

*HERSTORY: FEMALE ARTISTS' RESISTANCE IN THE AWAKENING,
CORREGIDORA, AND THE DEW BREAKER*

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*For Grandma Bev, who was the first person to call me a writer,
and who, after twenty-two years of kicking cancer's ass,
earned her wings.*

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For women in patriarchal societies, life is stitched with silence and violence. This is especially true for women of color. In a world that has cast women as invisible and voiceless, to create from the margins is to demand to be seen and heard. Thus, women's art has never had the privilege of being art for art's sake and instead is necessarily involved in the work of articulating and (re)writing female experience. When women seek, through their work and art, to feel deeply and connect with other women, they tap into what Audre Lorde has famously termed "the power of the erotic." Lorde suggests that to acknowledge and trust those deepest feelings within our bodies is a subversive power that spurs social change. In the following work, novels by Kate Chopin, Gayl Jones, and Edwidge Danticat are linked by their female characters who seek the erotic via their art of choice and, in doing so, resist disempowerment and explore the life-giving nature of female connection. Furthermore, because the authors themselves are engaged in rendering the female experience visible, the novels discussed actively converse with their respective waves of feminism and propel social activism and feminist discourse. Hence, this project provides both a close reading of *The Awakening*, *Corregidora*, and *The Dew Breaker*, and a broader contention on the role of women's literature in social justice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There is more strength in a confident camp than in a threatened enemy. The sense of inferiority must be innerly compensated, self-conviction must supplant self-justification and in the dignity of this attitude a convinced minority must confront a condescending majority. Art cannot completely accomplish this, but I believe it can lead the way.

-- Alain Locke, "Art or Propaganda?"

Tyrants know there is in the work of art an emancipatory force, which is mysterious only to those who do not revere it. Every great work makes the human face more admirable and richer, and this is its whole secret. And thousands of concentration camps and barred cells are not enough to hide this staggering testimony of dignity.

-- Albert Camus, "Create Dangerously"

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

-- Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury"

"Herstory: Female Artists' Resistance in *The Awakening*, *Corregidora*, and *The Dew Breaker*" redefines "resistance" as something nuanced, complex, and communal instead of the heroic, grandstanding acts of solitary revolutionaries. It examines the role of art and artist on both societal and textual levels. Essential to each of the three chapters that follow is the notion that art is liberating: it frees us from restriction, disempowerment and trauma even if momentarily. Art empowers us to speak, defy, endure, and experience deep feeling and joy – a recognizing of what Audre Lorde calls the power of the erotic. In 1898, Leo Tolstoy separated good art from bad art in its ability to promote unity, to move "humanity forward towards perfection" (383)¹. Tolstoy insisted on art as an instrument for reform and progress, and this understanding of art informs this project. With its ability

¹ Tolstoy theorizes two forms of "good" art, religious and universal, in his essay "What is Art?"

to advance a universal understanding of humanity and promote social justice, art is a “burden of” the oppressed – not because the oppressed should have to take on the work of justifying their humanity, but because they do not have the privilege not to. In Alain Locke’s above assertion, he expresses the role of art as a vehicle for social progress. Art for art’s sake, then, has never been a reality for the underrepresented or underprivileged; it has never been a mere indulgence for female artists. In its liberation and unlocking of creative powers, art destabilizes systems of oppression and serves as a site of resistance even if those acts of defiance are covert.

Women live and work within patriarchal systems of domination and often find themselves silenced, exploited, and unable to express themselves. Within institutional dehumanization, female creativity and expression are purposely suppressed and devalued. I contend, therefore, that women who create from the margins, knowing well the inherent dangers that accompany female visibility, expression, and creativity, are actively resisting oppression and transforming silence into voice and action. Edwidge Danticat comments on Albert Camus’s concept of creating dangerously², saying that “it is creating as a revolt against silence, creating when both the creation and the reception, the writing and the reading, are dangerous undertakings, disobedience to a directive” (*Create Dangerously*

11). And in her reflections on poetry, Audre Lorde says:

As we learn to bear the intimacy of scrutiny and to flourish within it, as we learn to use the products of that scrutiny for power within our living, those fears which rule our lives and form our silences begin to lose their control over us. (36)³

² The opening epigraph provides insight into Camus’s position, which is more fully elaborated on in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (1961).

³ The opening epigraph expands on Lorde’s assertion that poetry shapes individual growth and social progress. For more on this, see *Sister Outsider* (1984).

It is this understanding of art as subversive, which informs my readings of female artists in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), and Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* (2004) – three novels written over a century, each during a different wave of the feminist movement. I see these novels responding to the three waves of feminism, spanning the late nineteenth through early twenty-first centuries, and contextualize each within its historical and political milieu.

To begin, I explore how Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* lays out the concerns of the first wave of feminism – a predominantly white, middle-class women's movement – in its challenge to the “cult of domesticity” that separates the private and public spheres. Chopin writes at the close of the 19th century when women have been fighting for the vote for half a century and are still more than two decades away from getting it. She writes daringly about daring women, rejecting the assumption that women are content in their restricted roles within marriage and motherhood. And at least one major biographer, Emily Toth, connects the themes of solitude, independence, and identity apart from husband and children prevalent in Chopin's most well-known work, *The Awakening*, with Chopin's own life⁴. Chopin's commitment to personal freedom motivated her to smoke cigarettes, wear scandalous costumes, travel alone, refuse to remarry after her husband's death, and take occasional lovers (“Editor's Note” 120). Her novel further questions the role of woman as a selfless wife and mother who acts as a moral guide to her husband and gratified nurturer to her children.

The Awakening confronts the strict masculinity of the public sphere and interrogates the assumptions that motherhood is necessarily fulfilling and self-actualizing.

⁴ See Emily Toth's *Kate Chopin* (1990).

Chopin's protagonist Edna Pontellier finds herself not particularly well suited for motherhood and exceedingly discontent in marriage. She begins her awakening by recognizing her own desires and giving way to impulse over propriety. She combats the limitations on creative women in the nineteenth century through her connections with other women, her increased exposure to the public sphere, and her painting. Edna's independence anticipates the modern woman who would emerge decades later with suffrage. Hence, Chopin's novel not only converses with the feminist addresses that came to New Orleans with Susan B. Anthony in the 1880s and 1890s, but also foresees the questions of female subjectivity that will arise once suffrage is granted and women form identities and roles outside the home.

Second-wave feminism, which erupted in the 1960s and 1970s, challenged rigid notions of race, gender, and sexuality and articulated the ways systems of oppression interact to disenfranchise women of color, third-world women, and lesbians on multiple levels. Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* is representative of second-wave feminism because it challenges universal sisterhood, foregrounding the experiences of women of color, challenging heteronormativity, and destabilizing identity politics through its attention to intersectionality – how different strands of identity (and systems of oppression) interrelate⁵. When the early anti-male sentiment fell through and issues of class and race began to be discussed within feminist discourse, it became apparent that sex, class, race, sexuality, etc. were interdependent. Instead of fighting for equality within existing

⁵ See bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000) for an accessible introduction to the nature of feminism, past and present, that presents intersectionality as a foundation of second-wave feminism.

systems, feminists began to speak of revolution, a dismantling of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy which could never furnish true equality.

Central to any conversation of second-wave feminism are the Black Power Movement and the Women's Renaissance. The shift to the Black Power Movement in the 60s, while allowing black political leaders to attack white supremacy and the emasculation of black males, divided black communities by equating freedom with patriarchal manhood. Politically motivated artists and musicians sought to empower black people, specifically black males; however, they adopted hyper masculinity at the expense of black women. In response, black women wrote themselves into being. Gayl Jones, along with Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Toni Cade Bambara, and Audre Lorde, sailed to the forefront of a black women's arts movement that would document and validate the particularities of the black female experience. Whereas feminist theory and scholarship were often written with an academic audience in mind, an upsurge in women's literature, specifically black women's literature, disclosed women's voices and experiences, connecting feminist thinking to social realities of marginalized groups.

Gayl Jones published *Corregidora* at the close of the Black Arts Movement amidst the proliferation of writing by women of color that would come to be known as the Women's Renaissance. The novel addresses the lingering effects of slavery on African Americans and the destructive divides between black men and women. Crucially, it responds to the hyper masculinity of the time, elucidating the ways that the black community is wedged farther apart by the perpetuation of colonialist, patriarchal values. Jones's work resists the Western model both thematically and technically, relying on oral

traditions and the blues form to gain greater artistic sovereignty. Jones speaks of the tendency of African American novels to combine aesthetics with social motive in terms of what James Joyce denounced as “kinetic art,” that which moves the reader to action⁶. I agree with Jones and add to her assertion the particular implications of writing by *women* of color. *Corregidora* not only questions language, art, and humanity from an African American perspective, but from a female African American perspective. Ergo, *Corregidora*, like *The Awakening*, confronts the issue of female value based on reproduction, while it extends the discourses of intersectionality arising in the second-wave of feminism. Whereas Edna’s understanding of motherhood is based on having the unnamed black nanny to care for her sons, Ursa’s understanding is formed and deformed by slavery.

By the mid-1990s, postcolonial thinking had eradicated the early notions of universal womanhood that were challenged in the second wave. Third-wave feminists destabilized the very notion of power as gained through control and exploitation of others, and broadened the hopes for equality for women to equality for all in “a global ecological vision of how the planet can survive and how everyone on it can have access to peace and well-being” (*Feminism is for Everybody* 110). Feminism moved beyond its attack on sexual inequality to confront heteronormativity and disrupt the very concepts of fixed gender and sexuality. Importantly, a surge of multicultural literatures stepped up to contend with separatist discourses and debunk those traditional understandings of identity, reliant on essentialist thinking. In this context – where identity is no longer understood in terms of fixed categories and power relations but as a fluid and contingent

⁶ Jones elaborates on “kinetic art” in African American tradition in the introduction to her book of criticism, *Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature* (1991).

performance – Edwidge Danticat writes of Haiti and the United States. As an immigrant artist, Danticat attacks some of the same oppressions as Chopin and Jones, but extends themes of trauma, displacement, and alienation to exiled Haitians living in a postcolonial world but very much still battling the vestiges of colonialism.

The Dew Breaker tells the stories of transnationals who can no longer differentiate before and after, authentic and imitated, because of the realities of a globalized transcultural world. Danticat's women resist disempowerment not only as women, or black women, but as immigrant black women enduring old and new traumas. Beatrice Saint Fort suffers psychological trauma stemming both from oppressions in the United States where she is rendered invisible and silent, and in Haiti, where she was subjected to tyranny and torture carried out by her fellow Haitians but undeniably linked to colonialist histories. She exercises a limited (and problematic) control over her body by moving from house to house and, through her occupation as a seamstress, reestablishes an identity as the "Mother" of her clients, Haitian American brides-to-be. Beatrice desires to cloak the female body – exposed, even tortured – in beautifully stitched fabric, and, in her creative work, copes with her own traumas by metaphorically becoming the dress. This cloaking, this adornment can be read as a form of artmaking that heals and protects women after trauma, even as it links to the patriarchal institution of marriage. Beatrice's story reflects third-wave discourse because it problematizes the notion of a fixed identity and acknowledges the fragmented nature of postcolonial subjectivity.

In her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde theorizes the erotic as a feminine force within us all, a creative and generative sense of power located in deep feeling. She acknowledges the root of the word erotic: "*eros*, the personification

of love in all its aspects – born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony” (55). For Lorde, the erotic allows us to engage with “our deepest and nonrational knowledge” (53) to live a meaningful and fulfilled life suffused with satisfaction. In order to maintain hierarchical oppressions under patriarchy, women have been taught to distrust their feelings, emotions, sensual pleasures – their sense of power. Since capitalism and patriarchy in Western societies operate “in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need” (55), women are robbed of the appeal of life, work, and love. To tap into the erotic is to experience the deep creative feeling that governs our nonrational selves, to know and share our innermost sentiment. Thus, when women access the erotic, they recognize its power and aspire to live a full and empowered life. It follows that when women access and operate in the erotic realm, then, that they resist oppression and destabilize the systems which have worked to nullify them.

Lorde says,

When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (55)

Lorde suggests that women can use creativity and female connection to imagine social alternatives and live more fulfilling and self-actualized lives. It is both a human need and a key to social change: “[r]ecognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama” (59). Both these women characters and the women writers sensitize and strengthen their experiences through an accessing of the erotic, creating artistically and imagining social alternatives. I assert that in seeking to

express themselves and resist that which denies female agency, Chopin, Jones, Danticat, and their rebel women artists seek the power of the erotic, and work toward subjectivity⁷.

I don't mean to suggest that the texts' female artists are always aware of their need for the erotic or even aware of their own resistance. In fact, they often participate in systems of domination even as they push back, move within the margins, question their roles, and negotiate their identities. Instead, I contend that via creativity, connection, and love, these women, knowingly or unknowingly, access the power of the erotic and envision ways of being that transcend those options available under patriarchy. In these moments, they glimpse modes of expression beyond current social systems and are, therefore, discontent, fragmented, and unwhole in their present lives. In "Love as the Practice of Freedom," bell hooks echoes Lorde, saying, "[w]ithout an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination – imperialism, sexism, racism, and classism" (289). Whereas Lorde calls our culture "anti-erotic," hooks calls it "anti-love," requiring violence for sustainability and treating love and sexuality as capitalistic feats (293). Through art, the women in the novels I discuss embrace and nurture their creative feelings rather than suppressing them, and in doing so, they are resistant and resilient.

Edna Pontellier, the protagonist in *The Awakening*, recognizes her desire during a vacation at Grand Isle where she is surrounded by other women. She questions her roles as wife and mother, and how much of her true self she sacrifices to fill these roles according to cultural expectations. She awakens to her sexuality through intimacy with

⁷ For more on identity as production always in process, see Stuart Hall's "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (1990). Edited by Jonathan Rutherford.

mother-woman Adele Ratignolle, pianist Mademoiselle Reisz, and summer fling Robert Lebrun. Eventually, she moves out of her husband's home and explores her creative desires via painting. When she realizes that her newfound self isn't compatible with the reigning patriarchal system, she walks out into the sea. Ursa Corregidora, the protagonist in *Corregidora*, questions her self-worth after a physical fight with her husband that ends her pregnancy and leaves her wombless. She battles the legacy of slavery which haunts four generations of her matriarchal line and moves beyond her trauma through the discovery of her mother's story. Through blues singing, Ursa searches for her own song, one that expresses the female experience of love and hate. Ursa's search to voice her deepest feelings calls into question heteronormativity and the possible liberation of fluid sexuality. Beatrice Saint Fort, a minor character in *The Dew Breaker*, endures the trauma associated with a being a direct victim of Haiti's infamous tonton macoutes through mobility, female connection, and seamstress work. Living in the immigrant neighborhoods of New York City, Beatrice exercises control over her body through constant relocation and establishes a female network through her dressmaking business. In her work, she designs and stitches by hand beautiful wedding gowns which move her from the margins to center stage; her sewing is a metaphorical stitching up of her own fragmented psyche and marred body that doesn't offer her wholeness but does allow her visibility and voice from her marginalized position. In my reading of the texts, these women are intimately linked by their determination to create, express, and connect from places of invisibility, silence, and isolation. This reimagining of resistance requires attention to subtle gestures rather than grand ones. As Lorde suggests, the power to feel

deeply within our bodies the creative work we do is a subversive power that enables us to imagine social alternatives and resist disempowerment.

The understanding of feminism that frames this project is intersectional, suggesting the ways race, class, sexuality, and nationality interact with gender to produce women's experiences and therefore impact their subjectivities. In 1980, Audre Lorde set forth, "Ignoring the difference of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women's joint power" ("Age, Race, Class" 117). It follows that ignoring differences in class, sexuality, and nationality also stands in the way of more fully understanding female experience and inhibits progress. Hence, it is appropriate here to acknowledge the particularities of Edna, Ursa, and Beatrice even as I suggest overarching themes of oppression and resistance. Edna is a white, upper-class, heterosexual woman learning to question the Victorian standards and Christian values that govern her role in society. Ursa, a black, working-class woman, therefore, resists from an extended marginalization. Ursa, for example, has never had the privilege of understanding her self under the standards of femininity that plague Edna; she has been historically denied womanhood and even personhood. Beatrice has more in common with Ursa, but also struggles to make sense of a transnational identity. She is black, working-class, female, and exiled immigrant. I don't point out these differences in order to rank oppressions but instead to acknowledge the complex particularities that determine each woman's political, economic, and social context. In other words, I seek to recognize difference among women to enrich the women's struggle and to inform the wider examination of feminist movements. In very different social contexts, Edna, Ursa, and Beatrice extend female value beyond reproduction and

complicate questions of corporeality, of who “owns” the female body. These women’s novels simultaneously engage with the feminist concerns of their era and advance feminist discourse by confronting injustices and offering social alternatives.

