Their marginalization and/or presence within the literary canon speaks to the sex worker as a denied feminist figure in African American fiction.

Alice Clement explains that during the depression "the women who poured into sex work

at the bottom fled the rising tide of unemployment, eviction, and hunger. Working in the most exposed forms of prostitution, namely streetwalking and tenement prostitution, these women, who were disproportionately black, faced violence, low pay, and periodic arrest and incarceration” (204). This form of sex work is embedded in the threads of Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* and Louise Meriwether’s novel *Daddy Was a Number Runner*. I contend that the black woman sex worker is a feminist figure that materializes her presence and experiences in these two novels, presenting uncomfortable and nuanced stories of agency, circumstance, and survival. Francis Coffin is Meriwether’s protagonist, an eleven-year-old girl who experiences sexual assault on a normal basis at the hands of adult white men in 1930s Harlem. China Doll is a young woman who chooses to be a street-based sex worker rather than be employed as a domestic worker because it “was just a job to her, better than breaking her back like her mother did for pennies a day” (Meriwether 20). Petry’s protagonist Lutie Johnson subscribes to a model of middle-class respectability and rejects sex work and steps away from domestic labor as a source of income. She recoils from her downstairs neighbor Mrs. Hedges who propositions Lutie to becoming a sex worker for a white customer by telling her, “If you ever want to make a little extra money, why you let me know. A nice white gentleman I met lately—” (Petry 84).

These two novels were written thirty years apart but exist in the time period of the earlier half of the mid-twentieth century of the United States and are set in the same neighborhood of Harlem, New York where both protagonists live within blocks of each other over the space of time. Ann Petry’s *The Street* was published in 1946 and Louise Meriwether’s feminist novel *Daddy Was a Number Runner* was published in 1970 at the cusp of the Black Power movement that followed the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Meriwether’s novel is positioned during the Depression era of the 1930s and is a precursor of the social conditions in Petry’s Harlem

where racial segregation and the continued poverty from the depression continue their corrosive effects on the black community. Meriwether approaches looking back in time from a place where black women are continuing to fight for equality after civil rights have been granted for all black Americans, to an era of Jim Crow, where cities continued the oppression of slavery in the south by means of racial segregation. Broadening a new interpretation of memory *Daddy Was a Number Runner* speaks to Petry's *The Street*. They display hidden truths of oppression of black women at the hands of white supremacy and black misogyny.

Historically black women were used by plantations to supply and increase its population of enslaved blacks for labor during slavery (Hine 126). In the year 1808 it became illegal to import new slaves into the United States. Enslaved black women became further exploited as their bodies now served a critical economic function for plantation owners to produce a continuous supply of slave labor for upcoming generations (Hine 126). Plantation owners constructed “views of Black female sexuality” in order to “justify his own sexual passion toward her” while also “blam[ing] the female slave for the[ir] sexual exploitation” (Hine 123). Enslaved black women who were young and particularly attractive were sold on the auction block as “fancy girls” for the purposes of sexual abuse and rape, whose high prices exceeded the cost of a field laborer (Hine 124). The historical trauma and violence that the slave trade placed on black women through sexual and economic oppression; where they were denied the autonomy of their own bodies, and subjected to mythologies of inherent hypersexuality that condoned their condition as slaves, makes analyzing black women’s consensual sex work historically, and in literature, difficult to approach because their bodies were used as the “maintenance of the slave system” (Hine 125).

The production of racialized stereotypes of hypersexualized black women that dominate

the racist white imagination contributes to the development of the sex worker's stigmatization. The stereotypes used against black women to reinforce their subjugation during slavery becomes "recodified" at the end of slavery to continue their oppression by means of ingraining ideas that black women are ruled and motivated by sexual proclivities with men in the American imagination thereby contributing to their discrimination in society (Alexander 5). This discrimination via methods of invented stereotypes and images of black people affected how black women writers wrote stories and characters, claiming that "the most common attack on the image of black women was to portray them as immoral women, licentious, and oversexed, whose insatiable appetites were responsible for the bestial nature of the black man... So widespread was the image of black women as sexually immoral that virtually every black woman who took up a pen felt obligated to defend black women against these charges" (Washington 73). Black women had to defend themselves and their community from these claims. Because "narratives by black women embody the tension between the author's desire to privilege her experience and being able to speak only within a discourse of conventionally held beliefs about the nature of black womanhood," sex workers are not considered models of respectability because their existence performs in opposition to narratives of racial uplift (Carby 22).

Discussing the burden of her role in writing a biography on the Black Freedom movement activist Ella Baker, Barbara Ransby advises to "be cautious of the danger inherent in our work: imposing our contemporary dilemmas and expectations on a generation of women who spoke a different language, moved to a different rhythm, and juggled a different set of issues and concerns"(2). When I began developing my thesis on how sex workers were represented in African American literature, I was initially met with unease at the topic. "Sex work" as terminology was niche and still entering the academic and popular vernacular. I was told that the

phrase “sex work” would be unclear and that it should be referred to as prostitution, because readers would not understand. In the following few years there has been a radical shift in discussions towards the topic of paid sexual services as labor. I contend it is now in vogue to discuss the topic of decriminalizing sex work, and demanding they have labor and human rights, thanks to grass-roots sex work activists who fought and introduced the layman to the 2017 passing of SESTA/FOSTA in the United States, which “increased pressure on Internet platforms to censor its users” in an attempt to curb online trafficking, which not only restricted sex worker’s digital labor and presence on the internet but also affects the non-sex working public’s first amendment rights to free speech online as well (Blunt and Wolf 4). Sex workers have risked personal and criminal exposure to fight and gain an accurate visual presence in media, policy, academia and culture.

Black sex workers as characters have not been given proper academic attention in literary criticism according to Lashawn Harris, who argues in *Sex Workers, Psychics and Number Runners* (2016) that “[s]cholarly discourse on the vast dimensions of paid sexual labor situates white women at the center of urban sex economies, offering complicated narratives that tease out the benefits and limitations of their work and how varying forms of sex work impacted city vice and urban and commercial development” as well as “presenting nuance and refreshing interpretations on white sex workers, some historians have excluded and marginalized black female sex workers from studies on prostitution” (Harris 24). I contend that the lack of focus historically given to analyzing black women who engaged in sex work contributes to the inadequate attention given to the presence of urban sex work and black women sex workers in African American literature, a result of what historian Cynthia Blair would call the “analytical neglect” of black women’s experience in paid sexual labor (Harris 124).

Harris argues that the “economic crisis of the 1930s hit black women the hardest” (146). As an alternative method of labor, sex work offers an economic opportunity outside of domestic labor and other types of employment that were denied to black women during the early twentieth century. Danielle Blunt and Ariel Wolf argue that “under capitalism all labor is vulnerable to hyper-exploitation” which is “increased in criminalized economies that lack labor protections, such as sex work” and that those who “have traded sex live at the intersection of marginalized identities and may have limited access to other sources of income or employment due to stigma, discrimination, and lack of social support” (1). Sex work was an option that many black women participated in during the early twentieth century. Harris unveils “the challenges of documenting black prostitution in New York and the broad socioeconomic and personal circumstances outlining black women’s entrance into paid sexual labor. Extreme poverty, sexual abuse and trauma, family obligation, and the active pursuit of sexual desire and pleasure brought a diverse yet significant group of black women into sexual labor, a field of work that urban moralists and activists considered damaging to women’s bodies and souls and evidence of city women’s unbridled and unchecked sexuality” (125). Analyzing sex work in literature opens up explorations into accounts of black women who have been declared as deviant by society and ignored in academia.

Petry and Meriwether’s novels evidence the environment of racial segregation and oppression, and the methods by which black women struggle and try to survive. As a “method of social control” against African Americans and emigrating blacks to the United States, white violence was intertwined with the Jim Crow criminal justice system (Pilgrim 530). Black women sex workers learned to navigate, survive and thrive under this setting of violence into the twentieth century and well as criminalization of their employment.

Paying “attention to the narratives of women places issues of reproduction, sexuality, motherhood, and children at the forefront of discussion of freedom and resistance” (Li 8). Under the weight of systemic racism, discrimination and sexism, black women experienced a dual oppression by being both black and women. Black sex workers were further weighed down by criminalization and persistent whorephobia. Whorephobia is a form of slut-shaming and a common term used by contemporary sex workers to define the negative feelings, behaviors or prejudices against people who participate in all forms of sex work.

Katherine McKittrick explains that the “connection between geography and blackness is crucial to identifying some of the conditions under which race/racism are necessary to the production of space” (12). The black geographical space in Petry and Meriwether’s novels take the form of a segregated Harlem during the first half of the twentieth century. During the great migration from the South to Northern cities during Reconstruction, young black women left small southern towns and moved to cities like New York and Chicago, creating and defining a new geography of labor. Those women who could or would not work as domestic laborers in the homes of whites would transform the underground sex labor economy in crowded tenements, night clubs, hotels and streets.

Black women sex workers occupied in/visible geographies of their own within their segregated communities that were accessible to not only the black men who lived there for the consumption and accessibility of white men as well. This is present in *The Street* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner* where white men leave their middle and upper class neighborhoods to seek out pleasure and access to black women without disrupting their home life and social conventions of race separation, such as the white men who harass Francis in her neighborhood, the white customers that visit street-workers in Harlem and the white men that drive around trying to pick

up young black women and girls.

By looking at how paid sexual labor is positioned and represented within these two texts one can locate the “black absented presence”(McKittrick 33). Coined by McKittrick, the black absented presence is defined as the invisibility or erasure of the black experience and contribution to geography and memory by whites. White consumption of black sexual labor occurred outside the boundaries of affluent middle-class neighborhoods. The experience of black women in the underground sex economy are present in fiction and their academic analytic exclusion erases their lived experiences that shaped the cities they worked in.

