BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY AND NATURE OF WOMANHOOD IN THREE WORKS BY AFRICAN-AMERICAN FEMALE AUTHORS: Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston and Gayl Jones

VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, Saarbrücken, 2009.
Table of contents

1. Introduction ................................................................. 5

2. Presence and absence of African-American Women in United States society, history and literary discourse ......................................................... 8

2.1. Erasure and exclusion of African-American presence from American dominant society and literary production ................................................................. 8

2.2. Invisibility and marginality of black women in African-American cultural history ........................................................................................................ 12

2.2.1. The myth of the black macho ........................................ 16

2.3. Exclusion and absence of black women from white feminist theory and the emergence of Black feminist movement ......................................................... 17

2.4. The position of black women in American Society .................. 18

2.4.1. Silence of the oppressed .............................................. 18

2.4.2. Multiple oppression of Black women and questions of identity ........ 19

2.4.3. Race-sex analogy ......................................................... 20

2.4.4. Double and multiple ‘jeopardies’ .................................... 21

2.5. ‘Lifting the veil of silence’: Political activities of black female leaders of the 19th century and their fight for equal rights ......................................................... 23

3. Sexuality and the nature of womanhood of black women .................. 27

3.1. The construction of sexuality and femininity of black women ........ 27

3.2. Historical analysis of black female sexuality ................................ 30

3.2.1. Iconography of the black female bodies in the nineteenth century .......... 30

3.2.2. Black female slave experience ....................................... 34

3.2.3. Reconstruction period and Jim Crow laws ................................ 38

3.3. Complexity of social roles of black women ................................ 40

3.3.1. Black woman’s economic role and labor-force participation .......... 40

3.3.2. Disorganization of the black family and female-headed families .......... 43

3.4. Dominant stereotypes and images of black womanhood in American society ...... 47

3.4.1. Image of the masculinized black woman ................................ 48

3.4.2. The Jezebel myth .......................................................... 49

3.4.3. The Sapphire stereotype .................................................. 50

3.4.4. Image of the mobile middle-class woman ................................. 52

3.5. Stereotyped images of black women in American Literature ............. 52
3.5.1. The black mammy figure ................................................................. 52
3.5.2. The image of the black concubine .................................................. 53
3.5.3. The tragic mulatta image ................................................................. 54
3.6. Stigmatizing black beauty .................................................................... 56

4. Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* .............................. 61
4.1. Short biography of Harriet Ann Jacobs and summary of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* .................................................................................................................. 61
  4.1.1. The publication, marketing and re-discovery of *Incidents* .................. 64
4.2. Tradition of the slave narratives ............................................................ 66
  4.2.1. Historical development of slave narratives ........................................ 66
  4.2.2. Conventions of slave narratives ........................................................ 69
  4.2.3. The uniqueness of Jacobs’ slave narrative ........................................... 72
4.3. Authenticity, authority and objectives of *Incidents* ............................... 74
  4.3.1. Objectives and critique ................................................................... 74
  4.3.2. Questions of authenticity and authority ............................................. 75
4.4. Sexuality and notions of womanhood ..................................................... 77
  4.4.1. Ideology of true womanhood vs. real womanhood ............................... 77
  4.4.2. Heroic slave mother ....................................................................... 79
  4.4.3. Jealous mistress ............................................................................ 81
  4.4.4. Sexual exploitation and redefinition of sexuality and womanhood ........ 82
  4.4.5. Relation between black and white women ......................................... 87
4.5. Genre conventions, narrative technique and literary styles ...................... 88
  4.5.1. Conventions of the seduction novel and rejection of the tragic mulatta stereotype 89
  4.5.2. Literary styles and narrative voice .................................................... 94
  4.5.3. Silences, omissions and the need for secrecy .................................... 95
  4.5.4. The importance of Jacobs’ work ...................................................... 96

5. Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ............................ 98
5.1. Zora Neale Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance .................................... 98
  5.1.2. Hurston and the ‘New Negro Movement’ ......................................... 103
  5.1.3. Criticism and rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston’s works .................. 107
5.2. Formal aspects of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ............................... 109
  5.2.1. Structure and plot ......................................................................... 109
  5.2.2. Language and narrative techniques ................................................ 111
5.3. Themes, motifs and characters ............................................................. 112
5.3.1. Janie’s notions of sexuality, love and marriage ........................................114
5.3.2. Nanny as a tragic victim of slavery ..........................................................115
5.3.3. Jody Starks .................................................................................................116
5.3.4. Tea Cake Woods ..........................................................................................118
5.3.5. Janie as the questing heroine ........................................................................120
5.3.6. Power of speech vs. lack of voice ..................................................................121
5.3.7. Storytelling and the black community .........................................................124
5.3.8. Janie’s response to patriarchal power and the symbols of her liberation .........126
5.3.9. African-American identity and racial prejudice ..............................................129

5.4. Reception and importance of Their Eyes .............................................................132

6. Gayl Jones: Corregidora .....................................................................................134

6.1. Portrait of Gayl Jones .......................................................................................134

6.2. Policy of gender and sexuality in the 1970s fiction ..........................................137

6.3. The analysis of Corregidora .............................................................................139

6.3.1. Plot ...............................................................................................................140

6.3.2. Ancestral legacy of slavery and communal memory vs. individual experience .141

6.3.3. Sexuality and notions of womanhood .........................................................144

6.3.4. Homosexuality and Homophobia ...............................................................148

6.3.5. Female victimization and domestic violence ..............................................149

6.3.6. Colorism and relationship between color and sexuality ............................153

6.3.7. Power of voice and blues ............................................................................155

6.3.8. Female liberation and empowerment .......................................................158

6.3.9. Ursa as an unconventional heroine ............................................................161

6.3.10. Language, narrative technique and use of blues aesthetics .......................162

7. Conclusion ...........................................................................................................166

8. Bibliography .......................................................................................................169

8.1. Primary literature .............................................................................................169

8.2. Secondary literature .........................................................................................169

8.2.1. Books ..........................................................................................................169

8.2.2. Articles .........................................................................................................173

9. Index ...................................................................................................................178
1. Introduction

I am I
See me
Perceive me
But I
Shall name
My self

(Maud Sulter, in Jewell, 101)

When I first read this quote I had no idea what it really meant because I did not understand what being black and female in a predominately male-dominated, racist world meant to the majority of African-American women. Since I am not an African-American woman I will probably never be able to fully grasp the depth of their pain and oppression, but through my study of the black female sexuality and the nature of black womanhood I hope to gain an insight into the complexity of black female experience.

I must add that the concepts of sexuality and the nature of womanhood in the sense in which I am referring to them in this study include a variety of different issues, such as sexual victimization and exploitation of black women, sexual pleasure and desire, notions of love and marriage, intersection of race, gender and class, problems of finding a voice, perception of black female bodies, need to refute sexual stereotypes, motherhood, female liberation from patriarchal power, autonomy, self-definition, etc.

My main intention in this study is to examine the ways sexuality and the nature of womanhood of African-American women have been depicted in Black women’s literature and to show in what ways the sexuality discourse in African-American women’s literature has developed since the end of the nineteenth century until the 1970s. In order to examine the treatment of the issues of black women’s sexuality and multiple oppressions of black women, I have chosen to analyze three representative works written by three African-American female authors: Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston and Gayl Jones. These works are representative for my study because they were
written in three different historical points, namely, late nineteenth century, the Harlem Renaissance and the 1970s. Each of these historical periods had an enormous importance for the development of black female consciousness as well as for African-American female literature, and in a way these works offer an overview of the development of black female sexual discourse.

This study consists of a theoretical and an analytical part. The theoretical part, which includes chapters 2 and 3, provides an introduction to the historical and sociological background of the African-American women’s experience. I will not seek to demonstrate the historical developments of the roles and positions of African-American women in American society in detail, but I will try to provide a general overview of the ways in which the presence of black women was obscured in American society as well as in American literary criticism. In my analysis of the situation of black women in the United States I will consider the importance of history of slavery and discuss the most prevalent stereotypes and sexual images of black women that have historically been deployed in order to undermine their value and distort their humanity. As a point of reference in my study I will mainly use the critical framework and concepts of black feminist criticism and body studies.

The analytical part contains a close examination of the three works under consideration: Jacobs’ slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Jones’ blues novel *Corregidora*. In this part I will analyze how the specific problems of being black and female are depicted in these texts and I will also look at the way the female protagonists are viewed by others and how they perceive themselves. I seek to prove that the triple oppression of race, gender and class has influenced the lives of the heroines of these works and that their own history of sexual abuse, or the slave history of their foremothers, has influenced their self-perception. The major issues which I will explore include the black woman’s search for self-fulfillment, identity and voice, and the responses of the heroines to the constraints of racism and sexism that they are subjected to. I will also provide necessary historical background of the literary and historical periods that these works are concerned with, as well as a short summary of the each of the writings, and the main biographical information about the authors.
My reasons for choosing this topic are several. When I first read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* three years ago I was fascinated not only by Hurston’s beautiful language and her use of imagery, but I also became curious about everything that Hurston omitted in the depiction of Janie's Crawford sexuality. It was then that I decided to examine the issues of black female sexuality and the nature of black female sexuality further and the more I read about it, more interesting it became.

Since the topic of my examination is very complex, I will surely not be able to say all that it needs to be said about the nature of black women’s experience, but through the interpretative analysis of the three chosen works I will try to bring the world of African-American women closer to the readers.
2. Presence and absence of African-American Women in United States society, history and literary discourse

2. 1. Erasure and exclusion of African-American presence from American dominant society and literary production

Before I turn to the analysis of the position of African-American women in United States society, politics, literature and academy, I would like to examine the way African-American people in general have been treated and viewed in American culture.

There is a children’s rhyme that clearly reflects the way in which American society functions:

If you’re white,
You’re all right.
If you’re brown,
Stick around,
But if you’re black,
Get back, get back. (Berzon, 4).

As Caroline F. Gerald\(^1\) remarked in her essay “The Black Writer and His Role”, African-Americans are black people living in a white world. To be black in America often meant to be excluded from the dominant culture and despised by white America. This fact had enormous consequences on black people’s social reality and their self-image. Gerald wrote that the people who are in control of the images have the power to shape social reality. She further explains:

When we consider that the black man sees white cultural and racial images projected upon the whole extent of his universe, we cannot help but realize that a very great deal of the time the black man sees a zero image of himself (Berzon, 5).

Many African-American scholars have criticized the neglect of the role of African-Americans in the formation of American identity. They stated that their ethnic experience is often left out of American history books or not analyzed in a proper way. They argued that the history of African-American people is vaster and far more complex

\(^1\) Cf. Berzon, 5
than it is portrayed in the general histories of the American national experience. Finally, they concluded that their partial invisibility in both American history and the literary canon is due to a pejorative attitude of white-dominated American society towards African-American people.\(^2\)

Throughout the history of America, the system of slavery has systematically denied positions of power in white male hierarchy to African-Americans. Whites have used specific forms of terror and exclusion mechanisms to oppress the black population and keep them isolated from the dominant culture. The exclusion of African-Americans from the social, political and literary history of the United States was exercised to maintain already existing power relations which supported white supremacist ideology.

It is important to remember that the collective memory of African-Americans, as well as their literary production, has been shaped by their difficult history and the experiences of middle passage, slavery, sharecropping, industrialization, and urbanization. For that reason, in the depiction of the African-American ethnic experience there is often a heavy feeling of burden and reference to their history of conquered and oppressed people. Their desires to became visible and write themselves into existence have historically been central objectives of many African-American literary works.

The search for an identity and satisfying role in American culture and the attempts to cope with the issues of color, assimilation, nationalism and injustices of the American social system are other important traits of the African-American ethnic experience. That widespread preoccupation of African-Americans with the question of their identity and their quest for self-knowledge is obvious in both black literary production and within a larger society that worships mobility, change, growth and progress. As they do not always see themselves as a part of this society they are constantly in a process of searching for ways of self-definition.

One interesting and important concept for the study of African-American experience is Charles Valentine’s concept of ‘bicultration’, which is very useful for explaining the relationship of African-Americans to white society. ‘Biculturation’ assumes that

African-Americans have simultaneously been socialized into two different cultural systems: the white Euro-American and the black African-American.\(^3\)

Already in 1903 W.E. B. Du Bois defined the identity crisis of African-Americans in his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is concerned with the merging of two cultures within the soul of every black American. Du Bois recognized that African-Americans have two identities, one connected to their African roots and another proceeding from their experience as Americans. Consequently, he developed a concept of ‘double consciousness’ which refers to the African-American experience within the context of repressive racist American society and he concluded:

> One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideas in one dark body [...] The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the other to be lost. He would not Africanize America [...] he would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism [...] He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois, 3).

However, as Judith Berzon points out, not all African-Americans wanted to acknowledge their African heritage that Du Bois embraced. In the nineteenth century black middle- and upper-class elitist communities in certain southern cities emphasized their rejection of the black proletariat and embraced white value systems, in which success, status and money played major roles. Despite their awareness that they were a part of the oppressed racial minority, these African-Americans desired to become a part of American culture and to live the American dream, and some black writers have reflected this wish in their works. The motif of the tragic opposition between the promise of the American dream and the reality of life in America for the marginal member of a lower caste is one of the most recurrent themes in Black fiction. Moreover, John Oliver Killens emphasized:

> The Negro remembers better than anybody else the American dream, deferred and forgotten by most Americans. He remembers, because he lives constantly the dream’s negation, yet lives for the day when the dream will become a reality (Berzon, 6).

\(^{3}\) Cf. Dill, 547
Killen also restates the famous ‘American dilemma’ identified by Gunnar Myrdal as the conflict between the fact of racial prejudice and the proclaimed egalitarianism of the African-Americans. Myrdal assumes that it is to the advantage of African-Americans to become assimilated into American culture and to acquire the traits of the dominant culture.

On the other hand, in his review of Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* Ralph Ellison asserted that in order to achieve justice and equal rights for themselves, black Americans must first define themselves and start to have pride in their cultural heritage and not look at black culture as product of a ‘social pathology’.  

However different the ideas of the social scientists about the definition of black experience and identity might be, all of these concepts have one common denominator which links them together: the concept of marginality. Indeed, the color prejudice of white Americans has resulted in the definition of the position of African-Americans in the terms of their marginality within the dominant culture.

In spite of their marginal status, black Americans have managed to produce a huge body of literature; however, their rich literary and cultural production has not assured them a privileged place in the American literary canon, from which they were often simply erased.

In her book *Dark Continent of Our Bodies* Frances White argues that the erasure of African-American presence from American literature takes place on more than one level: in her opinion the problem is not only that African-American literature is ignored, but that it is also often undervalued.

Further evidence of this ignorance of the existence of African-Americans as a part of American culture lies in the fact that white critics and writers fail to write black people into existence and when they do, they use their presence only to define their whiteness or to provide a context for some other major problems or dilemmas with which American society has to deal with. Another problem is that even when blacks are present in white American literature or discourse, the critics fail to recognize their presence.

---

4 Berzon, 6-7
Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize winner for literature and the dean of black writers, writes in her article “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” about the attempts of white traditionalists to ‘maintain the standards’ and keep African-American literature out of the canon. She does not only demand that African-American writers be included in the master canon, but she also thinks that an urgent rereading of the canon is needed in order to recognize the presence of ‘Africanisms’. Morrison uses the term ‘Africanisms’ to refer to ‘denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as an entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people’ (Morrison, 6-7).

Frances White describes ‘Africanisms’ as ‘figures of speech that help Americans imagine the negative, the abnormal, the evil, or by contrast, their opposites—the positive, the normal, the good’ (White, 155). Moreover, White mentions another work by Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, where the famous black female author discusses the Africanism trope in white American literature and emphasizes the failure of literary critics to acknowledge the existence of Africanisms. Morrison is disturbed by the fact that the master canon and traditional literary criticism have constructed American literature as if it were universal and race neutral.

Despite the historical exclusion of the African-Americans from the institutions of the dominant culture, we must recognize that their position in American society has changed in recent years. Even though blacks have symbolized the opposite of whiteness for a long time, recently those interested in race questions have turned their attention from an isolated focus on blackness towards a simultaneous construction of both whiteness and blackness and the interaction between the two.

### 2. 2. Invisibility and marginality of black women in African-American cultural history

It is certainly true that African-American men have historically been excluded from the positions of authority and power in the United States; however, no other group has had their identity so strongly ‘socialized out of existence’ as African-American women. They are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a part
of a larger group of women. When black people are talked about, the focus tends to be on black men, and when women are talked about the focus is on white women. Black women are not only deliberately left unacknowledged in African-American cultural and literary history, but also in feminist theoretical analysis and criticism.\textsuperscript{5}

Although black women have been actively involved in the development of African-American literature right from the start, African-American writing in the United States has been systematically discriminatory against black women until recently. Despite the fact that throughout the history of the United States black women proved their abilities as cultural producers and performers, their contributions have been ignored as a part of the larger history of production of African-American culture. It is possible, therefore, to describe black women’s presence in African-American literature not only as marginal, but also as partly invisible. In this regard, Barbara Smith nicely stated that:

   Black women, whose experience is unique, are seldom recognized as particular social entity and are seldom thought to be important enough for serious scholarly consideration. This invisibility, however, means that the opportunities for creative research are infinite (Jewel, 33).

Traditionally, the world of Black literature in the United States belonged to the black men. In the past, the works of African-American authors which received significant critical attention were almost universally authored by black male writers, who often belittled and suppressed black female authors and the works they produced. Just a small number of African-American female writers were recognized prior to the twentieth century and the majority of the African-Americans who were treated as major contributors of Black literature were men. A large number of black women intellectuals and feminists such as Hazel Carby, bell hooks and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham have complained about the absence of African-American women from the academy and condemned the lack of consideration of black female experience from various public discourses.\textsuperscript{6}

African-American studies and cultural criticism have characterized the turn of the 19\textsuperscript{th} to the 20\textsuperscript{th} century as the ‘Age of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois’. There is no doubt that \textit{Up from the Slavery} and \textit{The Souls of Black Folk} are exceptional works of

\textsuperscript{5} hooks, \textit{Ain’t I a woman}, 7-8
\textsuperscript{6}
literature, but one should not forget that there were also a number of black women writers who gave their contribution to the African-American cultural production during the decade of 1890s. For instance, the essays of Anna Julia Cooper and the novels of Pauline Hopkins are evidence enough that the intellectual genius of black people was not only restricted to black men.