The female artists in *The Awakening*, *Corregidora*, and *The Dew Breaker* seek new ways to express and define themselves; they move within the margins and discover creative outlets to negotiate with language and their own phallogocentric internalizations to form subjectivities outside the traditional sphere of gender roles and expectations. Through artistic expression, they come to see themselves as subjects and expand their self-understanding while coping with legacies of domination that threaten to silence and render them invisible. Central to my project then is the connection between women artists in the novels and the women authors who breathe life into them. I contend that art is accountable to politics – it accounts for women’s experiences, expands the wider consciousness, and points toward strategies for change. As such, I recognize the important work of each author as a woman artist, producing art for the people’s sake. It is not just the feminist movement which seeks to change social realities; women’s literature too participates in a form of activism that can be just as valuable in changing public consciousness as social advocacy and demonstration. These novels speak to social activism directly because their female artist characters model the work the authors themselves do, an unsilencing. In each example, both author and character gain agency born of vulnerability, using their position within the margins to resist and destabilize existing forms of power. My readings reimagine resistance as an active transforming of silence into expression that allows women to access the power of the erotic and thereby destabilize systems of oppression. In tandem, the three novels demarcate the evolving

concerns of feminism over a century and converse with feminist scholars, theorists, and activists to make visible injustices and point towards new ways of being.

Chapter 2: “I wouldn't give myself”: Suicide as Subversive Art in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

“I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself.”

-- Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) offers a radical perspective on women's experience of marriage and motherhood at the end of nineteenth century United States, breaking codes of silence and disrupting ideas of female fulfillment. The novel follows the nine-month identity quest of its female protagonist, Edna Pontellier, as she exits the domestic space, awakens to her artistic and sexual desires, rejects patriarchy and conventional motherhood, and finally, creates her great work of art – in effect, her suicide. During Edna's summer on Grand Isle, she (re)claims her sexuality in her intimacy with the ideal mother-woman Adele Ratignolle, finds truth and freedom in the aesthetics of pianist Mademoiselle Reisz, and arouses her erotic imagination in flirtatious adventures with the young dreamer Robert Lebrun. It is through art and an awareness of her sexuality that Edna begins to wake up:

It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth [...] the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. [...] A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before. (26-27)

Throughout the novel, Edna links female expression, connection, and eroticism with the sea. The music of Mademoiselle Reisz stirs her, the beauty and affection of Adele Ratignolle release her carefully donned reserve, but it is in the sea that she “walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence” into her “native element” (27). I

interpret Edna's quest for female creativity amidst patriarchal conventions as a seeking of the erotic and argue that her controversial suicide is subversive artwork that symbolizes a return to the female womb.

Edna's coming to consciousness makes apparent the tensions between the two options available to creative post-Victorian, white, upper-middle class women – that of the mother-woman Adele who dabbles in art to enhance the home on behalf of the children, and that of the spinster, the asexual Mademoiselle Reisz, who is allowed to be a serious artist only as long as she isolates herself from society. What Edna yearns for – a wholly creative and erotic femaleness – has no place in the traditional, patriarchal social order. In other words, the autonomous, sexual female artist is simply not permitted existence. Chopin was writing at the very end of the nineteenth century, the Victorian era⁸, and, thus, battled the assumptions of essentialism. The public sphere was very much a masculine sphere that rewarded forceful authority and aggression. On the other hand, the private sphere existed as the realm of morality, modesty, and selflessness. As such, the subject of a woman's desires for sensual fulfillment and intellectual satisfaction outside the confines of marriage and motherhood was anything but a safe topic. *The Awakening's* transgressive subject and ambivalent ending triggered outrage – Chopin had failed to denounce her protagonist's immorality. Consequently, Chopin drew little acclaim in the early 20th century, when she was remembered merely as a “local color” writer commenting on the particulars of the lives of elite Creoles⁹ in New Orleans. It

⁸ See “The Nineteenth Century” in *Women's Worlds: The McGraw-Hill Anthology of Women's Writing* for a succinct explanation of the political and economic circumstances as well as gender conventions of the Victorian era.

⁹ The term Creole as Chopin uses it refers to the descendants of the original French and Spanish settlers of Louisiana.

wasn't until the rise of feminism in the 1970s, long after her early death, that Chopin's work received its due.

As part of that second-wave feminist criticism, Susan Gubar's "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity" discusses male primacy in theological, scientific, and artistic creativity, contending that historically woman has existed as a poem, but never the poet, as a creation but never the creator (295). *The Awakening* demonstrates the process of destroying the potential creator. As this essay will expound upon, the institutions of motherhood and family have worked together closely to prohibit or make otherwise invisible the woman who is sexual and creative, both muse and artist, preferring instead the domestic object that operates within but never shapes culture. If we accept that "the erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (Lorde 53), it follows that Edna accesses the erotic during her summer at Grand Isle when she found herself "seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself that colored and changed her environment" (39). Her unrecognized feelings and passions usher her at first to her drawing pad and eventually to her canvas where she can resist the confines of Victorian womanhood through imaginative female creativity.

It is no surprise that Edna refuses reintegration into a society that suffocates her. Her profound transformation takes place in a community of women on the margins of structured social order. Grand Isle supplies a fruitful atmosphere, close to nature where "discipline is relaxed, all social obligations are more or less forgotten or disregarded, and the barriers behind which the higher classes seek protection are withdrawn" (Arnavon

184-5). The men work all week in the city, only visiting on the occasional weekend; the women and children are left to their own devices to swim, sew, read, and congregate as they see fit. The Creole women, at first, surprise Edna, a product of a Kentucky Presbyterian upbringing, with their daring – they pass around erotic novels and converse openly about child labor. It isn't long before Edna begins to discover her own desire for freedom and female expression. She apprehends her place in the world, and begins to reject social reality as deceptive and intolerable. Her transformation is one of transcendence and liberation. In a female colony temporarily separated from her capitalist husband and the rigid social routine she has blindly followed, Edna takes risks, follows her own impulses, and critically questions which aspects of her personhood are true to her nature. In other words, Edna comes to see herself as a subject: “[...] Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (14).

Edna's suicide has been the topic of controversy since the novel's publication but especially so since the late 1960s when Chopin's forgotten novel was rediscovered. The proposed reading of the text here is not intended to deny the many discerning articulations of Chopin's conclusion but rather to illustrate the range of political, moral, and philosophical concerns on which this novel mediates. Furthermore, this essay is not merely interested in joining the debate of whether Chopin intended Edna's suicide to be read as either victory or defeat. Instead, I claim that critics have continued to limit Edna's agency and reaffirm a definition of traditional womanhood via relationships to men focusing too much on Edna's love affair with Robert Lebrun. In reality, all the Lebrun affair shares with Edna's self-determination is its season. If we read Edna as an

autonomous subject, we begin to see her very existence as contradictory to the ruling patriarchal ideologies within the novel's turn-of-the-century, upper-middle class cultural sphere. Put simply, Edna wishes to have an identity apart from her children and husband. She rouses from "the daily treadmill of life" (30) and gradually discovers the deeper needs of her soul. She seeks solitude and self-expression – a room of her own – the two factors that Virginia Woolf laid out as foundational to female literary creativity that were explicitly denied to the post-Victorian wife and mother. In fact, Edna's longing for sexual and personal emancipation can be viewed more broadly as the conflict between maternity and artistic creativity. As Elaine Showalter insists, "artistic fulfillment required the sacrifice of maternal drives, and maternal fulfillment meant giving up artistic ambitions" (39). As such, the 1899 novel reveals an up-to-this-point unexplored female consciousness while it exposes the obstacles working against the woman artist.

Early critics suggest Edna's newfound independence blooms only with her sexual desires for Robert. In an essay from 1909, Percival Pollard rightly acknowledge Edna's own passions, but refers to Robert Lebrun as "the man she has waked up for" (181), trivially denouncing Edna's awakening as unlikely because of her age (apparently a woman approaching thirty is well past personal growth and change). Some dismiss Edna as impetuous and irresponsible, claiming that she neglects her husband and children for a fleeting, naïve romance (May 1970). Cyrille Arnavon, in an otherwise perceptive critique, finds "insufficient justification for Edna's "romantic suicide" (185), failing to then consider the possibility that her suicide is not provoked by romance. Many more critics position her suicide in terms of a failed reconnection with Robert; for these reviewers and critics, Edna can be understood as a passive romanticist who is hopelessly

heartbroken or, at least, capricious, idealistic, and weak (Porcher 1899, Cather 1899, Spangler 1970). Just months after the novel's publication, a review in *The Mirror* wished Chopin "had not written her novel," since the wearisome protagonist kills herself upon realizing she is "too weak" to go on (Porcher 162). George M. Spangler reduced Edna to "one who simply dies from disappointed, illicit love" (210). Harsher still, a review in *Public Opinion* reported being "well satisfied when Mrs. Pontellier deliberately swims out to her death in the waters of the gulf" (168). *The Nation* called Kate Chopin "one more clever author gone wrong" (173).

Later criticism, influenced by the feminist movement and a subsequent upsurge in feminist literary criticism, offered a more nuanced rendering of the novel. An insightful few acknowledge the complexity of Edna's circumstances and her need to escape confining conventions; they might express pity, or deem Edna's fate tragic because she cannot imagine another way out (Stone 1986, Showalter 1988). Critic Marie Fletcher calls Edna's suicide "the last in a series of rebellions which structure her life," noting that the awakened Edna cannot bring herself to relinquish her newfound independence (195). Carole Stone claims that "Edna drowns herself because she cannot live as a conventional wife or mother any longer, and society will not accept her newfound self" (30). For Stone, Edna "succeeds in giving birth to a new self" (31) but Adele's childbirth and Robert's departure "finally defeat Edna's search for artistic wholeness" (29). What these criticisms share, I think, is that they interpret Edna's actions through Robert. She (woman) is understood in relation to him (man). And while these readings prove valuable and interesting, they ultimately fail to acknowledge Edna's autonomy. Of course, it is

worth noting, that some critics have avoided this pitfall¹⁰, and have done so intriguingly. This essay then hopes to join the latter conversation in proposing alternative readings of *The Awakening*, considering the complexity of Edna's ontological ambivalence and understanding her actions, even her final act, as a purposeful resolution "never again to belong to another than herself" (76).

Robert Lebrun's significance is limited to the fact that Edna initially projects her newly realized sense of power onto him; she conflates her empowered self with a male love interest, misunderstanding something that has been inside her all along as something fastened to or propelled by another person. This mistake is quite understandable – Edna, a product of institutionalized patriarchy, has internalized self-doubt. She connects all power to the male domain; power within herself is, at first, unrecognizable. By the end of the novel, however, Edna realizes her mistake: "To-day it is Arobin; to-morrow it will be some one else. It makes no difference to me, it doesn't matter about Leonce Pontellier' [...] she even realized that the day would come when [Robert], too, and the thought of him would melt out of her existence, leaving her alone" (108). While her realization is accompanied by despair, a "[d]espondency [that] ... had never lifted," it is followed by agency and autonomy as she "cast the unpleasant pricking garments from her [...] and stood naked in the open air [...] like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (108-109). Therefore, I contend that Robert, who merely coincides with her awakening, is very much beside the point. Edna, in rejecting conventions of marriage and motherhood, seeks an expressive space to access her own

¹⁰ See Carol Christ, Kenneth Eble, Sandra Gilbert, Michael Gilmore, and Per Seyersted.

creativity and discover her own sense of power, which has been thus far erased by male primacy.

In a telling dialogue with Robert toward the end of the novel, Edna asserts, “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both” (102). Robert, of course, doesn’t understand her meaning; he has been “dreaming of wild, impossible things, recalling men who had set their wives free” (102). Robert can conceive of Edna as his or as another man’s but never as belonging to herself. Thus, Edna will not find what she is looking for in Robert, or in any other man for that matter. She resists patriarchal oppression and the “cult of domesticity”¹¹ by actively leaving the private sphere and prioritizing her artistic creativity over conventional respectability: “[s]he began to do as she liked and to feel as she liked” (54). It is this “absolute disregard for her duties as a wife” which angers Edna’s husband since her time “would be better employed contriving for the comfort of her family” (55). Yet, her mobility (not only her exit from the private sphere to wander the city alone, but also her relocation to the pigeon house) and her art, not her infatuation with Robert, work toward her self-actualization, “daily casting aside that fictitious self which [she assumes] like a garment with which to appear before the world” (55).

To trace Edna’s quest for the erotic, I first examine her physical movement throughout the novel, illustrating the ways the discursive subject resists oppression through mobility itself. From female community to husband’s home to solitary cottage and finally to the sensuous sea, Edna’s emerging selfhood is represented figuratively by a

¹¹ For a detailed account of the duties and expectations of a nineteenth century aristocratic wife, see “An Etiquette/Advice Book Sampler” in the 2nd edition Norton’s Critical Edition of *The Awakening*.

physical journey that threatens patriarchy in its disregard of conventional notions of motherhood and family. Chopin creates a female wanderer, one who comes to a heightened awareness of existence and begins to transmute personal experience and feeling into public acts. Second, I claim that essential to understanding Edna's character is her role as artist. Her journey to find an autonomous self coincides with her search for individual expression. In the early stages of Edna's transformation, she casually dabbles in sketching; but, by the end of the novel, Edna gains financial independence through her painting. In a time and culture where serious art is reserved for men, perhaps all of Edna's art is subversive; yet, her progression as an artist culminates in the "courageous soul" Mademoiselle Reisz speaks of – "the soul that dares and defies" (61) – which leads to this essay's premise. Considering Edna's subversive disposition and her defiant choice to take control of her own body in an artful, expressive act, Edna becomes artist in her final performance, an impressionistic rendering of the world around her. Her suicide, according to this reading, is less about Edna's feelings for Robert, her own guilt, or what critics have perceived as an innate weakness, and more about becoming an agent in her own life, painting a portrait in "a long, sweeping stroke" (108) of the fate of the female artist in elite, turn-of-the-century America. Far from denoting an impulsive or desperate hopelessness, Edna's suicide is her great work of art. This essay's opening epigraph illustrates Edna's determination to endure, not bodily (for that is deemed unessential); she saves the self, refuses to surrender it to her husband and children, by sacrificing the body to her art. Lastly, I contrast Edna-as-artist with Kate Chopin, coupling their rebellions. As evidenced by the unfavorable responses to Chopin's novel, *The Awakening* cannot exist outside its historical and political context. Just as Edna's creative acts are subversive,

Chopin writes female experience into existence in a world where women's voices and feelings are confined to the private sphere, subdued, even erased. Her novel reflects a deeply felt female consciousness, and the personal necessarily includes the political structure which governs those experiences.

I.

“The Awakening was the most important piece of fiction about the sexual life of a woman written to date in America and the first fully to face the fact that marriage, whether in point of fact it closed the range of a woman's sexual experiences or not, was but an episode in her continuous growth. It did not attack the institution of the family, but it rejected the family as the automatic equivalent of feminine self-fulfillment, and on the very eve of the twentieth century it raised the question of what woman was to do with the freedom she struggled toward.”

-- Larzer Ziff (1966)

Edna Pontellier “awakens to the reality of her own nature in relation to life” (May 214) and longs, very simply, for solitude without loneliness. The biggest threat to Edna's story is its great accomplishment: she effectively questions the assumption that marriage and motherhood are a woman's principle vocation, that all fulfillment and happiness stem from this one role. The *New Orleans Times-Democrat* reiterates the unforgivable offense when its reviewer describes Edna as one “who in pondering upon her relations to the world around her, fails to perceive that the relation of a mother to her children is far more important than the gratification of a passion which experience has taught her is, by its very nature evanescent” (167). Edna, according to conventions of motherhood and femininity, commits the ultimate crime: she fails to find absolute fulfillment in nurturing her children. Her quest for subjectivity begins with an increased mobility which enables her to revise the dominant discourses restricting her personal development.

Edna's subjectivity as a shifting process is represented figuratively in her circular journey. The reader encounters Edna first on the beaches of Grand Isle through the eyes of her husband Leonce as a "valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (4) before witnessing her engage in banter and intimate conversation with both Robert Lebrun and Adele Ratignolle. Despite "the abundance of her husband's kindness" (8), predictably exemplified in the comforts he supplies, Edna experiences an "indescribable oppression [...] like a mist passing across her soul's summer day" (8). John R. May describes the novel's initial setting as providing "a climate of psychological relaxation sufficient to allow Edna's true nature to reveal itself. Thus, because Edna is what she is, the longing for freedom has become the assertion of independence" (216). Edna's discontent with marriage and motherhood surfaces at Grand Isle presumably because it's the first time she's questioned her social position and the conventions she has hitherto adopted unquestioningly. Edna describes motherhood as "a responsibility which she had blindly assumed and for which Fate had not fitted her" (19). Critic Carol Christ describes this common existential crisis, saying, "Women often live out inauthentic stories provided by a culture they did not create. The story most commonly told to young girls is the romantic story of falling in love and living happily ever after. As they grow older some women seek to replace that story with one of free and independent womanhood" (1). Within the strict patriarchy of the upper-middle class cultural sphere that Edna inhabits, marriage and maternity are presented as the sole social power open to women, and to crave something else, something more, constitutes an intolerable deviance.