In conversation with the works of Petry and Meriwether, I will also be looking at Curtis Lucas’s novel *Third Ward Newark* which depicts the city of Newark in New Jersey and the segregated neighborhood referred to as the Hill. Published in 1946, the same year as Petry’s *The Street*, the novel depicts the attempted rape of the protagonist, a black teenage runaway in foster care named Wonnie, and the murder of her best friend Mildred at the hands two white men. Lucas illustrates how the Depression affected the economy of the black community of Newark as well as the economic aftermath for black women at the end of WWII by providing a compelling look at black women employed in factories during the war, who had previously worked as sex workers and who after the war were the first to lose their jobs because they as black women. He exhibits how they once again re-enter the sex trade to survive.

Black sex workers are the most marginalized in society because their labor is seen as exploitative and immoral. Harris explains that working class African Americans “shunned labor that bypassed city ordinances” such as sex work because they “adamantly refused to compromise their dignity, self-respect, and neighborhood reputation for economic stability” (177–178). In African American literature, black sex workers perform in opposition to not only characters of

racial uplift but to all non-sex working black women such as women who work in domestic labor as well. Lutie Johnson is a character of racial uplift because she tries to work towards middle class aspirations while battling race discrimination. Black women who worked as domestic laborers are seen as morally superior to sex workers because they mitigate attempts of sexual assault by white employers whereas black women sex workers have sex with white men for money.

While everyone in Lutie Johnson's neighborhood in *The Street* are affected by poverty, Lutie empathizes with domestic laborers in her community but sees herself as morally superior to sex workers, referring to them as "little girls" with "resignation in their voices," with "no hope, no life" (187–188). With this in mind, it is not surprising that one may not find positive representations of sex work or overt female sexuality and expression in early twentieth century narratives by black women, as they were trying to preserve their reputations that contradicted the false narratives that oppressed them. Sexual repression by means of racist stereotyping combined with discourses of racial uplift and middle class advancement that presented African Americans as model Christian citizens that were deserving of equality and human rights diminished the likelihood for black women writers depicting strength of black female sexuality, negating positive portrayals of not only black women in sex work but black women participating in sexual roles outside of marriage.

Lutie Johnson and her desire for middle class mobility corresponds with the black press's "counter-discourse that documented the black community's professional successes and worked to secure its economic and social mobility with idealized representations of middle-class domesticity" in response to the representations of blacks as "morally questionable, socially reprobate and pathologically sexual" by mid-twentieth century white society (Hardison 150).

Women who participate in sex work “fall short of the ideal of respectability” and “are thus subject to abjection” because they challenge “norms of femininity” (Auger 105), therefore negating the efforts by racial uplifters. Consequently, I do not expect to find positive representations, but pragmatic depictions of these women that offer a realistic perspective of their engagement in urban sex economies.

Anti-vice efforts had been in place during the time periods preceding *Daddy Was a Number Runner and The Street* at the beginning of the 20th century, such as the Committee of Fourteen (COF), which was used to locate and expose to the NYPD illicit activity pertaining to saloons, dance clubs, prostitution, brothels, and hotels (Harris 126). These were heralded by “racial uplifters” who wanted the “eradication of urban vice” for the “moral health and reputation” of the black community (Harris 128). The NAACP asserted that the COF was a hidden effort under the guise of seeking out vice to segregate establishments that catered to a mixed crowd of black and white patrons in New York. Closing down saloons and places of entertainment were found to be “violating New York statutes that prohibited discrimination in places of public entertainment,” according to W.E.B Du Bois, cofounder of the NAACP and editor of the *Crisis* magazine (Harris 128).

Pervading stereotypes of black women as “innately hypersexual, lawless, and free of physical and emotional restraint” contributed to the over saturation of black women arrested for prostitution in New York City crime reports (Harris 132). Financial extortion and “arrest quotas” (Harris 134) exposed a discriminatory and corrupt practice by the New York Police Department in apprehending non-sex working black women and charging them with prostitution due to anti-vice efforts by organizations such as the Committee of Fourteen (COF) which was established in 1905 by the New York Anti-Saloon league (Harris 126). The COF used undercover agents

posing as “potential sex patrons and partygoers” to identify locations of “sex houses,” creating “committee reports” that today provide a historical narrative of the descriptions of women, their practices, and conversations surrounding sex work including their age, origins and choice of hairstyle and dress (Harris 126-127). The historical records of “urban vice reporting” (Harris 134) by the COF, the Women’s Prison Association, the Bedford Reformatory as well as various other social work cases and police arrest reports have aided in putting together a record of black sex workers at the beginning of the twentieth century allowing their individual stories and histories to be heard (Clement 11). While incomplete and biased, the reports offer glimpses into the lives of poor and working black women prior to becoming sex workers and their motivations behind entering the underground urban sex economy.

Wanting to eradicate “crime in black communities,” black racial uplifters who aspired for middle class respectability participated with the COF in efforts to dismantle “white urbanites’ perceptions that black enclaves were sites of pleasure for joy-seeking whites” (Harris 129). Sex workers who did not want to divulge their identities for purposes of privacy or recount their life stories to unsympathetic and untrustworthy social workers and police officers began to be recorded in official records as “physically unattractive, uncommunicative, uncooperative, and disagreeable” leading to further prejudice, racism, and stigmatization towards black women’s paid sexual labor, which reduced their opportunities at receiving “sympathy” and “financial assistance from caseworkers” (130).

The Raines Law of 1896 produced “new venues for prostitution” when its law for suppressing alcohol consumption in New York City “inadvertently” created new spaces for paid sexual labor to flourish. The law made it illegal to sell liquor on Sundays except for hotels with ten beds or more, prompting businesses to place beds in “backrooms” and “permitting sex

workers to rent” them out. The turn of the century saw sex workers becoming “major participants in the city’s burgeoning nightlife, forging new partnerships with urban business owners and devising new ways of earning a living and asserting control over their professional lives” (Harris 148).

The migration of hopeful African Americans from Southern states, particularly young single black women to cities such as New York and Chicago during the 1920s was known as one of “the most dramatic interregional migrations in the nation’s history...dramatically transf[orming] the social landscape they encountered, forging a new sense of community, creating a dynamic culture, and developing new strategies for resistance to racial oppression and economic exploitation” (Ransby 66). Jessica Pliley explained that the Great Depression “ushered in a phase of increasing concern about how the worsening economic climate would lead to rising rates of prostitution,” causing “many to worry that high levels of male unemployment would undermine and disrupt traditional gender roles...produc[ing] a crisis in American manhood as unemployed men could no longer fulfill their roles as the family breadwinner, leading to emasculation and the potential loss of familial authority” (144-145).

Narratives of victimization “reinforce the stigmatization of sex work and erase sex workers lived experiences” whose “motivations for trading sex exist within a complicated landscape of choice, circumstance and coercion” yet are “reduced to a binary: victim or criminal” (Blunt and Wolf 3). Representations of sex work in Petry and Meriwether’s novels provide nuanced narratives of black women sex workers engaging in the urban sex economy of paid sexual labor during the 1930s and 1940s in New York. Invented racial stereotypes of black women that were used to justify slavery in the United States contributed to the stigmatization of these black women sex workers in the African American literary imagination because sex

workers conflict with the established narratives of racial uplift that wanted to move away from prevailing stereotyped images of black women.

My thesis will explore how images and perceptions of sex work has been historicized in Ann Petry's *The Street* and Louise Meriwether's *Daddy Was a Number Runner* in how they engage with gender, race, class and poverty. I will explore the historical stereotypes of black women and their sexuality in these texts and how these stereotypes engendered negative responses to women working in erotic labor. I explore if the figure of the black sex worker is subversive because of her distinct economic situation, and if it leads to financial independence and sexual autonomy.

I approach my thesis with a positive pro-sex worker and decriminalization position. Validating sex work as a profession allows sex workers to operate under safer conditions. Decriminalization leads to de-stigmatization. This thesis does not engage with continuing the cycle of enforcing stigmatizing representations of sex workers but rather with engaging and discussing the complicated realities of sex work, and how they are presented in the following works of fiction. I aim to subvert the prevailing narrative of fallen women by presenting evidence of the political, social, and economic conditions of black women who historically participated in sexual labor and whose lives act as the inspiration for Petry's and Meriwether's characters which explore, subvert and/confirm existing images of sex workers as homeless, drug abusing, and mentally deficient victims.

Chapter One

“[S]he wondered why they all had the idea that colored girls were whores”: Middle Class Aspirations and the Cult of True Womanhood in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946)

In an interview with *Crisis* journalist James Ivy, Ann Petry explained that the purpose behind her novel of social criticism (Petry, “The Novel” 32), was to “show how simply and easily the environment can change the course of a person’s life... I try to show why the Negro has a high crime rate, a high death rate, and little to no chance to keeping his family unit intact in large Northern cities. There are no statistics in the book, although they are present in the background, not as columns or figures but in terms of what life is like for people who live in over-crowded tenements” (Ivy 48). Black women participating and surviving through sex work are present in Petry’s novel. In *The Street* we experience black women navigate difficult terrains of poverty using different methods of survival such as being a madam to sex workers, cohabitating with violent men, singing, and domestic labor. We do not get to see these women experience joy as they are each on the verge of social death. Petry’s protagonist Lutie Johnson struggles through a multitude of obstacles to try and create a life for herself and her son away from poverty. Characters such as Mrs. Hedges run a brothel and Min works in domestic labor while living with the building’s super as another means of survival.