Several female critics, as, for example, Hazel Carby, have tried to reconsider the decade of 1890s as the ‘women’s era’, not only in order to insert the black women into gaps of African-American cultural history, but also to shift the object of interpretation from individual to a collective production of black women, which included a wide variety of cultural practices. While the male authors have almost exclusively portrayed male protagonists and completely ignored the black female experience, black women have mainly depicted their own complex black female experiences.7

Although the first half of the twentieth century brought about a new generation of African-American female writers and intellectuals, the position of black women in the American literary world did not change much. Even during the rebirth of African-American culture in the 1920s, black women authors received the usual secondary treatment, unlike black men, some of whom, as, for example, Jean Toomer and James Weldon Johnson, rose to heights of literary fame. Calvin Hernton observes that despite the rich literary production of black women writers such as Jessie Redmond Faucet, the author of the novel The Chinaberry Tree (1931), popular black female poet Georgia Douglas Johnson, novelist Nella Larson, author of Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929) , Anne Spencer, Alice Dunbar- Nelson, Dorothy West, Helene Johnson and others, it has been almost impossible to read the critical works and general history of the Harlem Renaissance without getting the impression that the representatives of the ‘New Negro’ movement of the 1920s were almost entirely of the male sex. The only African-American female writer of the period who actually received substantial critical recognition was Zora Neale Hurston, who was considered the most creative black female figure during the Harlem Renaissance and Great Depression.

Even though black women did not receive their reward for their literary work, they continued to write throughout the Depression period and well into the 1960s.

---

7 Carby, “On the Threshold of Woman’s Era”, 302-303
Whereas Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), devoted to the plight of America’s black male was praised as a masterpiece, Ann Petry’s 1946 novel *The Street*, in which she depicted the tragedy of a black female, has been known by only a small number of African-Americans. Other African-American women writers who wrote about black female experiences, such as Paule Marshall, Lorraine Hansberry and Margaret Walker, had to face the same situation. With the exception of Gwendolyn Brooks, who won a number of prizes and awards from the white literary world, no other black female writer was accorded a worthy status in African-American literature prior to the 1970s; not even Hansberry, who was the first Black woman to have a play on Broadway.⁸

During the 1960s the male chauvinism in African-American literature continued to predominate. In fact, Hernton suggests, during the ‘Black Power Movement’ and ‘Black Arts Movement’ of the 1960s, the unequal recognition and treatment of African-American female writers was even more obvious, because now there were more black women writers than ever before. One could go through the Black Studies curriculum and learn all about the ‘black experience’ without learning anything about black female experience, because black men defined themselves as sole interpreters of the African-American experience. Yet, as in the past, also during the 1960s black women continued to write. They did not give up, and despite all barriers they managed to get published and a few of them even achieved some degree of academic recognition. The macho philosophy of the ‘Black Power’ leaders resulted in protests of black women who fought to assert their presence.⁹

In 1970 Toni Cade Bambara published one of the most notable anthologies which tried to articulate the experiences of black women, their attitudes toward women’s role in society and the impact of sexism on their lives. In *The Black Woman*, twenty seven women writers expressed ‘the rising demand by women for liberation from, their chattel-like roles in male-dominated society’ (Hernton, *The Sexual Mountain*, 42). This anthology definitely signalized the slow ending of the historical inequality of women writers in African-American literature.

Over the last few decades, African-American women have managed to write themselves into the national experience. Their work is widely read and it has become the object of

---

⁹ Ibid., 42-43
critical inquiry. The impact of such writers as Audre Lorde, Paule Marshall, Gwendolyn Brooks, June Jordan, Maya Angelou, Ann Shockley, Sonia Sanchez, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, to name just a few, resulted in responses from readers and critics across boundaries of gender and race. And although black women are still partly on the margins of the academy, their voices are finally being heard by an increasing number of people.

2.2.1. The myth of the black macho

When black male literary dominance over females started weakening, the contemporary black female writers dared to fight the traditional sexual roles accorded to black women by patriarchal ideology and started producing more explosive and sexually more open-minded and challenging writings. The works of new black feminist authors were enriched by a new freshness of style and ideas, a boldness of subject and language, and a newness of treatment.

However, black males started feeling threatened and offended by the publications of works which expressed opposition towards black macho ideology. Especially controversial works, which received a strong reaction from both critics and general public, were Ntozake Shange’s Broadway production *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* and Michelle Wallace’s book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Supervwoman*. Black men called these women ‘men haters’ and ‘traitors of the race’, because according to them they were trying to put down black men right in front of the eyes of white world.  

The issue of black macho became one of the main issues in African-American culture of the 1980s. Not only black men, but also a number of black women writers, intellectuals and political activists criticized the degrading treatment of black males in these works. African-American men and women who opposed the idea of black feminists claimed that black women were turning against their men due to the influence of white feminist propaganda and that they were ‘aiding the white dominated, racist society in its oppression of black people’ (Hernton, *The Sexual Mountain*, 45).

---

2. 3. Exclusion and absence of black women from white feminist theory and the emergence of Black feminist movement

Unfortunately, black women were not only theoretically erased from African-American literary analysis, but also from white dominated feminist theory. Moreover, the exclusion of black women is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the body of feminist literature.

What has lead to the marginality of black women within feminist discourse was that white feminists have often ignored the presence of black women within a larger discourse of women’s cultural production, and they analyzed the works of African American female writers in isolation from other forms of women’s culture. Throughout history, American scholars have been accustomed to using the term ‘women’ for referring to the experience of white women. Such custom denied the existence of non-white women in America and perpetuated racism and sexism. And most white women did nothing to challenge this sexist-racist practice but continued to deprive black women of their sexual and racial identity.¹¹

In order to come to terms with their ‘absence’, black women had to develop their own theoretical and critical approach. They started providing articulate criticism of the neglect of issues of black women’s experience and especially their sexuality within feminist theory.

The black feminist movement, which emerged in the mid-1970s, was a response to the sexist practices of the ‘Black Power’ movement and white feminist movement that perpetuated the structures of white patriarchy. Scholars such as Hortense Spillers argued that the sexual experiences of black women were rarely depicted in feminist texts. Spillers even published an anthology entitled Pleasure and Danger, which is an important feminist survey of the ways in which the sexuality and femininity of African-American women have been ignored within feminist theory.¹² In addition, many black feminists have complained about the fact that their political struggle for equality has been ignored within feminist theory. They criticized the white feminists who tended to ignore black women’s political activities and demanded that the white women acknowledge the existence of racism in feminist theory.

¹¹ Cf. hooks, Ain’t I a Woman, 8
Since black women’s experiences have not only been structured by gender-specific, but also by racist oppression, some concepts central to feminist theory, such as family and patriarchy became contradictory when placed in the context of black woman’s experiences.\(^\text{13}\) Therefore, black feminists pointed out that the construction of the gender of black women needs to be differently constructed from the gender of white women. They wanted white women to recognize that they hold the positions of power in relation to black women by virtue of their race.

The accusation that racism and non-recognition of the black woman’s experiences in the women’s movement have excluded the participation of African-American women has led to an explosion of debate in the United States. Black feminist scholar bell hooks\(^\text{14}\) observed that while the recent woman’s movement called attention to the dual oppression of racism and sexism on the status of black women, white feminists tended to romanticize the black female experience rather than discuss the negative impacts of that oppression on the lives of black women. hooks believes that the tendency of white feminists to emphasize the endurance of black women and their incredible ability to cope with their oppressions was reflected in the way that American culture as a whole perceived black women, which led to the stereotypical image of the strong and independent black woman.\(^\text{15}\) Some black feminists are of the opinion that many white women are not even aware of the racist implications of their beliefs and that exploration of contemporary racism within the feminist theory has yet to begin.\(^\text{16}\)

2.4. The position of black women in American Society

2.4.1. Silence of the oppressed

Although various ethnic groups besides African-Americans have been victims of prejudice, discrimination, injustice, violence and persecution, it has been the black woman, more than anybody else, who has had to bear the heavy burden of racial and sexist oppression in America from the first moment she was brought to the New World.

\(^{13}\) Cf. Carby, “White woman listen”, 45-46
\(^{14}\) bell hooks spells her first and last name in small letters, so I’ve chosen to do the same when mentioning her name
\(^{15}\) Cf. hooks, Ain’t I a Woman, 6
\(^{16}\) Cf. Carby, “White women listen”, 49-50
As Cheryl Wall observed: ‘In a society ordered by hierarchies of power based on race, class, and gender, no one is more powerless, hence more vulnerable than poor black girl’ (Wall, 3).

Unfortunately, during a long period of their oppression, black women remained silent in regard to the impact of racism and sexism on their lives and social status. According to bell hooks, this silence, which she calls ‘the silence of the oppressed’, was primarily due to the black women’s passive acceptance of their lot. They failed to acknowledge that not only their race but also their womanhood was an important aspect of their identity. Racist and sexist society which had devalued their femaleness had demanded from them to submit, be silent, and fade into the background. In other words, black women were forced to deny the female part of their identity and regard race as their only self-defining trait.

Black women were afraid to fight against sexist oppression, because they thought that it was more important to fight the brutal reality of racism first. With a few notable exceptions, such as Sojourner Truth, only in the last decades of the twentieth century have black women openly stated that race and sex are two interrelated issues, which determine the black woman’s identity.17

2.4.2. Multiple oppression of Black women and questions of identity

In order to provide a distinctive context for the analysis of the nature of black womanhood, which is of crucial importance for my thesis, I decided to analyze the various simultaneous factors of the multiple oppressions, i.e. race, gender and class oppression on the lives of African-American women in the United States.

Several models have been developed which try to explain the specific problems and dangers of being black and female in the white, male dominated society. I have chosen to present the most common of these models, some of which have succeeded in illuminating the harsh social reality of black women’s lives, while others failed to grasp the depth and complexity of black woman’s experience.

17 Cf. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 1-4
2.4.3. Race-sex analogy

One of the most debated questions concerning race and gender has been the question of a relation between these two social categories. Accordingly, there have been numerous attempts to explain sexism and racism as parallel processes of division.

In her article about the multiple jeopardizes of being black and female, Deborah King presents the model of the ‘race-sex analogy’, one of the first and most widely used theoretical approaches for the understanding of black women’s status. This race-sex model assumes that the oppressive forces of racism and sexism are comparable and that there are certain parallels between the systems of domination for blacks and those for women.

The formal typology of the race-sex analogy identifies four main aspects of the similarity of the status of blacks and women:
1. ascribed attributes of emotionality, immaturity and slyness
2. the notions of an appropriate subordinate place
3. accommodating behavior
4. economic, legal, educational and social discriminations.\(^\text{18}\)

In sum, the ‘sex-race analogy’ has been used successfully as a means of conveying an image of women’s subordinate status, because the race model was a well-established and effective tool for the theoretical conceptualization of sexual inequality.

On the other hand, the ‘race-sex analogy’ has been dismissed by some scholars who argued that although race and gender are similar in the sense that they both constitute socially constructed categories which are responsible for the oppression of certain groups of people, they nevertheless cannot be seen as parallel institutions. Michele Barrett, for example, has pointed out that the construction of parallels between race and gender is fruitless because they are two different categories which need to be analyzed independently.\(^\text{19}\)

This is especially true in the case of analysis of black woman’s experience since she is a subject to the more than one simultaneous source of oppression.

\(^{18}\) Cf. King, 332-333
\(^{19}\) Cf. Carby, „White Women Listen“, 45-46
Deborah King indicates that through the ‘race-gender analogy’ the black woman’s experience is only assumed and never really explicitly stated. It is mistakenly believed, she adds, that there is no difference in being black and female from being generally black or generally female. The differences between racism and sexism and their effects on the self-image of black women need to be identified, because their scope and intensity are not the same. The group experience of slavery and lynching for blacks is not comparable to the physical abuse, social discrimination, and cultural degradation suffered by women. The differences between black men and black women and between black women and white women should not be neglected because they are crucial to the understanding of the nature of black womanhood.  

2.4.4. Double and multiple ‘jeopardies’

The notion of ‘double jeopardy’ and ‘dual oppression’ of black women is not a new one. Already at the end of the 19th century, Anna Julia Cooper, a former slave and black educator spoke of ‘the double enslavement of black women’ and of them being ‘confronted by both a woman’s question and a race problem’ (Lerner, 537).

In 1904, Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women wrote:

Not only are colored women [... handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women. But because they are colored women (Terrell in: King, 331).

In 1972, Frances Beale introduced the term ‘double jeopardy’ to describe the dual discriminations of racism and sexism that subjugate black women. In her article “Double jeopardy: To be Black and Female”, Beale wrote:

As blacks they suffer all the burdens of prejudice and mistreatment that fall on anyone with dark skin. As women they bear the additional burden of having to cope with white and black men’ (Beale, 303).

---

20 Cf. King, 333-334
Although Beale observed that the dual discriminations often entailed economic disadvantage, she viewed class status as a consequence of racism rather than a third source of black female oppression.

However, some scholars, such as Beverly Lindsay, have built up on Beale’s notion of double jeopardy and have created a paradigm wherein black women are presented as ‘triply disadvantaged’. Since the majority of black women have received the very lowest wages and have often lived under the poorest conditions, they have incorporated economic class oppression as a third jeopardy.21 Lindsay argues that triple jeopardy, ‘the interaction of sexism, racism, and economic oppression is the most realistic perspective for analyzing the position of black American women’ (King, 335). Other black feminists such as Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde have even suggested that homophobia represents a fourth jeopardy.

Although nowadays the concept of the triple oppression of patriarchy, racism and class that determine the lives and experiences of black women has been widely recognized and accepted by feminist theorists, it is only in the writings of black feminists that we can find the attempts to theorize this interconnection of gender, race and class. White feminists emphasize patriarchic oppression alone, forgetting to include the aspect of race and leaving black women’s experiences out of their work, while most black male critics are only concerned with the racial aspect of black people's oppression and leave the woman’s question out of their discussions.

However, King asserts that while this concept of triple oppression of black women goes beyond the narrow limits of ‘race-sex analogy’, it still fails to convey the multiple forms of discrimination of black women. Unfortunately, most applications of the concepts of ‘double and triple jeopardy’ have been very simplistic in the sense that they assumed that various discriminations are merely additive, which does not faithfully represent the nature of black womanhood and her subordinate status. Such assertions ignore the fact that racism, sexism and class oppression constitute three interconnected control systems. In order to explain these processes better, King developed a new, interactive model

21 Cf. King, 333-335
which she termed ‘multiple jeopardy’. That term does not only refer to several, simultaneous sources of oppression, but also to their mutual interdependence.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{2.5. ‘Lifting the veil of silence’: Political activities of black female leaders of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and their fight for equal rights}

In her essay “Woman’s Political Future”, Frances Harper wrote that ‘If fifteenth century discovered America to the Old World, the nineteenth is discovering the woman to herself” (Carby, “On the Threshold of Woman’s Era”, 301). This was certainly true because from the very beginning of black political activism in the United States, black women have made substantial contributions to African-American politically history. The movements for social equality such as abolitionist movement in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century or the in the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century were prototypes for women’s collective action. However, black women’s historical importance was denied by black men, who had difficulties dealing with the double oppression of black women in a serious way.

That leads us to the conclusion that black women were not only omitted from African-American literary history but where also left out from the black political life. This omission was mainly due to the fact that black men were influenced by the white patriarchal values which ruled American society. Many black male activists defined the Black liberation as the attainment of ‘black manhood’. The struggle for racial liberation was seen by black male political leaders only in terms of opposition to white men who were trying to degrade them and rob them of their manhood.

The patriarchal relations within the black community in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century did not allow the black women to have equal legal rights as black men. Moreover, they had difficulties in getting their works published since all the benefit societies and black newspapers were funded, directed and controlled by black men. As black men advanced in American political sphere, they encouraged black women to assume a more subservient role.

\textsuperscript{22} Cf. King, 336
Still, some black men were willing to support women in their fight for equal rights. The leading male proponent of women’s rights who supported black women in their struggle for suffrage was Frederic Douglass. However, Douglass’ advocacy for feminist causes ended after the Civil War when Douglass started concentrating primarily on winning the battle for black male voting rights. Although some other black male political activists sympathized with the cause of women’s rights advocates, they did not want to risk their own chance to gain the right to vote.  

It is important to note that the majority of African-American women in the period immediately after the abolition of slavery seldom demanded social equality, thus some black women succeeded in overcoming the barriers of patriarchy and started fighting for both racial equality and women’s rights. Prominent black female intellectuals of the 19th century such as Anna Cooper, Amanda Berry Smith, Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth and others were very much aware of the fact that in order to be really free they must liberate themselves from a sexist social order. They broke the long years of silence and began to articulate their needs. They were active in both antislavery and suffrage organizations and they particularly emphasized the female aspect of their being which caused their experiences to be different from that of the black men.

Maria Stewart was the first woman to speak in public on behalf of black women’s rights and advancement. She criticized the institution of slavery and urged black women to ‘awake, arise: no longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish yourself’ (Hine, “Lifting the Veil”, 230). Amanda Berry Smith observed and commented on the universal exploitation and oppression of black women, while Anna Cooper spoke about the limits and restrictions of patriarchal power: 

Yet all through the darkest period of the colored women’s oppression in this country her yet unwritten history is full of heroic struggle, a struggle against fearful and overwhelming odds, that often ended in horrible death; to maintain and protect that which woman holds dearer than life […] The white woman could at least plead for her own emancipation; the black women doubly enslaved, could but suffer and struggle and be silent (hooks, 2).

---

23 Cf. Manning, 5-8  
24 Cf. Manning, 10-14
Perhaps the best example of a politically-minded black woman in the ante-bellum period was antislavery spokeswoman and women’s rights movement leader Sojourner Truth. She was one of the most outstanding orators of Black liberation in the 19th century, a former slave, she fought for the freedom of her people still in bondage. However, in the eyes of 19th century America the black female was a creature unworthy of the title of a woman. So Truth, despite racial and sexist hostility, stood before an antislavery rally to prove that she was indeed a woman and delivered her legendary ‘Ain’t I a woman’ speech:

Ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! [...] I have plowed, planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me-and ain’t I a woman? I could eat as much as any man, and bear de lash as well-and ain’t I a woman? I have borne five children and seen ‘em mos all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with mother’s grief, none but Jesus hear-and ain’t I a woman (Hine, “Lifting the Veil”, 233).

She was also very outspoken on the issue of black women’s suffrage. She emphasized that without the right to vote, black women would have to submit to the will of black men: ‘if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as before’ (hooks, Ain’t I a Woman, 4).