Removed from the Pontellier home in New Orleans and surrounded mostly by women, Edna reacts to the seductive voice of the sea “never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in the abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation” (14). It is Adele – described by Edna as “a faultless Madonna” (11) with “excessive physical charm” (14), “the embodiment of every womanly grace” (9), a “picture [of] the bygone heroine of romance” (9) – to whom Edna attributes her real awakening. Christ defines a woman’s awakening as “the experience of enlightenment – the movement from conventional notions of the meaning of life to a more direct experience of the ‘really real’ or ground of being, from ordinary to extraordinary consciousness, from bondage to freedom” (18). In each other’s company, lying on the beach caressing one another affectionately after escaping Robert, Edna feels with Adele a loosening in “the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her” (14). This empowering woman-to-woman intimacy is supported by Audre Lorde’s claim that “[i]nterdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative” (111). Edna awakens, then, on an island on the margins of patriarchal society in the sensuous presence of “the fair lady of our dreams” (9) when she experiences female connection and “a first breath of freedom” (19) in her confessions to Adele.

Edna’s realization of her power culminates in her learning to swim. The sea – which reminds her of a Kentucky meadow where she once threw out her arms and beat the grass, walking “idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (17) to escape the Presbyterian service and her gloomy father (read patriarchy) – intoxicates Edna with a “newly conquered power,” until she feels like “the little tottering, stumbling, clutching

child, who of a sudden realizes its powers” (27). The symbol of the sea and its connection to the Kentucky meadow remain significant throughout the novel since the meadow denotes the last time Edna lived according to her own impulse and desire. She mistakenly describes her childhood freedom as idle and absentminded because it lacked the propriety of religion, marriage, and Victorian etiquette that have since “driven [her] along by habit” (17). On the contrary, Edna has been much more thoughtless in her adult years as evidenced by her marriage which she describes as “purely an accident” (18) and her later confession that she has remained “a dupe to illusions” (105). Interestingly, Edna associates her awakening with a descent in the social scale – her strength and creativity increase as she abandons social obligations.

Her “newly conquered power” (27), exemplified by her learning to swim, is not sparked by Robert, who has failed all summer to teach her, but by the music of Mademoiselle Reisz that had aroused the passions within her soul. Edna muses aloud to Robert, “I wonder if I shall ever be stirred again as Mademoiselle Reisz’s playing moved me to-night. I wonder if any night on earth will ever again be like this one” (28). Later, it is Mademoiselle Reisz whom Edna searches out to announce her intention to become an artist herself, and it is right before the “soulful and poignant longing” of Mademoiselle’s Impromptu that she partners artistic creativity with resistance and defiance. Art as an emancipatory force, one irrefutably linked to freedom resonates throughout the novel. It is first recalled in Edna’s mental picture of a naked man looking out in “hopeless resignation” as a bird flies away from him (26). While it remains unclear if Edna initially sees herself as the bird, she later employs the bird metaphor to symbolize the female artist. It is no surprise that this mental image emanates from the music of Mademoiselle

Reisz. Using this lens, we might read *Grand Isle* more purposefully, allowing it to exist as a space where women can question their roles and develop a radically altered consciousness that recognizes the contradictions in society that silence female sexual experience. Specifically, the music stirs and the sea empowers Edna. Robert's observation that on Edna's first night of successful swimming she seems to be inhabited by a spirit who rises from the Gulf mirrors a later description of Edna as "Venus rising from the foam" (106), an image which is examined at length later in this chapter.

Back in the interiors of New Orleans, Edna is in danger of again becoming one of Leonce's valued "household gods" (48). The Pontelliers' "charming home on Esplanade Street" (47) serves as a microcosm of societal restraints. Leonce, as capitalist man, comes and goes as he pleases, dividing his time between business, entertainment, and his family, while Edna is expected to "observe *les convenances*" (48), overseeing the servants, donning her best reception gowns, and always remaining at home to take potential callers. In effect, she must be static, unseen unless sought, and silent unless called upon – a mere reflection of her husband's public success. Furthermore, she must be utterly self-sacrificing in her role as mother. Leonce chastises her for her apparent indifference earlier in the novel, asking "If it was not a mother's place to look after children, whose on earth was it?" (7). When Edna voices her intention to spend time painting, Leonce responds, "Then in God's name paint! but don't let the family go to the devil" (55). The acceptable wife and mother advances the stories of others; she does not live out her own story. Hence, Edna's emerging selfhood – demonstrated most clearly in her attention to her own desires, her willingness to leave the private sphere and act independently, and

her artistic aspirations – not only threaten her assigned role as a mother, but also endanger the broader institution of the family.

Edna purposefully moves in and out of the space allotted to her, apprehending a social reality once thought of as natural as utterly intolerable: “She felt no interest in anything about her. The street, the children, the fruit vender, the flowers growing there under her eyes, were all part and parcel of an alien world which had suddenly become antagonistic” (51). Edna’s attempts to mobilize and articulate the female body destabilize the delicate hierarchy that patriarchy relies on. Her return to patriarchal social order not only develops the plot and pushes Edna over the edge, but it is also important in its depiction of the unstable nature of Edna’s subjectivity. Critic Michael Gilmore explains Edna’s participation in the oppressive society she hopes to escape: “Edna is trapped not solely by circumstance but also by her own unconscious consent to the values of her society” (83). She works to transcend the conventions that regulate female behavior – conventions that she has in fact internalized – without a model of which to duplicate. The modern woman is unprecedented. Nearly a century after the novel’s publication, feminist Sandra Lee Bartky theorizes the raised female consciousness as “an ethical and existential impasse. She no longer knows what sort of person she ought to be and, therefore, she does not know what she ought to do” (436). Alienated from her world and divided against herself, Edna wanders the streets, expresses herself through painting, and searches for subjectivity outside the private prison of her home.

Edna’s pigeon-house, aptly named, represents a woman’s space which in and of itself subverts Western traditions. Edna becomes aware of her wings, but isn’t sure how to fly, knowing only that “[s]he had resolved never again to take another step backward”

(55). Traditionally relegated to submissiveness, silence, and stasis, Edna challenges gender polarities when she becomes homeowner, painter, and wanderer: “I always feel so sorry for women who don’t like to walk; they miss so much – so many rare little glimpses of life; and we women learn so little of life on the whole” (101). “Like Virginia Woolf after her, Chopin recognizes that women cannot gain freedom to create the world from their own experience until they are freed from emotional and financial dependence on men and from the constant interruptions of household duties and children” (Christ 33). Edna further disrupts ideas of white, middle-class female purity when she flaunts an affair with the known womanizer Alcee Arobin. Her woman’s space in the pigeon house unites creativity and sexuality, and symbolizes Edna’s strengthening departure from traditional expectations:

Like recent feminists, she implicitly rejects the choice of either a conventional sexual life in a marriage that allows no time for her to express her creativity, or the solitary spinsterhood of a woman who is devoted to her art or career. Like men, she wants both. Her refusal to accept the nineteenth-century choice offered her marks Edna’s quest as a particularly modern one. (Christ 28)

In her cottage, Edna experiences liberation and first begins to enter a semiotic realm where rebellion is possible.

The novel circles back to Grand Isle in the final scenes when Edna returns after witnessing the “scene [of] torture” (104) of Adele’s childbirth and reading the letter from Robert which reaffirms his desire to possess her rather than love her. Weighed down by society’s refusal to allow her an alternate existence, Edna (re)submerges herself in nature and female sexuality. Edna’s remarks to a sympathetic Dr. Mandelet echo feminist thought from the late 1970s when she admits, “perhaps it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one’s life” (105). Edna has

awakened to a sleeping society. Her search for solitude and expression has been interpreted by those around her as a selfish trampling upon the little lives (105). Adele's final whisperings to her are none other than: "Think of the children" (104). Edna returns to the island that first stirred her soul, not heartbroken in the way many readers understand her to be, but exhausted with the constant barriers inflicted upon her quest by even her most intimate relations and determined not to surrender her newfound subjectivity. She is once again without articulation as depicted when she ends the conversation with the doctor, "Oh! I don't know what I'm saying, Doctor" (105), lost to the incoherence and ambivalence of her own thoughts certainly, but also trying desperately to, as Lorde would later warn against, dismantle the master's house with his own tools (112). Without expression, there are no experiences, no stories, no self. Edna, therefore, removes herself from the confines of patriarchal social order to "the waves that invited her [...] like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known" (108-109). Her submergence into the sea, nine months after her first swim, revoices a birthing scene and suggests a new medium of female expression.

Grand Isle unites Western dualisms that normally divide and restrict Edna; it is an in-between space of spirit and body, rational and irrational, nature and freedom, life and death. After all, this is what Edna seeks – a new vision of womanhood that encompasses a whole female experience. Edna's return to this space is in itself subversive; critic Cristina Giorcelli maintains, "[s]ince it is the tendency of her nature to escape structured categories, her ambivalence is underlined by the characteristics of the places where events occur" (113). Hence, I suggest, Edna's return constitutes a mobile choice to remove the limitations and impediments that block the female imagination. It is a refusal

to assimilate into male ideologies and a geographic representation of her search for the erotic and a new vision of female power. In the first scene of her return to Grand Isle, Edna interrupts Victor telling a story about her own dinner party. He describes Edna as “Venus rising from the foam [...] blazing with beauty and diamonds at the head of the board” (106). Venus, of course, is the Roman goddess of love and beauty. It is important to note here that Venus rises in birth rather than in death, that Edna’s final location constitutes a triumphant depiction of female sexuality and power.

II.

“It begins in an experience of nothingness. Women experience emptiness in their own lives – in self-hatred, in self-negation, and in being a victim; in relationships with men; and in the values that have shaped their lives, thus opening themselves to the revelation of deeper sources of power and value. The experience of nothingness often precedes an awakening, similar to a conversion experience in which the powers of being are revealed.”

-- Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*

In *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, Christ defines a woman’s spiritual quest as “a woman’s awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe” (8). While this is an apt description of Edna’s nine-month transformation, it is important to note that her quest is for erotic expression, for a language of female sexuality and creativity. Chopin’s novel opens up with a “green and yellow parrot” hanging in a cage that speaks “a language which nobody understood” (3), clearly a symbol of Edna’s oppression. Music, an expressive art often appreciated for giving voice to sensations that defy and transcend traditional language, furthers this understanding of Edna as a caged bird searching for freedom and self-expression. When Mademoiselle Reisz plays a piece that Edna has mentally titled “Solitude,” she imagines a naked man standing “beside a desolate rock on the seashore” (25) longing after a bird

who flies away from him. As Edna's artistic voice develops, she tells her own story of "a woman who paddled away with her lover one night in a pirogue and never came back" (67). Edna's search for subjectivity and freedom from stifling conventions of womanhood coincides with her search for artistic expression. Therefore, I suggest Edna's artistry is the essential key to understanding her character, and thus, her suicide.

I'm not the first to understand Edna as first and foremost an artist. Carole Stone interprets the novel as a depiction of "the conflicts faced by women who wish to become artists" (31). Furthermore, Showalter juxtaposes maternity and artistic creativity in her consideration of the novel, arguing that women, especially mothers, are excluded from the male club of art (38). We see that exclusion most succinctly in the rendering of two other female characters within the novel. Adele Ratignolle, the ideal mother-woman – a term Edna defines as those "who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (9) – rationalizes her own artistic endeavors as a maternal project "on account of the children [...] because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive" (24). Edna initially justifies her own interests in a similar fashion, calling herself an unprofessional dabbler, very aware that women of her class are permitted to "do art," but not "be artist." Art has the power to create, reinforce, subvert, and/or change social order; as such, it is explicitly denied to the oppressed. Thus, the woman artist is dangerous. Lorde reminisces on her role as a poet, which has implications for all oppressed artists, saying, "I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom" (38).

Mademoiselle Reisz, the foil of Adele, “was a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost every one” (25), and although she is permitted to be a serious pianist it is at the sacrifice of everything else. She is isolated, alone, asexual, and physically unappealing. Living on the margins of New Orleans Creole society dressed daily in all black, Mademoiselle Reisz is merely tolerated. Essentially, society grants her artistic creativity in exchange for all that it would deem feminine. Critic Wendy Martin describes the two options that present themselves for Edna: “Her life represents the tension between Adele Ratignolle’s code of affiliation and the politics of separation of Madame Reisz. Often Edna’s life seems like a montage of dreams; emotions surface, and she drifts on a sea of impressions” (21). Put simply, Edna must choose between the respectable, self-sacrificing mother who dabbles on occasion or the outcast, spinster who devotes herself to art at the expense of all society. No story exists of the wholly creative *and* wholly sexual female.

To speak, like the parrot, in a language in which nobody understands, Edna must lead the way. She must be a pioneer. “The simple act of telling a woman’s story from a woman’s point of view is a revolutionary act: it never has been done before. A new language must be created to express women’s experience and insight, new metaphors discovered, new themes considered” (Christ 7). Edna must have the “courageous soul” in a patriarchal order that doesn’t imagine the upper-middle class, white housewife to have artistic feeling at all. Edna as artist must create and express the truths she apprehends in the world, the truths she feels stir inside her when she hears Mademoiselle’s music, Madame Antoine’s folktales, and Robert’s fairytales. Like many artists, Edna wishes for a place to think and work alone, a room of one’s own, a place to encourage her talents

and give voice to her experiences; but as we know all too well, the mother and wife is not extended solitude. Her private sphere offers no privacy. As an amateur, Edna feels in her sketching a “satisfaction of a kind which no other employment afforded her” (12). In New Orleans, Edna begins to devote herself to painting only to be reproached by Leonce for “her absolute disregard for her duties as a wife” (55). Yet, Leonce discontinues his lament once Edna agrees that she is not a painter. In this way, the novel shows Edna’s actual existence, a significant and definable part of her identity, to be completely simultaneously recognized and erased. It exists only as contradiction and, therefore, not at all. Later, even though she isn’t yet striving toward accomplishment, she feels herself begin to work “with sureness and ease” (70), and confesses to Mademoiselle Reisz that she is “becoming an artist” (61). By the time she moves into her small cottage, she is selling her art regularly.

It would seem that a person dedicating herself to art, identifying herself as artist, and even gaining financial independence through her art is in fact an artist. But still, even among women, Edna’s creativity is denounced. Mademoiselle Reisz dismisses Edna, claiming that “[t]o be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts – absolute gifts – which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul [...] The soul that dares and defies” (61). Perhaps, Mademoiselle Reisz sincerely doubts Edna’s talent. Perhaps, she revels in the seclusion of being the only female artist around. More likely, Mademoiselle Reisz is aware of the implications of being both female and artist, and doubts that Edna will be willing to surrender all that Mademoiselle has given up to gain voice via the piano. Later, Mademoiselle Reisz affectionately warns Edna that “[t]he bird that would soar above the

level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth” (79). Interestingly, the air and sea symbolize freedom and desire whereas the earth constitutes a failure, a return to patriarchy and propriety.

Edna’s quest for female expression isn’t limited to sketching and painting. During her progression toward an artistic vocation, Edna tries her hand at storytelling – an art form successfully coupled within the novel to an empowered, autonomous woman. At Cheniere Caminada, Madame Antoine, a native who “[a]ll her years ... had squatted and waddled upon the island, gathering legends of the Baratarians [pirates] and the sea,” had impressed Edna with her ability to bring life to “the whispering voices of dead men and the click of muffled gold” (38). With a model, Edna participates socially in new ways. At dinner with her husband, her father, and Dr. Mandelet, Edna becomes quickly disheartened by the men’s tales. Mr. Pontellier conveyed adventurous stories of boyhood in the woods of Iberville; Edna’s father “related a somber episode of those dark and bitter days;” the doctor “told the old, ever new and curious story of the waning of a woman’s love, seeking strange, new channels, only to return to its legitimate source after days of fierce unrest” (67). In response to the dull, lifeless, and in the latter case didactic, stories of the men, Edna paints a dream of two lovers who paddle off into the unknown never to be heard of again. Unlike those of her contemporaries, Edna’s story gives life to the “hot breath of the Southern night,” “the long sweep of the pirogue through the glistening moonlit water, the beating of birds’ wings” (68). The novel suggests the power of female expression when Edna’s story can be felt and heard in contrast to the unimpressive and unimpressible tales of patriarchy.

Another opportunity to create and express poetic truths comes in the form of Edna's dinner party. In fact, Showalter sees Edna's "*coup d'etat*" (81) as her moment of mastery, claiming that "dinner parties are virtual set pieces of feminist aesthetics, suggesting that the hostess is a kind of artist in her own sphere, someone whose creativity is channeled into the production of social and domestic harmony" (52). Edna's table for ten adorned "a cover of pale yellow satin under strips of lace-work," "wax candles ... burning softly under yellow silk shades," and boasted of silver, gold, and crystal "which glittered like the gems which the women wore" (83). As such, Edna's position at the head of the table is not merely another lifeless domestic role, but instead illustrates her authority as artist over the table. She has channeled her creativity into the domestic sphere, suggesting an ability to move within the margins, to express female beauty and desire in her daily housework. Interestingly, among the guests is yet another inconspicuous woman artist: Miss Mayblunt, a rumored intellectual, writes under a pseudonym, presumably because her work wouldn't be taken seriously and/or she would face societal reproach. Like the caged songbird, Edna exists as a creative woman trying to express herself from within the confines of the domestic sphere and often finding the conventions of language inadequate for female experience. Her duties, assigned to her by patriarchal ideologies surrounding the acceptable family unit, require subjugation of her artistic urges, but the repressed returns in her stories and dinner parties.