The novel takes place during the 1940s in Harlem. The segregated neighborhood that Lutie Johnson lives in takes center stage as the space where the black community is battling to stay alive. Discussing *The Street*, Ayesha K. Hardison explains that “Petry exposes this cycle of poverty and disaffection, ensuring Lutie’s fate as an abandoned wife and absent mother in the vein of the protest novel” as well as invoking “naturalist critiques in *The Street* by concretizing the city’s oppressive environment in the kitchenette and indicting its culpability in the social

death of urban black female subjects” (71-72). Within the overcrowded tenements found throughout Harlem, Lutie Johnson finds herself living in a building that houses a small brothel run by a middle-aged black woman named Mrs. Hedges. Young black women are sex workers within her social space. The figure of the sex worker is the urban black female subject I will discuss. Hardison continues to explain that “[t]he specter of Jane Crow marks a rupture in twentieth-century African American literature. The moniker describes the burdening of black female subjectivity under a specific set of social conditions: mass migrations, changing gender relations, class anxiety and racial strife” (3).

As a Jane Crow novel, which is a text that is “historically between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts movement, between World War II and the modern civil rights movement” (Hardison 203) that challenges the “traditional, protest-driven” novel (Martin 128), *The Street*’s narrative is formed “from heightened cultural tensions between black women’s race and gender concerns, between their desire for middle-class respectability and disillusion with domesticity” (Hardison 203). As a Jane Crow text, *The Street* must “wrestle with refining conventions of the protest novel, theorizing the intersections of racism and sexism, and resisting black women’s double jeopardy as both subject and writers” (Hardison 203).

When we meet Lutie on 116th street in Harlem, New York at the beginning of the novel, Petry invites us to witness the garbage being thrown about by the wind, the “dirt and dust and grime on the sidewalk” being “swirled into the faces of the people on the street” doing what it could to “discourage the people walking along the street” (2). She sees the metal sign for an apartment for rent whose years of rusting in the elements had made “a dark red stain like blood” (3). Lutie is far from the aspirational suburban Connecticut home of her former employers and her former home in Jamaica, Queens. The sign reads “respectable tenants.” Lutie thinks to

herself, “Respectable tenants in these houses where colored people were allowed to live included anyone who could pay the rent” (3).

Ann Petry writes Lutie Johnson as a character striving for racial uplift and middle-class mobility. As a domestic worker, we see the “extremes of racialized labor, marginality and invisibility” (Peterson 75) that Lutie experiences living in the Chandler’s home. While working one day, Lutie overhears Mr. Chandler’s mother talking about the potential Lutie has of seducing Mr. Chandler to her daughter-in-law Mrs. Chandler. Lutie thinks to herself, “Here she was highly respectable, married, mother of a small boy, and, in spite of all that, knowing all that, these people took one look at her and immediately got that now-I-wonder-look. Apparently, it was an automatic reaction of white people—if a girl was colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason she had to be a prostitute” (Petry 5). Due to Lutie’s race, gender and general attractiveness, she experiences these prejudices as a live in black domestic worker in the home of the Chandler family.

Mrs. Chandler’s mother remarks to her daughter-in-law, “Now I wonder if you’re being wise, dear. That girl is unusually attractive and men are weak. Besides, she’s colored and you know how they are—” (45). The Chandlers’ relatives and friends view Lutie’s youth, gender and race as indicators of what they believe to be her predisposed lasciviousness. Mrs. Chandler’s mother is referring to Lutie Johnson as a jezebel, a racialized stereotype of the hypersexual black woman who desires and seduces white men. Lutie becomes offended and angry towards these comments. Lutie has a “distrust” and “a dislike of white men far deeper than the distrust these white women had” for her (46). Although she is poor and a member of the working class, she is married and has a son of her own and she holds herself up to a standard of middle-class respectability.

Lutie Johnson “wonde[rs] why they all [white people] had the idea that colored girls were whores” when she “didn’t want any of their thin unhappy husbands” (41). The jezebel stereotype was “used during slavery as a rationalization for sexual relations between white men and black women, especially sexual unions involving slavers and slaves” (Pilgrim 107). Describing Lutie as a “good-looking colored wench” the Chandler’s friends explain that they would not have one in their own home because “they’re always making passes at men. Especially white men” (40-41). This comment supports racist attitudes towards black women based on the jezebel stereotype that claimed black women “desired relations with white men” (Pilgrim 108). Black women during slavery who experienced sexual exploitations had to survive and without many other options, had sex with white plantation owners. Deborah Grey White argues that “some women...took the risk involved and offered themselves [to slave masters]. When they did so, they breathed life into the image of jezebel” (33). I disagree with White’s assertion that black women subjected themselves to their own stereotyping by using sexual labor as a means of surviving on a plantation.

Prior to its dissolution, Lutie’s nuclear family at the beginning of the novel illustrates Petry’s counter-discourse to the prevailing white supremacist notions of black female sexuality. The insinuation that Lutie is a hypersexual black woman, who is looking to steal her white employer from his wife and is also potentially a sex worker because of her race and gender contrasts with the image she has of herself and her cultural view of racial uplift. Lutie’s aversion to the implications of being a potential sex worker by Mrs. Chandler and her addressing the reader about being part of a happily married family, exposes what Ayesha K. Hardison explains as a “response to hegemonic culture’s pathologizing of black sexuality” where “black counter-discourses contrived expressions of female sexuality as permissible only within the confines of

wedded bliss” (163).

Nineteenth-century ideologies of womanhood marked the differences between the images portrayed of white women and black women in the United States. White women were required to be submissive to their husbands, especially in their sexual responsibilities in marriage that were conducted in the privacy of their home while becoming desexualized to society. The idea of “true womanhood” was completely dependent on the ideologies and stereotypes around blackness in order for white woman to contrast against the image of the black woman (Jenkins 7), such as their image of innate sexuality and promiscuity. True womanhood as an ideology became the “dominating image” of “female behavior” utilizing “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity,” which “promised happiness and power” to white women (Carby 23).

The specter of the cult of Victorian true womanhood haunts Lutie Johnson, guiding the choices she makes throughout the novel. Lutie’s aspirations of middle-class respectability for herself and her son are thwarted by systems of white supremacy and oppression. Lutie is trying to imitate a blueprint for social mobility by moving into her own apartment after studying and finding a job as a civil servant, an opportunity outside of domestic labor; however, this blueprint was never meant for black Americans. The income she generates from her new job does not make her enough to save money after rent and expenses, thus creating the cycle of poverty that many black women like her experience, even though she has acquired a skilled job outside of cleaning homes and sex work.

Lutie rejects her intuition towards dangerous situations, such as ignoring “the instinctive, immediate fear she had felt when she first saw the Super” (20) and the discomfort she felt upon meeting Mrs. Hedges, whose eyes were “malignant as the eyes of a snake” that “stared at her –

wandering over her body, inspecting and appraising her from head to foot” (6), foreshadowing Mrs. Hedges plan to sell her to Junto. Lutie abandons her instincts in favor of realizing her middle-class white dreams which she believes can be achieved through hard work, against the backdrop of systemic racism. She tries to attain the middle-class ideal that is presented to her in mainstream magazines of white middle class families. Ultimately, systemic racism actively works against her so that she is unable to achieve this ideal no matter how much she tries.

Lutie and her husband Jim struggle to find work and remain employed in post-Depression-era New York. Francis Beal explains that “capitalism found it necessary to create a situation where the black man found it impossible to find meaningful or productive employment...he couldn’t find work of any kind. And the black woman, likewise, was manipulated by the System, economically exploited and physically assaulted. She could often find work in the white man’s kitchen, however, and sometimes became the sole breadwinner of the family” (340-341). Jim is unable to find work, “though he hunted for one – desperately, eagerly, anxiously” (Petry 30). Jim had exclaimed to Lutie, “All I want is a job. Just a job. Don’t they know if I knew how I’d change the color of my skin?” (Petry 30). They are married, have a child and are paying off the mortgage to a home in Jamaica, Queens. They are at the cusp of Lutie’s middle class aspiration by owning property as a married nuclear family, but are about to lose their home without income.

Lutie decides to take a job as a live in domestic worker that pays her seventy-five dollars a month, enough she knows to pay the interest on their home, as well as preventing them from needing to “apply for relief” (31) or a state-sponsored program that betrays her efforts towards middle-class mobility and bourgeois ambitions, thus creating what Ayesha K. Hardison calls the “bourgeois blues aesthetic”(56). Hardison explains that the “bourgeois blues

aesthetic...manifests in each text's irreconcilable conflict between the protagonist's desire for social mobility and the narrative's representation of black women's historically fixed social condition" (56). Lutie's desire for social mobility is consistently halted by the other self-serving characters of the novel that she encounters by moving onto 116th street. Petry reveals that Lutie's social condition as a single black mother dictates the life she will lead.

Lutie seeks out employment and finds a job as a full time live-in domestic worker after she and her husband lose the income from taking in foster children. While working for the Chandler's for two years in Connecticut, she saves money by skipping visits to see her husband and son, saving the train fare, sending it home to Jim and Bub instead. This selfless act contributes to the demise of her marriage, when she returns home to find another woman living with her husband in the home she has been paying for. Lutie had previously ignored a warning by an older Italian woman who ran the neighborhood grocery store who had given her a reference for her job as a domestic, telling Lutie, "It's best that the man do the work when the babies are young. And when the man is young. Not good for a woman to work when she's young. Not good for the man," promoting the idea of male being the breadwinners while women take care of the children (33).

Hardison claims that "Lutie's relegation to domestic work conflicts with her traditional domestic roles as wife and mother...she struggles to reconcile her disintegrating marriage with illusions of middle-class white domesticity, her need to work with the glorified image of sacrificial motherhood, and her sexual exploitation with the stratagems of racial uplift" (73). Working for the Chandlers, Lutie falls for the capitalist trap of the middle-class myth of the American dream, a dream that was not created for black Americans. The narrator tells the reader, "After a year of listening to their [the Chandlers'] talk, [Lutie] absorbed some of the same spirit.