Although the 19th century was generally hostile to politically active women, black women continued their struggle for racial advancement and sexual liberation. In spite of the racism and prejudice that they encountered among both black men in the antislavery and white women in the suffrage movements, black female activists contributed to the abolitionist and women’s cause.

In the late 19th century, black male leaders focused almost exclusively on winning political and economic rights for themselves, while black women still tried to obliterate the negative images of their sexuality. The leading black female activists during the post-Reconstruction Era of political accommodation such as Ida B. Wells, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin and Mary Margaret Washington launched a movement to mobilize black women and engage them in the battle against racial and sexual discrimination and Jim Crow laws.  

During the 1920s the fight for equal rights of African-American women continued. The chief male supporter of the women’s rights movement at that time was W.E.B. Du Bois. In his essays he emphasized that the struggle for Black freedom must include the demand for the emancipation of women. This black scholar strongly criticized the sexism of black politicians and argued that the women’s right to vote is a necessary precondition to the realization of democracy.\textsuperscript{26}

In the post World War II era an increasing number of black women also achieved national prominence, including Marry F. Berry, Angela Davis, Patricia Harris, Barbara Jordan and Rosa Parks. When the Civil Rights Movement began in the 1950s, both black men and women participated in the struggle for social equality, yet black female activists did not receive the public acclaim awarded to black male leaders. It was a generally accepted fact that the respected and appreciated black leaders were men, and many black women did not question patriarchy.

The 1960s movement toward black liberation clearly marked the boundaries between the roles of black women and men. Black male activists expected the black women involved in the movement to conform to a sexist role pattern and to assume a subservient role. Toni Cade Bambara discusses the sexist attitudes that prevailed in the black organizations of the 60s and explains that black men were of the opinion that black women must be supportive and patient so that they could define and regain their manhood.

While some black women activists refused to play a secondary role, others accepted the male demands for submission. In the end a movement that struggled to free all black people from racist oppression turned out to be a movement which established black male patriarchy and failed to draw attention to the dual impact of the racist and sexist oppression of black women. The fact that the black women were ‘dually victimized’ by both racist and sexist oppression was mostly seen as insignificant; black women’s experiences faded into the background because men thought that the sufferings of black women could not compare to the sufferings of black males.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{26} Cf. Manning, 15-16
\textsuperscript{27} Cf. hooks, \textit{Ain’t I a Woman}, 8-9
During the past few years, however, black women’s organizations have emerged whose aim is to combat both sexism and racism. A trend toward a greater acceptance of feminism is probably due to changes in black women’s perception of oppression, which also reflects changes in the American social order.

3. Sexuality and the nature of womanhood of black women

3.1. The construction of sexuality and femininity of black women

In the first chapter we had a look at the ways in which the presence of black women has been ignored in American history and the literary canon as well as in feminist and antiracist theory. However, the absence of African-American women from dominant academic discourse and their exclusion from the dominant society is just one aspect of their racial and sexual oppression. The other important aspect of black women’s lot is the misrepresentation of their experience, especially in regard to their sexuality and femininity.

In discussing the misconceptions and stereotypes of black women, it is important to know that there is no one single monolithic concept of the black woman, but there are many different models of black womanhood. Unfortunately, most of these models characterize black women in a rather negative way. Gerda Lerner emphasized that the special victimization of black women by whites, which was based on arbitrary definitions of white supremacy, has been essential to the functioning of the racist system of oppression. It is true that black women have shared all aspects of the racial oppression with black men, but they were also subjected to the modes of sexual exploitation specific only to black females. African-American women in the United States were subjected to a different kind of oppression than black men, because, as we have seen, their gender and sexuality have not only been constructed and influenced by racism but also by white patriarchal ideology.

Since black women have simultaneously embodied the diverse roles of workers, housekeepers and mothers, those often contradictory roles have contributed to the
confusion of the definition of black womanhood. Moreover, black women’s dominant roles in their families had a strong impact on the relations of black women and men. Influenced by the conventional codes of morality of dominant society, African-American women often experienced inner conflicts regarding the nature of their sexuality. Elsie Johnson McDougald concluded that the emotional and sexual life of the black woman is a reflection of her economic situation. She has long ago been described as having lower sexual standards than other women. However, McDougald argues the sex irregularities have not been a matter of race, but of socio-economic conditions.  

Black feminists have generally described black woman’s sexuality as an absence when viewed from the dominant discourses, and some feminists argue that even when black women were regarded as visible, they were defined in non-human terms and their presence was ill-conceived. American society has predominantly constructed black female sexuality and femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the Western world, have been endowed. In one of the earliest discussions of black female sexuality Hortense Spillers observed that black women are ‘unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb’ (Hammonds, 487). For Tony Morrison, black woman’s sexuality is one of the ‘unspeakable things unspoken’ of the African-American experience, i.e. a terrible taboo that nobody seems willing to discuss about. That is why the sexuality of black women is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, or as a void that is simultaneously exposed and invisible.

Historically, black women have reacted to the repressive discourses which perceived and constructed them as embodiments of sex with silences and partially self-chosen invisibility. ‘The politics of silence’, as described by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, by black women on the issue of their sexuality began with the production of the image of a black female sexualized ‘other’ in the 18th century by European colonialists and scientists.  

By the 19th century, white Americans accepted the subordination of African-Americans and women as the natural order and the negative images of black womanhood were spreading all over America. With the increasing exploitation and abuse of black women during and after slavery, American black women reformers started developing strategies

---

28 Cf. Lerner, 170-171
29 Cf. Hammonds, 487
to resist the dominant negative stereotypes of their sexuality which were used as justification for the rape, lynching and other abuses of black women by whites. At that time the belief in the immorality of black women was commonly shared among white people. Black women were characterized as ‘promiscuous and loose’, in other words, as natural prostitutes.

In the early 20th century African-American women propagated public silence about their sexuality which, it seems, continues to the present. This ‘politics of silence’, Higginbotham concludes, emerged as a political strategy by black women who hoped by their silence to demonstrate the lie of the image of the sexually immoral black woman as they tried to shield their inner lives from their oppressors.30 ‘Only with secrecy’, historian Darlene Clark Hine explains, ‘thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own’ (Hammonds, 487). Furthermore, she argues, by the promotion of images of proper Victorian morality, they hoped to gain greater respect and opportunity.

However, Higginbotham notes, there are major problems with this strategy. First, it obviously did not achieve its goal of ending negative stereotyping of black women, and second, in choosing silence black women also lost the ability to articulate their own conception of their sexuality. By choosing the politics of silence they allowed their sexuality to be exposed in a negative way and defined only in white racial and sexist terms. The consequence of black women’s silence about their sexuality is that we still have a very limited view of black female sexuality and know very little about the possible varieties of their sexual desire. Black female sexuality is, as Carol Vance defines it ‘simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency’ (Hammonds, 489).

It is certainly true that the issue of sexuality represents one of the major issues in black feminist theory, but Hammonds argues that black feminists have only concentrated on the elision of black women’s sexual experience and their sexual exploitation and have neglected the important aspects of pleasure and sexual desire. It could be that black feminists have chosen to keep silent about these issues because of their marginal status in the academy. Even though many black women today are socialized in a tradition

30 Cf. Hammonds, 487-488
similar to those of middle class white women, the oppressive conditions under which they had to live left traces on their construction of identity and sexuality.

Taking into an account that the historical interpretation of the role of American women of African descent is closely connected to the way the white dominated patriarchal society has portrayed black women, there is still a strong need to refute the myths and stereotypes about black women’s sexuality and the nature of their womanhood. Black feminist critics who tend to describe the black female body as ‘colonized’ are trying so hard to reclaim the ‘immoral’ black female body that they still cannot focus on their sexual needs and wishes.

Simply put, as scholar Patricia Williams pointed out, black women are still struggling to dismiss the negative stereotypes of an ‘unreliable, untrustworthy, hostile, angry, powerless, irrational’ black female, and therefore they still do not feel entirely free to talk about their sexual desires. It is also interesting to mention that most black feminists, with the exceptions of Cheryl Clarke, Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, have only theorized about black female heterosexuality, whereas the possibility of black lesbian sexuality is rarely addressed.\textsuperscript{31}

\section*{3.2. Historical analysis of black female sexuality}

\subsection*{3.2.1. Iconography of the black female bodies in the nineteenth century}

To fully understand the ways in which black female sexuality has been constructed, it is necessary to provide a historical analysis of the negative representations of black women and show the impact they had on the consciousness of American people.

Cultural historian Sander Gilman analyzed the iconographic artistic and medical representations of African-American women, which offer what he calls ‘mimetic portrayals’ of black women and their bodies. He points out that these negative representations are of an iconographic nature because they do not present the reality, but

\textsuperscript{31} Hammonds, 489-490
rather represent the position of the observers and their perception of the world at a given historical moment.

The popular myth of the inherent sexual difference of black women which set them apart from the rest of the society emerged during the nineteenth century, when medicine, biology and ethnography started to develop as sciences and led to the formation of cultural, scientific and aesthetic ideologies. In the iconography of the nineteenth century, whose conventions are clearly recognizable in the world of art, literature and medicine, two negative female images gained prominence: the icon of the Hottentot Venus and the image of the prostitute, both of which were symbols of the ‘sexualized woman’. 32

The Hottentot Venus icon goes back to a young African woman whose body was publicly exhibited at spectacles in England and France. Her real name was Saarjite Baartman (also known as Sarah Baartman) and she was brought to Europe from Cape Town in 1810 by an English surgeon who wished to show Europeans the woman’s enlarged buttocks. The display of her naked body caused a public scandal in Europe but it also became a main attraction at the West European public spectacles. However, Sarah was not the only African to be so publicly displayed. The exhibition of non-white bodies for entertainment of Westerners was a popular practice in both Europe and in the United States throughout the nineteenth century.

Moreover, live exhibitions were not the only forms of human spectacle. Often the dissected and embalmed remains of the bodies, particularly sexual organs, were also publicly displayed. This was also true in the case of Sarah Baartman, whose genitals were dissected, cast in wax and exhibited at a French museum. 33 The unique structure of Sarah Baartman’s oversized genitalia and her large buttocks served as a central image of a black female throughout the nineteenth century. Her essence was reduced to her sexual parts and she became the epitome of the sexual lasciviousness of black women. Anatomist George Curvier, who dissected Sarah’s genitalia, offered her sexual parts as a physical proof for the black women’s ‘primitive sexual appetite’. According to him, the physiognomy of black women, their skin color and the form of their genitalia label them

32 Cf. Gilman, 225
33 Cf. Gilman, 231-235
as inherently sexually different. As a consequence, black women were perceived as possessing not only primitive sexual appetite, but their ‘primitive genitalia’ were also seen as the external signs of their unrestrained sexual temperament.

Curvier’s descriptions of black women, which centered on the presentation of sexual parts, reflect the general nineteenth century understanding of black female sexuality as uncontrollable, lascivious and pathological. The Hottentot Venus thus became an icon of black female deviant sexuality and the image of her oversized genitalia resulted in a general view that the anomalies of the black female’s sexual parts were inherent. The scientists finally concluded that the model of degeneracy found in one generation would lead to degeneracy in the next and that the animal-like sexual appetite of black women was an unquestionable indicator for the difference in sexual psychology between races. The physical appearance and the uniqueness of the Hottentot’s buttock and her genitalia were central to the nineteenth century medical description of the polygenetic difference between the white and the black race. In other words, the Hottentot Venus stereotype was employed to describe the ‘otherness’ of the non-whites, the antithesis of European morals and beauty. In that way the link between the malformation of black female sexual parts and anatomical marks of the non-unity of the races was definitely established.

Such an attitude about the biological and cultural difference of non-whites served to promote the Western colonial ideology of the supremacy of the white race and the need of non-white cultures to be civilized. Furthermore, the psychologist Havelock Ellis provided a detailed example of the perception of the ‘sexualized other’. He believed that there is an absolute scale of beauty which is objective and which ranges from the white to black. Ellis ranked the races by the size of their pelvis and asserted that a narrow pelvis was a sign of racial superiority. In that regard the Hottentot’s buttocks were seen as a ‘comic sign of the primitive, grotesque nature of the black female’ (Gilman, 238).

Since black women were the favorite targets of myths about the sexualized female as such they were often the objects of sexual fantasy. So when whites were looking at the

---

34 Ibid., 323-235
35 Cf. Gilman, 235-237
36 Ibid., 237-240
black female they saw her only in terms of her buttocks and her genitalia, and that attitude is clearly reflected in the images of black women in literature and the arts of the nineteenth century. The presence of exaggerated bottoms in a number of paintings and novels from this period, however, also points to the popular fascination that black bodies held for white people.

These images of black women as sexual objects had very harsh consequences. Indeed, in the nineteenth century the black woman was not only perceived as the embodiment of sexuality but she was even linked with another symbol of the sexualized female: the prostitute. During the late nineteenth century a large body of detailed literature concerning prostitution was written. Descriptive presentations of the appearance and physiognomy of the prostitutes were provided by the scientists, and consequently the myth of the physical anthropalogy of the prostitute was born.

There was a common attitude that a woman is inherently marked as a prostitute. Certain physical features and specific pathologies of genitalia were regarded as signs of the lower scale of beauty which pointed to the primitive sexual nature of a female. What is striking is that the supposed physical anomalies of the prostitutes partly corresponded to those of Hottentot Venus. Thus, the models of the sexual deviancy of the prostitute and of the black woman were regarded as parallel. Both the appearance and sexual identity of the prostitute and of the Hottentot were seen as established by heredity and they were both seen as possessing physical signs which set them apart from the normal. Consequently, the level of lasciviousness was put at the same level as the ‘primitive’ sexuality of the Hottentot.37

This use of analogy between the prostitute and Hottentot articulates the pathological models of female sexuality present throughout nineteenth century. It became a general opinion that black women did not care about adultery or virginity, and eventually the perception of black woman merged with the perception of the prostitute. They were both associated with uncontrolled, unrestrained sexuality, which was viewed as pathological and in need of a social control.

Further, in his analysis Gilman asserts that black females did not only symbolize the sexualized female but they also represented the source of corruption and disease. The

37 Cf. Gilman, 240-245
dark color of the skin of the people of African descent was in medical tradition viewed as a result of some sort of pathology. Consequently, black women became the emblem of illness because of their skin color.

The medical discourse which dominated during the nineteenth century was also embedded in the literary images, which often illustrated the function of the sexualized female as the sign of disease. Her broad buttocks, her broad hips, and her ‘Negroid’ features were all seen as signs of her innate physical degeneracy and her atavistic, destructive sexuality. Such sexualized female was the icon of sexual corruption and the moral decay of the entire nation.

Gilman reminds us that this image of the ‘Madam World’, who through her beauty masks her corruption and her disease of being a woman, was an old image: ‘the blackness of the earth […] the world of black, primitive, the world of disease […] pre-eminently unclean’ (Gilman, 234). He argues that the uncleanness and the disease forms are the final links between the images of the black woman and the prostitute: ‘Just as the genitalia of the Hottentot were perceived parallel to the diseased genitalia of the prostitute, so too the power of the idea of corruption links both images’ (Gilman, 236). ‘It is thus the inherent fear of the difference in the anatomy of the others’, Gilman writes, ‘which lies behind the synthesis of images’ (Gilman, 236). The observed similarities between the black women and the prostitutes, as bearers of stigmata of sexual difference and pathology captured the imagination of the nineteenth century and made them responsible for the sexual corruption of the society. Gilman argued that the white man’s internal fear of loss of control and power was transferred into the need to control the sexuality of ‘the other’. The need for dominance was thus projected in the colonial mentality, which viewed both ‘natives’ and women as being in need of control.

3.2.2. Black female slave experience

After society created these negative sexual myths about black women, the excuse was provided for their institutionalized exploitation, which was set during the slavery period and continued over many years. From the earliest moments of slavery in America, the vicious sexual abuse of black women became a permanent feature of American
patriarchal and capitalistic society, and since the slavery period black women have suffered every form of sexual exploitation that one can imagine.

In order to illuminate the black female slave experience, which is depicted in Harriet Jacobs’ autobiographical narrative in a very lively way, it is necessary to look at the slave laws and the ‘race philosophy’ of the South, and to see how this ideology affected the general view of black women as well as their sexuality. In his essay “The Negro Woman” Calvin Herton explores the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery and reflects on the reasons for their partial loss of femininity.

Black women were brought to the United States as slaves for two reasons: to be exploited as unpaid workers and to serve as ‘breeding animals’ for even more slaves. As slaves black women did the same demanding physical work and suffered the same brutal punishments as black men, but at the same time they were also subjected to forms of abuse that were only applicable to women. They were often used as ‘body toys’ by their white masters and their reproductive and child-rearing abilities served to enhance the slave economy.38

In the ante-bellum South the African-American slave was a privately owned commodity, a chattel. By sexually exploiting them, the white slaveholders and other whites in power forced enslaved black women to give up their bodies. The color of the skin of a black female was sufficient invitation to Southern white men to regard her as sexually available. Slave masters, their sons, and even the overseers took advantage of the powerless black women whenever they could, as they were completely defenseless in the face of their sexual advances.

Consequently, black women were transformed into ‘sexual beasts’, and their bodies and minds were dehumanized. They were not considered to be human beings, but they were seen as strange, exotic, wild, savage creatures ‘without souls’.39 The designation of black women as inherently immoral and hypersexual served as a justification for the sexual exploitation of black female slaves. The power of the myth was so great that even the majority of white abolitionists held black women responsible for their fate and did

38 Cf. King, 226
not view them as victims of sexual abuse, as we will later see by the example of Linda Brent.

Unfortunately, as Kolchin reminds us, black female slaves were not only the victims of rape on the side of the white men, but they were also easy targets of the sexual aggression of black male slaves. Although the rape of a white woman was a capital offense, a rape of a slave woman was ignored by the state and mostly by the slave owners. On the contrary, in an effort to rapidly expand the slave population, slave masters encouraged sexual intercourse and promiscuity among their slaves. Others who were also interested in the moral conduct of their slaves tried to regulate their sexual behavior and punished the slaves for extra-marital sex, but they mostly failed to prevent male slaves from satisfying their sexual appetite. The slave woman was deprived of any protection against sexual assaults of both white and black men.

Hernton argues that since black women during the slavery period were completely denied any privacy of their own bodies, it is absolutely ridiculous to discuss the situation of black female sexuality in terms of white ideals of restrained ladylike womanhood and female refinement. Black female slaves often had to stand naked in public places on auction blocks and were touched in the most intimate places. Above all, they were forced to be white men’s concubines, mistresses and sexual slaves, so it cannot be denied that the story of their sexual oppression is not to be compared with that of the white women.