III.

"If what we need to dream, to move our spirits most deeply and directly toward and through promise, is discounted as a luxury, then we give up the core – the fountain – of our power, our womanness; we give up the future of our worlds."

-- Audre Lorde

To name women's experiences, to tell women's stories, to actively shape the world with women's perspectives is to resist patriarchal order. Edna's quest for selfhood correlates with her quest for female expression, constructing a complex portrait of the female artist's situation in the world. Edna tries to escape the fate of both Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz; but, without the stories of other women who have broken free from a misogynistic hegemony, she cannot at first conceive of another option. She longs for a new language, a new medium with which to express herself, a sense of self apart from the mythical mothering angel that patriarchy has conveniently substituted as her double; or as Gilbert and Gubar insist, she looks for a way to "kill the aesthetic ideal through which [women] themselves have been 'killed' into art" (596). Uselessly attempting to configure her own experiences into the language of a social order that doesn't acknowledge her existence, Edna as artist must find a way to disrupt the mediums she has been given, and in that resistance, define a uniquely feminine existence closer to nature, body, and emotion. She must self-define in order to self-express.

Many have used Mademoiselle Reisz's prophetic warning to confirm that Edna's death is her defeat. Moments before Edna plunges into the cold sea for the very last time, she watches a "bird with a broken wing [...] reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (108). This scene directly follows Edna's realization that her love affairs would always be fleeting and insignificant and that her children were "like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days" (108). While these scenes are certainly and purposely left open to interpretation, I suggest that far from being defeated, hopeless, and unthinking, Edna is more self-aware than ever before. She understands that she merely

attached a feeling to Robert that he was never responsible for. She sees that lover after lover would only seek to possess and confine her. She perceives that she cannot possibly escape the demands of her children in a patriarchal society where women are subordinated in the home on a daily basis. She also recalls the voice of the sea, repeating almost verbatim the lines used earlier to signify her initial awakening: “The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (108). I agree with Kenneth Eble’s assertion that “Edna’s struggle, the struggle with *eros* itself, is farthest removed from capriciousness. It is her self-awareness, and her awakening into a greater degree of self-awareness than those around her can comprehend, which gives her story dignity and significance” (192). Edna recognizes a society in which she will never govern her own body, remarking that her husband and children were a part of her but “need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (109).

When Edna stands naked on the beach, she exposes herself to the mercy of the natural elements and casts off any fictitious social constructions. While Edna’s ordering of dinner before swimming into the sea suggests that she tidies up in a way that allows patriarchy to explain away her suicide as simply physical weakness, her decision to remove her bathing suit cancels out her initial gesture. The bird with a broken wing falls not to the ground as in Mademoiselle’s earlier metaphor, but into the sea, “the waves that invited her” (108). Free from her constraints, Edna enters the sea and revisits memories of her childhood; naked and vulnerable, she metaphorically returns to the female womb as evidenced by the imagery of fertilization. Gubar comments on the female body as the only available medium for women’s art, stating “women’s use of her own body in the

creation of art results in forms of expression devalued or totally invisible to eyes trained by traditional aesthetic standards” (296). The sea, a symbol of the womb and of female sexuality, represents the semiotic state, a pre-Oedipal realm, a time before language and patriarchy, a time of drive and impulse and feeling¹². As evidenced throughout this chapter, the sea calls to mind birth; it is the adventurous meadow of childhood; it beats upon Edna’s body like the music of Mademoiselle Reisz; it is a space of female empowerment where she first swims and where “her will had blazed up, stubborn and resistant” (31). By reorienting herself to the sea, and perhaps the unnamed mother, Edna uses her artistic expression to render female experience, to validate the female consciousness, and to disrupt an order that denies both her sexuality and her creativity.

In the opening epigraph of this chapter, Edna voices her determination to never sacrifice herself for her children, a resolution she repeats at the novel’s close. When she walks toward the sea, she doesn’t speak of death, but instead of eluding those people and social structures that seek to control and dominate her (108). Her suicide represents a sacrifice of life for a preservation of self. A product of her time and class, Edna comes to see she cannot have both. The erotic, as “the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (Lorde 54), can only be accessed when Edna devotes herself to her painting, to her creative energy, an energy suppressed by marriage and motherhood. Her return to the sea symbolizes a (re)submergence into a deeply female plane and an explicit refusal to quietly conform to standards of conduct. Subversive insofar as Victorian women create babies not art, her art takes on a new meaning when her suicide is described like a portrait, in the “long, sweeping stroke[s]” (109) of a painter.

¹² See *The Kristeva Reader* (1986) for a close examination of the symbolic versus the semiotic. Edited by Toril Moi.

Edna's refusal to assimilate into male ideologies expresses a purposeful subversion, a literal plunging into a realm of female experience and expression, *the* act of supreme autonomy. She reaches out "with a long, sweeping stroke," like that of an impressionistic painter and enfolds her body into the sea's "soft, close embrace" (109). She remembers the meadow where she first resisted a male-centered definition of herself, and laughs at the words of Mademoiselle Reisz. A radical saboteur, Edna finds her voice in a blatant refusal to succumb to either category of what woman *can* be. After all, what could take more courage? What could be more daring? What could express more defiance? That is to say, the student becomes the teacher, successfully taking her body back from an oppressive society. It is possible, I think, to read Edna's suicide as both artistic expression and resistance to oppressive patriarchy that allows Chopin's readers the kind of critical questioning that makes literature a privileged place of social change. If we understand Edna's artistic quest as one for solitude and expression, she gains both in her last work of art, her suicide. In the last lines of the novel, Edna returns to her childhood, recalls her very first stirrings of sexual desire, and sinks into "the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks," (109) obvious symbols of sensuality and fertilization. She swims out to sea not in desperation, not in escape, not in hopelessness, but in a simultaneous expression of and defiance of society's values as filtered through the female artist's consciousness.

Edna yearns for an existential identity in a culture which defines her through the home, through her ability to serve and sacrifice for her husband and children. It follows that her behavior is not only capricious but threatening to the patriarchal system in which she lives. To be unsatisfied as a wife and mother is to be selfish. To seek the erotic and

long for artistic and intellectual fulfillment is to be unvirtuous and unruly. Within this context it becomes clear why these themes continued to dominate Chopin's work – she was, after all, a mother of six and a writer in the same period of which she writes. Chopin discovered her own appetite for a creative life only after her husband's death when “she became an avid student of the latest developments in philosophy, literature, and the natural sciences” (Warhol-Down, et al. 1049). Chopin, a rebel woman herself, depicts a rebel woman for her readers, a woman who sees nothing “but an appalling and hopeless ennui” (54) in domestic harmony and so turns to her own creativity and passions. Here, the woman artist exemplifies the New Woman which would occupy modernism and propel the first-wave of feminism.

Chapter 3: “*I sung back in return*”: Female Sexual Desire in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*

Published in 1975, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* came at a crucial time for African American literary tradition; a follow-up to the Black Arts Movement and precursor to the Women’s Renaissance, the novel anticipated the latter’s trend of exploring slavery’s effects on the African American present. As such, the text inextricably links themes of oral storytelling, continued abuse of black bodies, and policed black sexual desire. The novel tells the story of four generations of black women living in rural Kentucky during the early twentieth century. Simon Corregidora, often referred to as Old Man, took Ursa’s great-grandmother “out of the field when she was still a child” to “break her in” before putting her to work in his whorehouse (10); he fathered both Ursa’s grandmother and mother. Ursa struggles to construct selfhood amidst the traumatic stories told by her Great Gram and Gram, stories that link Ursa to brutal institutionalized rape, incest, forced prostitution, and murder. Ursa, from the age of five, is taught to associate sex with horrific violence, femininity with trauma, and desire with shame. Ursa’s sexual repression is understandable given her family’s lamentable past at the hands of a vicious slaveowner and whoremonger in Brazil. When a fight with her husband turns physical and Ursa loses not only her baby but her chances of ever becoming a mother, the text traces her anxious attempt to pass on the narrative of Corregidora’s heinous crimes without being consumed by it.

Early critical works generally favored Jones’s first novel despite some controversy over its depiction of black men. Claudia C. Tate calls it “a bizarre romantic story that exposes the intimate life of the main character, Ursa Corregidora, with such candor and immediacy that its narrative texture seems like a screen onto which her

unique psychological history is projected” (139). Ashraf H.A. Rushdy aligns *Corregidora* with Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, calling it “an ancestral narrative of slavery ‘framed within a novel that dramatizes a modern version of it’ ... focusing on the intersubjective relations” surrounding the passing down of slave experience” (273). Missy Dehn Kubitschek succinctly situates *Corregidora* with works by Marshall, Walker, and Morrison that “all recognize [that] one can still drown on the Middle Passage” (144). Certainly, the novel belongs to the portion of African American women’s tradition of the latter half of the twentieth century that addresses how history can stifle rather than enable the present.

The *Corregidora* women pass on their experiences to leave evidence for posterity in an assertion of orality’s superiority to burnable and burned written record. The stories of victimization, told over and over, become dogmatic, even peremptory; hence, Ursa is slapped for questioning their authenticity. Adult Ursa isn’t only shaped (arguably obliterated) by the narrative, but repeats it herself in a disabling, abusive marriage. According to critic Jennifer Griffiths, a “connection between sexuality and destruction continues to shape the inner life of the *Corregidora* women long after slavery ends” (72). Literary critic Stephanie Li goes further, interrogating the conflation of Ursa’s identity with her ability to mother subsequent generations: “Once objectified as lucrative ‘pussy’ within the slave economy, the *Corregidora* women now privilege the womb as the primary site of female value. In both conceptions, women are reduced to a physical function and alienated from any notion of personal desire or sexual pleasure” (133). Racial domination thus coincides with sexual domination. Many early critics evaluate how Ursa reclaims female value by singing the blues (Dixon, Boutry, Griffiths). It is

through her singing, a medium of expression Ursa feels compelled by, that she “give[s] name to the nameless” (Lorde 37) and copes with the conflicting emotions of those memories burned into her consciousness so that “*when it comes time to hold up the evidence, we got the evidence to hold up*” (14).

In a 1979 interview with Claudia Tate, Jones remarks on a conspicuous critical oversight: “I don’t recall the lesbianism entering into any critical discussions except as an overall part of the sexual picture” (146). It is not the first time critics have failed initially to take into account a novel’s exploration of homosexual desire. In 1986, literary critic Deborah E. McDowell surprised the literary world with her reading of lesbian desire in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*¹³. Seven years before, Barbara Smith had inspired similar controversy with her reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*¹⁴. Pioneering black feminist Patricia Collins offers enlightenment on the silence surrounding black female sexuality during the latter half of the twentieth century when she identifies three forms of suppression on black women’s thought: economic, political, and ideological (4-5)¹⁵. Ideological oppression includes the controlling images of black women that permeate Western social systems and justify systematic subjugation. As a result of these images – the untamable breederwoman, the hypersexual Jezebel, the asexual mammy, and, more recently, the welfare mother – issues surrounding black women’s sexual agency have been largely ignored.

¹³ See Deborah E. McDowell’s “The Nameless . . . Shameless Impulse”: Sexuality in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*.” “The Changing Same”: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory (1995).

¹⁴ See Barbara Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.”

¹⁵ For more on the intersectionality of economic, political, and ideological suppression, read Patricia Hill Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000).

Even in black communities, traditional notions of passivity, submissiveness, and nurturing motherhood seek to counter negative stereotypes and, in some ways, prompt a silence around issues of female sexuality. This silence divides black communities where bisexual, lesbian, and other queer women of color are named sexual deviants and further marginalized. Jones is all too aware of this silence, and despite the explicit language and candid sexual images of her novels, she remarks that the erotic imagination “is problematic for Afro-American writers – even more so women (and why many of our early writers scrupulously avoided it) – because when you write about anything dealing with sexuality it appears as if you’re supporting the sexual stereotypes about blacks” (Rowell 171). Yet, four decades after the novel’s publication – marked by the LGBT movement and the upsurge in queer criticism – the oversight persists.

The little work that has been done on lesbianism in *Corregidora* often relies on a dichotomous understanding of sexuality that greatly simplifies both Cat’s and Ursa’s experiences. Keith Byerman references the novel’s lesbianism as a futile substitute, calling it “a form of narcissistic evasion ... a space of not-men rather than of women” (179). Missy Dehn Kubitschek addresses Ursa’s need to resolve her feelings about Cat’s sexuality rather than her own (152-5). Arguably, despite Tate’s acknowledgement of the effect of lesbian encounter on Ursa and critic Thomas Fahy’s 2006 essay, “Unsilencing Lesbianism in the Early Fiction of Gayl Jones,” critics have not thoroughly examined fluid sexualities in *Corregidora*. Fahy attributes this silence to Jones’s heterosexuality and argues that “early black feminist criticism discouraged queer readings of Gayl Jones” (204). I take this explanation further, suggesting that Jones’s marriage to the controversial and explicitly homophobic Robert Higgins and early critics’ assumptions about Jones’s

own homophobia (Smith 1990) might explain the disregard of lesbianism, same-sex desire, and fluid sexuality that pervade *Corregidora*.

Ursa's ambivalent impulses are reflected in the novel's structure: a fragmented, stream-of-consciousness narrative consisting of italicized dream-memories that move between and confuse the characters of Old Man Corregidora, Mutt, and Cat. Many critics have pointed out the similarities between Old Man and Mutt, attributing their likeness to slavery's lingering effects on modern social relations (Mitchell, Rushdy, Li). Black men – historically powerless to protect their mothers, lovers, and daughters – emulate the violent possession and consumption of black women's bodies to regain a semblance of control and combat ongoing emasculation and dehumanization. The novel clearly supports this interpretation. But this reading of racialized sexual violence in *Corregidora* fails to consider the ambiguity around Cat's presence in Ursa's internal dream-memories. Ursa cannot separate heterosexuality from violence – a product of her matrilineal line's insistence that her sexuality exists only for the production of a new witness to protect against destruction of the historical truth. Thus, fluid female sexuality and its expression via blues singing exist as sites of resistance. I argue that because of the novel's focus on the domination of heterosexual relationships and the inheritance of trauma through generational storytelling, readers have paid less attention to the text's flirtation with homosexuality as an alternative to humiliating, dehumanizing heterosexual relationships. As Ursa searches for erotic power and self-realization through blues singing, she struggles to confront her awakening sexual desires for Cat.

This essay contributes to the critical conversation surrounding the limits of language to adequately express the traumatic experiences of black women by claiming

that the blues provides a language of same-sex desire, opened up to a sexually ambivalent Ursa once she is freed from a rigid heterosexuality by the removal of her womb. It then discusses the continued abuse and consumption of black bodies under the oppressor/victim binary of heterosexuality, in which all sex is exploitative. To its opprobrious critique of heterosexuality, the text juxtaposes a possibly liberating same-sex desire. Ursa – who accesses the erotic via blues singing, giving voice simultaneously to “*hate and desire*” (102) – resists the eradication of the female body under oppressive heterosexual relations. I urge readers and critics alike to acknowledge “the contradictions of who and what are being left out” (Smith 186) in criticism and writing. I do not suggest that Jones intended the reader to perceive Ursa and Cat’s relationship as inherently lesbian. However, in the tradition of trusting the text rather than the authorial intention, I suggest that abandoning heterosexual critical assumptions reveals what has been left out and creates a viable space to give voice to an alternative way of being.

I.

“Corregidora’s system of slavery and prostitution depends upon the silence of women. Also silenced for and by Ursa’s mothers, however, are the voices of desire and love – any voice, in fact, that does not speak vengeance. In this way, Jones argues that women as well as men are agents of silencing.”

-- Amy S. Gottfried, “Angry Arts: Silence, Speech and Song in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*”

At the close of *Corregidora*, Ursa refuses to visit Cat and settles for an ambiguous reunion with Mutt, leaving both heterosexual and homosexual sexualities unresolved. According to Fahy, “Jones contributes to a black lesbian political project by both giving voice to sexual identities that have been stifled by heterosexism and challenging her readers (and some of her characters) to question a dichotomous understanding of

sexuality” (204). Interestingly, it is through Great Gram and Gram’s refusal to acknowledge their own sexual agency that a rejection of simplified sexuality becomes most apparent to the reader. Ursa inherits a legend in which women are always victims of rape, and men are always violent rapists. Yet, this uncomplicated binary collapses with Martin’s pivotal question, “How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love?” (131). By blurring the division of oppressor and victim, the text challenges any straightforward understanding of sexuality.

Great Gram and Gram’s incessant testimonies, and their coinciding denial of their own sexualities, speak to their struggle to produce a language that extends to the expression of both female trauma and desire. I interpret their compulsion as a dissatisfaction with the language available to express the inexpressible. Their repetition and subsequent obliteration of Mama’s and Ursa’s subjectivities are consequences of their inability to “give voice” to their female experiences under slavery and white supremacist patriarchy. The available language functions as a space of white, male supremacy and fails to viably account for even limited black female agency. Ursa, then, is able to do what they have failed to do, but only through a breaking away from Western language (metaphysics/dichotomies) and heterosexual restrictions via the blues. To see Great Gram and Gram as simply hectoring and begrudging is to ignore their attempts to act beyond what they cannot speak. Ursa’s blues, albeit similarly incomplete, extends this attempt in a healthier, more fulfilling reclamation of self, and allows her to endure an inherited trauma through testimony that salves the wounds of the wider black community in which she performs.