The belief that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully enough” (43).

Citing Candice M. Jenkins idea of the “salvific wish” Hardison argues that “the restrictive covenants of middle class respectability” enables “Lutie’s subjugation under racial and patriarchal oppression” (73). This is because the salvific wish is unattainable. Lutie wants to both “protect herself with the inviolability of ladyhood” that the mythology and cult of white womanhood or “pedestal womanhood” (Hardison 145) is supposed to provide, as well as “to rescue the black community from racist accusations of sexual domestic pathology through the embrace of bourgeois propriety” (Hardison 73). Lutie’s hard work and sacrifices for her family cause its failure. Hardison continues to explain that “the salvific wish...is middle-class black’s response to white society’s pathologizing” of the black community, and as a “fixed working class subject,” i.e., the urban black female subject, Lutie cannot “claim the privileges of middle-class social mobility” (Hardison 73).

Situating Lutie within the private sphere of the Chandler’s white middle-class home allows Ann Petry to place Lutie in a space that provides a “unique access” to “white wealth” (Peterson 76) as a domestic servant. In doing so, Lutie’s exposure of Mr. Chandler’s alcoholism, Mrs. Chandler’s passiveness , their young son Henry Chandler Jr’s neglect, and Mr. Chandler’s Christmas morning suicide turned gun-shot accident “demystifies racial hierarchies...providing a counternarrative to the sensationalist, racist, stereotyping of African Americans”(Peterson 76) by revealing the insanity, corruption and hypocrisy of white supremacy and white middle class ideals that are exemplified in the unveiled disfunction that is the Chandler home. Rachel Peterson contends that the domestic servant “acquires agency” (11) through this process of witnessing and recording. Peterson reasons that Petry voices her “anti-capitalist sympathies

through the seemingly powerless, socially and politically negated figure of the servant” (Peterson 78), granting Lutie agency in her role as a domestic worker, that she is otherwise denied by the power structures that are trying to control her. While Petry lends voice to the domestic worker, we can find agency among the figure of the sex worker, as she is also powerless, socially and politically negated figure in the novel who should be given a sympathetic voice as a negated figure.

Hardison explains, “Housing discrimination and economic exploitation erase the special and social boundaries between neighbors and Lutie’s new home places her in close quarters with additional women from whom she desires to distinguish herself, namely Mrs. Hedges and Min” along with the sex workers in Mrs. Hedges’s home (76). Rather than living with her father’s unsophisticated girlfriend who exemplified the antithesis of middle-class respectability by “offending Lutie’s policing gaze” and “bourgeoise asceticism,” Lutie chooses to leave the safety of her imperfect family home to find her own apartment (Hardison 76). Already living in Harlem with her father she looks for an apartment within the same segregated boundaries because these are neighborhoods that will rent to black people because “[r]ace discrimination in New York’s housing and real estate markets relegated blacks of varying socioeconomic stations and backgrounds to the same undesirable living spaces” (Harris 170).

Hardison shows that “Lutie prefers to live under the menacing gaze of the predatory super of her rented apartment rather than with her inept father and his tacky girlfriend. Notions of decorum dictate her unwitting decisions and their reverberating consequences for her safety” (73). Those consequences to her safety become Lutie’s attempted rape by Jones the Super, Mrs. Hedges’s plot to traffic Lutie for their landlord Junto, her attempted rape and self-defense murder of Boots Smith, and the Super’s vengeful plan and entrapment of her son Bub to be arrested and

sent to reform school, a type of juvenile detention. Lutie Johnson has choices in the novel, not grand ones or perfect ones, but Petry makes it clear that even under the context of social immobility, Lutie is her own agent, even under the oppressive weight of systemic racism and the threat of the street in her segregated neighborhood.

As Brothels began to disappear, sex work became more visible in working class New York. Sex workers “enmeshed themselves tightly into the fabric of working-class life” becoming “an integral part of the community, visible to residents and business people, to adults and children, in essence to all of their neighbors” (Clement 87). The sex workers of Mrs. Hedges tenement brothel offer a view into the forms of labor available to black women in Harlem, as these are young women, unmarried or separated, who have moved North from the South. Mrs. Hedges finds them by looking out her window, and whom she invites them into her home to exploit. Mrs. Hedges described finding potential “business” by looking out of her window: They are always lonesome, sad-looking girls just up from the South, or little girls who were tired of going to high school, and who had seen too many movies and did not have the money to buy all the things they wanted. She could pick them out easily as they walked past. They wore bright-colored, short-skirted dresses and gold hooped earrings in their ears. Their mouths were a brilliant scarlet against the brown of their faces...And there were other little girls who were only slightly older who had been married and woke up one morning to discover that their husbands had moved out. With no warning. Suddenly. The shock of it stayed on their faces. (Petry 252) Mrs. Hedges would be there to ask these women, “I was wonderin’ if you wouldn’t like to earn a little extra money sometime” (252). Hardison explains that “while white society debases black maids as sexual threats to domesticity, the street repeatedly propositions single women as prostitutes” therefore Lutie’s “social condition historically dictates the inevitability of her

subjugation, and her fidelity to the politics of respectability produces her bourgeois blues” (72). Active players on the street like Mrs. Hedges want to swallow and use Lutie for their own benefit. Mrs. Hedges “snubs the patriarchal politics of respectability and predatorily capitalizes on the single women who relieve their economic despair with prostitution”(Hardison 76).

Hardison argues that “*The Street*...does not adhere strictly to the naturalist blueprint of social realism, and thus the novel challenges its generic conventions. Petry’s text significantly weighs the repercussions of Lutie’s decisions against her oppressive surroundings” (72). Lutie justifies renting the top-floor apartment that horrifies her and that already holds two people who she has a bad gut feeling about because in her mind, “You’ve got a choice a yard wide and ten miles long. You can sit down and twiddle your thumbs while your kid gets a free education from your father’s blowsy girlfriend. Or you can take this apartment” (19). Her aspirations for middle class mobility are an important driving motivator behind her choices, but ultimately her love for her son Bub and the possibilities of his racial advancement in society if she works hard enough is the biggest motivation behind her choices.

The women who work in Mrs. Hedges apartment, which Lutie refers to as a “whorehouse” are part of this historical reality of women in the urban sex economy (57). Alice Clement explains that “[t]enement prostitutes” were “integrated into the communities in which they lived, these women sometimes worked as casual prostitutes, using prostitution to supplement other income. Their presence reflected the real differences between working-class and middle-class attitudes about prostitution. While working-class neighbors may not have approved of prostitution, they also understood why women resorted to it and the very real crisis that pushed women into this work” (107).

Jones the Super, who becomes obsessed with Lutie and attempts to rape her, hates Mrs.

Hedges and tries to get Mrs. Hedges arrested for “[r]unnin’ a disorderly house” (90). He is met by the tenants of the building, who he seeks out to file complaints about Mrs. Hedges as dismissive and indignant. They do not care that Mrs. Hedges runs a brothel in their building on 116th street. They offer responses such as “Mis’ Hedges’ girls come up here and looked after me when I was sick,” or, “Mis’ Hedges keeps her eye on Johnnie after school,” providing claims that they are active participants in the community (92).

When the Super Jones argues that “Them girls she’s got in there ain’t no good” (92). They respond that “Goods most of the folks round here. And they minds they own business. You leave Mis’ Hedges alone” (92). Some of tenants understand that there is a sentiment of revenge behind the Super’s trying to get rid of Mrs. Hedges. They respond by saying, “Wotsa matter, Poppa? Won’t she let you buy nothin’ in there?,” referring to sex and, “Go on, man, them gals is the sweetest things on the block,” “Hell, she’s got a refine place in there” (92). The unnamed tenants in conversation with the Super do not vilify, victimize or stigmatize the young women who are employed in Mrs. Hedges brothel. What they do is showcase that the sex workers are part of the community. They are included into “most of the folks”; they are respectful and participate in community standards by minding their business, and even act as caretakers for one of the neighbors kids when the mother is not home, most likely because she is out working.

The conversation between the tenants and the Super about the sex workers in Mrs. Hedges apartment indicate that “prostitutes often functioned as integral parts of the community, relying, as other women did, on networks of friendship to sustain them” (Clement 104). If Lutie had been willing to engage with the other tenants and sex workers, she may have had another set of eyes and ears watching out for her son to help her when she wasn’t home. However, because Lutie sees these them as victims, they are bad influences that do not contribute to her bourgeois

aesthetic.

After quitting her job as a domestic laborer, Lutie studies shorthand and typing at night to become a civil servant while working at a steam laundry and living with her father on Seventh Avenue. Lutie is able to move into the apartment on 116th street because of her employment typing downtown. One of her major issues was never being home when Bub would come home from school in the early afternoons. During those hours he would be alone in the apartment and out of boredom would go and spend time with the Super who was trying to use him to get closer to Lutie, as well as hang out on the street. Lutie is scared of the streets because anything can happen to her son when she has not watching. After attempting to rape Lutie, and later finding out through Mrs. Hedges that she is saving Lutie for Junto their landlord and that he must stay away from her, the Super enacts his plan of revenge to get Bub arrested. Lutie's son naively believes the Super is secretly helping the police find a thief and begins stealing mail from building in the neighborhood, handing them over to the Super every day. The Super tips off the police and Bub is caught in the act and carted away in front of everyone in the neighborhood. Bub's arrest leads Lutie to seek out Boots Smith to help her pay for a lawyer for Bub (she did not need one, but the lawyer omits this information to take advantage of her desperation, charging her she two hundred dollars), and murders him as he attempts to rape her as well.