The subject of sexual exploitation of black women remained a taboo in the United States for a very long time. White Southerners were very sensitive on the subject and they mostly avoided any discussion on that topic, while blacks were reluctant to openly reveal the details of sexual abuse in an era of prudish standards.40 According to Herton, it was during the slavery period that black women began to develop the ‘depreciatory concept’ of themselves, not only as women, but also as human beings. Robbed off their womanhood, they started to look upon themselves just as the whites viewed and treated them. The abuse of black women and the ignorance of that fact only affirmed the nature of the general oppression of African-Americans, which Gerda Lerner described as ‘the

40 Cf. Kolchin, 280-282
ultimate expression of contempt for a defeated foe since it symbolizes his helplessness more than any other conceivable act’ (Lerner, 172).

Katz suggests that the sexual oppression of black women did not only function as a mean of putting the black women down, but also as an instrument of terror for the entire race. Since black men were prevented from defending their women, they were symbolically castrated and assaulted in their dignity. As a result, black women were ‘doubly instrumentalized’ by the whites in power: as objects of sexual abuse and as instruments in the degradation of their men. The sexual assaults on the black women were a part of the system of racial and economic exploitation. Physical terror against black men who tried to defend their women was one part in reinforcement of the oppression of African-Americans, while the threat of death by lynching of black men who had sexual contact with white women was another.41

Another important issue which needs to be discussed is the problem of the disintegration of black families during the slavery period. Yanick and Feagin as well as Katz examined the status of black marriages during the ante-bellum era. Since slaves had no civil status, they were not allowed to enter into legal marriages. The slave marriages were not sanctioned by civil law, so they stood outside of Western concepts of morality and civilization, and that meant that blacks by the law did not constitute a family. A black slave could not really call the mother of his children his wife because she was legally the private property of the slave master. Thus the marriages of the slaves, which existed outside the civil law, served the interests of the slave owner, who could easily dissolve families if he sold a slave at the auction block.

Katz reflects on this fact by explaining the terminology which was used to describe the status of a slave:

In legal language slaves were called stock as were domestic animals. The slave mother was called a breeder. Her unborn child was called increase, and after birth was referred to as issue. The child of a slave was considered ‘like that of other female animals’ in judicial decisions because that was the custom (Katz, 279).

Forced separation of family members constituted one of the most dreadful experiences of bondage for the slaves. Although most of the slave owners disliked the idea of separating their slaves, whenever the slave trade served their economical interest they did not refrain from separating slaves from their loved ones. Often children were taken away from their parents and sent to serve ‘in the big house’, and adults were hired out to plantations far away. 42 Katz sees these harmful effects of slavery upon the black family as the main cause of the permanent destruction of the institution of the black family. However, the defenders of slavery insisted that the victims of the slave trade suffered only briefly because, according to them, blacks lacked the white people’s capacity for forming deep, long-lasting relationships.

Even after slavery finished, this attitude of whites towards black family bonds persisted in American society. On one occasion Martin Luther King voiced strong sentiments about this issue when he said:

[...] no other group in American life is the matter of family life more important than to the Negro. Our very survival is bound up on it [...] no one in all history had to fight against so many physical and psychological horror to have a family life (Ladner, 270).

Contrary to popular thinking, black parents and especially black mothers have a very strong attachment to their children. Despite or maybe even due to the difficult slavery experience and the forced separation of black families in the past, African-Americans have sustained firm family bonds.

3.2.3. Reconstruction period and Jim Crow laws

Both Katz and Herton commented on the efforts that were made during the Reconstruction period to lift the African-Americans out of their state of degradation. There was a strong need to change the image of black people, and for the first time in the history of the United States marriages of black couples were universally legalized. The Fourteenth Amendment in 1866 granted all African-Americans United States citizenship, and they finally got the right to legally enter marriage. Polygamy and

42 Cf. Kolchin, 125-126
promiscuity were prohibited, and black men started treating their women with more respect and courtesy.

Yanick and Feagin report that exercising the civil right to marry was as important to newly freed blacks as the universal right to vote. To vote and to marry were two indexes for measuring how black people valued their civil liberties. Many advocates of social justice referred to high marriage statistics of ex-slaves to counter the popular arguments about the decline in morality among free blacks. Contrary to popular thinking, we can then conclude that marriage had a great social value for black people. In addition, efforts were made to end the cruel punishments imposed upon black women during slavery, and laws were enacted to punish those guilty of committing murder, assault, lynching, whipping, etc. 43

Unfortunately, the glorious period of Reconstruction ended sooner than was necessary for the complete liberation of African-Americans. The North compromised with the South, Union troops were withdrawn and the black woman was left again in the merciless hands of an embittered South. The former slave masters returned to power, and with them returned a modified form of oppression. After the failure of Reconstruction thousands of blacks were left hopeless and uneducated while black women in the South were left without any protection, and once more they became sex toys of white men. The Ku Klux Klan and other similar white supremacist groups spread throughout the South, making rape and torture of black women became a commonality. 44

Katz observed that: ‘In a short period of three decades, from 1891 to 1921 the South lynched forty-five young women, several of whom were young girls from fourteen to sixteen years old’ (Katz, 284). Add this to the fact that black women still did all the domestic work for upper- and middle class white people and reared Southern white children, and we can note that the black woman did not gain much from her freedom. True, some did have their own home, which they had to maintain, and many were free to bring up their own children the way they wanted. However, most of them still lived with the notion that they were on the bottom of the American social hierarchy. Jim Crow

43 Cf. Katz, 282-283
laws kept putting African-American women down, and denying some of their basic rights; nonetheless they somehow survived.

3.3. Complexity of social roles of black women

Gradually overcoming their cruel past and painful degradation, black women rebelled against the roles that the dominant society assigned to them. In spite of the limits imposed upon them by patriarchal and racist society, black women tried to modify their social and economic status by educating themselves and working hard to achieve economic independence. Most refused to accept the subordinate roles in the family and community, and through it all many managed to keep their dignity and develop an inner strength to rise above the false attitudes of society about their sexuality and essence.

The ability of black women to perform a wide range of different social and economic tasks despite the oppressions that controlled and limited their existence is the best evidence of the complexity and multidimensionality of their experiences.

This complexity of the social roles of black women is probably most evident through the examination of the black family patterns and the participation of black women in the labor-force.

In the following chapter I will examine the complex variety of social roles that black women have performed in reaction to ‘multiple jeopardies’.

3.3.1. Black woman’s economic role and labor-force participation

Several studies have argued that the historical tradition of work of African-American women forms one of the most essential components of their lives. The black woman’s economically productive role in labor force had a strong impact both on the construction of black female sexuality and on the set of social roles of black women. Labor, whether unpaid as under slavery or paid as an employment, has been a distinctive characteristic of black women’s experience.

The brutality of the slave system forced black women to work in the fields and on plantations for twelve hours a day along with the male slaves. According to Dill, this
black female slave experience, which resulted in high rates of female labor-force participation, had a tremendous impact on the growth and development of women in African-American culture.\textsuperscript{45}

The African-American women’s work role projected a false idea of equality among the sexes and generated alternative notions of womanhood which are at times contradictory to those of the traditional white American society. Black women have been viewed simultaneously as workers and as wives and mothers, which has brought them a significant degree of self-reliance and independence.

During the slavery period, African-American women performed a wide variety of tasks for the white slave-owners. They worked on plantations as field slaves and in the slave-master’s homes as domestic slaves who cooked, ironed and reared the white children. With the establishment of share cropping, great numbers of black women stopped working in the fields as farm laborers and started working in homes of white families. However, many white and black men saw the domestic service employment as being merely the extension of the natural role of black women and considered such jobs valueless. That means that even though many black women were employed, they were only seen in the light of their traditional female roles of mothers and wives.\textsuperscript{46}

The period between 1900 and 1940 produced changes in the opportunities for black women’s education. More frequently than ever before, black women were leaving their kitchens and earning their own wages in the labor force. As a consequence the number of children within the black families decreased, and black men started accusing the women of ‘race suicide’. Conservative black nationalists condemned birth control as ‘a legal means to reduce the black population’ and warned that ‘when the black woman kills her unborn child, she is murdering the advancement of her nation’ (Manning, 20).

Between 1945 and 1960 ten thousands of black women went into jobs previously held by men. Now black women were not only employed as private household workers, but also as blue collar workers and farm laborers. However, their men were disturbed by the transformation of sex roles and the creation of better economical opportunities for black women. The sexist belief that black women are submissive made men encourage their

\textsuperscript{45} Cf. Dill, 548-550
\textsuperscript{46} Cf. Manning, 21
wives to settle back and return to the kitchen. In their opinion the role of the husband was that of the provider, and a task of a wife was to produce offspring. After 1945, the birth rates for black women climbed sharply. A woman who did not have a child was not considered a real woman, so black women started ‘bearing children for their race’. \(^{47}\)

In order to explain why black women are still earning the lowest incomes, I must once more return to the origins of the problem, which is the racial and sexist discrimination of black women in American society. Race and sex are two main factors which have limited black women’s employment possibilities and contributed to the subordinate status of black women in all aspects of American public and social life. The influence of racism and sexism on the socioeconomic and educational status of African-American women, and the complex relationship between race, gender and class are responsible for black women’s low paid, mostly menial jobs. It must be pointed out that despite the changes in the education level and social status of a number of black women in recent decades, on the average they are still at the very bottom of the social scale and receive wages lower then that of white men, white women and black men. \(^{48}\) Some black men tend to draw the wrong conclusion that black women are taking away their jobs, but the truth is that many unemployed black men do not want to take low paying jobs that black women are willing to accept. The illusion that black women are earning more money than black men is a reversal of economic reality. \(^{49}\)

As a result of the dominant female role in the labor force and the unemployment of black men, African-American women have been accused of the psychological emasculcation of black men. Black women were told that they ‘overstepped the bounds of femininity’ because they worked outside their homes, and black men perceived their wives’ ability to gain employment and provide economic support for their families as an assault on their masculinity. The argument that the black men have been emasculated because they were unemployed and not able to assume their ‘natural’ role of economic provider of the family, was evoked by those white male scholars who wished to discredit black men and women and perpetuate their negative images. \(^{50}\) Hooks argues that the stereotype of the emasculated black men does not make much sense, because the

---

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 22  
\(^{48}\) Cf. King, 339-340  
\(^{49}\) Cf. Manning, 21  
\(^{50}\) Cf. hooks, Ain’t I a Woman, 75-76
role and desire to provide for the well-being of the family is not only restricted to men and because achievement of manhood is not determined solely on the basis of economic dominance. William Ryan argued that it is a cruel irony that the black woman’s role as worker and provider has been used to represent the loss of masculinity of black men. He labeled this type of reasoning ‘blaming the victim’\(^{51}\), because it ignored the social reality and profound traumas of black women.

**3.3.2. Disorganization of the black family and female-headed families**

In this chapter I seek to demonstrate that some aspects of black family modes have been distorted and misinterpreted by some contemporary social analysts and to prove that black family life is an important factor that significantly shaped the social reality of black women.

During the past few decades, there has been much controversy over the role that black women occupy within the black family and community. The debate over the entry of women into the labor force evoked the question of possible effects on family life. Social analysts became increasingly concerned about the so-called ‘plight of the black family’, and they wanted to intervene in this institution in order ‘to uplift it from its alleged decay and disorganization’ (Ladner, 269). The high rate of the black female labor-force participation and the percentage of the female-headed families in the black community led social scientists to conclude that matriarchy was the characteristic form of black family life.

Political activist Angela Davis emphasized that the designation of the black women as matriarch ignores the social status of black women. The term matriarch implies the existence of a society in which women exercise social and political power, a state which does not resemble the condition of black women in American society. At the time when sociologists proclaimed the existence of matriarchal order in the black family structure, black women were one of the largest socially and economically deprived groups in America, and in no way assumed the authoritative role in government and community.\(^{52}\) Consequently, the misuse of the term matriarch still conditions many people to identify

\(^{51}\) Cf. Dill, 550  
\(^{52}\) hooks, 72
any female-headed household as a matriarchal family structure. Jean Bond and Pauline Perry wrote that ‘the so-called Black matriarch is a kind of folk character largely fashioned by whites out of half truths and lies about the involuntary conditions of black women’ (hooks, 72).

It is important to note that most of the sociological investigations concerned with black women do not attempt to place the black woman’s experience in the context of the historical background and that is why there are so many misconceptions and myths about the black women’s familial roles. If we want to interpret the position of black woman properly, it is necessary to examine the roles and functions that black woman have historically held within the family units.

The available historical evidence indicates that the maternal role was strongly emphasized in African societies and that African women had unbreakable bonds with their children. In African tribes motherhood was a symbol of the continuity of life, so there was a high esteem placed on the African woman’s role as child bearer and guardian of the social organization of the group. Staples stated that it is true that the black mother’s transition from Africa to the New World and the slave system had an effect on her role as mother, but it did not eliminate any of the fundamental maternal feelings that she had toward her children.

The slave mother was unable to care for the child the way she wanted because she was forced to return to the fields and work right after childbirth. And the slave child, apart from not having a protected childhood, was often taken away from his/her mother and sold on the auction block. An even bigger problem during slavery was that the slave father’s role was obliterated. The male slave’s function was fieldwork and service, and while he was often used as a breeding instrument, he had almost no authority over his children. Many times the father’s name was not even indicated on plantation birth records, and the children were mostly listed as belonging to the mother. This meant that slave women were expected to serve the function of providers for their families in the absence of a father-figure. Since many of the children did not know their father, all the child’s family-ties were traced back to the mother, who played a strategic role in the
family. Thus, due to the inability of the slave father to play a sustained role in the life of his family, the slave mother became the most consistent person in a child’s life.  

The dominant studies of the black family, as for example E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States*, provided a historical and sociological analysis of black family life based on theories of the racial inferiority of blacks, which lead to the misinterpretation of the historical data. Frazier linked the black family experience to the legacy of slavery and concluded that the prototype of the black family life is a female-headed household, which he wrongly termed ‘the matriarchate’. He argued that the disorganized family pattern that had developed during the slavery period gained even more prominence after emancipation. He viewed the mass migration of blacks to the cities as further cause for the disruption of black family. In his opinion, the dysfunctional and divergent black family modes were a consequence of the economically unstable and isolated position of African-Americans in society, as well as their failure to assimilate in the dominant white culture. 

Later on, more similar analysis of black family life were undertaken, all of which generally followed Frazier’s thesis. However, there is a very problematic aspect underlying Frazier’s approach. The values of black family life are compared to those of the white middle-class families. The nuclear family, monogamy and patriarchy are seen as the only acceptable forms of family life, while black female independence from male authority and economic control are seen as destructive. The existence of a distinctive African-American culture is denied in this theoretical framework, which only emphasizes the weaknesses of black family structures, instead of attempting to recognize their strengths. Indeed, none of the analysis conducted according to the Frazier’s model has dealt with the social oppression of African-Americans and its devastating effects on black people’s lives. Consequently, the dominant trend of thought in intellectual circles came to be that blacks do not value family life, which, as Joyce Ladner assures, is a faulty conceptualization of the nature of African-Americans.

Hence, the dominant image of black women that emerged from Frazier’s sociological framework is that of a strong and independent person who easily engaged in sexual activities and placed little value on marriage. In order to prove that assumption wrong,

53 Cf. Staples, *The Black Women in America*, , 128-133
54 Cf. Frazier, in: Dill, 544 -545
black women attempted to emphasize their commitment to motherhood. They tried to prove their value by demonstrating that they were women who sacrificed for their children and whose lives are deeply rooted in their families. However, in cases where the black woman was the primary or only earner for the household and worked hard to provide for her children, she was seen to fail as mother precisely because of her position as worker and economic provider. The majority of social critics interpreted black women’s dominant roles in their families and their self-sufficiency as deviance and a threat to black family life and they regarded the black family structures as ‘pathological’. Although Frazier recognized black women’s qualities of self-reliance and autonomy, he evaluated them as negative because according to him black women’s independence was contributing to the disorganization of African-American family life.

In recent years the issues of black marital dissolution, illegitimacy rates and female-headed households have been the most debated questions concerning black families. And although Frazier’s theory of black family life has been discredited, some of his basic assumptions about the black matriarch and broken black households have still remained. For example, Herbert Gutman’s study of black families suggested that although ‘matriarchal’ forms of households are atypical patterns of black families, they are still recurrent in African-American society. Nonetheless, Gutman’s analysis of the black women’s roles in their families in specific historical moments and emphasis on the distinct African-American cultural norms, which sometimes differ from those of the dominant white culture, supports the idea of the potential of African-American culture to generate alternative notions of womanhood.

Black sociologist Andrew Billingsley asserted that the black family must be viewed as a separate social system within the larger society. He placed the black family in a historical context of African heritage and slavery. Applying this model one could conclude that in order to analyze the role and condition of black women in the family one must first consider the complexity of their historical and social roles. Unfortunately, most scholars tend to view black women and black family patterns in terms of the white family structures and dominant culture rather than within African-American culture itself. That is why Bonnie Dill suggests that the study of the black family and the black women’s roles within their families requires a serious revision. In her opinion, the black

55 Cf. Dill, 544-545
women’s specific experience must be placed within a proper historical framework, and then the contradictory nature of the African-American female experience must be recognized in order to understand the complexity of her roles. In other words, there is an urgent need to analyze the roles of African-American women within the family by taking into account the models of marriage and family that existed in the slave world, as well as their specific experiences as a multiply oppressed group of people.  

3.4. Dominant stereotypes and images of black womanhood in American society

We already concluded that the multiple discriminations of race, sex and class are crucial for the conditions of black women’s lives and for their social reality, but it must also be noted that they have had a strong impact on the cultural stereotypes and self-images of black womanhood. The mass sexual exploitation of black women during slavery had an enormous effect on the construction of black female sexuality even after slavery ended. The proliferation of different myths and sexual stereotypes of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries has been responsible for the obscuring of the reality of African-American women and affected not only the way American society viewed them, but also the way in which black women defined themselves. All the negative stereotypes used to describe the black woman characterized her as ‘anti-woman’.