Great Gram's and Gram's dissatisfaction with their narrative manifests itself in their attempt to overcome the inadequacies of language by bearing children to "leave evidence" (14) because "they can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious" (22). However, the oral tradition, in this instance replacing continuity with mere repetition, fails to act as testimony and move toward healing, accounting for the Corregidora women's failure to acknowledge Martin's crucial implication. Instead, a partial, static history stifles and obliterates Mama and Ursa. From "pussy" to "womb," measurement of female value persists in patriarchal, heterosexist discourse where women are commodities and breeders. Hence, after Ursa's hysterectomy, she loses her subjectivity and must search for a tenable identity: "As if part of my life's already marked out for me – the barren part" (6). For Ursa, selfhood is possible only after discovering her mother's part in the family history, and then finding a song of her own: "I was thinking now that Mama had gotten it all out [...] maybe she and *some man*... But then, I was thinking, what had I done about my *own* life?" (132). Jones says of Ursa, "She doesn't want to be 'bound' by that history, but she recognizes it as important [...] Her story is connected to theirs but she also wants her own choices and acts of imagination and will – most of which come through singing her own songs" (Rowell 177). The blues allows Ursa to break away from the cycle that reduces womanhood to either victimization or procreation.

In one internal monologue, Ursa asks herself what the blues does for her, then answers, "It helps me to explain what I can't explain" (56). Blues, therefore, creates a space where Ursa can negotiate the limits of language. Here, she gives voice to fluidity. Words like "pain" and "pleasure", "submission" and "resistance", "surrender" and

“resilience” no longer have to exist separately – what is in one language rigid contradiction now coexists. Suddenly, a language accounts for the simultaneous feelings of hate and love that epitomize Great Gram’s and Gram’s confused sexualities. Interestingly, the text suggests that this coexistence exemplifies the very nature of female sexual experience; a coming-of-age May Alice struggles to explain intercourse to a disbelieving adolescent Ursa: “it hurts for a little while, and then all the hurting goes, and then it feels good ... it gets to so you can’t help it” (137). Thus, the blues transcends the dichotomies of a racist, patriarchal system, opening up a dialogue that encompasses the nuances of female sexuality. After her surgery, Ursa obsesses over getting back on stage, envisioning a more encompassing testimony: “I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life *and* theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded by the new world” (59). Her search demands female agency and creative power via expression, and becomes possible only when Ursa’s body can no longer function as breeder.

Although Ursa is clearly misguided about her worthlessness without a womb, the text suggests that her most glaring delusion concerns her feelings for Cat. After her surgery, Ursa sings for Cat, who says that her voice “sounds like you been through something [...] Like Ma, for instance, after all the alcohol and men, the strain made it better, because you could tell what she’d been through” (44). Fahy notes that the reference to Ma Rainey, a famously bisexual blues singer, “subtly suggests that the blues is a medium where the tension between heterosexuality and homosexuality can be expressed” (216). While I agree with Fahy’s claim, I propose that, in confining that interpretation to Cat, he overlooks that the comment was made to acknowledge the

transformation of *Ursa's* voice. Freed from her heterosexual duties as outlined by her foremothers, Ursa occupies a space of ambivalent sexuality, a space where she questions, "Now, what good am I for a man?" (25). Cat's likening of Ursa's voice to that of Ma Rainey, therefore, can be read as the recognition of a more fluid sexuality, one that liberates Ursa from the humiliation and abuse she has known thus far.

If the blues indeed offers a space to express a fuller female sexuality, what Lorde calls, "those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared" (56), then the song that Ursa searches for would disarm the linguistic binaries permeating patriarchal society and recontextualize her own story. Fahy sets out these binaries when he argues that the "passive linguistic construction of fucking and being fucked" inhibits any other sexual identities by refusing women agency (215). Speaking to Cat in a dream-memory, Ursa insists, "A man always says I want to fuck, a woman always has to say I want to get fucked" (89). Later, during intercourse Tad asks Ursa, "Am I fucking you?" to which she replies, "You fucking me" (75). Immediately after, Ursa recalls a similar scene with Mutt where they repeat the mantra: his "What am I doing to you, Ursa?" to her "You fucking me" (76). In essence, heterosexuality as defined under patriarchy relies on the passivity of women, stripping female agency and subordinating female pleasure.

When Cat offers Ursa tough advice about moving too fast with Tadpole, Ursa says, "Fuck you," to which Cat replies, "You can't" (35-36). Here, the sexual innuendo indicates that were a sexual relationship to occur between Ursa and Cat it would not (and could not) exist under the same restrictive binaries as Ursa's relationships with Tad and Mutt. I suggest, then, that the text validates homosexuality's ability to deconstruct the

linguistic hierarchy that typifies heterosexuality. How Ursa will use song as a tool of resistance does not become clear until she is freed from Great Gram and Gram's narrative – an obsessive perpetuation of this same hierarchal system. This freedom arises with the loss of her womb, an impelled interruption of the transgenerational storytelling crucial to individual and family identity. A barren Ursa disrupts the cycle and no longer has use for the familial understanding of heterosexuality as procreation or “leaving evidence.” A liberated Ursa possesses a more fluid subjectivity and an opportunity for self-fulfillment through blues singing.

Ursa's transformed voice presents new possibilities for her song and for the black community more generally. Cat isn't the only one who *feels* her voice. Max Monroe, the owner of the Spider, where Ursa sings after Happy's, comments that Ursa “got a hard kind of voice ... The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can't explain it. Hurt you and make you still want to listen” (96). Again, his comment evidences the paradoxical concurrence of desire and distress – mimicking the language used to describe Great Gram's biting of Old Man's penis – inexplicable but expressible through the blues. The power of blues to express pain, sorrow, and dehumanization unites a marginalized people in an expanding communal song. Ursa's performances widen her idea of kin from the Corregidora women to the entire black community, supporting Amy Gottfried's claim that, “Jones contributes to Black feminism's ‘overarching theme of finding a voice to express a self-denied Black women's standpoint’” (567). Ursa's artistic expression revoices Janie's in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In both cases, female protagonists rehearse a foremother's slave experience bound by historical sexist patterns in their present lives and experience a fragmented sense of self that compels them toward

expression. For Janie, participatory expression means relaying her story of Tea Cake and the Muck to Eatonville through Phoebe. For Ursa, participation means bearing witness through song to the continued abuse and policing of black female sexual desire. Both protagonists create opportunities for a coherent self through oral storytelling, and what Kubitschek calls in *Their Eyes* the “resultant possibility for communal as well as personal growth” (54). The voice-in-community offered in both novels acknowledges a potentially disabling past, but then allows for a dialogic recontextualization that serves the current generation. Specifically, for Ursa, stagnant and partial (re)memories become functional and amenable, servicing her creativity and supporting identity formation.

II.

“The past repeats itself in the novel not only because it is traumatic, but also because forms of power endure.”

-- Naomi Morgenstern, “Mother’s Milk and Sister’s Blood: Trauma and the Neoslave Narrative”

Corregidora expands Great Gram’s and Gram’s compulsion to repeat their traumatic and ultimately crippling stories to the current relationships between black men and women. Ursa’s burden is two-fold in that she suffers from trauma, “a birthmark between my legs” (45), and is culturally compelled to repeat the past within her own life. In other words, the novel’s profound treatment of black female sexuality originates in historical oppression that continues to inform modern social relations. Critic Ashraf Rushdy discusses long-term psychic effects of slavery in the novel, saying that “Jones focuses on the subject of desire as constituted historically in order to show how both the spectacular and the hidden experiences of slavery, especially the historical subjection of desire, operate in the formation of contemporary African American subjectivity” (274). If examined through the dynamics of institutionalized slavery, not only are ideologies

surrounding black female sexualities more understandable, but they reveal important elements of the historical emasculation of black men.

Under slavery, and the decades that followed, black women were essentially excluded from definitions of womanhood. A dual oppression organized black female bodies as victims of both rape and barter, in stark contrast to the ideals of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity that constituted white womanhood. In essence, ideologies surrounding black female sexualities formed an antithetical relationship to womanhood itself. Whereas white women exemplified purity in their complete lack of sex drive, black women – problematically deemed as intrinsically impure, promiscuous sorcerers – preyed on white men. Moreover, whereas white women served the private domain, caring for the home and raising children, black women were exploited as breeders for capital accumulation and denied motherhood. Black men were similarly subject to domination, commodification, and policed desires. Conditions of slavery dictated and thwarted black male desire, while denying black men any chance to protect their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. Conventions insisted on “the male protector” while simultaneously stripping black men of any agency associated with “manhood.” As a whole, slavery denied humanity in its most basic forms, excluding black men and women from definitions of what is human, what is man, what is woman, etc. as evidenced in the combined spectacle of rape and lynching on the plantation next to Corregidora’s when one woman resisted her master’s sexual advances: “*They cut off her husband’s penis and stuffed it in her mouth, and then they hanged her. They let him bleed to death. They made her watch and then they hanged her*” (67). In this memory, the black

male slave is castrated, literally cut from his sex and life to die unsexed. The woman is silenced with the male sex organ, and her lifeless body is made spectacle.

The contradictory and often confusing sexual identities and familial roles produced in enslavement suffuse the romantic relations between characters in *Corregidora*. Despite Mutt's later assurance that "we ain't them" (151), he repeats Old Corregidora's very words, calling Ursa, "[m]y little gold piece" (60) and creating a relationship where a husband is just "[s]omebody to give your piece of ass to" (55). When Ursa refuses to quit her job despite Mutt's assertion that "[a] man works for a woman," he puts her on the metaphorical auction block: "I got me a piece of ass for sale" (159). For Mutt, marriage signifies ownership, and other men's desire for Ursa relentlessly threatens his possession of her. He understands only two options for Ursa, that of passive, childbearing housewife or that of sexualized commodity. In his attempt to reclaim black masculinity, he has imitated the silencing of the black female via phallic power. Ursa's second lover, Tadpole, though initially attentive, treats her similarly. When she catches him in bed with another woman, he devalues her femaleness by her failure to please him: "Her tiddies do more for me than your goddamn pussyhole do" (88). Ursa's humiliating, and even dehumanizing, relationships with men succinctly illustrate the lingering effects of slavery on the African American experience and speak to the sociopolitical environment in which Jones writes.

Despite early critics who saw the novel's representation of black men as particularly unflattering (Reckley, Barksdale), women also carry the remnants of slavery into their present sexual relationships. Mama explains her exploitation of and then disregard for Martin, Ursa's father, saying, "I carried him to the point where he ended up

hating me, Ursa. And that's what I knew I'd keep doing. That's what I knew I'd do with any man" (121). Fearing the same vulnerability her mother evades, Ursa refuses (or fails) to feel during sexual intercourse. Her reluctance to feel, to love and be loved, recalls a dream-memory where she explains the effect of forced prostitution on her matriarchal line: "*He made them make love to anyone, so they couldn't love anyone*" (104). Her "pretending" and desensitizing eventually culminate in Mutt's reminder: "I ain't *your* slave neither" (160). On several occasions, each of them refuses the sexual appetite of the other. Ursa recognizes the compulsion to repeat: "But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore?" (184). Here, Ursa acknowledges that the drive for control is not gender-specific, racially-specific, or historically-specific.

Although it is obviously problematic to align these offenses – certainly, Old Man's institutionalized rape of Great Gram and his own daughter differs from Mama's sexual exploitation of Martin – that's exactly what Ursa does. Again, the text unravels the facile opposition of victimization and agency. For Ursa, a drive for power – violent or passive, institutionalized or random, literal or figurative – culminates in the continued policing of black sexualities, and thus, the continued repression of black subjectivities. A sadistic misogynist, Old Man Corregidora rapes Great Gram and then their daughter (Gram). Great Gram returns the favor by biting his penis, an act establishing sexuality as a site of resistance certainly, but ultimately a move to expose Corregidora's vulnerability and demonstrate her own power. At one point, Ursa mutters to Great Gram in a dream-memory, "You were sacrificed [...] They ate your genitals" (59), an act Great Gram

apparently mirrors in her attempt to regain agency. African American literature scholar Carlyle Van Thompson, discussing the novel in his book *Eating the Black Body*, calls racialized sexual violence during enslavement the “literal and metaphorical consumption of the reproductive black female body, her genitals, and her womb. Equally important, this sexualized consumption manifests in the lives of countless black men and women who carry their psychosocial pasts to their present relationships with each other” (73). Great Gram and Gram figuratively rape Mama and Ursa with destructive storytelling that obliterates their sexual agency and shames them into abstinence and numbness respectively. Mama exploits Martin for his semen before pushing him out of her body/bed/house and denying him any further sexual relationship. He reciprocates the humiliation by beating Mama, tearing off her clothes, and forcing her to walk the streets like “a whore.” Mutt creates a spectacle of sex in the dance hall and, later, de-wombs Ursa when he pushes her down the stairs. Ursa seduces Tad to get “something I needed but couldn’t give back” (4). And so on. Within the novel, sex simply doesn’t exist outside of manipulation and exploitation.

The exploitative nature of sex is hardly surprising since heterosexuality represents the domain of male power and capitalistic accumulation. Heterosexism, therefore, relies on the hierarchal binary between men and women. Such a narrow definition of sexuality, without much room for mutual agency, undoubtedly fosters the problematic relations rendered within the novel. Feminist critic Sally Robinson explains the impossible position of the black woman: “As a victim of white male sexual exploitation, she has been made responsible for a sexuality that is, at once, the fantasy of the white male constructed in opposition to white femininity, and a threat to the black male’s

masculinity” (149). Perhaps, the most consuming theme in *Corregidora* is the dialectic between desire and abuse, or as Ursa understands it, “*Two humps on the same camel? Yes. Hate and desire both riding them*” (102). While we must acknowledge the patriarchal myth of women not being entirely unwilling during rape, *Corregidora* insists that it is just as pivotal not to erase black female sexuality entirely by assuming pure victimhood. Jones deconstructs the binary politics of heterosexuality through a poignant exploration of the possibility of desire in very undesirable conditions, desire within domineering heterosexuality.

The ambiguities of desire and agency under this regime manifest in two harrowing images of failed resistance. Mutt’s great-grandfather bought his freedom and then eventually bought his wife’s. However, when the freed black man owed a debt, his wife was taken from him as payment. The man “went crazy” and “wouldn’t eat nothing but onions and peppermint,” the “onions so people wouldn’t come around” and the “peppermint so they would” (183-4). The second image appears when Ursa uncovers her Great Gram’s secret, the one that can “make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can’t get her out of his mind the next” (184). She realizes that her great-grandmother bit the penis of Old Man Corregidora during fellatio: “a moment of pleasure and excruciating pain, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness” (184). Great Gram, forced to flee Old Man’s brothel after her sexual defiance, leaves Gram subject to the whim of her father-turned-rapist. Both images enlist the ambiguous imagery characteristic of the novel’s blurring of Western binaries and speak to its larger project of creating artistic space for these supposed opposites to coexist.

Many critics concern themselves with whether Ursa and Mutt reconcile during the final scene (Byerman, Dixon, Li). Certainly, *Corregidora* is not the only open-ended text of the canon; from Larsen's *Passing* to Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, black women writers have often encouraged reader-text interaction, a reliance on audience response that is reminiscent of oral tradition. In my reading, Ursa has created an opportunity for personal and community growth via the uncovering of her mother's story and the singing of her own, but her reunion with Mutt is purely physical suggesting a failed reconciliation ("We didn't speak. We got out of our clothes. I got between his knees" (184)), and her choice not to repeat her great-grandmother's act doesn't change the possessive nature of heterosexuality within the novel. As Ursa voices, "there'd still be demands" (183).

The text is concerned with the ways that black communities perpetuate colonialist racist and sexist ideologies, and, therefore, cautions against any master narratives that tend to limit rather than broaden the social constructs of race, gender, and sexuality. Although healthy heterosexuality might be possible, the ambiguous images infiltrating Ursa and Mutt's reunion, and the narrow definitions available for female sexuality mean that the novel cannot offer resolution. Put another way, domination during sexual relations exhibits the failure of the current system to transcend a slavish consciousness. Ursa first met Mutt while "singing a song about a train tunnel," in which the "tunnel tightened around the train like a fist" (147), a sexual image evoking the violent closing off of her body to male intrusion. She is portrayed as an object searching for subjectivity, but the continued consumption of the black female body under white patriarchy envelops her in a sort of sexual paralysis.

III.

“Having shown that the enracing of black women largely occurred through the commodification of their sexuality and the coercion and control of their desires, Jones goes on to demonstrate how the performance of an unfettered sexuality and a liberated desire provides an answer to and a way of undoing the historical legacy of that enracing process.”

-- Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, “Relate Sexual to Historical”: Race, Resistance and Desire in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*

My reading of *Corregidora* suggests female expression and fluid sexuality as resistance to the humiliating, oppressor/victim binary of heterosexuality. Within the novel, the black woman must choose between the stereotype and the anti-stereotype; anything else constitutes an intolerable deviance. She is either without sexual desire or hypersexualized. Plagued by the domination of sex and the legacy of slavery, the *Corregidora* women alternately choose not to feel or are shamed by their desire. Furthermore, Ursa’s initially violent reaction to Cat’s sexuality and Great Gram’s disgust at being likewise raped by Old Man’s wife suggest utter intolerance for anything outside heteronormativity. Gender Studies scholar L. H. Stallings asserts, “As long as Black female criticism continues to rely solely on the rhetoric of sex, which is foundationally based on Western binary metaphysics such as male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, and man/woman, the radical ideologies of desire present in cultural texts by Black women will be misunderstood or lost” (11). The novel itself is poised between these tensions. To be sure, Ursa is not a lesbian, but her failure to break away from the repressive sexual dichotomy reinforces rather than undoes the limiting patriarchal order.

After Ursa’s hysterectomy and pending divorce, she courts not one but two potential lovers: Tadpole McCormick and Catherine Lawson, both of whom have shown previous interest in her, both of whom offer shelter, food, and friendship while Ursa

convalesces. The text linguistically suggests Ursa's confused sexual desires for Tad and Cat first in her parallel nomenclature: Ursa enticingly calls them "Taddy" (7) and "Catty" (14) during the early periods of her recovery. She takes turns living with and being cared for by both her devotees, opening up to each in varying degrees about her anger towards Mutt, her despair, and her desire to return to singing. Her alluring pet names, however, come to an end. Immediately after Ursa discovers Cat's homosexual relationship with Jeffy, she refers to her with "Cat," and even the formal "Catherine." Likewise, as Ursa and Tad's marriage cools, she refers to him only as "Tad," and in her dream-memories with Mutt, he is "Tadpole." Interestingly, both of Ursa's male lovers subconsciously suspect Ursa's muddled desires; at points in the novel, they both ask her, "Cat got your tongue?" (62, 157).

Ursa and Tad's conversations further hint at Cat's appeal. When Ursa scoffs at the doctor's offensive farewell, "Same time, same position" (20), Tad alludes to Cat's successful subversion of conventional heterosexual bias. The "bold" Cat refused "the bastard" doctor who commanded her to "[g]et up on the table" (21). Lest the reader miss Cat's resistance to sexualized hierarchies that shame the female body, Tad recounts a time when Cat gave her husband (now ex-husband) a Kotex box to repair his broken car window (21). Later, Ursa considers Cat and her ex-husband's breakup, concluding, "Maybe it's just a man can't stand to have a woman as hard as he is" (40). To suggest the extent to which Ursa and Cat are both independent, strong women subjugated by relationships with men, the text aligns this consideration with Ursa's self-questioning, "what if I'd thrown Mutt Thomas down those stairs instead" (40). For Ursa, Cat – and possibly fluid sexuality (Cat has had both male and female lovers) – undoes patriarchal

order by equating herself to the “hardness” of men. In doing so, she empowers Ursa to think of herself as acting rather than simply reacting. Cat’s magnetism exists simultaneously in her strength and tenderness; she indicates that she could care for Ursa’s wounds better than Tad when she says, “But even he can’t give you everything you need” (26). Here, Cat acknowledges the intrinsic abuse when sexual relationships operate under capitalist, heterosexist exchange; Lorde says,

When we look away from the importance of the erotic in the development and sustenance of our power, or when we look away from ourselves as we satisfy our erotic needs in concert with others, we use each other as objects of satisfaction rather than share our joy in satisfying, rather than make connection with our similarities and our differences. (59)

Cat’s remark suggests then that same-sex desire offers a desirable alternative that doesn’t reduce the participants to the pornographic.

Such evidence merely gestures toward a sexual relationship between Ursa and Cat. Yet, in Ursa’s quest for selfhood, her emerging sexual feelings pervade her psyche. In fact, the awakening of Ursa’s erotic desires for Cat coincides with Ursa’s recollection of her childhood discovery of sexuality. Her slightly older friend May Alice, who “had already started bleeding” (135), carries on a sexual relationship with the teenaged Harold because “once you had it in you, it seems like you have to keep having it in you” (138). Even at this age, sexuality is dominated by the notion that females don’t have “any right to tell them to stop” (140). But Ursa remembers that when May Alice became pregnant, she asked, “why couldn’t I have been Harold and then nothing would have happened” (141). I agree with critic Missy Dehn Kubitschek’s claim that, “May Alice’s desired substitution of her female friend for her male lover denies the polar opposition of heterosexuality and homosexuality, showing the same woman as being able to experience

both desires” (154). Furthermore, it offers a glimpse of two coming-of-age black girls who begin to equate heterosexual desire with shame and danger, and at least one of them glimpsing lesbian desire as safety.

When Ursa receives unwanted sexual attention from Jeffy while staying with Cat, she quickly realizes that Jeffy and Cat are sexually involved and frantically rejects same-sex desire, effectively ending her friendship with Cat. Yet, Ursa says, “It wasn’t until years later that I realized it might have been because of my own fears, the things I’d thought about in the hospital, my own worries about what being with a man would be like again, and whether I really had the nerve to try. But then I just felt evil” (48). Although Ursa appears homophobic at the time of the incident, another reading suggests that Ursa’s own same-sex desires shamed her into an overreaction. A confrontation with Jeffy toward the end of the novel reiterates Ursa’s ambivalence toward lesbianism. Jeffy assures Ursa that she knew there wasn’t a sexual relationship between Ursa and Cat “even if you didn’t” (177). Ursa pretends not to know who Jeffy is talking about. Ursa’s denial not only suggests her feelings for Cat, but also her continuing reluctance to acknowledge those stifled desires.

Critic Christina Sharpe claims that, “For Ursa a whole family of history of desire and sexuality and the attendant monstrous intimacy of that history is condensed in the female sex, the genitals, the womb ... Ursa wants ... to imagine a sexuality beyond *Corregidora*, a nonhysterical sexual awakening”; however, Ursa curiously uses the word hysteria both “in her relation to her thwarted desires, and ... when she talks to her neighbor Cat Lawson about Cat’s sexual involvement with Jeffy” (48). Possibly, Ursa’s confusion stems from Cat’s violent sexual threats to Jeffy that perpetuate the same

traumas Ursa associates with heterosexual relationships. Although Ursa doesn't explicitly raise this point, the age gap between Cat and Jeffy is equally troubling, raising the question of consent in yet another context. Also likely is that Ursa's upbringing isn't easily undone. Ursa has been conditioned to equate womanhood with bearing children, a historically dictated argument of the "unnaturalness" of lesbianism. A net of social institutions, including Ursa's own participation in patriarchalized gender discourse, strangle female sexuality.

Confronted with Cat's disavowal of patriarchal values, Ursa insists on her own heterosexuality by rushing into marriage with Tadpole. Her hurry serves as a futile attempt to counteract the radical sexual desires that she can no longer ignore and that her new marriage fails to quell. Upon breaking up with Tad, she asks Cat in a dream-memory:

Why won't you turn back toward me? I'm so tired of waiting. Afraid of waiting. I gave you what I could. You didn't ask for that. You knew about the scar on my belly. You didn't ask for children that I couldn't give. What I wanted too. Afraid of what I'll come to. All that sweat in my hands. What can you do for me? (90)

The price Ursa pays is greater than she had imagined. In rejecting Cat, she refused the only lover who "knew" and "didn't ask," who expected nothing more than what Ursa "wanted too." Yet, her fragmented thoughts reveal her constant contradiction. As a woman, Cat understands her wounds, but Ursa isn't convinced Cat can "do" for her. Moreover, Ursa simultaneously fears confronting Cat and "waiting." Ursa identifies men with impossible demands, the children she cannot give; but, given Great Gram and Gram, it isn't just men who demand generations after all. Cat dismantles the agenda of

possessive, insatiable men and the obligations imposed by Ursa's foremothers, but same-sex desire remains a taboo, a stigma Ursa cannot seem to overcome.

Cat would likely relate to this powerlessness. In attempting to repair their friendship, Cat explains her isolation in a world that is white and male. From the white woman's kitchen where Cat endures male sexual harassment to her own bed where she has "to feel like a fool" (64), Cat struggles for safe sexual expression amidst constant degradation. Despite her unwillingness to admit it, Ursa too recognizes her own suffocating performance. Ursa and Mutt's bedroom, at times satisfying, often "exhausted [her] with wanting" (64) to the point of having to "use my fingers" and "wanting to cry" (65), but fearing vulnerability in front of a man. The scene ends with Cat "waiting for an embrace" that never comes (66).

The text suggests further parallels between Ursa and Cat when a factory incident results in Cat's losing her hair – a removal of womanhood mirroring Ursa's hysterectomy. Jeffy relays the story of the accident to Ursa, remarking that loss of hair is the "kind of thing makes you don't feel like a woman" before attempting to recruit Ursa to visit Cat, who needs "to get her ass together" (177) – in effect, to return the friendship Cat gave when Ursa suffered from a similar experience. Jeffy's description of a piggy bank signifies her understanding of the options for female sexuality:

I used to come in here and buy those little dime banks ... They got some that you have to wait till you get ten dollars in them before they open up. Then they got some got a hole in the bottom, you can get your money out anytime. I used to like the ones you had to wait for. (177)

Jeffy, like other female characters, knows too well that sex can be an empty, domineering exchange. Instead, she advocates for a more mutual relationship, one you "wait for" and from which you get something worthwhile in return – a possibility perhaps for Ursa and

Cat were they to reunite and reconcile over female wounds. And the question remains as to why Ursa, who insists that she does care about Cat, allows Jeffy to interfere with her impulse to see Cat. Is it because of Jeffy's obnoxious sexual taunts? Is it that after all this time Jeffy still suspects Ursa's desire for Cat? Or is it that Jeffy, a fluid sexual being who has been with both man and woman, exemplifies what Ursa has spent decades running both to and from?

Corregidora is poised between the tensions of black female sexuality in mid-twentieth century United States. A return to Martin's question clarifies my reading of the text. Martin demands that Great Gram and Gram recognize that they were not solely passive victims and admit the ambivalence that governs their sexual lives. Historically, both desire and shame perforce constituted black female sexual appetite. The dialectic of seemingly paradoxical terms coexisting in female experience pervades the novel's attention to recontextualize Ursa's matrilineal narrative to include her song. To argue only that the ending of *Corregidora* illuminates constructions of race, gender, and sexuality at the height of the Black Power Movement is to undermine an important effort of the text – the complication of inflexible dichotomies that cannot account for lived experience. Given the tortured history of black female sexualities, it is not surprising that Ursa and Cat ultimately fail to connect. Like critic Stephanie Li, I think "the novel's conclusion does not offer an easy promise of future happiness for the two lovers" (145-6), and I attribute that to Ursa's reluctance to explore a more expansive sexuality. The text urges a broader understanding of sexuality than was widely available at the time of its publication – certainly, the loosening of restrictive social constructions (camouflaged as concrete ontological categories) remains an ongoing project. Importantly, by the end of

the novel, Ursa has told Mama her song, a suggestion that her art has opened new avenues of language and allowed her to voice her experiences in a way that moves forward rather than repeats the past. In her reunion with Mutt, she uses the blues form and repetition of verse to expose her own vulnerability and admit that she doesn't want "a kind of man that'll hurt me neither" (185). Yet, if her art has allowed her resistance, agency, and an opportunity to dislodge the perpetuation of exploitative sexual relations, her reunion with a man where it always "had to be sexual" (184) and where she falls to her knees without words calls into question whether she has resigned herself to heterosexual silencing.

Chapter 4: “Here comes the dress”: Daily Resistance in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew*

Breaker

“To suddenly become emblematic of a problem, the ‘face’ of a ravaged Haiti, is its own rude awakening, its own culture shock. Yet it allows a larger story to be told that in many ways can be helpful, because it fights complete erasure. It forces others to remember that we were – are – here.”

-- Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously*

Audre Lorde rightly acknowledges the erotic as an assertion of the life force of women, “of that creative energy empowered” (55). Lorde identifies the systematic repression of women’s experience as the foundation of Western thought and links female subjectivity directly to the body. The erotic, the internal true feeling which embodies creative power and harmony, has been suppressed and distrusted under capitalist patriarchy. Women, caught in a male-centered world, have no way of truly knowing or representing themselves; they have been taught to be suspicious of their bodies and, therefore, distrust their source of female creativity. For Caribbean women in the diaspora – marginalized not only for their gender and race but also for their immigrant status – this source of female power has been repressed on multiple levels but not obliterated. To access the erotic, to discover the female body in all its feeling and fullness, is to endure and resist patriarchal oppression. Edwidge Danticat answers the call for new representations of female consciousness as she revises women’s resistance via oral literature¹⁶, braiding together the voices of exiled women in a dialogue that doesn’t offer a solution but does constitute agency.

¹⁶ Whereas *Corregidora* is certainly an example of literature in which orality is a dominant theme, I differentiate *The Dew Breaker* in that its separate chapters, which can exist exclusively, speak to and inform one another. The text itself is engaged in call and response.

Danticat's braiding of voices mirrors the seamstress work of Beatrice Saint Fort, a character of her 2004 novel *The Dew Breaker*, as Beatrice accesses creative female power and community through dressmaking. Beatrice chooses to create in a world that has cast her invisible, to express herself from a place of systematic silence. Because Beatrice uses her work to feel deeply within her body and to connect with other women, it becomes a space of empowerment. My intention, then, is to posit the daily seamstress work of Beatrice as an active seeking of the erotic, a means to thwart invisibility and silence through creative feeling and female connection. Yet, what partially frees Beatrice partially confines her as well, and we meet her at the close of her occupation when Aline Cajuste, a young, Haitian American journalism intern, arrives to record Beatrice's story. I propose that, although the novel doesn't explicitly state it, Beatrice was raped by the dew breaker during her torture; thus she uses her work to momentarily reclaim her unmarred sexuality and pre-tortured subjectivity but fails to confront the highly sexualized nature of her torture as evidenced by her partial story.

Considering that Beatrice comes from an oral culture and that women's voices have been historically erased, the opportunity to tell her story could yield further empowerment. Certainly, there is power in telling your own story, in shaping how you are remembered¹⁷. Together, Beatrice (born in Haiti and knowledgeable of its oral traditions) and Aline (born in the United States and a representative of the written word) have the power to rewrite history, to revise and contribute to the national record of female experience under the Duvalier regime. Yet, Beatrice tells an incomplete story, omitting the violent sexual nature of the dew breaker's crimes. Therefore, in her retirement and

¹⁷ In Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," she asserts that silence is not protection and elaborates on the dangers of not speaking your own truth.

failure to pass down a full story, Beatrice effectively cuts herself off from her female community, her art, and thus the erotic. Ergo, Beatrice's resistance via dressmaking initially gives her power to endure but eventually fails. It is Aline who offers Beatrice a not so tragic end. The chapter closes with Aline staying with Beatrice, allowing her a final chance to shape how her story is told.

This paper discusses Danticat's contribution to the wider Caribbean tradition, distinguishing *The Dew Breaker* as a novel-in-stories that bears witness and testifies to social injustice and generational traumas. I argue that dressmaking becomes an artform which allows Beatrice limited resistance in that she uses it to access female power and cope with trauma, stemming both from her past and marginalized present. Similarly, Beatrice exercises a limited control over her body in her constant relocation. Her mobility, albeit confused flight from a past trauma, nonetheless constitutes agency. She can move and remove her body as was not possible in her former Haitian community where her body was property of the tonton macoutes. I acknowledge the novel's paradox in that Beatrice seeks female empowerment as a bridal seamstress – weddings, of course, celebrate a profoundly patriarchal relationship. Consequently, Beatrice's resistance is limited and eventually overpowered by patriarchy; she loses her "daughters" and fails to relay a full testimony. While the novel valorizes (re)memory and storytelling, it doesn't offer wholeness or resolution. Instead, Danticat insists on a necessarily fragmented postcolonial subjectivity. Lastly, this paper aligns Aline's determination to write the stories of others with Danticat's own creative resistance, her writing and its influence on her social activism.

Danticat's novels testify to the women who refuse to be subjugated and give voice to stories that go otherwise unheard; they are intimately tied to her nonfiction, interviews, and documentaries¹⁸. With a careful sense of duty, Danticat records female experience and expands the voices of history, crafting stories that can be passed on and enacted as tools of resistance themselves. She calls it "creating as a revolt against silence" and sees her work, and the work of other immigrant artists, as both dangerous and urgent (*Create Dangerously* 11). Dangerous because it disobeys systems of oppression that silence and erase. Urgent because it is both memorial and insurgent – a testimony to those stifled and annihilated under the legacies of colonialism and dictatorship, and a tool to resist, to avoid further erasure and give future generations a sense of bearing. Danticat's reimagining of female experience in her oral fiction is life-giving; it ensures the legacy of Caribbean women and enables future generations to reclaim a history that never made it to the textbooks.