Upon meeting Jones the Super to rent the apartment, she becomes uncomfortable and later on becomes terrified of him after his attempted rape. He has become mentally unstable from living in basements and cellars of buildings throughout the years. Mrs. Hedges refuses him access to the women in her apartment and because of his age and demeanor, he stares at the young women walking down the street in front of the building longingly. He is rejected by young attractive single women on the street and young women who sell their sexual services. The only

women that stay with him are his age and unappealing. He cannot stand the sight of Bub because “he looks like whoever the black bastard was that used to screw her” (88), indicating his emasculation via the image of a strong younger man possessing Lutie. He is delusional and believes that his rejection by Lutie Johnson is because he is living with a woman named Min. After he attempts to rape Lutie, he confuses her screaming as a misunderstanding as he tries to drag her into the basement, an image that evokes Lutie being dragged to hell.

Ann Petry presents a scathing and dismal view of the black men in Harlem and a compassionate view of working black women in her novel. Lutie’s “...attempt to escape the poverty of New York’s inner city provide one of the most startling examples we have of the corrosive effects of racism and poverty on the human psyche.” (Hardison 117). While coming home one freezing afternoon Lutie describes a scene of women carrying bags full of groceries: “They’ve been out all day working in white folks’ kitchens...then they come home and cook and clean for their own families half the night...here on this street, the women trudged along overburdened, overworked, their own homes neglected while they looked after someone else’s while the men on the street swung along empty-handed, well dressed, and carefree. Or they lounged against the sides of the buildings, their hands in their pockets while they stared at the women who walked past, probably deciding which woman they should select to replace the wife who was out working all day” (65). Gloria Wade-Gayles reinforces the scene, explaining that working class black women “leave apartments of poverty to spend the day working in homes of comfort and luxury, and they return to those apartments with meager earnings and injured pride” (143). Lutie is remembering her own experience with her husband Jim who lived in New York with their son and whose only job was to pay the mortgage every month while she worked in Connecticut away from her family, and who instead wasted the money and moved another

woman into their home.

Lutie Johnson is propositioned by Mrs. Hedges to participate in sex work, not by working in her brothel, but by being the landlord Junto's personal sex worker. Junto is the building's white landlord, and owner of the Junto Bar and Grill, a popular neighborhood bar in the neighborhood. He pays off the police to leave Mrs. Hedges brothel alone. After Mrs. Hedges propositions her, Lutie thinks, "if you live on this damn street you're supposed to want to earn a little extra money sleeping around nights. With nice white gentlemen" (84).

Readers are conflicted with feeling sympathy for Mrs. Hedges because of her past; however, she is not a sympathetic character because she is a predator. She was homeless and started working her way up with the help of Junto who was also a man on the streets. She wears a bandana after becoming bald from the fire that left her entire body in burns. She does not see Lutie as a person; she sees her as a financial opportunity. She saw the young women on the streets looking for work after coming up from the south during the migration as a financial opportunity. They would pay her rent. She would sell their sexual labor and she would make her income that way.

There is a theme of men preying on Lutie Johnson throughout the novel. Junto first sees Lutie one night at his bar having a drink. A man named Boots Smith, who is the pianist at the bar and Junto's muscle approaches her and tells Lutie he is in a band, prompting Lutie to tell him that she is a singer. She auditions for the band and impresses them with her voice while singing the blues. Boots invites her to sing with the band and she sees this moment as an opportunity that would provide her the income and lifestyle that could move her and her son out of the apartment, allowing her to be a mother who is home every day when her son returns from school.

However, this dream of hers is a nefarious scheme on the part of Junto the landlord. He

enlists both Mrs. Hedges and Boots to get her to consensually agree to the arrangement which would make Lutie his exclusive woman, until he was bored, and then Mrs. Hedges would keep Lutie for herself and sell her to white clients. Junto threatens to ruin Boots and send him back to the streets if he does not convince Lutie to sleep with him. He instructs Boots not to pay Lutie for her singing. He is trying to trap Lutie into being his mistress. Boots desires Lutie as well and resentfully participates in this plan because the luxurious middleclass lifestyle he has obtained working for Junto has higher value than trying to sleep with Lutie. Boots decides to rape Lutie as revenge against Junto.

The persistent efforts that Lutie makes to advance herself are systemically obstructed and thwarted by players on the street in the form of the Super, Mrs. Hedges, Junto and Boots, as well as other white men who try to take advantage of her by asking her to sleep with them in exchange for whatever she needs. She sees the streets of Harlem as “the North’s lynch mobs...the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place...brick by brick by eager white hands” (323). The desire and attempts to possess, consume, and discard her black body by the players in the neighborhood go back to the idea of slave ownership and the auction block where Lutie has no control over her circumstances while “the street outside played nursemaid to your kid and trained your kid for you, and it was an evil father and a malicious mother” (407). When Jones and Boots cannot attain her, emasculated by their loss of power they revert to methods of sexual violence to possess her.

Lutie is a young black mother who is married and whose husband is unable to find any form of labor because of systemic racist policies. These circumstances of institutionalized racism lead her to becoming the economic provider for her family because she is able to find a job as a black woman in domestic labor. For many black women, domestic labor was one of the few

forms of labor which they had opportunities, whether it was live in labor, or daily cleaning responsibilities in white people's homes. This created a shift in gendered power dynamics that disrupted male supremacist ideologically accepted mythologies that espoused men as the bread winners for their families.

Informal ways in which women survived in poor segregated cities are exemplified by the character of Min in *The Street*. Min is an older woman of indeterminant age. She lives with Jones the Super in his rent-free apartment on the first floor of the building. They are companions out of necessity, as they share a space and bed together, but there are no romantic feelings shared between them. After Lutie moves into the building, his focus is diverted to obsessively desiring a younger attractive woman and he begins to beat Min and their dog out of rage. She works daily as a domestic worker and her method of surviving the streets is to cohabit with men who would help provide room and board while she saves her money. Men she has previously lived with have beaten and robbed her of her earnings before and so she stashes her money in her ornate piece of furniture that was gifted to her by one of her employers. The table moves with her from one living situation to another. She realizes the Super's obsession over Lutie has become too violent and that she might die soon if she remains living with him. She decides to leave without having found new lodging. This is a method of survival, having chosen to make her escape while he spends the morning painting a vacated unit in the building. She does not have new lodgings ready before calling on the street porter to pick up her things. As he begins pushing her items off of 116th street, decides to try and live with him (371), thus ensuring her safety and loneliness as an older woman by sharing a space with a man in her Harlem neighborhood since "a woman living alone really didn't stand much of a chance" (370).

Mrs. Hedges is a paradox of the racist mammy figure. The mammy figure, as David

Pilgrim illustrates, was the desexualized image of black women whose purpose was to be the polar opposite of the “idealized white woman” that lacked “all sexual and sensual qualities” (63). She was “portrayed as dark-skinned, often pitch black, in a society that regarded black skin as ugly...obese, sometimes morbidly overweight...often portrayed as old, or at least middle-aged”. Most importantly, during slavery, “de-eroticizing of Mammy meant that the white wife—and by extension, the white family—was safe” from the idea of the licentious jezebel (63), by hiding the fact that white men were attracted to black women (64). Petry describes Mrs. Hedges as an unattractive woman, whose height and dark skin not only intimidated men in the South but men in the North as well. Mrs. Hedges motivation for moving North was to find a romantic partner. After narrowly escaping a fire with her life, she becomes bald and disfigured by scars. She dons the bandana that covers her head which she is known for from that moment forward and we only see her when she’s leaning outside of her window watching the street. After Junto sets her up in her own apartment, she begins using other women’s bodies to make money. She is far from the nurturing mammy figure, as her interests in helping Lutie is to lay a trap for her eventual trafficking, since once Junto is done with her, she can sell her among other white men.

The novel culminates after Lutie’s son’s arrest and with her murder of Boots Smith. She goes to him to get money to pay for a lawyer for Bub. He is there with Junto and they try to trap Lutie and make her have sex with Junto in order to get the money she needs. She tries to escape and murders Boots when he tries to rape her. The narrator says, “This impulse to violence had been in her for a long time, growing, feeding, until finally she had blown up in a thousand pieces” (434). By murdering Boots, even in self-defense, Lutie’s “efforts to maintain bourgeois respectability” have been thwarted as “his blood stains her white gloves, which are her last anchor to ladyhood” (Hardison 81). If Lutie had succumbed to sleeping with Boots, Junto and

becoming a sex worker for Mrs. Hedges, her circumstances and income would not have led her to a “middle-class white suburbia” because of *The Street’s* “naturalist elements” (Hardison 81). She runs away to Chicago, leaving her son behind in jail, never to see him again because she believes it is best he thinks she left him than to know she was a murderer. Hardison contends that “If Lutie had no bourgeois desire, she would have fallen prey to the street long before. However, her commitment to the edicts of middle-class respectability too is a failed effort...Excluded from the true white womanhood by systemic racism, sexism, and classism, Lutie is not naïve but remains convinced about the integrity of her performance as a respectable lady” (Hardison 81-82). Lutie is essentially punished by white supremacist society, in the form of the street, for having aspirations for herself and her son.