Hooks indicates that the systematic rape of enslaved black women during slavery not only deliberately crushed black woman’s sexual integrity, but it also led to a devaluation of black womanhood long after slavery ended, which influenced the way in which black women have been perceived in American society throughout history. In fact, many of the anti-black-woman stereotypes originated in slavery. Long before the existence of the theory of black matriarchy, white men created a complex system of myths of black women to discredit black females and show them in a negative light in order to justify the oppression and sexual exploitation of the black women.

Most of the predominant negative stereotypes and popular images of black women can be found in the works of white American authors, but others are deeply rooted in the thoughts of American people and can be only detected by a more detailed sociological analysis of the prejudice against the black woman and everything that she stands for.

56 Cf. Dill, 545-547
57 Cf. hooks, 54
Sometimes, unfortunately, the power of these myths about African-American women is so strong that the line separating legend from fact becomes so blurred that the stereotypes become accepted as reality, which, of course, only reinforces the discrimination of black women in the United States.

3.4.1. Image of the masculinized black woman

According to hooks, one of the dominant images of black womanhood, which emerged already during slavery, is the myth of the black women as ‘masculinized sub-human creatures’. Black women slaves have shown that they were able to work in the fields just as hard and as long as men, that they were able to endure hardships and pain, and also perform domestic tasks of housekeeping, cooking and child-rearing. Their ability to cope with all these tasks posed a great threat to the patriarchal myth about the woman’s physiological inferiority. In this regard Angela Davis pointed out:

It is true that she was a victim of the myth that only the woman, with the diminished capacity for mental and physical labor, should do degrading household work. Yet, the alleged benefits of the ideology of femininity did not accrue to her. She was not sheltered or protected; she would not remain oblivious to the desperate struggle for existence unfolding outside home. She was also there in the fields, alongside the man, toiling under the lash […] In order to approach its strategic goal-to extract the greatest possible surplus from the labor of slaves-the black woman had to be released from the chains of the myth of femininity…the black woman shared the deformed equality of equal oppression with the black man (Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role”, 7).

In order to explain the black female’s ability to perform tasks which were traditionally characterized as male duties, white men argued that black slave women were not ‘real’ women but that they possessed ‘unusual masculine-like characteristics not common to the female species’ (hooks, 71). This attitude eventually led to the formation of theories about the matriarchal power of black females which provided an explanation for the independent and decisive role black women played within the black family as well as in labor force.
3.4.2. The Jezebel myth

Throughout history black women had to endure a special kind of racial sexism in a white-dominated society which perceived them as wanton and sexually loose by nature. As we have seen, the image of the black woman as the ‘fallen’ woman, the whore and the prostitute that has so often symbolized African-American woman is rooted in the popular imagination of the nineteenth century and in the ideology of the slave system. White America typically reduced the black woman to a sexual object and the cruel stereotype of the ‘jungle bunny’, the so-called black Jezebel\textsuperscript{58}, and this white image of sexually aggressive black women influenced also the thinking of some black men. These harmful sexual myths of black women resulted in their cultural devaluation and denigration.

In *Black Women in White America*, Gerda Lerner discusses the complex system of mechanisms that encouraged the negative myths of black women:

One of these myths was the myth of ‘bad’ black woman. By assuming a different level of sexuality for all Blacks than that of whites and mythifying their sexual potency, the black woman could be made to personify sexual freedom and abandon. A myth was created that all black women were eager for sexual exploits, voluntarily ‘loose’ in their morals and, therefore deserved none of the consideration and respect granted to white women. Every black woman was, by definition, a slut according to this racist mythology; therefore, to assault and exploit her sexually was not reprehensible and carried with it none of the normal communal sanctions against such behavior. (Lerner, 163-164).

Lerner also mentions a wide range of practices that reinforced this myth, as for example, the laws against intermarriage, the denial of the title Miss and Mrs. to a black woman, or assigning same sex toilet booths to both sexes.

In her response to the repeated allegations of the immorality of black women and inferiority of the black race, Fannie Barrier Williams declared: ‘we must look at American slavery as the source of every imperfection that marks the character of the colored American’ (Lerner, 165). Unfortunately, the sexual exploitation and devaluation of black women did not end with slavery. Thanks to the racist-sexist myth of a sexually permissive and morally deprived black woman, American

\textsuperscript{58} Cf. Yanick and Figean, 100-101
people continued to view black women with contempt and disrespect and regard them as creatures of little worth and white men continued to sexually abuse them long after slavery ended.\textsuperscript{59}

Lerner also quotes an anonymous author who wrote a wonderful article for the magazine \textit{The Independent} on the position of black women in the South:

A colored woman, however respectable, is lower than the white prostitute. The Southern white women will declare that no negro women are virtuous, yet she places her innocent children in their care [...] the negro is not chaste. The negro woman’s immorality shows more plainly than her white sister’s because she is poor and ignorant [...] the negro girl is too poor to hide her shame (Lerner, 167).

Although ever since Reconstruction black women have been struggling to change the negative stereotypes of black womanhood and dispel the myth of sexually loose black women, the efforts to improve their image often seemed in vain.\textsuperscript{60} Concerning this issue historian Hazel Carby stated that:

In the face of a dominant culture that characterized all Black women as sexually promiscuous beings, public recognition of the self as a sexual being was seen as compromising the reputation of all Black women and of the race in general (Jewell, 179).

In 1895, James W. Jack, then a president of the Missouri Press Association, summarized what many white men were thinking: ‘the Negros of this country are wholly devoid of morality’ and that ‘women were prostitutes and all were natural thieves and liars’ (Hine, 235). This statement is a proof that even though black women tried to defend their sexual image in a society that viewed them with contempt, the implications and broader social ramifications of this negative stereotype made this stereotype almost impossible to eliminate.

\textbf{3.4.3. The Sapphire stereotype}

Before the Civil Rights Movement, black civil society, which reinforced patriarchal values, produced within popular culture the figure of Sapphire, a black woman who was

\textsuperscript{59} hooks, \textit{Ain’t I a woman}, 55-58

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid. 55-58
‘evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn, and hateful’ (Manning, 21). The distorting image of the strong, unfeminine and domineering matriarch had strong consequences on the lives and status of African-American women. According to Manning, the Sapphire stereotype was used by white males, so that they ‘could justify their dehumanization and exploitation of black women’, and by black males, so that they could ‘claim that they could not get along with black women because they were so evil’. Patriarchal society employed the figure of Sapphire to explain those black women who ‘exhibited the tendencies of strength that were designated for males only’ (Manning, 21).

The contradiction between the historical role of the black woman as a laborer and the white American ideal of fragility and domesticity of women strongly affected not only the black women’s conception of womanhood but also their relationships to their families and community. African-American women’s historical participation in the labor force and their dominance in the black families were often seen as negative qualities, responsible for black women’s loss of femininity. Sociologist Calvin Hernton explains the reasons for this loss of femininity in the following way:

In reaction to the abuse of the white world, the black woman has often had to become stronger, less ‘feminine’ than her white sister; the luxury of feminine innocence and demureness has largely been denied to her. She has been forced to devise ways of surviving in a hostile white world (Herton, “The Negro Woman”, 30).

However, today the dominant image of an economically independent, strong, self-reliant and hardworking black woman is no longer seen as negatively as in the past. Moreover, the stereotypical image of the strong black woman is no longer seen as dehumanizing in the feminist theory, but has often been emphasized and romanticized as the new symbol of female glory and independence. When the women’s movement was at its peak and white women started rejecting the traditional role of breeder and sexual object, black women were celebrated for their ability to bear tremendous burdens, and to simultaneously assume their roles as both mothers and workers.\(^{61}\) This image was adopted by some and resented by others because it represents both the oppressive experiences of work and the liberating attitudes of personal autonomy and sexual equality.\(^{62}\)

---

\(^{61}\) Cf. hooks, \textit{Ain’t I a Woman}, 76-77

\(^{62}\) Cf. Dill, 553
3.4.4. Image of the mobile middle-class woman

Another pervasive model of contemporary black womanhood is that of an upwardly mobile middle-class woman, suggested by Joyce Ladner in her study of the black female experience. Ladner observes that women who rejected the dominant model of the independent, resourceful and hard-working black woman often adopted a model which she calls ‘a carefree, laissez-faire, egalitarian model of womanhood’. Although this model is different from the dominant one, in Ladner’s opinion, it also encompasses a sense of self-reliance, strength and autonomy.63

3.5. Stereotyped images of black women in American Literature

In general, American literature and especially Southern white literature fashioned stereotyped images of black women intended to create further submission of black women as well as continue the institutionalized devaluation of black womanhood in order to socially control them. Most of the common images and stereotypes assigned to African-American women are negative images which support the white attitude that black women are morally and socially subordinate to white women and as such are not worthy to be viewed as real women. In her book, *Black Feminist Criticism* Barbara Christian identified the main images of black women present in white American literature: the mammy figure, the image of a loose black woman, and finally the tragic mulatto image.

3.5.1. The black mammy figure

The most prominent black female figure in white American literature is that of an overweight, nurturing, kind and above all enduring maternal black figure who is symbolically the mammy of the South. She is plump and strong, with big breasts and arms, who needs and demands little. One could describe her as an all embracing figure whose main purpose is seen in her nurturing service. This image of the black mammy also known as ‘Aunt Jemima’ stands in direct contrast to the ideal of the frail and sensitive white woman of extraordinary beauty and incapable of doing hard work. These two images are dependent on one another, because they represent two contradictory

---

63 Cf. Ladner, 121-127
poles of female existence, and they emphasize the racial opposition of black and white female social role and beauty.

The white woman could not be seen as ornamental, fussy and fragile if she nursed and brought up children. She would have to debase herself in order to become a mother, and in the popular mythology of the South men were not supposed to protect the honor of and worship a woman who was doing domestic work and minding children. The ideal woman was supposed to be pretty, weak and in need of manly protection. In this way the dominant image of the ideal white woman is deprived of all the physical aspects of being female, whereas the black mammy, who was harmless and powerless in her position as slave, was made into an image that embodies exclusively physical female. The mammy figure is also very prominent within the genre of the slave narrative. In both white southern literatures and in the slave narrative, she is a cook, a housekeeper and a nursemaid always nurturing and caring for her folk, but the difference is that in the slave narrative she is not satisfied with her lot and she tries to protect her children and rises up against slavery.

In African culture the figure of the mother was an important symbol of fertility and creativity of the earth, but that image was distorted by the white southern gentlemen who thought that the black mammy lacked the femininity that white southern belles were seen to incorporate. The ideology of black female domesticity and motherhood has been constructed through the role of black female slaves as domestics and surrogate mothers to white families. However, the black mammy saw herself as a mother who was proud and full of dignity, and not as a symbol of domesticity. For example, Sojourner Truth, famous ex-slave fighter for women rights, is seen as the physical embodiment of the mammy who rebelled against slavery and fought for the rights of black mothers.64

3.5.2. The image of the black concubine

The other fairly dominant image that Johnson identifies in white American literature is the famous stereotype of the black woman as an ‘easy’ woman, a prostitute, a concubine. In the last chapter I already explained the origin of the stereotype of black

64 Christian, 3-5
women as sexual savages and commented on why the image of a loose black woman gained such a prominence in American society.

3.5.3. The tragic mulatta image

At the time when the main focus of white literature was on images of the black mammy and concubine, black literature centered on the figure of the tragic mulatta, and this heroine was to become a lasting image in African-American literature for decades.

Already the first novel published by an African-American, William Wells Brown’s *Clotell* (1850) and the first novel by a black woman *Iola LeRoy* (1892) by Frances Harper, set the stage for the tragic mulatta theme, a theme which reveals the conflict of values which people of mixed race often had to face. It is important to mention that the mulatto women rather than men are the ones chosen to depict the tragic lot of the mixed-blood people. Christian argues that this was the case because the woman, as she bears and raises children, has often been seen in American culture as an embodiment of the ideals of one culture. *Clotell* and subsequent novels of that genre present the mulatta as a person who is worthy to be free, because she is beautiful, courageous and refined.

The mulatta has captured the imagination of novelists during almost every period of American literature. The mixed-blood characters have not only been the central protagonists in many works by African-Americans writers, but they were also used in the works of some of the most influential white American authors, such as Twain, Faulkner and Gertrude Stein. Since the plight of the mulatta proved to be an interesting reading material for the whites, the figure of the tragic mulatta is present in a number of white abolitionist works and novels of propaganda in order to criticize the brutality of the slave system that enslaves people who are ‘one of us by virtue of his or her white blood’ (Berzon, 13). Barbara Christian asserted that a part of the mulatta’s tragedy lay in the fact that no matter how light she might be, or how much she identified with the white father-master, she could never have the same power as whites or enjoy the pleasures of the Big House.65 Slave narratives also abound with the stories of tragic mulattas who served as field and house slaves, breeders, and mistresses who were sexually abused and sold as high class courtesans. The stereotype of the tragic mulatta

---

65 Cf. Christian, 3-7
reaches its peak during the Harlem Renaissance in Jean Toomer’s famous work *Cane* (1923), and in the novels of Nella Larson *Passing* (1929) and *Quicksand* (1928).

In her book *Neither Black nor White* Judith Berzon offers a detailed study of the patterns and themes of American mulatto fiction and the roles that mixed blood individuals have played in American culture. According to Berzon, since alienation and inner conflict are essential parts of the mulatta’s being, she is seen as the reflection of the myths, the taboos, the fears, the lusts, the shame, and the burdens of American society and a symbol of its ambiguities and hypocrisy. Historically, the mulatta was a person who usually emerged out of the sexual relationship between a black slave mother and a white slave master. As a product of miscegenation, she symbolized the illicit crossing between two races, and her mere existence denied the concept of slavery that blacks were not human beings. The term ‘mulatto’ and ‘mulatta’ was borrowed from the Spanish and it is derived from the Latin term ‘mulus’, meaning mule.

Although the mulattos combine the physical characteristics of both races, and are in fact neither white nor black, during slavery they were mostly viewed and treated in the same way as full-blooded blacks. In *Roll, Jordan Roll* Eugene Genovese observes that: ‘The two caste system in the Old South drove the mulattos into the arms of the blacks, no matter how hard some tried to build a make-believe third world for themselves’ (Genovese, 431). The mulatto and especially the tragic mulatta character had a significant role in American literature on many different levels. In most works the mulatto is defined as a figure who in the words of Everett Stonequist is ‘poised in psychological uncertainty between two social worlds, reflecting in his soul the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions of these worlds’ (Berzon, 14).

Generally, the Southern whites made little distinction between blacks and mulattos, thus relegating mulatto to the lower caste. Most of the laws dealing with black slaves add ‘and mulattos’ to make clear that mixed blood did not confer exception from slavery. Nevertheless, in some Southern cities such as New Orleans and Charleston there was a third caste which consisted mostly of the light-skinned free blacks who often built black bourgeois communities. The members of this community were mostly mulatto children of planters who were educated and freed by their fathers. However, the mulattos who

---

66 Cf. Berzon, 9
were free and had built a distinctive group from other blacks were rather an exception to
the rule, for the large majority of mulatto children born to slaveholders lived their lives
as slaves with no special privileges. 67

It is often the mulatto bourgeoisie of the cities that appeared in the literature of the ante-
bellum period, while the fiction of the post-bellum period is centered on the character of
light-skinned house servants of the big planters in southern rural areas.
Many authors have regarded the mulatto as a symbol of the failure of the American
myth of egalitarianism. The early black novelists used the mulatto character to
emphasize his superiority and to show white America that some blacks could succeed
within the framework established by the dominant white majority and to criticize
American society for not recognizing the true worth of the members of non-white
groups. Other black writers, however, utilized the mulatto theme to attack white middle-
class values and to praise the values of black folk.

3.6. Stigmatizing black beauty

Yanick and Feagin wrote that beauty is an ethnocentric notion, resting in the eye of the
cultural beholder. It is a social construct which reflects the existing power relations
within a society. Since in the United States racist ideology determines what is perceived
as beautiful and what as ugly, the images of American culture reflect a white aesthetic
according to which beauty is identified with the physical superiority of white Europeans
which is linked to intelligence, and aesthetic and moral superiority. Therefore aesthetics
is another area in which African-American women had to face widespread gendered
racism.

H. Rap Brown argues that skin color and physical characteristics such as hair color and
width of nose and lips have no meaning in themselves, but that black people are born
into a society that has given a meaning to color, so the color of one’s skin became one of
the most determining factors of a person’s existence. 68 The white world has given color
not only a political, social, economic and historical meaning but also physiological,
philosophical and aesthetic meaning. Winthrop Jordan, who explored the concept of

67 Cf. Genovese, 416
68 Cf. Berzon, 3
blackness in a white society, remarked that even before the discovery of the New World the diametrically opposed concepts of blackness and whiteness defined philosophical dualism of ‘purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil, God and the devil’ (Berzon, 5).

As we explained earlier, during the nineteenth century, when the human body was of central interest to European and American scientists, the white body was viewed as the superior body type and non-white people were identified with degeneracy. Western science and aesthetics defined light-skinned, fair-haired, slender white women as the standard of female beauty, while black women were by definition ugly. The historical association of whiteness with beauty and the structures of racist imaging that still persist in the United States have had far reaching consequences for the construction of identities of African-American women.

Bell hooks suggested that the rule of beauty among Americans is still: ‘the fairer, the better’. Beneath the black women’s feeling of deviating from the norm because they are not able to live up to the ideals of white beauty lies their struggle to secure her racial and gender identity. Because aesthetics is ‘racialized’, the black woman’s full humanity is not recognized by the larger society and the consequences of this misrecognition on the lives of many African-American women are very strong.  

In the imagination of the dominant white group, who is glamorized by prevailing standards of beauty, black women who are closest to the white look are always described as the most beautiful of the group. The lighter the skin, the straighter the hair, the more appealing to whites they are. In contrast, the more African their features, the less favorably they are viewed. As we can notice, in addition to skin color and physical features, also hair plays an important role in the aesthetic visions of beauty. The old and symbolic meaning of hair as a component of feminine beauty endures. Long, straight hair represents femininity, whereas short and curly hair is less alluring and less feminine.  

In such white aesthetic norms, whiteness is an essential condition for beauty, and so in order to gain access to beauty, African-American features need to be ‘whitened’. These

---

69 Cf. Yanick and Feagin, 36-37
70 Ibid., 36
dominant standards of beauty in the United States reveal the old ideas that link biology, race and aesthetics and underline racist attitudes partly still present in American society. Responding to the assertion that black is a synonym for ugly Awa Thiam commented: ‘To be a Black Woman or a Black man and to retain one’s natural complexion is an act of demystification and demythification. The color black is not ugly’ (Jewel, 7).