Haitian literature has inevitably dealt with reconfigurations of relationships and identities, both national and individual, as characters speak out against the silence of Haiti's past. As a Haitian American writer, Danticat has participated in the movement in Caribbean women's literature to revise and extend the predominantly male configurations of Caribbean subjectivity and nationality¹⁹. In the early 1990s, Danticat rose as a prominent voice in Caribbean literature, articulating themes such as mother-daughter relationships, voice and silence, traumatic memory and (re)memory, preoccupation with

¹⁸ See Danticat's collection of essays *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* (2010) and the following films: *The Agronomist* (2003) in which she was producer, *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy* (2009) in which she was writer and narrator, and *Girl Rising* (2013) in which she was writer.

¹⁹ For a notable, early text that examines gender and class in Haiti, see Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Love, Anger, Madness* (1968).

the female body, fragmented subjectivities and exile, necessary revisions of history, and the lifesaving force of storytelling. Essential to Danticat's project is the inclusion of multiple voices and multiple perspectives. Her writing is transnational, transcultural, transgenerational, and oftentimes transtemporal. Her pen is explicitly political; her novels are told from a community of the colonized and exiled. Patti M. Marxsen, Caribbean scholar and literary critic, calls Danticat "the voice of the Haitian-American Diaspora," remarking that her work "is redefining the meaning of past, present, and place for a new generation" (140-1). But what continues to differentiate Danticat from her precursors is her attention to a collective dialogue – expressive art, performance, and storytelling – that bears witness and explicitly resists disempowerment. While the orality of African American and Caribbean women's texts has been discussed at great length, I contribute to this conversation by interpreting the disjointed, dialogical structure of Danticat's novels as a mirroring of the inevitably fragmented nature of her characters whose subjectivities cannot be adequately accounted for by identity-bound differences but instead are in a constant relational flux as a result of cultural interactions and exchanges.

The Dew Breaker, Danticat's third novel, weaves together nine stories of exiled Haitians to offer a plurality of perspectives that speak to the legacies of historical and political trauma haunting generations of Haitian diaspora. The reader encounters the fragmented transnational characters as they attempt to rebuild their lives and cope with their traumatic histories on U.S. soil. The stories within *The Dew Breaker* are linked by the arbitrary and senseless violence of the Duvalier dictatorship, as we hear from direct victims, children of those victims, perpetrators of violence, children of those torturers, political refugees, and the wider Haitian community. In other words, a multiplicity of

voices converse with one another to tell a nuanced story, a history. This essay offers a feminist reading of *The Dew Breaker* that draws on postcolonial theories and their interconnectedness with race, gender, and transcultural subjectivities. If we understand black feminism “as a theoretical and practical effort demonstrating that race, gender, and class are inseparable in the social worlds we inhabit” (Davis 3), and postcolonial theory as that which “investigates, and develops propositions about, the cultural and political impact of European conquest upon colonized societies, and the nature of those societies” (Ashcroft, et al. xv), then we can situate Danticat in a feminist and postcolonial context that transcends national borders to conceive of a third-world, intergenerational, black women’s struggle within modern global relations. Danticat’s emphasis on the collective voice, a dialogue of stories recollecting oral traditions, responds to the dangers of individualist ideologies in the rise of global capitalism. A new age of multicultural writers has taken up the work of intersectionality and writing women’s experiences into being, but has done so with new understandings of national borders, cultural interactions, and collective histories. Within an intersectional framework, these novels enrich transnational and transcultural discourses that move beyond cultural pluralism to privilege both difference and universality.

The Dew Breaker’s distinction lies in its reverberation of oral traditions and its loyalty to a multiplicity of perspectives. No event, history, or situation is viewed through one set of eyes. Like oral traditions, the stories of *The Dew Breaker* converse with one another; they interact and inform one another. Not only does this call into question the written record of imperialist histories but also raises the problematic nature of ranking oppression and the precarious responsibility of voicing the experiences of others. The

unnamed eponymous torturer, the man who links the nine stories, isn't the central character; rather, we come to see him and the extent of his crimes through the voices of other Haitian Americans. While he is never excused from his actions as a tonton macoute under the Duvalier dictatorship, he is nevertheless complicated until the victim/victimizer dualism collapses²⁰. In fact, Danticat continuously blurs the lines between innocence, complicity, and guilt, showing how no relationship can be simplified to the hunter/prey model and questioning what it means to go on living both after being a victim of trauma and after inflicting trauma on others. Literary critic Carine Mardorossian addresses Danticat's talent for layered characters that resist categorization and judgment through her succinct description of *The Dew Breaker's* staging of "the historical, cultural, and gendered contexts through which the tortured become agents of suffering and the torturers in turn become tortured beings who are prisoners of their own conscience or of recurring nightmares" ("Danticat and Caribbean Women Writers" 42). Not only do Danticat's characters defy simplistic understanding, but the very role of (re)telling and (re)visioning their stories is equally complex. The novel's disjointed structure relays the dew breaker's story from a multitude of voices including those of his wife Anne and his daughter Ka. In Ka's memorable statue, a cracked rendition of her father in the pose of a praying mantis, we glimpse the intricacy of his character.

The novel's nine stories symbolically correspond to Haiti's historical nine districts. Danticat has said that her country is one of uncertainty – sometimes understood as Haiti and other times understood as the United States – but that she feels “as an

²⁰ *The Dew Breaker* thus carries on the project of *Corregidora*, refusing to simplify violence and rape to innocent vs. guilty. Whereas in *Corregidora* Great Gram's and Gram's own desire complicates a conception of them as passive victims, here the guilt and trauma experienced by the torturer complicates a rendering of him as purely evil.

immigrant and as an artist” to belong to what is called “the tenth department” (*Create Dangerously* 49). Historically, Haiti has “had nine geographic departments and the tenth was the floating homeland, the ideological one, which joined all Haitians living outside of Haiti, in the *diaspora*” (*Create Dangerously* 49). Danticat describes a transcultural space, a space of displacement where people are neither one nor the other but both, unique but connected by an ancestral heritage. This tenth space is not always friendly; displaced peoples are strangers both in their new lives and in their native countries. Yet, the tenth space simultaneously highlights the individual and the collective, constituting a space for a more complex subjectivity to form outside the dichotomies of Haiti/United States, male/female, and perpetrator/victim. I suggest, then, that in giving her novel nine separate sections she envisions the novel in its entirety as a tenth space, a space where her characters and their stories meet, a space of community, where the diasporic is not outside of both home and host culture but very much situated in both.

While continuing to debunk sameness and contend with national reactions to the lingering effects of colonialism, Caribbean women writers have blurred borders and begun to engage in a universal conversation of cultural subjectivities. Whereas Danticat’s predecessors were interested in writing against a male literary tradition in order to write women’s voices into nationalist histories, Danticat marks a generational shift in her reimagining of female diasporic resistance amongst the complexities of transnationalism and transculturalism in a globalized world. She engages with imperial dominance in all its modes and manifestations, illuminating the complexities of identity formation for displaced women who live and endure within multiple cultures. In this, she transcends

her literary forbearers in her acknowledgment of an irreducibly fragmented postcolonial subjectivity. In Danticat's narratives,

female agency and the metaphor of voice are sites of contradiction rather than unidirectional tropes of power and authority. Instead of narratives whose central preoccupation is the unproblematic because decontextualized coming to voice of women, her novels generate questions surrounding the fraught process of voicing, self-determination, agency, and the production of cultural and national identity. ("Danticat and Caribbean Women Writers" 42)

Her characters do not work toward wholeness or experience outright healing, but instead resist disempowerment daily through female creativity, art, and storytelling. Stories, and female expression more generally, refute silence and censorship; they empower us to cope with our histories and traumas; they grant visibility that withstands the constant threat of elimination. Moreover, stories offer insights for future generations who will live, love, and work in a world where cultures cannot be conceived of as separate entities but instead as in constant interaction. My project situates women artists at the core of its analysis, proposing that women who create from the margins forge spaces of female empowerment and resist erasure.

I.

"We are on the high seas. The artist, like everyone else, must bend to his oar, without dying if possible – in other words, go on living and creating."

-- Albert Camus

Beatrice Saint Fort, a direct victim of the dew breaker, actively resists debilitation and accesses the erotic through the art of dressmaking, a metaphor for her stitching together of self in the creation of wedding gowns that symbolize female virtue and mask imperfections. I consider how daily women's work like sewing and threading can be seen as both creation and creativity that ultimately work to destabilize structures of

oppression. And while I maintain that Danticat purposely does not offer a solution or initiate a path towards wholeness for her characters, her women characters resist through their very endurance, through their insistence on visibility. I further contend that Beatrice's sewing enacts the book's structure and performs the threading together of parts that the book carries out thematically. In her work as a seamstress, Beatrice finds an outlet for female expression and empowerment; through her creativity and a network of female clients, she momentarily comes to terms with her trauma and reclaims the feminine beauty and unmarred sexuality that were stolen from her. However, not only is Beatrice's agency limited but she cannot completely heal, partly because her inherited life abroad comes with its own systems of oppression and partly because she fails to relay a full testimony. She employs the power of the erotic to cope with her sense of loss and to resist complete debilitation in her present life; yet, there is no going back to the youthful beauty she imagines. Just as her colonized nation can never reclaim a pre-imperial authenticity²¹, Beatrice can never reclaim her pre-tortured body or subjectivity.

Restoring a sense of self to exiled immigrants has been a long-time trope of Caribbean literature. Danticat complicates this theme by refusing to offer the hope for self-actualization that for so long has demarcated women's fiction²². Instead, in *The Dew Breaker*, Beatrice employs the art of dressmaking, just as Danticat employs writing, as a tool of resistance to refute negation and subvert systems of oppression without the promise of a happy ending. To create from a space of marginalization, to voice experience from a space of silence, to make yourself visible in a world that erases female

²¹ See Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997) for an examination of Creole identity as constructed in relation and not in isolation.

²² See Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970) and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).

expression, constitutes resistance. Furthermore, because Beatrice's work invites her to (re)formulate an identity and explore the sacredness of female connection, Beatrice's resistance stems from the erotic. While wholeness remains unattainable because postcolonial subjectivities are necessarily fragmented, the voicing of female experience as a means of empowerment is imperative to survival. As Lorde suggests, it is through our deepest feelings and our sharing of those feelings that we "become less willing to accept powerlessness," and harness "the energy to pursue genuine change within our world" (58-59). Beatrice's creative acts, her art of dressmaking, therefore, temporarily allows her to cope with her marred body and to resist further disempowerment.

Like her art of choice, Beatrice's mobility acts as temporary agency but cannot overcome her powerlessness to wholly reclaim her body. Living in Queens, she still suffers from a fractured psyche due to her experiences as a transnational subject haunted by horrific memories of Haiti where she was a victim of the dew breaker. To escape these traumatic memories, Beatrice moves from place to place so as to evade her imagined persecutor. For her, the dew breaker is a ghost on her heels, a phantom never far off. Danticat's characters are all transnational and transcultural, some using movement as escape (both from others' violence and their own), as refuge (a space safe not only from violence but from memory and trauma), as a new start (an opportunity to forge a new sense of self), and as educational/economic opportunity. Whereas movement generally implies escape from terror, autonomy, and hope for the future, it becomes, for Beatrice, a mode of self-destruction. Critic Regine Michelle Jean-Charles suggests that "[b]eyond the problems of language, belonging, and longing for homeland, the immigrants in Danticat's texts find themselves confronted by the demons of their past no matter how

much distance they seek to place between the traumatic experiences from home and their new lives in the United States” (63). Movement does not free Beatrice’s body but instead manifests her constant fear. Her inherited land does not offer solace but instead presents new challenges to remaining visible and secure. Hence, she flees her memories, relocating across New York City’s immigrant neighborhoods in hopes of maintaining some semblance of control over the body that she understands as constantly under threat.

Beatrice’s victimization infiltrates every aspect of her life, tearing her away from her community, nation, and selfhood. She prefers to be called “Mother” by her clients but has seemingly no relations, friends, or children. Her isolation is an effect of her excessive mobility and her distrust of having anyone in the house for long (126). When Aline interviews her, she recognizes the extent of Beatrice’s alienation and traumatic memories. When Aline asks how long Beatrice has been a seamstress, Beatrice replies, “since Haiti” (126), as if Haiti is a time, an event, as much as it is a place. For Beatrice, there is simply before the dew breaker and after the dew breaker. Her life is but a daily toil of blurred survival, marked only by her incessant movement and her art – a weaving of parts into wedding gowns that, for Beatrice, embody feminine beauty and sexuality, and signify human connection and family. Beatrice, then, attempts to reclaim what she understands as stolen from her in her creative work. If we understand Beatrice’s work of dressmaking as an art form, which she employs in her unending quest for self-actualization and empowerment, we can conceive of her sewing as an active and even literal attempt to thread herself back together.

The stitching motif pervades the novel. When Dany, a tenant living in the dew breaker’s basement, returns to Haiti to tell his Aunt Estina that he has found the man who

killed his parents, he learns that she, a village midwife, had always wanted to be a seamstress. Although Estina's "burn marks had smoothed into her skin and were now barely visible" (97), the fire left her blind and, therefore, unable to sew. Like Beatrice, Estina had once dreamt of marriage and children, and like Beatrice, she lost these aspirations, or rather, the dew breaker's violence robbed her of them, leaving her body and psyche scarred. Yet, unlike Dany, who "was still back there, on the burning porch, hoping that his mother and father would rise and put out the fire" (108), and unlike Beatrice, who finds her torturer on every street, Estina was seemingly able to reintegrate into her community and preoccupy herself with life, with the delivering of babies. She treated her own burns, an indication that she confronted her wounds in a way Beatrice has been unable to and therefore didn't need the work of stitching in the same ways that Beatrice might. For both characters, the marred and disfigured female body plays an integral role in identity formation; and interestingly, both women are seen as motherly figures despite not having families of their own. Estina, though, is empowered by her role in the community and quite literally heals her scars; they remain visible but not crippling. On foreign soil, Beatrice's defaced body dominates her sense of self, and she experiences new forms of trauma; her displacement imperils her further.

Again in "The Funeral Singer," stitching as a means of holding together fragments – both literally and figuratively – appears. Freda – one of three Haitian women immigrants taking courses in the United States and sharing their stories of home with one another – is a funeral singer whose father mysteriously disappeared during the Duvalier reign. Freda remembers the small notebook held together by her mother's embroidery thread that she crowded with "tiny faces, to keep [her] company in case [her] mother also

disappeared” (178). Freda’s mother, to deal with the loss, used the telephone rope for a maypole dance to “[weave] the wind, plaiting it into a braid as thick as the rainbows” and embroidered crimson clouds on pieces of cloth because her husband had always said that a “ruby twilight would mean a calm sea, but a blood-red dawn might spoil everything” (168). For Freda and her mother, sewing acts as a means to endure trauma and loss. Perhaps the most jarring appearance of stitching in the novel occurs after Anne first meets the dew breaker outside the prison and treats his wound – the scar that covers his face and declares his guilt. The doctor “pulled a silver thread in and out of his skin [...] like some kind of torture [which] he didn’t seem very pained from,” while warning him that his face might “heal in a way that would make him look like a monster” (238-239). Here, the inability of stitching to undo the past becomes evident. Hence, stitching as both a method of expressive coping and as a way to conceal wounds reappears several times. Interestingly, the characters all share a similar fate in that their sewing cannot undo or fully mask their scars; in this last example, the stitching actually highlights the traumatic past, suggesting that the dew breaker is particularly haunted by his violence.

II.

Beatrice describes her seamstress work as *becoming* the dress, an act which allows her to move from the margins to center stage: “I am that dress. It’s like everyone’s looking at me” (126). I interpret her seamstress work as a refusal of invisibility, an expressive art that refutes silencing and erasure. Furthermore, the wedding dress is reminiscent of female virginity, beauty, and human connection. Beatrice-as-dress embodies those precious things stolen by her torturer. She momentarily reclaims her sexuality, voice, and hope for a future as a wife and mother. Yet, we cannot ignore her

work's reliance on patriarchy. Her dresses connect her with creative power and allow her to share feeling with her "daughters," but simultaneously foretell their coming marriages and realignment with patriarchal power. Her "daughters" become "wives," and in designing and constructing their gowns, Beatrice participates in the exchange of female bodies. Rather than argue that Beatrice moves towards "wholeness," I contend that Danticat encourages the voicing of traumas but refuses to offer female expression and (re)memory as a promise of healing.

On the contrary, complete recovery and relief from her terror remain elusive for Beatrice. She is necessarily fragmented, a reflection of the very nature of postcolonial experience and migration, but her art exists as daily means of convalescence and reclamation. I agree with Jean-Charles that for Danticat's female characters, "subjectivity is informed by the multiple positions they occupy as women who are usually poor, black, immigrant, second generation, and inhabitants of a country that is not their own" (58). Therefore, racial, gender, national, and even cultural identities are challenged as stable points of reference. Instead, identity formation exists as a relational and fluid process for displaced women who are transnational and transcultural, constantly withstanding the ambiguities and contradictions which make up their sense of self. In an essay, Danticat states, "[o]ne of the advantages of being in an immigrant is that two very different countries are forced to merge within you" (*Create Dangerously* 112). In withholding wholeness, Danticat seems to suggest that survival for the postcolonial, diasporic women consists of daily toil and negotiation with conflicting conceptions of self and identity. The transnational subject – those inhabiting the tenth space – must cope with old and new traumas, accepting the scars that can either hold them together or rip them apart.