Chapter Two: “[S]he’d know how to make us some safe money”- Mitigating Predatory White Men in Louise Meriwether’s *Daddy Was a Number Runner*

Louise Meriwether’s novel is a feminist catalyst to the theme and trend of the 1970s Black Power movement of black women’s writing about racial and sexist conflict in society, family and particularly exposing truths about how men participate in the oppression of black women as well. Gloria Wade-Gayles states that “fiction mirrors fact” and that black women writers took their “personal experiences as black women...turn[ing] traditional images upside down, inside out and expose them as poor reflectors of the truths of black womanhood” (12). We see Meriwether’s young protagonist Francis Coffin experience institutional racism and the effects segregation and extreme poverty has on her community, friends and family, throughout the span of a year in her life in Harlem as a pre-teen black girl. She learns what James Baldwin describes as “the recognition that the men, one’s only hope, have also been cut down and cannot save you” (Baldwin 6).

In his foreword to *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, James Baldwin describes the coming of age story a “point of view of a black girl on the edge of terrifying womanhood” (5). He calls the numbers lottery game that the community plays and that Francis’s father works for as “the American dream in black-face” and at the heart of the novel is Francis’s realization “of being one of the victims of a collective rape—for history, and especially and emphatically in the black white arena, is not the past, but the present” (5-6). Louise Meriwether begins the novel on “June 2, 1934” (2), halfway into the Depression era that lasted into the late 1930s before the beginning of World War II. A lack of job opportunities for white American men has been reduced, leaving fractional work opportunities for black men. Gloria Wade-Gayles states that “[p]oor and unskilled black women in white America have historically been ‘ghettoized’ in the labor

market...In large urban areas, they are often number runners, prostitutes and procurers” (142). Black women still have the option of working as domestics with reduced wages under increasingly exploitative working conditions. Sex work remains an opportunity for black women as well. In the case for Francis’s father, James Coffin, he has found work running numbers in his neighborhood on commission from the winning hits, having lost his job painting houses six months prior which had been “none to steady to begin with” (21), revealing the difficulty in finding consistent work during this time period for Francis’s family. LaShawn Harris explains that “many black New Yorker’s faithfully took part in games of chance, most notably the city’s popular yet illegal numbers racket” (176). Francis would help her father by collecting her neighbors’ hopeful number slips in the mornings before going to school, a task that familiarized Francis with the people in her neighborhood who know her by her first name.

Comparable to Ann Petry’s opening description of the cold winter wind blowing garbage and dirt on the Harlem street where the novel’s protagonist Lutie Johnson finds an apartment for rent, Meriwether greets us in the heat of summer time that fuses the smells of rotting garbage from the tenement dumbwaiters, fried fish emanating from the apartments, vomit, urine and potential dead rats from the basement, filling the street with people who are trying to escape the heat of their buildings (12). The similarities in the two introductions show the novels in conversation with one another and exemplify the setting of the street as tantamount to the people who live there. It is a visceral experience for readers to recognize the combination of smells that bring those neighborhoods to life.

During an argument with Henrietta Coffin and her husband James Coffin, he argues “They ain’t got jobs for the ofays [white people] so how in hell you expect me to find anything?” (30). The Depression has devastated the black community, where jobs for black men are hard to

find when white men are unemployed as well. Nelly McCay in the novel's afterword reiterates that labor opportunities "for poor working-class black women, and even some with trade skills, only this menial work [domestic labor] or prostitution, outside of the law, was open to them for a long time" (220). Unlike Lutie Johnson in *The Street*, Francis's mother and father do not look down on non-skilled labor. While they may dream of middle class aspirations, they do not have the luxury of desiring a bourgeois aesthetic when they are struggling to eat and clothe themselves, except for Mr. Coffin's insistence that Henrietta remain a stay at home mother, which subscribes to traditional middle class gender roles of man as breadwinner, provider and authority figure. When Francis's brother Sterling goes downtown with a shoe-shine box he has made himself, his father provides him with transportation fare and regards him as "enterprising" (33). Lutie's response to her eight year old son Bub making his own shoe shine box and returning home with money to share with her, was to smack her son across the face in anger because she did not want him to think that shoe shining was the only kind of work he was going to do for the rest of this life (Petry 66-67).

The furniture in the Coffin's family tenement home includes a mahogany table with dragon-head legs (16), reminiscent of the "overornate" and "varnished" table with "intricately carved clawed feet" that Min owned in *The Street*. Lutie Johnson had surmised that Min's table looked like the "kind of big ugly furniture white women love to give to their maids" (Petry 24). The dragon-headed table and matching furniture set that belongs to the Coffins is a hand-me down gift from the "Jewish plumber downstairs" (16). Much like Min used her claw foot table to hide her earnings from domestic labor from being stolen by all the men she has previously cohabitated with, the Coffin family use the matching dragon head buffet to hide the father's collected numbers from the police. This does not prevent the police from arresting Mr. Coffin,

causing him to have a record and lose his job running numbers (73).

The Depression provided a “dehumanizing impact on poor black women” (Ransby 76). Ella Baker witnessed and wrote an article titled “The Bronx Slave Market” concerning the black women waiting for work as domestic laborers, as well as sex workers on Simpson Avenue. Baker wrote, “Not only is human labor bartered and sold for slave wage...Negro women, old and young, sometimes bedraggled, sometimes neatly dressed-but with the invariable paper bundle, waiting expectantly for Bronx housewives to buy their strength and energy...maybe their husbands, their sons, their brothers, under the subterfuge of work, offer worldly-wise girls higher bids for their time” (qtd. in Ransby 76). The paper bundle Baker describes is illustrated by Min in *The Street*, as she is often mentioned carrying a paper bundle containing her domestic uniform and shoes when she goes to work for her employer. While we do not see the congregations of black women in Petry and Meriwether’s novels waiting to be hired for a day of work with meager earnings and exploitative conditions, Meriwether describes as Francis’s mother pleads with her husband James Coffin to go up to the Bronx to get “some days work” (29), presumably in the same scenario that Baker described in her article.

The contemporary philosophical debate behind whether sex work is a form of labor that is liberating for some women is individual to the worker’s experiences. One way of reducing the stigma attached to sex work is by decriminalizing it, which leads to the creation of labor protections by halting arrests and preventing exploitation that occurs through criminalization. Sex workers would not have to fear arrest and exploitation at the hands of the police and the prison system in order to disclose theft, abuse, and trafficking. These protections do not exist as long as sex work is criminalized.

In *Daddy Was a Number Runner*, China Doll is a young black woman who is working as

a street-based sex worker on 118th street in Harlem under a pimp, a black man named Alfred (13). China Doll is Francis Coffin's best friend Suki's older sister. Francis interacts with and observes China Doll who is kind to her and gives her advice and small tokens of money when she visits. Francis has the misfortune of having to occasionally watch her get publicly abused and battered by Alfred. There is contention between Suki and her mother, because of fears that Suki will follow in her sister's footsteps and become a sex worker too. Towards the end of the novel, China Doll murders Alfred because he has raped her younger sister Suki.

The exploitation China Doll experiences at the hands of her pimp Alfred is a result of criminalization. "In the west the pimp as a social actor in the field of sex work in the late nineteenth century when numerous laws were adopted to eliminate 'prostitution'. The consequence of these changes was to increase the isolation and vulnerability of female sex workers, who then came to depend on the pimp's support and protection" (Parent and Bruckert 14). To protect herself from the law, such as being arrested, affording bail, potential imprisonment, as well as protecting herself from clients who may harm her through assault, non-payment and theft, she chooses the abusive relationship of working for Alfred, handing over unspecified profits from her sexual labor, in exchange for criminal protections because "the illegality of activities linked to sex work discourages female sex workers from pressing charges when they have been the victims of abuse or violence, they fear that they will be arrested" (Parent and Bruckert 35).

China Doll refuses domestic labor as a form of income. Watching her mother work as a domestic, she decides she will not clean for white women for "pennies a day" (120). She chooses paid sexual labor and has agency. Contemporary scholars such as Colette Parent and Chris Bruckert argue that "thinking about sex work as work allows us to transcend neo-liberal

rhetoric about choice and to appreciate that sex workers, like any other workers, are selecting their labor location within the context of a constrained range of options” (65). In another attempt by China Doll to exert her own agency, she premeditates the murder of her pimp Alfred after he rapes her younger sister Suki towards the end of the novel after telling him “I’ll kill you” if he ever laid a finger on her sister (121). In an unexpected twist, the courts clear the charges of murder against China Doll because they were deemed “justifiable homicide” (206) Meriwether’s choice to do this contrasts with Petry having Lutie run away after murdering Boots in self-defense. Whether China Doll continues street-based labor after she is released, on her own or under another pimp for criminal protection, is unknown.

Gloria Wade-Gayles states that “the sixties was a decade of black protest, the seventies was assuredly the decade of women’s liberation” (56). Meriwether publishing her novel in 1970 at the end of the civil rights movement and cusp of the Black power movement exposes not only the injustices towards the poor working class Black community in Harlem, but also participates in the emerging trend of exposing how black men also subjugate black women and impose their misogyny and patriarchal concepts that throughout the novel contribute to Francis’s mother’s oppression. Mrs. Coffin is not allowed to work, even though they cannot feed their children, or apply for relief because the cost is Mr. Coffin’s ego and pride because he believes in the idea of men providing for their families of the time.

We see the education that Francis receives at her public school where there is only one Black teacher and the rest are white and terrified of their students of color. The majority of the kids do not respect their teachers and do not pay attention in class, such as Francis who openly participates in reading smutty romance comics during math class. When confronted by her sewing teacher that Francis could become a seamstress if she just came to class more often,

Francis responds that she wants to become a secretary when she grows up. Her teacher tells her it is unlikely she will find that form of professional work and that she should not have hope and just learn practical skills that provide jobs for black women (144).