Given the popular associations of white with beautiful and black with ugly, Yanick and Feagin emphasized that the black woman was seen as attractive when her appearance showed certain non-black features. Historically, there have been distinctions made between lighter- and darker-skinned members of the oppressed group. Lighter-skinned blacks have sometimes received preferential treatment by the whites, but on the other side have been envied by other blacks. Especially mixed-blood individuals had an ambiguous position in American culture. A mixed black was seen as an improved black, but could also be considered as a degraded white. In examining the particular mulatto experience Berzon explains that the skin color and Caucasian features have allowed some mulattos to assimilate into the white culture more easily than the ‘full-blooded blacks’. However, this phenomenon known as ‘passing for white’ is often marked by a rejection of African heritage and acceptance of white ideals and value systems.

In recent years black feminist theorists have often theorized about the ways in which black women define themselves and construct their own identities. Debbie Weeks, who did research on black female constructions of beauty, concluded that although the definitions of black identity in the academy and popular culture began to move away from fixed and unitary conceptions of blackness, the restrictive ideas of black identity still exist within the black communities. In her view, specific physical signifiers such as hair texture and skin color have come to symbolize the boundaries along which black women define blackness. These fixed definitions of blackness have to be understood in the context of African-American marginal positions within society.71

The definitions of feminine attractiveness that have been based upon the dominant white ideals of beauty have influenced both the self-images of black women and the way in which they are perceived by black men. The hair texture, skin shade and shape of lips and noses are often defined as more beautiful if they are closer to the European

71 Cf. Weeks, 113-118
standards of beauty. In Weeks’ opinion the contemporary representations of blackness are connected to the legacy of ‘shade prejudice’. She notes that the historical legacy of preoccupation with skin shades emerged from the slave owner’s preferences for mulatto women. Throughout the history of the United States’ hierarchy of shades came to signify social status in that darker-skinned individuals were located in the poorer sections of society and lighter-skinned ones mainly within the middle-class. The process of negating the beauty of black textured hair and darker shades of skin had strong implications for black women in terms of appearing attractive to males. Weeks relates practices such as skin bleaching and hair straightening to the preference of black men for women with European physical characteristics.

The construction of black femininity as ugly and white womanhood as beautiful is demonstrated in Eldridge Cleaver’s novel Soul on Ice by an elderly African-American man’s descriptions of images of black and white women:

There’s a softness about a white woman, something delicate and soft inside her. But a nigger bitch seems to be full of steel, granite hard and resisting […] I know that the White man made the black woman the symbol of slavery and the White woman the symbol of freedom. Every time I embrace a Black woman I’m embracing slavery, and when I put my arms around a white woman, well, I’m hugging freedom( Cleaver, 107).

However, the issues of hair and shades of skin illustrate the ‘emotional ambiguity’ of black women. Although today black women are trying to reject the white standards of beauty, at the same time they tend to conform to the prevailing white aesthetics. The ambivalence between black women’s wanting and yet not wanting to have straighter hair and lighter skin is a very problematic issue in black aesthetics. Since physical characteristics such as skin shade and hair texture are the basis for the racial characterization of an individual, many mixed parentage individuals are placed on the margins of definitions of blackness. As the mixed parentage holds the stigma of linkage to whiteness, fairer-skinned women are often ostracized or envied by other black women.

With the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and early 70s, the white ideals of womanhood and negative ‘racialized’ imagery were rejected, and African-Americans

---

72 Weekes, 114-116
attempted to redefine black identity and construct a positive image of blackness. Afro hairstyles became popular because they were associated with political change and self-knowledge. Black popular culture criticized women who sought to alter their physical appearance and move away from their racial identity. Artificial straightening of hair with hot combs and bleaching of skin with creams were seen as signs of self-hatred.  

During this era African-American artists and intellectuals tried to define the ideals of a ‘black aesthetic’. According to Addison Gayle Jr., one of the major theoretician of the Black Arts Movement, black aesthetics was ‘a means of helping black people out of polluted mainstream of Americanism’ (Berzon, 7). Berzon asserts that the movement of black aesthetics was extremely important for African-American culture because during that period the leading white social scientists tried to understand black cultural autonomy for the first time in American history. The black aesthetic movement inverted conventional white ways of thinking about otherness and suggested that everything black was good and everything white was bad. However, links between black cultural nationalism and revolutionary politics led to the subordination of art and aesthetics to politics. According to Larry Neale, one of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement, art was to serve black people in their struggle for liberation and was to inspire resistance.

The consequence of this subordination of was, hooks argues, that rather than promoting diverse artistic expression, the movement began to dismiss all forms of cultural expression of African-Americans that did not address political issues. The Black Arts Movement was based on the notion that people’s art, i.e. cultural production for the masses, could not be complex or abstract. Since the aesthetic judgments of the Black Arts Movement often did not allow recognition of multiple black experiences and the complexity of black life, in hooks’ opinion, the movement failed to produce serious criteria for evaluating black art. She concludes that even though the Black Arts Movement’s views were often restrictive and limited artistic development, the movement provided a useful critique based on a questioning of the meaning of aesthetics for black cultural production.  

---

73 Weekes, 116
74 Cf. hooks, Yearning, 107-109
4. Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed some of the most important questions regarding the social and historical context of African-American literary production, and I have established the theoretical framework within which I will analyze three works written by African-American female writers, the first of which is Harriet Jacobs’ famous slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*

4.1. Short biography of Harriet Ann Jacobs and summary of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*\(^{75}\) is Harriet Jacobs’ personal account of her experiences during the slavery era, and the events described in the narrative correspond to the story of her life quite accurately. The fictional narrator Linda Brent is in fact only Jacobs’ pseudonym, while the other characters in the narrative parallel the real people from Jacobs’ surroundings.

Harriet Ann Jacobs (Linda Brent)\(^ {76}\) was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina in 1813. She was the daughter of two mulatto slaves owned by different masters. Her father, Daniel Jacobs, was a skilled carpenter, a slave of Dr. Andrew Knox and probably the son of Knox’s neighbor, Henry Jacobs. Her mother, Delilah, was owned by John and Margaret Horniblow. Harriet’s grandmother Molly Horniblow (Aunt Martha) was a highly respected black woman, who had been freed and who owned a house in Edenton and earned her living as a baker.

Harriet’s childhood was a happy one, for she lived in a close-knit family and as a child had no knowledge of herself being a slave. In 1819, when Harriet was six years old her mother died and the girl was taken into the household of her mother’s mistress Margaret Horniblow, a kind woman who taught her how to read, spell and sew. When Harriet was twelve years old, her benevolent mistress died, and she was willed to her three or five-year-old niece (Jacobs’ is inconsistent in citing her age) Mary Matilda Norcom (Miss Emily Flint). Since the child was still young, Harriet’s actual masters were her father Dr. James Norcom (Dr. Flint) and his wife. Shortly after

\(^{75}\) Due to the length of the title of the work, I will refer to Jacobs’ slave narrative as *Incidents*

\(^{76}\) The fictional names of the people she pseudonymously presented in her book are put in parenthesis
Harriet and her brother John S. Jacobs (William) moved into the Norcom household, their father died.

At the age of fifteen, her life was starting to become unbearable because of Norcom’s unrelenting sexual advances. Harriet asked Norcom for permission to marry a free black man, but Norcom refused, and in his determination to make Harriet his concubine, he built a cottage for her four miles away from the town to get her away not only from the man she was in love with, but also from his own wife, who was getting jealous and suspicious. Desperate to escape Norcom, Jacobs designed a plan to disrupt his sexual conquest: she became sexually involved with a young neighbor, the unmarried white lawyer Samuel Tredwell Sawyer (Mr. Sands), who was a very nice and caring man. Consequently, she gave birth to two children: a son Joseph (Benjamin) and a daughter Louisa Matilda (Ellen). However, Norcom continued to pursue Jacobs. After she repeatedly rejected his advances, he sent her to a plantation several miles from Edenton to work as a field hand, while her children were left with her grandmother. But when she learned that Norcom was planning to move her children to the plantation to work in the fields, she decided to rescue them from plantation slavery. She believed that if she were gone, her master might sell the children, and so she ran away.

For a while she was hiding at the homes of sympathetic black and white friends and neighbors. Thinking that she has had escaped, Norcom sold Jacobs’ children and brother to a slave trader who was actually acting on behalf of Sawyer. Their father allowed the two children to return to Jacobs’ grandmother’s house, but he failed to keep his promise to Harriet to emancipate them. In order to be near them, Jacobs moved into a tiny crawlspace under the front porch roof of her grandmother’s house. Although this ‘garret’ was only nine feet long, seven feet wide, and three feet high, she spent nearly seven years hiding in there. Through a little peephole that she had drilled, she was sometimes able to see her children playing outside, and she sewed, read, and practiced writing.

Between 1838 and 1842 two events occurred that convinced Jacobs to escape. Sawyer took Louisa to Washington, D.C. to live with him and his new wife Lavinia Peyton and then sent her to his cousins to New York. Furthermore, Jacobs’ brother John ran
away from his master Sawyer, and her mother’s sister Aunt Betty (Aunt Nancy), who was very close to Harriet, died. In 1842, Jacobs sailed to Philadelphia and then traveled to New York by train, where she was re-united with her daughter and arranged for her son (who was still living with her grandmother) to be sent to her brother in Boston. Jacobs spent several years as a fugitive slave, living in Boston and New York, where she found work as a nursemaid for the daughter of magazine writer and editor Nathaniel Parker Willis (Mr. Bruce) and his wife Mary S. Willis (Mrs. Bruce).

Dr. Norcom repeatedly traveled to New York to catch his runaway slave, but with Mrs. Willis’ help she fled with Louisa to Boston in 1844. The following year, after Mrs. Willis died, Jacobs accompanied Mr. Willis and his daughter to England. When she returned to America, she found out that her son had been subjected to racist abuse and shipped out to sea.

Enrolling her daughter in a boarding school run by abolitionists, Jacobs moved to Rochester, New York, in 1849 to join her brother John, who was now lecturing for the abolitionist movement. In Rochester she helped her brother to run an antislavery reading room and bookstore, which was in the same building as the offices of Frederic Douglass’ newspaper *The North Star*. During this time, Jacobs became involved with a circle of antislavery activists and read her way through the abolitionist books and papers. While working with the group of white abolitionists and feminists, she met the Quaker reformer Amy Post, who eventually became one of her closest friends and encouraged her to write her personal history and in that way aid abolitionism.

In 1850, Congress passed a Fugitive Slave Law ruling that all citizens, including those in free northern states, were subject to punishment if they aided fugitive slaves. In the following years, Harriet moved back to New York and met Nathaniel P. Willis’ second wife, Cornelia Grindell Willis (second Mrs. Bruce) and was employed by her to care for her newborn baby. Mary Matilda Norcom, who after her father’s death inherited Jacobs, traveled to New York with her husband, Daniel Messmore (Mr.
Dodge), to find Jacobs and re-enslave her. Finally, in 1852 Mrs. Willis bought Harriet and set her free.\textsuperscript{77}

4.1.1. The publication, marketing and re-discovery of Incidents

Eager to use her freedom for good causes, Jacobs considered telling her life story, but she was very insecure about making her ‘unchaste’ and ‘sensational’ life public. However, once she decided to write and publish her autobiography, she fully committed herself to the project. At first she did not intend to write the account of her life by herself, but she wanted aid in producing a dictated narrative. Therefore, she sought support from the best-selling author Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had already gained fame with \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, but instead of helping her, Stowe offered Jacobs to include her story in her forthcoming book \textit{The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin}. Jacobs wrote in a letter to Amy Post that she felt Stowe had betrayed her as a woman, denigrated her as a mother, and threatened her as a writer. Disappointed and determined to write her story herself, she began practicing writing by sending anonymous pieces and letters to newspapers such as the New York \textit{Tribune}. She began compiling her narrative in 1853, completing it in 1858.

Her correspondence with Amy Post during this period also reveals that she was determined to write and fearful of being discovered. Jacobs was convinced that Nathaniel P. Willis was proslavery. Because of this she refused to ask for his help, and she did not want her employer to know that she was writing. For years while living under Willis’ roof, she wrote secretly and at night. In her letters to Post, she voiced the frustration of a would-be-writer who earned her living taking care of other people’s children.

After writing the narrative, Jacobs had difficulties in publishing her manuscript. For several years she tried to get her book into print. In 1858 she sailed to England with letters of introduction from Boston abolitionists, but she was unable to arrange for publication. Then she found two Boston publishing houses which accepted the manuscript, but unfortunately they both went bankrupt before they got the book.

\textsuperscript{77} Cf. Yellin, “Introduction” : for some reason Yellin’s introduction has no page numbers, so I cited only the source without the page numbers; Yellin, “Text and Contexts”, 263-269; Fleischner, 66-67
published. Jacobs’ friend William C. Nell introduced her to Lydia Maria Child, who agreed to write an introduction and act as Jacobs’ editor. With Child committed to the project, arrangements for publication proceeded. Jacobs purchased the plates of her book and had a Boston printer publish it ‘for the author’ in 1861. The following year a British edition was published in London under the title *The Deeper Wrong, Or Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.*

Marketing the book proved no easier than publishing it. In the days when the nation moved towards the Civil War, another slave narrative seemed of minor importance. Jacobs, however, was eager to promote her narrative. The Salem *Antislavery Bugle* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* printed a review of the book and urged the abolitionists to buy it. Her friend William V. Nell wrote an article for the *Liberator,* announcing the sale of *Incidents:*

> It presents features more attractive than many of its predecessors purporting to be histories of slave life in America, because in contrast with their mingling of fiction with fact, this record of complicated experience in the life of a young woman, a doomed victim to America’s peculiar institution (Yellin, “Introduction”).

Jacobs quickly became known among abolitionists for her work, and she spent the remaining years of her life as an activist, a reformer, and Civil War and Reconstruction relief worker. Throughout the war years, she nursed black troops, taught, and raised money for black refugees. After the war, she and her daughter Louisa worked in Savannah, Alexandria and Edenton to improve the conditions of recently-freed slaves. They distributed clothing and supplies and organized schools and nursing homes. In 1868, they traveled to London to raise funds for an orphanage and a senior home in Savannah. A year before her death, Jacobs was actively involved in organizing meetings in the National Association of Colored Women in Washington, D.C. She died in 1897.

Despite her relative popularity after the publication of the book, by the twentieth century both Jacobs and her narrative were forgotten. Those historians who did recall *Incidents* associated it only vaguely with Jacobs’ name. However, in the 1960s the

---

Civil Rights Movement re-published a number of slave narratives, including *Incidents*, and later the woman’s movement created interest in the book. But Jacobs’ achievement remained in obscurity until 1981, when her letters to Amy Post found at the University of Rochester authenticated her authorship.\(^79\)

### 4.2. Tradition of the slave narratives

Since *Incidents* is one of the most famous slave narratives written by a woman, it is important to take a look at the forming of the tradition of slave narratives and their conventions before moving to the actual analysis of Jacobs’ work.

#### 4.2.1. Historical development of slave narratives

Early African-American writers have mainly written literature of social and political protest, which was supposed to contribute to the amelioration of their social condition. It was almost impossible for black writers as oppressed people who were deprived of freedom for such a long period of time to compose ‘art for art’s sake’\(^80\). Since the primary motivation for production of African-American literature has been the condition of oppression of black people, racism and associated political, social and economic issues have always been the pervasive themes in African-American works.

As a consequence of the slave laws that were forbidding teaching reading and writing to the slaves, most of the blacks in the South were analphabets. For that reason, the first African-American literary works were written mainly for a white audience. The most popular genre among African-American writers during the nineteenth century was the slave narrative. Slave narratives constituted a considerable body of writing in ante- and post-bellum America, and made an influential contribution to American literary and cultural history of that time.

\(^79\) Cf. Yellin, “Introduction”
\(^80\) Cf. Hernton, *The Sexual Mountain*
A slave narrative is an autobiography of an ex-slave with a unique structure and distinctive themes that traces the narrator’s path from slavery to freedom. The prime objective of the slave narratives as authentic autobiographies was to establish the humanity of black people. About the principal motivations that led to the writing of the slave narratives Toni Morrison wrote:

Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: ‘This is my historical life-my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents race’. Two: ‘I write this text to persuade other people— you, the reader, who is probably not black—that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery’ (Frances White, 153).

According to Arna Bontemps, the recorded memoirs of the questing slaves were felt by many readers in the nineteenth century to epitomize the condition of an individual as it documented the personal history of the individual to whom bondage was reality and freedom was more like a dream. The main significance of the slave narrative lies in the fact that it was one of the best mediums of self-expression for black people in the United States, which had an enormous influence on the subsequent writing of African-Americans.

Slave narratives appeared in the United States around 1703, but the first one was published in Boston only in 1760 and entitled A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man, whose real author has never been established. The immediate successors were Oladulah Equiano, more famous as “Gustavus Vassa” and John Marrant with their narratives published in 1789. While Marrant's memoir A Narrative of the Lord’s Wonderful Dealings with J. Marrant, a Black, Taken Down from His Own Relation has been called ‘the simple ecstasy of a folk tale’, Vassa’s slave narrative The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Oladulah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the Africa, is considered the first truly notable book of this genre and one of the worthiest contributions to African-American literature.

When the genre shortly disappeared after the invention of the cotton gin, decades of a relative silence and invisibility of black people followed, which often paralleled a

---

81 Cf. Bontemps, vii
82 Cf. Ibid., xii-xiv
growing hostility against African-Americans. This was an era in which self-expression of blacks first went underground and when generations of blacks, deprived of their right to learn how to read and write were growing up. Sensitive and intelligent blacks fell back on the oral tradition of their forefathers and created folk music and spirituals which, at least, satisfied the cravings of the oppressed and deprived spirit of slaves.