Beatrice's work simultaneously serves as creative expression, coping mechanism, and site of resistance. Beatrice lives within two nations, two cultures, and in both the past and present, fleeing a phantom torturer and pampering her engaged "daughters." Only via dressmaking does she momentarily reclaim a sense of self and access the realm of female power: "[f]or the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" (Lorde 54). After enduring highly sexualized violence, Beatrice seeks female community and artistic expression; as such, her dressmaking provides relief and agency, albeit limited, from the arbitrary violence under heterosexist, patriarchal society. First, we must recognize Beatrice's torture as a direct response to her refusal of the dew breaker's sexual advances. Her kidnapping and mutilation occur only after she declines the dew breaker's offer to go dancing. Essentially, the dew breaker – to avenge this impudence, a perceived emasculation – arrests Beatrice, ties her up in a prison cell, and ravages her body. Of her bodily injuries, we know at least of her scarred scalp and maimed feet, "thin and sheer like an albino baby's skin" (131). Second, we must associate her female community, in which she is the respected "Mother," as a construction of her own tenth space so to speak. She reinvents a sense of community and nationhood in her dressmaking that allows her to fulfill a role and form an identity despite her exiled status.

The torture (re)memory as relayed to Aline recalls a rape in the explicitly sexual domination and wrecking of Beatrice's body that eradicates her sense of female agency and sexuality and consumes her sense of self. She describes her walk of shame: "Then he made me walk home, barefoot. On tar roads. In the hot sun. At high noon." (132). Beatrice is thus vulnerable – her body is exposed and she must walk painfully through

her community at the peak of the day, displaying her shame for all to see. Afterwards, she not only associates heterosexuality with choicelessness but also sees the consequences of female agency and voice as patriarchal punishment, corporeal violation, and community denunciation. Even if we accept the unlikely notion that the dew breaker didn't rape Beatrice during her torture on the basis that there is no textual evidence of it, she would, after being publicly shamed in this manner, likely be deemed, at best, property of the macoutes and therefore untouchable, or perhaps utterly spoiled and unvirtuous. Her self-hatred and suspicion of her sexuality, both consequences of her torture, prove effective tools of oppression and revoice Lorde's discussion of the suppression of the erotic, in which male models of power vilify sources of female power.

While the novel doesn't directly state that Beatrice was raped during her torture, I believe there is good reason for the reader to make that assumption. First, when the dew breaker meets Anne and she is trying to get in the prison, he tells her, "People who go in there don't come out" (232). He knows without a doubt that if Anne enters the prison, "the men would make her all kinds of false promises, then have their way with her" (232). His indication that all women who see the inside of the prison are raped supports the notion that he violated Beatrice sexually. Women in Danticat's other texts, most notably Martine Caco of *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, have also testified to the sexual brutality of tonton macoutes. Martine, pregnant with another man's child but haunted by the rapist who caused her first pregnancy, considers abortion, saying "I look at every man and I see him [...] Him. *Le violeur*, the rapist. I see him everywhere" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 199). At the close of Danticat's first novel, Martine stabs her stomach seventeen times, giving in "to her pain, to live as a butterfly" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 234). Martine's

suicide reveals two things: the immeasurable pain of living with the memories of the horrific sexual violence of the macoutes (her daughter Sophie believes her memories have effectively raped her every day since), and the possibility of interpreting her withdrawal not as a surrender but as an act of agency. (Sophie asserts that she is not going to Heaven but to Guinea where she will finally be free.) To accept the likely possibility that Beatrice was raped by the dew breaker is to further understand her paranoia as a reaction not unlike Martine's post-traumatic tendency of "seeing" her persecutor despite an ocean and twenty-five years of distance between them. And like Martine, Beatrice, in retiring and eschewing communication with others, chooses to stop seeing him, a choice I interpret as ultimately self-destructive.

Beatrice, understandably overcome by her fear, uncertainty and constant flight, rejects the demands on her to endure. If we accept that her creative passion for seamstress work allows her to access the realm of the erotic and that her brides comprise her sole sense of community and female connection, the fact that we meet her on her last day as a seamstress becomes particularly significant. Add to her impending retirement the fact that she redirects her interview into a testimony and we see the import of the oral motif. I allege that Beatrice relays a partial story, neglecting to acknowledge the sexual nature of her torture, and so misses an opportunity to confront her traumatic memories and pass down her experiences for the next generation. In Beatrice, Aline recognizes her own incomplete sense of self and history, acquiring a personal responsibility to tell the stories of people like Beatrice, "men and women whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space in their lives [...] men and women chasing fragments of themselves long lost to others" (138). Yet, in her retirement and failure to pass down a complete narrative,

Beatrice relinquishes female creativity and connection, effectively cutting herself off from the power of the erotic. While I argue that to disconnect from her art and her only sense of kinship, that of her female clientele, is essentially opting out, I don't necessarily interpret it as surrender. Just as there exists limited agency in daily endurance and female creativity, there too exists autonomy in her refusal to participate. While, of course, her artistic cessation and isolation from community manifest as very different forms of opting out when compared to Martine's suicide, it follows that if suicide can be interpreted as a freedom from systems of oppression and traumatic memories, then Beatrice's withdrawal could also be viewed as liberating.

To situate Beatrice's testimony, I first submit the fact that she erases any sexual undertones from her retelling – even the dew breaker's sexual advance is subdued to a simple request to go dancing. In effect, she is arrested and brutally punished for saying no to a man in power. Her punishment entails not only the physical violation and destruction of her body but also the obliteration of her identity. Furthermore, in targeting her feet, the dew breaker effectively insists that if she won't dance with him, she won't dance with anyone. He robs her of dancing – a performative female expression that is oftentimes a space for female sensuality and celebration of the female body. If we consider that dancing may be a stand in for sexual intercourse, or at least a suggestion of it, then the dew breaker violates her body to dominate and control her sexuality, to prevent her from having sex with other men. The dew breaker's gendered violence forces Beatrice to detest her own body and associate her sexuality with a loss of control – a complete repression of her erotic power.

Aline, a young Haitian American struggling with her own lesbian identity, social isolation, and disconnection from her parents, could benefit from hearing Beatrice's unmuted experiences. After all, the power of testimony is in leaving behind something that not only speaks for yourself but is also of use for posterity. Aline, taking on a role as immigrant artist at the close of this short story, wants to write the stories of people like Beatrice; she understands their significance and in accepting this responsibility, she considers returning home to "let her parents learn who she was" (138) and visiting her friend in Florida to avoid more nights of dining alone. In other words, she, like Danticat herself, senses that stories empower, that she can use them to develop a better sense of herself and reconnect to her community of family and friends. And so she sits down, with Beatrice sewing on her porch, and waits. While we can hope that Beatrice will take advantage of a second opportunity and relay a full story, her current censorship doesn't allow Aline to interpret and use her story in a meaningful way. Rather than integrating her voice into the communal story, Beatrice continues to mask her wounds, leaving it to Aline to (re)imagine the extent of her trauma.

III.

"Writers – journalists, essayists, bloggers, poets, playwrights – can disturb the social oppression that functions like a coma on the population, a coma despots call peace; and they stanch the blood flow of war that hawks and profiteers thrill to."

-- Toni Morrison

I am interested in female expression and creativity as resistance both within the novel and as an aim of the novel. Danticat suggests that the postcolonial self is necessarily fragmented, irreducibly tainted by the histories of imperialist conquest. The voicing of trauma, the passing down of memory, is encouraged throughout the novel, but is not allowed the lofty status (as procurer of wholeness and reconciliation) it has been

given in earlier women's novels. This same pattern resonates in Danticat's authorial endeavors: her storytelling gives voice without offering reconciliation. My reading engages with the text as a cultural practice to reveal the connections between Danticat's fiction and its cultural grounding. Aline, at the close of "The Bridal Seamstress," consents to the same project as Danticat herself – unsilencing. The price of voicing experience is high – to confront, to relive, to remember, to pass down, all without the promise of resolution. And so it goes for the marginalized, exiled, black, third-world woman who attempts to express herself across nations and cultures that deny her very existence: "to create dangerously is also to create fearlessly, boldly embracing the public and private terrors that would silence us, then bravely moving forward even when it feels as though we are chasing or being chased by ghosts" (*Create Dangerously* 148).

Danticat's activism suggests that she sees a direct connection between her writing and social justice. Like Toni Morrison above, Danticat places a responsibility on the artist to subvert social oppressions and remove the blindfold from the public consciousness. In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat explores what it means to be an immigrant artist. She finds hope in the immortality of artists, those who wrote the words that, regardless of how hard he tried, Papa Doc Duvalier could not make go away. For her, the only thing utterly unbearable is silence. She complicates the role of the immigrant artist further by contemplating "the deaths that brought her here, along with the deaths that keep her here" (17). While many critics of Danticat problematize the fact that she targets a white, English-speaking audience from her own position of relative renown in the United States, I believe Danticat answers this accusation and then some in her nonfiction essays: "[t]he immigrant artist shares with all other artists the desire to interpret and possibly remake

his or her own world” (18). In telling the stories of the silenced, Danticat offers her people interpretation, healing, and validation. In directing them toward a Western audience, Danticat demands the rest of the world’s attention and links her personal writing to social justice. She keeps people and their memories alive. She bears witness, and she forces others to do the same. And most of all, she refuses to keep quiet.

Danticat wrote and narrated *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy*, a 2009 film directed by Renee Bergan and Mark Schuller and produced by Mary Becker. In the film, Danticat braids together the stories of five Haitian women who live and work under the gendered violence of neoliberal globalization. One struggles to earn in a day’s work what it costs to send her child to school that day. Another describes how economic instability has fueled violence against women. Women unify in grassroots campaigns against gendered violence and in support of unions. The film interviews activists, scholars, government officials, and factory owners to display the complexity of gender, class, and industrial exploitation in Haiti. Danticat’s storytelling voice couples with repetitive images of hair braiding and the call-and-response *krik krak*, the language a Haitian griot uses to gain an audience’s attention and elicit their collaboration in storytelling. The imagery of hair braiding intimately connects generations of women and emphasizes female agency in the passing down of stories and experience. In her collection of short stories titled *Krik? Krak!*, Danticat writes,

You remember thinking while braiding your hair that you look a lot like your mother. Your mother who looked like your grandmother and her grandmother before her. [...] When you write, it’s like braiding your hair. Taking a handful of coarse unruly strands and attempting to bring them unity. [...] In our world, if you write, you are a politician, and we know what happens to politicians. (219-221)

Here, Danticat testifies to the lifegiving nature of stories and the very personal side of the political for those who have never had the privilege of art for art's sake. *Poto Mitan* communicates the power of stories to incite change.

When the very personal and particular becomes emblematic of a wider and far-reaching social injustice, the power of literature becomes clear. There will always be those who insist on the aesthetic value of art as its sole objective. Yet, for women, for minorities, for immigrants, and especially for immigrant women of color, the role of art has always been political. As Danticat suggests, artists of the oppressed have always had the further responsibility of advancing the interests of the people. As Frank Lloyd Wright famously said, "Art for art's sake is a philosophy of the well fed." Danticat cannot afford to tell stories for the love of telling stories, especially when there are so many Haitians whose personal histories go unheard. And so we see in her fiction her own resistance, her own sense of enduring, and her commitment to changing the future through memory.

Danticat braids together the stories of those who were not able to tell their experience and bears witness to the pain, loss, negation, and persisting fragmentation, all without hope of a reclaimed wholeness but instead hopeful in the power of storytelling itself to save lives. In its ability to voice female experience and create female community, storytelling accesses the erotic, momentarily uncurling the "energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all [our] experiences" (Lorde 57). Danticat, a rebel woman herself, writes the stories of other rebel women, creating a female space to combat erasure and cope with transnational and transgenerational traumas. Like Anne at the very close of *The Dew Breaker*, the black, postcolonial woman must continue to "hang up and try again" (241).

Conclusion

I echo Carol Christ when I acknowledge the importance of Lorde's erotic nearly forty years later²³. When I read Lorde's essay I am reminded not only that female connection is life-saving and life transforming but that the power to acknowledge and express the deepest feelings within our bodies is subversive. Thus, when women bring that energy to their work and art – painting, singing, dressmaking, and yes, writing – they create from a spiritual plane which refutes the numbed silence that patriarchy and capitalism enforce. As such, women's art has never existed merely for aesthetics, but has always been accountable to politics. When women explore the feelings of their bodies and choose to feel deeply in their relationships and creative endeavors, they resist the systematic suppression of the erotic, they embrace and express that which has been misnamed, made suspect, and misrepresented as inferiority.

My readings of Edna, Ursa, and Beatrice insist on the female artist's ability to generate power and resist disempowerment through creativity and female connection. This resistance, though not overt, liberates women, furnishing opportunity for them to tell their own story (or have a say in how their story is told). For Edna that means coming to recognize her own desire and need to express and know more fully that desire. She awakens to herself as subject, seeks a personhood apart from her husband and children, and turns to painting to (re)discover the self which has been stamped out by patriarchy. For Ursa that means claiming the worth of her body outside of reproduction and literally learning to "feel" again. The discovery of her mother's story and the search for her own song enable Ursa to break free from the legacy of slavery and the consumption of the

²³ See Christ's article "Remembering Audre Lorde and 'The Uses of the Erotic.'"

female body to imagine new ways of feeling and expressing female experience. For Beatrice that means dedicating herself to the sewing of garments representing female beauty, connection, and purity to reclaim the sense of self that was stolen from her through the mutilation of her body. She establishes her own female community and institutes a new family model in which she is Mother, life-giver. In each interpretation, I explore how women create from within the margins, seeking new ways to express themselves and find fulfillment, thereby resisting a patriarchal world which denies them true feeling and self-actualization.

This project suggests that in liberating women from patriarchal oppression which renders them silent and in allowing women to access and express their deepest nonrational feelings, art taps into the erotic and serves as a site of resistance. While I choose to focus within each chapter heavily on the literature itself and the novels' representations of female artists, by the same line of thinking, I deduce that the novelists themselves are engaged in this work. First, the writers are all female and invested in the work of voicing female experience. They find new ways of expressing the inexpressible and use story to raise important questions about female subjectivity, about knowing one's self in a world where one is taught to distrust the female body and all its feeling. For further evidence, I reference the ways in which these novels converse with the various waves of feminism and call attention to social injustices.

Chopin not only addresses the separation of public versus private spheres which plagues early first-wave feminism, but anticipates the questioning of the subjectivity of women as they come to see themselves as individuals in addition to wives and mothers. Jones expands the question of the value of the female body outside reproduction and the

right of women to control their own bodies, emphasizing the ways white supremacy and patriarchy have collaborated to disrupt relationships between black men and women and negate the black female body. Her text converses with the Black Arts Movement and intersectional discourse, and foresees increasing unease with heteronormativity. Danticat initiates a global conversation, addressing diasporic subjectivities in a not-so-post-colonial world. She envisions the complexities of identity formation when boundaries are blurred and individuals are products of multiple interactive cultures. My chapter on Danticat includes a more thorough discussion of her as both artist and activist specifically because she overlaps her writing with her fieldwork. In conversing with and propelling their respective feminist waves, these authors-as-artists engage in the important work of social justice via literature. Like their female characters, they access that which is sacred in female expression, creativity, and connection.

In Nancy K. Bereano's 1983 introduction to *Sister Outsider*, she says

We have been told that poetry expresses what we feel, and theory states what we know; that the poet creates out of the heat of the moment, while the theorist's mode is, of necessity, cool and reassured; that one is art and therefore experienced "subjectively," and the other is scholarship, held accountable in the "objective" world of ideas. We have been told that poetry has a soul and theory has a mind and that we have to choose between them. (9)

Simply put, this ordering of things, this seeing of categories as separate, this opposition of art and scholarship, is untrue. While it may be difficult to see, and more difficult to name, the work of writers and other artists does not, and cannot, exist apart from those social contexts in which we live and operate. To call art an indulgence, to take for granted art for art's sake, distances feeling and thinking, art and action, in ways that don't account for lived experience, and that, perhaps more importantly, reinforce the perceived

inferiority of deep creative feeling. As much as the artist, the critic creates a story of her culture, and if we are lucky, she too creates dangerously.

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Professional Appointments

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Presentations

The 39th Annual East Central Writing Centers Association Conference, Mar. 2017

“Telling Stories: Personal Essays and Personal Statements in the Writing Center.”

The 45th Annual Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, Feb. 2017
“‘Here comes the dress’: A Female Artist’s Daily Resistance in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*.”

Indiana University – Purdue University Writing Program, Aug. 2016
“Student as Producer: Writing to Pay Attention.”

Indiana University – Purdue University Research Day, Apr. 2016
“The Quest of the Female Artist: Suicide as Subversive Art in *The Awakening*.”

Indiana University Digesting Discourses: Taste, Appetite, & Consumption, Mar. 2016
“Ambivalent Appetites: Female Sexual Desire in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*.”

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