China Doll repeatedly instructs her sister Suki and Francis to stay in school because they “were gonna have a better break than she had”(120) through education so that they do not have to become sex workers like herself. She is indicating that while her educational opportunities are behind her, they are still young and there is a potential for work outside of sex work and domestic labor. China Doll’s turn to sex work is a choice made out of financial need, and for her was more self-respecting than cleaning for white people. As Huang emphasizes, “economically poor or unskilled women may benefit from sex work as they receive a better economic return on their investment of time and effort” (84). Her public life as a sex worker embarrasses her mother and her younger sister, who throughout the novel is combative and angry because her older sister is a “whore” and her father, an unemployed drunk who can be found sleeping in random hallways of buildings, eventually passes away from his alcoholism (13).

In Huang’s 2016 study of interviewed sex workers in Sydney, Australia she claimed that “the sex worker participants expressed that they felt offended to be viewed as victims or women lacking choices, as it is implied that sex work is not a good choice (89). China Doll emphasized to her younger sister that the money she was making was more than she would make as a domestic servant. Huang had observed in her study that sex work “is the most viable option” to “earn more money in a short period of time compared to other occupations” (91).

Similar to Amy Huang’s study on sex workers, one of my objectives was to also “highlight the less common view of sex work as a legitimate occupation and to allow the voices of these stigmatized and marginalized women to be heard” (84). While there is no definitive

positive representation of sexual labor in Meriwether's novel, China Doll's specific inclusion in the novel allows one perspective to be presented to readers. She talks back to her pimp and threatens him, even at the expense of physical violence. She makes it clear that she is not coerced into sex work and that it is a decision she weighed between her two options of domestic work and having sex for money. She is young, attractive, and understands that she will earn more in the space of sexual labor than cleaning after white people.

Francis is exposed to the existence of sex workers at young age, although she does not understand sex. Her father, James Coffin, does not want Francis to be influenced by her exposure to the neighborhood sex workers, and frequently scolds her when she and her friends walk down 118th street. Francis "knew all about them anyway" because Suki's sister China Doll "was a whore on this very same street" (13). She and her friends would sneak down 118th street "hopeful to see the prostitutes doing something exciting" (26).

There is an eroticized interracial fantasy at play between the pedophile white men who follow and fondle Francis throughout the novel. The historical breadth has its origins in chattel slavery and the unlimited access to black bodies, specifically the bodies of black women by white slave owners and anyone else invited by them. The men who molest Francis are predominantly Jewish men, indicating their participation historical presence in segregated black neighborhoods during the 1930s. In Francis's neighborhood there are seldom black-owned businesses. The butcher and the baker are Jewish and consistently grope Francis when they see her with invitations of free food. When Francis's mother sends her to the butcher with a list, he gives Francis two extra soup bones after she begrudgingly allows him to squeeze her pre-pubescent chest (43). At her local movie theatre, she is hunted by the soon to be dead Jewish man, who gives her money and molest her while she watches the movie. She has no other

recourse but to sit there and accept the abuse by white men for nickels and dimes as this is a routine she has been conditioned to experience. Francis focuses on the film playing in order to distract herself from the man groping her until feels him digitally rape her which elicits extreme pain, pleasure and shame, as this is the first time Francis has been penetrated. She runs home to wash her underwear in fear that her mother would notices the wetness and she would get in trouble (89).

Robin Bernstein explains that childhood in the nineteenth century was defined by innocence and that “representations of black children” were “evacuated of innocence” and that black children were “redefined as a nonchild—a ‘pickaninny’” (34). Bernstein illustrates the “[c]haracteristics of the pickaninny” stereotype as having “dark or sometimes jet-black skin, exaggerated eyes and mouth, the action of gorging (especially on watermelon), and the state of being threatened or attacked by animals” they “often wear ragged clothes (which suggest parental neglect) and are sometimes partially or fully naked. Genitals or buttocks are often exposed” and in “some of the most degrading constructions, pickaninnies shit or piss in public” (34). The exposed bodies and nakedness of the pickanniny image sexualizes black children, applying to them the same racist trope of hyper-sexualization attached to black women. The stereotype presents the pickaninny as not being able to “experience or express pain or sustain wounds in any remotely realistic way” (34). Meriwether showcases that Francis and her friend Suki are subjected to this racist image that was historically popular by the pedophilic white men who stalk them, viewing them as the “imagined, subhuman black juvenile who was typically depicted outdoors, merrily accepting (or even inviting) violence” (34).

The Ebony Earls are a gang of teenage boys in the neighborhood. Their members include Francis’s older brother James Junior and a neighbor’s older brother. The Ebony Earls

unknowingly rob and murder Francis's abuser, the middle-aged white man from the movie theatre, in the hallway of a building where he frequented a black sex worker. The morning newspaper details that he was a father of two young girls, one of whom is Francis's age. The white men in the novel are pedophiles, sexual predators and opportunists. The only white man Francis enjoys and dreams about is Ken Maynard, a 1930s movie star known for his cowboy Westerns. As Francis starts to realize her circumstances as a young black woman in a segregated black neighborhood and experiences the protests, riots, and speeches for racial justice occurring in Harlem, and the system of prejudice that is failing her family, she finds herself no longer rooting against the Native American's being shot in Maynard's films. Her recurrent dreams and fantasies of Maynard appearing to her as a white savior on horseback evolves into a faceless figure (204) , opening the possibilities to new symbolic heroes, including herself.

The choice of 1930s Harlem as the setting for Louise Meriwether's coming of age novel showcases what Barbara Ransby described as the "politically and intellectually invigorating place to be" where "intense political debates raged everywhere, spawning militant protests in the streets" (Ransby 67). We see the events occur throughout the novel. Francis experiences firsthand or by ear the following day via her family, neighbors, and morning white newspapers the numerous riots. The "nectar divine" of that socially and politically unprecedented time reminisced by Ella Baker is the same nectar that a pre-teenage Francis Coffin consumes (Ransby 67), providing for her the social understanding of her environment, and a growing love for her black community, neighborhood, and family whose complexities in poverty show their willingness to survive and celebrate under systemic racism.

Jesus G. Smith and Aurolyn Luykx (2017) state that "Fanon (1952) argued that interracial sex is always centered on racial fetishism, resulting in dehumanization of Blacks; that desire for

Blackness is always a racist response to White fears of Black sexuality; and that desiring Blackness is always tied to the painful past of racial exploitation” (4). Francis Coffin is at the mercy of a neighborhood of white outsiders who are predators, men with an erotic fantasy of the sexualized pickanniny child that they play out as they stalk her. They come to Harlem to seek out young black girls to expose themselves to, molest, and rape, as well as operate businesses in a black segregated neighborhood that forces its black residents to buy from white business owners, taking their money outside of the neighborhood rather than creating a circular economy between black business owners in the community and its residents. They fulfill their fantasies of interracial desire and accepted sexualized exploitation of black bodies condoned by slavery when they seek out Francis, and the other young black girls in her neighborhood.

Suki and Francis inadvertently and unknowingly participate in the sex trade as well. Francis reveals early in the novel that Suki would “know how what to do to make some safe money,” not wanting to go into her apartment because the white pedophile was still hanging around the roof of her building (26). Earning safe money comprises of exposing themselves to homeless men, who will throw their nickels at them, while they raise their dresses and underwear from a distance (45). She is trying to navigate a terrain of exploitation safely, because she is underage it is egregious to say that she allows them to molest her, and that her acceptance of money is her affirmative consent to pedophilic sexual exploitation. We assume this has occurring for some time as Francis is an eleven-year-old girl on the verge of turning twelve and has already been forcibly exposed to the genitals of pedophiles in her own apartment building, park and neighborhood multiple times.

She has a recurring encounter with the formerly mentioned murder white man who has followed her into the movie theatre. Hearing the whisper “Hey, little girl” before entering into

her apartment with the broken latch, Francis Coffin looks up and recounts, “I tiptoed around the railing and peaked up into the face of the white man who had followed me to the movies last Monday. He had tried to feel my legs and I changed my seat. He found me and sat next to me again, giving me a dime. His hands fumbled under my skirt and when he got to the elastic of my bloomers, I moved again. It was the same man...short and bald with a fringe of fuzzy hair around the back of his head. He was standing in the roof doorway” (15). He exposes his penis to her, which she refers to as his “pee-pee” reminding readers her true state of adolescence as well as her developed street smarts when she tells him she does not want to touch it, to throw the dime down. When he does not throw down the money she threatens to tell her father, sending the man running as he throws the dime down at her (15).

Francis Coffin has not yet experienced any sexual intimacies or exploration with boys her own age, prior to being kissed by her friend's teenage brother Vallie. Vallie's arrival into her dark apartment stairwell saves Francis from being raped by a sixteen-year-old, cat killing teenager named Sonny, who has cornered Francis under the stairs while trying to forcibly pull down her underwear while rubbing his exposed penis on her (99). Francis objections are ignored, and her terror paralyzes her before Vallie's appearance causes Sonny to pretend he was just play boxing with Francis (99-101). She experiences the neighborhood boys whistle and harass her, as well as Sonny trying to rape her, as well as having a history of being groped by adult white men.

Similar to Francis and Suki finding safe ways of making money, we see this same friendship dynamic between orphaned teenage friends Wonnie and Mildred in *Third Ward Newark* (1946) by Curtis Lucas. Although they are a few years older than Francis and Suki, they are young teenage girls living in a segregated urban enclave in Newark, New Jersey, also known as the Third Ward. Wonnie's friend Mildred already knows “how to get money” in a parallel

way to Suki showing Francis how to make “safe money” in *Daddy Was a Number Runner* (11). Mildred talks to older black men and has them pay their way at a dance, as well as allowing the white owner of the diner, who is similarly described as a fat “funny, red-faced man” as the white men in Meriwether’s novel (10), who grope Mildred’s chest so that their meal with Wonnie is free. She promises him more, but they run out of the restaurant ahead of time to avoid further sexual contact and exchange. Mildred laughs at Wonnie, proclaiming, “I wouldn’t have nothing to do with a white man for a thousand dollars. That slobby ain’t never going to see me again” (12). They later get kidnapped by two white men looking to rape them; Mildred gets murdered and Wonnie escapes. The community of the Third Ward react to the news of the death of the teenage Mildred by exclaiming their rage against white men: “White bastards! Pay a colored girl fifteen dollars a week to scratch floors, and fifteen dollars a night to sleep with them” (38).