When the antislavery movement began to shape up in the United States in the 1820s, new editions of the significant earlier black writing began to reappear and the new wave of black writers produced the most representative and genuine slave narratives. The list of slave narratives written during the era of abolitionism to the end of Civil War in 1865 is fairly long, but there were just a few of them that attracted widespread attention, such as *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (1869), *The Confession of Nat Turner* (1831), *The Narrative of Solomon Northup* (1857), as well as Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). However, the two most famous slave narratives published during this period were *The Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* and published in Boston in 1845, and William Wells Brown’s *Narrative of William W. Brown, Written By Himself*. After 1865, over 60 book-length narratives were published, including Booker T. Washington’s *The Story of my Life and Work*. This narrative together with its subsequent rewriting under the title *Up from Slavery* (1900) was the last ex-slave memoir in the great tradition of slave narratives.83

The tradition of slave narratives had a profound impact on the later works produced by African-American writers. Works such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, which trace the narrator’s journey from poverty and mental slavery to freedom, his determination to overcome his limitations, and willingness to transform his life, are referred to as neo-slave narratives, because their protagonists discover a sense of freedom by writing, much like the protagonists of the traditional slave narratives. Many contemporary black writers, as for example Toni Morrison, identified themselves and their writing within this tradition, because it brought them closer to their roots and gave them access to their past. Her novels, *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, exemplify fictional slave narratives and transform the conventional

83 Cf. Bontemps, vii-xvii
elements of that genre to achieve new dimensions. Even though Morrison placed herself in the tradition of the slave writers, she recognizes that time has created different conditions for 20th-century black female writers. They can now speak more freely about their sexuality and can finally put down the veil that was drawn over their lives. However, to gain access to the veiled interior life of the enslaved, Morrison observes, they have to make use of memories and recollections from their past. They must dig up the remains of their past and with the help of imagination reconstruct the world that these remains imply. Otherwise, the oppressive limitations of the past will continue to dominate.  

4.2.2. Conventions of slave narratives

Historians and critics of the slave narratives such as Arna Bontemps and Robert Stepto define slave narratives as highly formulaic personal accounts of the life of formerly enslaved black people who describe their experiences in slavery and their escape from bondage in the South to the freedom in the North. The plots are predetermined in that they always depict the journey from slavery to freedom.

Bontemps summarized the starting and ending points of a typical slave narrative:

The Negro’s suffering in his private hell of oppression was the point at which the narratives invariably began. Enduring this ordeal until he became desperate, or until otherwise engaged the reader’s interest or sympathy, the slave was eventually impelled to attempt the perils of escape [...] a promised land and a chance to make a new life as a real man was always a goal. (Bontemps, vii).

Most of the slave narratives document the horrors of slavery and contain descriptions of violence, whippings, slave auctions and other instances of slave-owners’ cruel treatment of slaves. By doing this the narrators exposed the brutality of the system of chattel slavery which treated slaves as property and depicted the courage and dignity of black slaves who were not afraid to fight back.

84 Cf. Frances White, 153-154
85 Cf. Stepto, 3-31
Another defining characteristic of the slave narratives is a phrase such as “Written By Himself/Herself” in the title of the narrative, as well as the prefaces, testimonials, letters and postscripts written by white abolitionists or editors which frame the narrative and testify to the credibility and authenticity of the stories.86

Due to the fact that slaves were legally denied the right to read and write, American slave narratives also focus on the quest for literacy, which was often linked to the quest for freedom. Especially male-authored accounts described the process of self-liberation through the achievement of literacy. For such narrators as Frederic Douglass, and Gustavus Vassa the path to freedom was marked by their acquisition of literacy.87 Deborah White and Hazel Carby argue that historians and literary critics have traditionally assumed that the patterns of the narratives provide reliable representations of slave life. However, they have demonstrated that while these patterns might reflect the experiences of male slaves, they ignore the slave woman’s existence.88

Male slave narrators often depict themselves as figures who achieve their freedom thanks to their physical mastery over the slaveholder and their solitary journey to the North. Valerie Smith and Mary Helen Washington asserted that by representing themselves as isolated subjects, male slave narrators defined their humanity in the prevailing conceptions of American male identity.89 In that regard Smith concluded that

by mythologizing rugged individuality, physical strength and geographical mobility, the narratives enshrine cultural definitions of masculinity. The plot of the standard narrative may thus be seen as not only the journey from slavery to freedom but also the journey from slavehood to manhood (Smith, Self-Discovery and Authority, 34).

From this we can conclude that the conventions of male-authored narratives thus relate the experience of slavery and freedom to definitions of masculinity. Deborah White suggests that the narrators of the male-authored accounts are able to represent

86 Cf. Stepto, 3-31
87 Cf. Smith, xxvii
88 Cf. Deborah White, 17-25; Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood. 45-46
89 Cf. Smith, Self-Discovery and Authority, 9-28; Washington, 7-8
themselves as solitary figures, because the circumstances of their captivity granted them a greater degree of autonomy than that allowed to female slaves:

The division of labor on most plantations conferred greater mobility on male than on female slaves […] few of the chores performed by bondwomen took them off the plantation. Usually masters chose their female slaves to assist in the transportation of crops to market, and the transport of supplies and other materials to the plantation. More male than female slaves were artisans and craftsmen, and this made it more difficult to hire out a female slave than a male slave (Deborah White, 76).

In addition, female slaves were more likely to be tied to the plantation by the demands of the child care. Factors such as these underscore important differences between the nature of male and female slavery in the United States and suggest why male rather than female slave narrators mostly figured themselves as mobile and self-sustaining individuals.90

Smith remarks that while the form and rhetoric of typical slave narratives may broadly suit the outline for the woman’s quest for liberation, they inadequately capture the specifics of female slave experience. Male narrators rarely feature protagonists who grieve over the separation from their families or who try to bring their relatives north with them, and above all they fail to represent the slave woman’s sexual vulnerability, the crucial fact that differentiated the female slave’s experience from that of her male counterpart.91 It should be kept in mind that the value of female slaves derived not only from their labor, but also from their ability to bear and rear children. Consequently, slave women were often subjected to rape and to forced liaisons that both satisfied their masters’ sexual desires and increased the human property upon which the slave system depended. As Carby notices, slave women who are figures of secondary importance in the male-authored narratives, are always represented as passive victims of sexual abuse. Rare is the account of the role of the victimized slave women, their interior lives or their survival strategies.92

90 Cf. Deborah White, 17-25; Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 45-46
91 Cf. Smith, “Introduction”, xxx-xxi
92 Cf. Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 35
4.2.3. The uniqueness of Jacobs’ slave narrative

Although the autobiographical accounts of former slaves represent the earliest genre in which large numbers of African-Americans wrote, the majority of the slave narrators were male. As one of the few slave narratives written by a woman, Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861, is also one of the last of over a hundred slave narratives published before the Civil War. As a personal account of life in bondage and the struggle to be free, *Incidents* clearly fits into the slave narrative genre. In the mode of the prototypical slave narrator, Linda Brent chronicles the tales of the physical abuse and sufferings of slaves as well as the brutality of slave owners. She also describes the experiences that led to her decision to flee from the South to the free North.

However, Jacobs’ slave narrative is different from other works of the genre because it offers a unique perspective on the complex position of the black woman as a slave, mother, and writer in the nineteenth-century United States. Critics have pointed out that while Frederic Douglass’ narrative presents the protagonist in terms of typical masculine attributes and physical bravery, Jacobs presents Linda Brent in terms of motherhood and other feminine roles. Instead of dramatizing only the quest for freedom and literacy, it also presents a heroic slave mother struggling for a home and freedom of her children.93

Frances Smith Foster argues that Jacobs’ treatment of conflict and power is more varied than that of the male narrators. While male slave narrators tend to tell the story of humanity lost and regained and depict the possibilities of living self-defined lives by fleeing to the free northern states, Jacobs depicts herself as a slave girl and a mother who is aware of her individual value and who is determined in defending her right to self-determination. Although she does flee to the North, in her depiction the flight is not the only available option for resistance.94

In contrast to the male-authored slave narratives, Jacobs’ account underscores her reliance on other people and reveals that the story of slavery and escape might be written differently. In her narrative she makes obvious her problematic relation to the

93 Cf. Yellin, “Introduction”
94 Cf. Foster, 95
typical masculine rhetoric that characterizes the slave narrative as a genre. In a few instances in the text, she indirectly suggests that as long as the rhetoric of the slave narrative identifies freedom and independence with manhood, it lacks a category for describing the achievements of enslaved black women.\textsuperscript{95} While \textit{Incidents} recalls other slave narratives in describing the struggle for freedom of its heroic protagonist, its focus on the sexual history of the narrator makes it a unique work in this genre.

The unusual character of Jacobs’ narrative is also evident in the title of the book. Yellin asserts that although \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl} identifies the narrator in term of gender and condition, \textit{Incidents} is not a typical female captivity narrative like those which were popular in Jacobs’ time. The captivity narratives normally presented a white female protagonist who ‘meekly submits before what she accepts as God’s rightful chastening’ (Yellin, “Introduction”). In contrast, Linda Brent is presented as a black woman struggling for her freedom and autonomy. Moreover, her characterization of Dr. Flint enacts an interesting version of power reversal in which the slave controls the master.\textsuperscript{96}

Furthermore, Jacobs’ angle of vision is revolutionary. In her text she does not merely reinforce the images of slavery as dehumanizing and oppressive, particularly for the slave women, who are more vulnerable than men, but she also counters the prevailing literary construct of slave women as helpless victims. In her story, a slave woman fights back and successfully deflects her master’s sexual advances and does not allow her children to be sold away.\textsuperscript{97}

However, in other ways Jacobs’ account of her battle for freedom follows the standard pattern of the genre. As in other slave narratives, in \textit{Incidents} this struggle is seen as recurrent. Despite her escape from her master midway through the book and her flight to the North, she does not achieve her goal of freedom until the final pages. This pattern of repeated struggle is further emphasized by her efforts to free her children. While their purchase by their father rescues them from Harriet’s hated master, he does not legally free them, and although they are later sent to the North, they are not out of danger until the end of the book.

\textsuperscript{95} Cf. Smith, xxvii-xxix  
\textsuperscript{96} Cf. Yellin, “Introduction”  
\textsuperscript{97} Cf. Foster, 95
4.3. Authenticity, authority and objectives of Incidents

4.3.1. Objectives and critique

Jacobs revealed herself as a great social critic and a writer of daring and skill. Her narrative embodied a dual critique of the nineteenth-century American ideologies and institutions: on the one hand, it challenged the institution of chattel slavery with its supporting ideology of white racism, and on the other hand it criticized the traditional patriarchal ideologies. Indirectly Jacobs also criticized white racism in the North and the passivity of many people in the North who did not take action in the fight against slavery.

In her preface to Incidents, Jacobs identified her audience and expressed the main objectives of her narrative:

I do earnestly desire to arouse women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse (xiv).

From this we clearly see that Jacobs’ main intention in writing this work was to call for public action and make the people in the North aware of the cruelties of the Southern ‘peculiar institution’.

It is, however, unusual that Jacobs, as a black woman and a former slave, represents herself as a mediator between the white women of the North and the black slave women of the South. She appeals to the sisterhood bonding between white and black women, and by doing so she significantly deviates from the patterns of the slave narratives and of women’s literature.

Furthermore, Incidents was published in the face of taboos preventing women from discussing their sexuality. By creating Linda Brent, Jacobs was able to write her sexual history under a pseudonym and to publish her shocking narrative, which helped her reconstruct the meaning of her own life as woman and mother. She provided an alternative model to the cult of true womanhood and challenged the readers to examine not only the social and ideological structures, but also their own
By deciding to write not only about slavery, but also about racism in the North, and about the prevailing conceptions of womanhood, she opened up a new path for future generations of African-American female writers. Jacobs refused to ignore the complicity of the North and Northern women in the oppression of black female slaves. Writing the *Incidents* was Jacobs’ way of struggling against the institution of slavery and against those individuals who had attempted to deprive all slave women of ‘their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ (Foster, 105).

### 4.3.2. Questions of authenticity and authority

Although today it is widely accepted that autobiographies are often unreliable, and that there is always some distance between the real person and the narrative self-construct, in abolitionist rhetoric ‘truth’ was highly valued. The nineteenth-century audience considered literary exaggeration and rhetorical excess threatening, and delicacy and modesty were virtues that were valued in women’s literature, even in African-American slave narratives.

Contemporary critics such as Jean F. Yellin and Mary Helen Washington proved that the correlation between Jacobs’ life and her representation of it in the text is almost one-to-one; however, in the 19th century, Jacobs’ *Incidents* was often dismissed as not true. For a long time Jacobs’ work was considered a narrative dictated by a fugitive slave to Lydia Maria Child, whereas others mistook it for an antislavery novel that Child had written in the form of slave narrative. Many black writers and historians denigrated it as well, among them Sterling Brown, Arna Bontemps and John Blessingame.

The questions of the authenticity and authority of Jacobs’ public voice assumed critical importance. As a former black slave and a female, Jacobs was at the bottom of the social ladder at the time of the writing of her narrative. A female writer in her position faced many problems in gaining the confidence of the white middle-class.

---


99 Cf. Foreman, 76-77

100 Cf. Yellin, “Introduction”
audience. Her credibility and authority were questioned many times by both historians and literary critics. For example, Blassingame concluded that Jacobs’ narrative is inauthentic, because it did not confirm to the typical guidelines of slave narratives. He especially criticized the frequency with which issues of miscegenation, outraged virtue and the slaveholders’ licentiousness are found in Jacobs’ narrative.101

In order to validate her claims and conclusions Jacobs used authoritative references such as biblical quotations and references to other people. As Campbell noted, women writers characteristically used references from the Scripture and statements by men, but on her title page Jacobs not only cites the Bible, but also an anonymous woman of North Carolina. The first quotation declares that:

Northerners know nothing at all about Slavery [...] They have no conception of the depth of degradation involved [...] if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown’ (Incidents, title page).

Given the assumed inferiority of blacks to whites at the time, most readers would have assumed that the speaker of such an accusatory and patronizing statement was white. Only then they would have been able to accept the implied authority of this anonymous woman. But since the race of the woman is not stated and since Jacobs was from North Carolina, it is quite possible that she is quoting herself.

Other way of claiming her personal authority is Jacobs’ biblical quotation, which reads: ‘Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear to my speech’ ((Incidents, title page). The relation between this didactic statement taken from Isaiah 32: 9 and the theme of Incidents is quite obvious. But the quotation does more than just cite a precedent for women becoming politically active. The prophecy from Isaiah is actually a warning. The women ‘that are at ease’, ‘the careless daughters’ who fail to rise up and support the rights of the oppressed blacks, will find themselves also enslaved if they do not do something to change the social conditions of the slaves.102

---

101 Cf. Fleischner, 45-46
102 Cf. Yellin, “Introduction”
4.4. Sexuality and notions of womanhood

I already mentioned that what makes Jacobs’ narrative so different from other slave narratives is that it is the first slave narrative that provides a coherent framework for a discourse of black womanhood and that it foregrounds the delicate politics of sexuality and race in the nineteenth century.

*Incidents* does not only chronicle the brutal reality of slave life, but it also focuses on the specific oppression of black female slaves and their sexual abuse. In one of the most famous paragraphs in her narrative, Jacobs’ exposes the dangers and cruelties of the life of a slave girl by saying: ‘Slavery is terrible for men: but far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications of their own’ (79). The greatest victims of the institution of slavery, according to Jacobs, were black women who were forced to endure shameful indignities ‘inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men’. Jacobs was aware of the triple oppression of black slave women and she reflected on the fact that their position was different from both the position of black enslaved men and free white woman. She also argued that the practice of conventional white principles of morality was rendered impossible by the conditions of slavery.

4.4.1. Ideology of true womanhood vs. real womanhood

In order to explain the hierarchical differences in power relations between black slaves and white slaveholders, Jacobs created a gallery of characters that incorporates the two opposing models of womanhood and motherhood in the nineteenth century: the ideal of the true woman and the ideal of the real woman.

The dominant model of womanhood which defined the boundaries of acceptable female behavior from the 1820s until the Civil War was ‘the ideology or the cult of true womanhood’. The cliché of the true woman was very prominent in patriarchal culture and was found in much of the women’s literature at the time. This was a concept identified by feminist historian Barbara Walter, which privileged the ‘pale, delicate, invalided maiden’ and the four cardinal female virtues of ‘domesticity, piety, submissiveness, and purity’ for which the woman was promised happiness and
power. Julia Cherry Spruill, author of *Women's Life and Work in the Southern Colonies*, concludes that these conventions of noble womanhood had an ‘incalculable influence in fixing the conception of the proper nature of women’ throughout the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{103}

However, Jacobs’ strongly criticized this ideal throughout her narrative, because as Foster explains, she believed that this definition of womanhood was suitable only for white women, and held some inherent problems for black women. No matter how elegant and refined she tried to appear and no matter how pale her complexion was, a black woman, and especially a slave woman could never live up to the standards of a virtuous white woman and stand as a lady in the eyes of the white patriarchal world. Jacobs showed that the ideology of true womanhood was a concept which excluded black women. Linda Brent is a perfect example of a slave woman who was light-skinned enough to be able to pass for white and who tried her best to stay chaste and virtues, but who, due to her condition as slave, was unable to reach the ideals of white womanhood: ‘No matter whether a slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death’ (26).

In Jacobs’ case, the fact that her two children were from a man who was not her husband, that she was strong enough to survive seven-years of hiding in her grandmother’s attic and that she later managed to support herself and her children by working as a domestic servant eliminated any claim of true womanhood.\textsuperscript{104} Jacobs illustrates this very clearly when she says: ‘that which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens the degradation of the female slave’ (27). If a slave woman attempted to be chaste and preserve her sexual autonomy, the economic system of slavery was threatened because slave women gave birth to the main capital of the economy of the South. Black women were in Linda’s words, ‘considered of no value, unless they continually increase their owners’ stock’ (49).

The other competing ideology of that era was the one that Frances Cogan has termed ‘the Ideal of the Real Womanhood’.\textsuperscript{105} Real womanhood was not, Cogan explains,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{103} Cf. Carby, “Reconstructing Womanhood”, 23
\item \textsuperscript{104} Cf. Foster, 112
\item \textsuperscript{105} Cf. Cogan, 4
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
simply an opposite to true womanhood. It was an approach that assumed that women did have a private sphere, but a sphere that was in a different relationship to the male domain than the advocates of true womanhood would concede. Cogan argues that:

The Real Womanhood ideal offered American women a vision of themselves, as biologically equal (rationally as well as emotionally) and in many cases markedly superior in intellect […] It demanded that the woman’s duty to herself and her loved ones was not to die, but rather to live; not to sacrifice herself, but to survive (Cogan, 5).