One of the most compelling descriptions of historical economic positions of black women that Curtis Lucas presents in his novel are the employment opportunities that were created during World War II for women to work in factories. Gloria Wade-Gayles explains that during the 1940’s, “under pressure from the Fair Employment Practices Commission and other government agencies, blacks were visible in defense plants throughout the nation...and other industries that thrived in the war economy” (27). *Third Ward Newark*’s protagonist Wonnie finds work on a shipyard that employs a mixed group of black men and women working alongside white men and women. This labor opportunity presents a contrast to Petry’s novel that does not discuss war jobs as an option although they both take place throughout World War II.

Lucas displays sex work in his novel, and like Petry and Meriwether sympathizes and protests against the circumstances that contributed to working class black women having to participate in the sex labor economy. The sex workers in the novel are present in a local bar

called the Gin Mill owned by the white man who had attempted to rape Wonnie and murdered Mildred. The bar's patrons are the black residents of the Hill. Lucas describes a scene where a woman named Ida is in the bar trying to find a client. The narrator explains that "the war had come along bringing good jobs a little too late to save Ida. She had been hauled into court too many times, and she had done too many stretches in Caldwell [prison]. She had grown too accustomed to a hustler's life to change when the war started" (104). There aren't as many young women who are trying to find clients in the bar because they have war jobs, which showed that black women "hadn't had a chance before the war. Only the older ones, those who were too far gone to change, still hustled in places like the Gin Mill. They were the lost ones, grim reminders of the hard depression years" (104). Those hard years of the Depression that precede Lucas's and Petry's novels are exhibited by Louise Meriwether in her novel.

Both Lucas's and Petry's novels were published in the same year of 1946, providing two examples of segregated neighboring cities experiencing the effects of poverty on their community and specifically expose black woman who do what they have to do to survive. Gloria Wade-Gayles explains that "at the end of the war 'black women were the first to be fired...and through economic need were forced back into domestic and other service jobs'" (30). The owner of the Gin Mill laments the loss of young black sex workers in his bar because they used to make him money by selling drinks. It was a symbiotic relationship where they were able to find clients in a safe location and he was able to profit off of them as well (125). Lucas exposes that if white people had given young black women job opportunities in places such as downtown stores, and offices then they would not have had to turn to sex work (134). Wonnie loses her war job, and so do the other black women and "colored girls who hadn't been near" the Gin Mill "in a long time were drifting back again" to become sex workers again (207).

Louise Meriwether was able to put the black family under focus and truly engage with how structures of racism truly tore apart a family that had been struggling but happy in *Daddy Was a Number Runner*. Meriwether shows the effects of the Depression on working class black families. Prior to the Coffin's move from Brooklyn, where Mr. Coffin was employed as a painter during the war, to a segregated neighborhood in Harlem, the Coffin family began to deteriorate because of poverty. Each individual family member is motivated to try and survive amidst the systemic racism. Meriwether shows the painful circumstances of Francis's sexual molestation by white pedophiles, as well as the discrimination that plagues her neighborhood and keeps everyone poor and disallows their advancement by keeping them in menial jobs such as domestic labor and criminalized jobs such as number running and sex work. Meriwether's choice of China Doll as a sex worker brings focus to form the underground sex economy where China Doll's job requires she have a pimp in order to evade arrest and theft. Francis Coffin witnesses and learns to navigate this terrain as an adolescent pre-teen girl.

Conclusion

I was encumbered by “dreams of subversion” (Morrison 3), frozen by the desire to prove radical sexual autonomy and freedom hiding within the margins or secretly whispered by supporting characters that would provide evidence that sex workers were engaging in a feminist revolt in novels by African American women. It is important to understand the reality of the lived experiences, manifestations of trauma, and the burden of survival that sex work as a form of labor brought. Sex work can be subversive and an act of rebellion, but it should not be romanticized, as this reduces the very complex nature of sexuality, intimacies, individual moralities and needs for financial survival, especially among women of color. Rather than seeking affirmations of sex positivity in sexual labor, I allowed the novels to show me the complexities found in engaging and rejecting sex work.

The early twentieth century gave way to vice raids and organizations aimed at reducing inter-race mingling, targeting black women sex workers in brothels, hotels, night clubs, tenement apartments and the streets. Their aim was to remove them from middle and upper-class neighborhoods. The laws against brothels gave way to the rapid increase in indoor sex work by providing hotel owners to rent rooms to sex workers as well as work together bringing in clientele and providing safety. The backdrop of vice organizations of the early twentieth century intertwined with race relations form the backdrop of Ann Petry’s *The Street* and Louise Meriwether’s *Daddy Was a Number Runner* .

The novels in conversation with one another expound compelling uses of sex work, intricately woven in the lives of the women in *The Street* and *Daddy Was a Number Runner*. Toni Morrison asserts that the “black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (5).

The black woman sex worker as a literary figure has been reduced to the margins the literary imagination. Exploring the “complex working lives” of these historically unrepresented black women, their “omission” has led to “the analytical neglect of the peculiar experiences of African Americans” thus showing a “lack of attention to the complex role that race played in shaping the turn-of-the century urban sex economy” (Harris 124).

I examined how the racial stereotypes of black women that were developed during slavery to justify their subjugation and sexual exploitation by whites followed black women into the twentieth century and how this affected the way in which Black women sex workers are represented in African American literature by focusing on the novels *The Street* by Ann Petry and *Daddy Was a Number Runner* by Louise Meriwether. By undertaking a close reading of the texts, I used historical evidence of slavery and racialized stereotypes, particularly that of the jezebel and the pickaninny to look at how black women and girls are imagined by whites and how this affected the black women and girls in the novels. Lutie Johnson fell into a trap of the American dream whereby her aspirations for middle class mobility were systemically halted because they were designed for white Americans. Francis Coffin sees her friend China Doll experience the violence that sex work can bring at the hands of her pimp, while she is forcefully acquainted to a history of racialized violence towards black children and girls as emphasized by the racist image of the pickaninny at the hands of adult white men.

Ann Petry wrote within the confines of respectability politics, presenting a character with middle-class goals who is driven by motivations of racial uplift for herself and her young son. She actively seeks out skilled labor, and her morals stand up against white American mythologies of black women, by providing the image of a loyal mother battling against discrimination, whose sexuality is out of view to readers, and whose disseminating marriage is

the fault of an adulterous husband. Sex workers contrast with Lutie Johnson's image of respectability, as their paid sexual labor is seen as an act of desperation and hopelessness. While sex workers are not the focus of Petry's novel, their existence within the narrative present evidence of their existence in the black community. Mrs. Hedges's role as an unconventional and manipulative brothel madam provide a supporting representation to Petry's views that young black women sex workers are victims because of Mrs. Hedges's exploitation.

Louise Meriwether speaks to black community of the Depression era in her novel. Writing during the 1960s, she is not confined to the decorum of respectability politics of Petry's era. Petry makes a radical move of exposing black men as oppressors of black women in the figures of Lutie's husband Jim, Jones the Super, and Boots Smith and Meriwether maintains this idea of bringing black women's experiences to the forefront of her novel, by continuing the conversation of black women fending for themselves when male providers are unable to work, leave, or die from alcohol abuse, as a result of poverty created by systemic racism. Her choice of using an adolescent black girl as the protagonist to her novel lays the foundation for a social criticism laid bare from the eyes and experiences of a naïve child. Francis Coffin's social conditioning makes sexual abuse at the hands of pedophilic white men in her neighborhood a normality. Francis and her friends try to navigate sexual coercion and assault by middle aged white men by creating methods of for getting paid in nickels, dimes, or free items. Meriwether's novel does not advocate for sex work as a legitimate form of labor, but also expresses that it was choice made out of labor limitations and financial necessity.

While my thesis focused on Petry and Meriwether's work because they are both black women writing about the social conditions that their protagonists, Lutie Johnson and Francis Coffin, experience during the 1930s and 1940s in New York, introducing and comparing Curtis

Lucas's *Third Ward Newark* provides the perspective of a male African American author, whose novel agrees with the ideas presented by Petry and Meriwether and expands on how the fundamental conditions of white supremacy, misogyny and sexism within the black community oppress black women as well. His focus on women's labor, particularly the exploitation of domestic workers and the poor economic conditions that create a desperation for sex work, align with that Petry's and Meriwether's stance that sex work is a choice made out of economic necessity, rather than pleasure and sexual expression. The setting of Newark, New Jersey offers a different point of view of a less prominent Northern urban segregated black community which neighbors New York City but expresses a unity with the oppressed community in Harlem. Lucas's descriptions of young black women who were able to find skilled work to aid in the war effort of the second world war, such as welding in a shipyard, introduced a unique historical economic experience and perspective that isn't touched upon by either Petry or Meriwether. With the end of the war, black women who found financial security in skilled labor are the first to be fired, and according to Lucas's novel, are the first to return to sex work for economic survival.

Black female sex work is a topic worthy of academic consideration and conversation. It is avoided and unheralded because of the initial discomfort it elicits through generations of stigma propagated by internalized and externalized misogyny. Whoreophobia in academia reduces the importance in researching and exploring this specific segment of the black population. However, the presence of black female sex workers in the texts I present show that it was a known part of the black experience in the United States.

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