Foster suggests that Jacobs develops the concept of the ideal of real womanhood as superior to the ideal of true womanhood. The most positive female characters in her narrative are the ones that are closer to the ideal of real women than of true women. Women such as Linda Brent and her grandmother Aunt Martha are perfect examples of real women: they are strong, independent, self-efficient, maternal and nurturing at the same time.106

4.4.2. Heroic slave mother

*Incidents* is extremely important for viewing nineteenth-century literary representations of black motherhood. In trying to affirm her slave woman’s rights to be respected as a mother, she evokes the natural and divine law of a mother to protect and take care of her offspring. Jacobs asserts that slave mothers

may be ignorant creature[s], degraded by the system that has brutalized [them] from childhood; but [they] have a mother’s instincts, and [are] capable of feeling a mother’s agonies (16).

In her narrative, Jacobs presents herself through the character of Linda as a heroic slave mother who on the one hand mourns that she is not a typical storybook heroine, but on the other hand affirms herself as a new kind of heroic female figure. Jacobs’ heroine is a demonstration of the devastating consequences that the institution of slavery had on black womanhood and motherhood. The bitterness of her mental...

---

106 Cf. Foster, 112-113
suffering and degradation which she was compelled to endure during her bondage made her only stronger and more willing to fight for her freedom.

In presenting Linda as a heroic and loving slave mother who is ready to endure the worst kinds of hardships in order to achieve the freedom of her children, Jacobs counters stereotypes about black slave families. It is vitally important to understand the close family bond between Linda and her relatives. Until the death of her mother, her family unit was not burdened by separation, as it was common among slave families during that period. And later, when Linda herself becomes a suffering slave mother, she does everything that is in her power to protect her children. Jacobs reveals that, contrary to the popular opinion, slaves were able to develop strong family ties and despite the cruelty of the system remain united.

Linda does not correspond to a stereotypical figure of the black mammy, who quietly watches her children growing up in slavery, but she is a proud and brave slave mother who takes action and resolves to free her children from bondage. She exhibits extraordinary psychological and physical strength that enables her to maintain her sanity during the seven years she spends hiding in her grandmother’s attic. She stands for a strong black woman who, against all odds, manages to survive and achieve freedom for herself and her children.107

However, Linda Brent is not the only slave mother in the narrative. Unlike Linda, who is ultimately successful in claiming her children, many other slave women suffer tragic separation from their children, and their stories form a contrast to Jacobs’ own story of personal triumph as a heroic slave mother.

The story of the Jacobs’ grandmother epitomizes black female oppression as experienced by black mothers. Even more strongly than Linda, Aunt Martha embodies the ideal of the heroic slave mother who refuses to allow slavery to destroy her hope, integrity, and human compassion, and who in Linda’s words ‘stands by her own children, and suffers with them till death’. Aunt Martha is portrayed as a woman of genuine sensibility and natural warmth. She embodies aspects of purity and piety

107 Cf. Tate, “Allegories of Black Female Desire”, 109
as well as physical and spiritual strength. Jacobs recalls her grandmother’s ideal maternal love by recalling her endless struggle to buy her children’s freedom.  

She especially underscores her grandmother’s strength with repeated references to the fact that she had to wean her own daughter, Jacobs’ mother, in order to breast-feed a white child, Jacobs’ later mistress Mrs. Flint. Jacobs’ figure of the grandmother stands as the source of a strong moral code in the midst of an immoral slave system. For her the act of nurturing gave rise to feelings of intimacy and she was unable to feel malice towards a person she has once fed on her breast.

4.4.3. Jealous mistress

The text juxtaposes the ideal slave mother with the cold, hard-hearted and ungrateful Mrs. Flint, who returns maternal nurturance with cruelty. When Mrs. Flint became jealous of Linda, she vented her anger on Linda’s grandmother: ‘She wouldn’t even speak to her in the street. This wounded my grandmother’s feelings, for she could not retain ill will against the woman she had nourished with her milk’ (91).

Jacobs demonstrates that Mrs. Flint is not only an unnatural (surrogate) daughter, but this rejection of the mothering relationship implies that she is also an unnatural woman, incapable of reproducing the compassionate generosity ascribed to women. Throughout the book, Mrs. Flint is shown as insecure, isolated and victimized by her own unwomanly and self-destructive actions. She represents the stereotype of the cruel and jealous Southern mistress often found in anti-slavery works. Jacobs showed that some Southern white women assumed the ideals of true womanhood to hide their hypocrisy and moral weakness. For example, she describes Mrs. Flint in ways that utilize the conventions of true womanhood while exposing them as contradictory:

Mrs. Flint, like many Southern women, was totally deficient in energy. She had no strength to superintend her household affairs; but her nerves were so strong, that she could sit in her easy chair and see a woman whipped, till blood trickled from every stroke of the lash (10).

\[108\] Cf. Tate, “Allegories of Black female Desire”, 109-110  
\[109\] Cf. Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 56-57  
\[110\] Cf. Tate, “Allegories of Black Female Desire”, 109-110
Jacobs recounts how on one occasion Mrs. Flint forced Linda to walk barefoot through the snow because the creaking of her new shoes ‘grated harshly on her refined nerves’ (17). In these and other passages, the conventional figure of the plantation mistress is ironically undermined. The attributes of the Southern lady, such as delicacy of constitution and heightened sensitivity, appear as corrupt and superficial qualities that cover cruelty and brutality: ‘The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage’ (27). Linda realizes that because of Dr. Flint’s sexual advances she represents a threat to Mrs. Flint’s dignity and pride. She explains that Mrs. Flint ‘who pitied herself as a martyr […] was incapable of feeling for the condition of shame and misery in which her unfortunate, helpless slave was placed’ (32).

By describing incidents similar to these Jacobs showed that white mistresses confirmed their own social position of power by denying the humanity of slave women, particularly when they were insecure in their own relation to patriarchal power: ‘I knew that the young wives of slaveholders often thought their authority and importance would be best established and maintained by cruelty’ (94).

4.4.4. Sexual exploitation and redefinition of sexuality and womanhood

In her narrative Jacobs dramatizes not only the success of her struggle for the liberation of herself and her children, but also her failure to adhere to the sexual patterns of the time. She knows that being intimate with a man who was not her husband would have severe consequences, and indeed, she is condemned by her grandmother for her deed and suffers terrible guilt. But in questioning the sexual standards she has been taught to endorse, she reaches toward an alternative moral code which could be acceptable for women like her. In Jacobs’ opinion, her decision to take a lover who is not her husband should not be viewed as immoral, but as outside conventional ethical boundaries.

By depicting her life as a black slave woman and by demonstrating the depth of their degradation, Jacobs was trying to correct misinterpretations of black female sexuality. Her depiction of herself and other slave women contradicted both the image of black

---

111 Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 54-55
112 Cf. Yellin, “Text and Contexts”, 271
women as ‘naturally lewd’, and as passive victims, which were the two most popular images of black women during the nineteenth century. Instead, she challenged the existing stereotypes of black womanhood and offered a new definition of womanhood that displaced piety, submissiveness, purity and domesticity.

Jacobs’ narrator refuses the standard white conventions of female sexual behavior, in that she does not characterize Linda as a passive female victim, but as an effective moral agent who chooses to take Mr. Sands as lover and who takes full responsibility for her actions:

I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master, for it was not so: neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness […] I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation (54).

She discusses her efforts to preserve her virginity and to maintain her self-esteem, but she also explains that without the protection of laws, a black slave girl like her had no chance of avoiding unwanted sexual advances. Linda’s master and pursuer, Dr. Flint, makes her effort to stay chaste indeed a very hard task. He is a representative cruel slaveholder, who embodies the evil of slavery that is an ultimate threat to his female slave’s virtue and purity. Obsessed with his young and pretty female slave Linda, he is aware that she has no options to escape his harassment. As her master he takes full advantage of her vulnerable position as a slave and continues to psychologically abuse her throughout the narrative. He reveals a complete lack of the conventional qualities of a gentleman as he tries to corrupt Linda by whispering foul suggestions in her ear when she is still an innocent girl, and he uses his power to prevent Linda from marrying her first, true love. Dr. Flint constantly reminds her that she is his property and that he could have her killed or imprisoned for resisting his advances, but he claims that he wishes to make her happy and offers to make a lady of her, if she will grant him her favors: ‘My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him’ (46).

Smith observes that one might be tempted to characterize Linda as a victim of her unfortunate circumstances, although she repeatedly demonstrates her ability to transform the conditions of her oppression into the conditions of her liberation.
Conventional feminine qualities of submission and passivity are replaced by an active resistance. Although Flint has ‘power and law on his side’, she has ‘a determined will’ and her strength and will to resist are described as having their source in her ‘woman’s pride, and her mother’s love for her children’ (87).

However, in order to assert her autonomy as a human being and gain control over her body, Linda has to sacrifice a part of her. First, she has to give up her great love, a free-born black carpenter, who is described as possessing all the qualities that are absent in slaveholders. In the chapter entitled “The lover,” honor is posed against dishonor and respect for Linda against disrespect and insult. Jacobs describes her black lover as intelligent and religious, while Dr. Flint appears as an animal trying to catch its prey. Despite the fact that Dr. Flint is the epitome of the corruption of the slave system, Linda manages to avoid being sexually used and corrupted and she repeatedly escapes sexual persecutions by choosing her own space of confinement: first the stigma of unwed motherhood over sexual submission to her master and later the garret in her grandmother’s attic over her own and her children’s enslavement on a plantation.

Then, when she is denied the right to marry the man she loved, in a desperate attempt to prevent her master from taking advantage of her, she decides to exchange her purity for an effort to maintain her self-respect. Hoping to gain a degree of self-protection from Dr. Flint, Linda stops avoiding sexual involvements and decides to become the mistress of Mr. Sands. She explains that she did that in order to avoid being ‘entirely subject to the will of another’, i.e. her hated master Dr. Flint: ‘It was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way’ (54).

Linda’s relationship to Mr. Sands is both imprisoning and liberating for her. She knows that by becoming his mistress she will have to compromise her virtue and reputation, but since her alternative is to yield to the master she loathes, she has no choice but to give herself to Sands. In the text she explains her reasons for choosing Mr. Sands as her lover:

113 Cf. Smith, xxxiv
114 Cf. Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, 57
115 Cf. Smith, xxxiv
It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment (54-55).

She admits that she was partly attracted to Mr. Sands because in contrast to Dr. Flint, who tried to force her into being his mistress, Mr. Sands ‘courted her’ and ‘expressed a great deal of sympathy, and a wish to aid me’ and ‘by degrees, a more tender feeling crept into my heart’(54).

Smith argues that Linda Brent’s dilemma whether to try to preserve her virginity in the face of the danger of being raped by her master or to give herself willingly to a man she considers kind and caring represents the essence of the problem of the slave woman’s sexual victimization and vulnerability. Linda’s relationship with Sands provides her with a measure of power and allows her a certain degree of control over her body, but it also shows the self-division and the traumas of slavery that were forced upon black women.117

For instance, while she is hiding in the garret, she prevents her capture not only by remaining concealed, but also by making her master think that she already escaped to the North. She writes him letters that she then postmarks as if they were sent from Boston or New York to make him angry and send him in the wrong direction. Here we have a case of reversal of power of a black slave and a white slaveholder, and it is obvious that Linda enjoys exerting some influence over the man who has tried to control her.

The sexual exploitation of female slaves is closely connected to the issue of the disfigured and sexualized black slave body. Although the seven-year hiding in her grandmother’s attic crawl space left Jacobs physically weak and almost crippled, those physical scars were nothing compared to the wounds that slavery left unseen on the surface of her body. Unlike many other slaves, Harriet did not have to do hard work in the fields since she was a child, and she was not whipped and beaten by her master, but her experiences in the Flints’ household left severe scars on her spirit.118

In order to protect herself from Dr. Flint’s advances, she had to sacrifice her body,  

117 Cf. Smith, xxxiv-xxxv  
118 Cf. Henderson, 49- 51
which represented the incarnation of her soul. Jacobs describes how the slave girl’s morality and innocence were maligned both by men who abused them in the most brutal way and their jealous wives:

Everywhere the years bring to all enough sin and sorrow, but in slavery the very dawn of life is darkened by those shadows. Even the little child [...] listens to the violent outbreaks of jealous passion, and cannot help understanding what is the cause. She will become prematurely knowing in evil things (27).

*Incidents* portrays a society in which female slaves are not only prevented from adhering to the conventional sexual standard of the era, but also forced to stand for its opposite. After recounting her youthful sexual history, the narrator asserts a radical alternative to the sexual ideology that can only be applied to white women. In a key passage for understanding the extent to which Jacobs challenged ideologies of female sexuality, Jacobs reflected: ‘Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others’(56). Carby describes this sentence as pivotal for the development of an alternative discourse of womanhood, because Jacobs’ narrative was one of the first African-American writings that established unconventional definitions of womanhood and motherhood.119 Yellin wrote that Jacobs’ narrative is ‘at once the plea of an erring American female, the heroic recital of a valiant slave mother, and a woman’s vindication of her life’(Yellin, “Text and Contexts”, 263).

Upon a mature reflection, Linda Brent suggests that black women like her should not be judged by the same moral standards as white women who had sheltered and comfortable lives protected by the law. In her opinion, the sexual behavior of black women should be judged on complex moral grounds rather than ‘on the single issue of their conformity to the sexual behavior mandated by the white patriarchy’ (Yellin, “Text and Contexts”, 274). Thus, Jacobs proposes a new definition of female morality grounded on her own sexual experience in a brutal and racist patriarchal society. She develops an alternative set of definitions of womanhood and motherhood which are in tension with the ideal of true womanhood. Consequently, she redefines both female sexuality and morality, as well as offers an alternative model of womanhood.

---

4.4.5. Relation between black and white women

The polarization between the lives of white and black women is a recurring motif in Jacobs’ narrative. The complexity of the social, political and economic differences that determined their experiences is continually stressed in the text. The nature of these differences is reconstructed in the story about two sisters, one black and the other white, whose race and social status determined the course of their lives:

I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child and the other was her slave, and also her sister […] I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave’s heart […] The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From the childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers […] How had those years dealt with her slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood? She was also very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank from the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink (28-29).

Northern women who formed Jacobs’ audiences were involved in the oppression of black women in two ways. In a passage that directly addressed the reader, Jacobs’ accused Northerners of allowing themselves to be used as ‘bloodhounds’ to hunt the fugitives and return them to slavery (34-35). She also illustrated how Northerners were not immune to the effects of the slave system or to the influence of racism.

Jacobs’ criticized white women who viewed black women in the way that Minrose C. Gwin describes in Black and White Women of the Old South:

White women rarely perceive or acknowledge […] the humanity of their black sisters. Most of these white women in life and literature see black women as a color, as servants, as children, as sexual competition, as dark sides of their own sexual selves - as black Other (Foster, 105).

However, Jacobs presents not only white women who supported slavery and the fiendish and jealous slave-owners’ views who are blaming their female slaves for their husbands’ unfaithfulness. In Incidents there are also white women who help Linda and show compassion and understanding for her situation. These white female characters, such as the female slaveholder who hides Linda in her house for a month or her northern employer who helps her flee from slave-catchers, understand the
plight of the desperate runaway slave Linda, because they can identify with her as women and mothers.

Viewed from a feminist perspective, *Incidents* is one of the major texts, because the women in Jacobs’ narrative betray the allegiances of race and class to assert their allegiance to the sisterhood of all women. Jacobs intends to write across the color line and mediate between races. She represents the events in her life as being at the same time unique and typical, unusual and commonplace. She asserts a common sisterhood with her white audience, but at the same time she warns about conflating the situation of enslaved black women and free white women.\(^\text{120}\)

During the years Jacobs was working on her manuscript, a small group of women were developing a critique of sexism modeled on the analysis of chattel slavery and wrote about ‘the slavery of woman’. The most committed white abolitionists in this group, such as Jacobs’ editor Lydia Maria Child and her friend Amy Post, were aware of the fact that their own oppression was not comparable with the triple oppression of sex, race and condition to which slave women were subjected. It was nevertheless a sense of their own oppression that made white feminists identify with the black fugitive slave woman like Jacobs.\(^\text{121}\) Seen from this angle of vision, Jacobs’ book is, in Yellin’s words, ‘reaching across the gulf separating black women from white, slave from free, poor from rich, reaching across the chasm separating ‘bad’ women from ‘good’ and it represents an attempt ‘to establish an American sisterhood’ (Yellin, “Text and Contexts”, 276).

### 4.5. Genre conventions, narrative technique and literary styles

Crucial to an understanding of *Incidents* is an examination of the generic conventions during the nineteenth century, and especially the ante-bellum period during which Jacobs’ wrote her narrative. Jacobs not only uses many conventions of literary technique familiar to her audience, but she also modifies many of these popular literary conventions and invents new ones in order make her testimony acceptable for her readers.

\(^{120}\) Cf. Foster, 96
\(^{121}\) Cf. Yellin, “Text and Contexts”, 275-276
Many scholars such as Yellin and Francis S. Foster have discussed Jacobs’ use of narrative strategies common to slave narratives and to sentimental fiction that she appropriated for her text. Some critics have also discussed the influences of abolitionist works, the religious narrative tradition, and the anti-slavery novel on Jacobs’ narrative. In the following chapter I will analyze the importance of the conventions of the seduction novel for Jacobs’ work and pay attention to the influence that the rejection of certain sexual stereotypes had on the re-definition of black female sexuality.

4.5.1. Conventions of the seduction novel and rejection of the tragic mulatta stereotype

Many critics mistook Jacobs’ narrative for woman’s fiction because Jacobs used several narrative devices associated with seduction novels. For example, Foster characterized *Incidents* as a story of pursuit and evasion, full of heroes and villains, of young men claiming freedom and of a desperate maiden trying to preserve her virtue, of mothers trying to protect their children and of the greed and exploitation of the powerful and wealthy.122

It is true that Jacobs employed the techniques of the sentimental novel in order to tell of her sexual vulnerability, a condition that the techniques and conventions of the slave narratives could not adequately represent. Her confession of sexual relationship with a white man and her plea for forgiveness seem to be clichés found in nineteenth-century popular fiction, which allowed Jacobs’ to identify with her white middle-class readers. It also provided her with a context to cast her story of virtue under siege. She wanted to prove that, like her readers, she aspired to chastity and piety, but her master, who was reluctant to force her to submit sexually, made it impossible for her to keep her chastity. With his sexual harassments and pleas to capitulate to his desires, Dr. Flint closely resembles the stereotype of the seducer in sentimental novels.123

---

122 Cf. Foster, 103
123 Cf. Valerie Smith „Introduction“, xxxi
The novels and tales of seduction and betrayal, such as Susannah Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791), and abolitionist versions of those tales, such as Child’s “The Quadroons” (1842), feature a victimized tragic mulatta betrayed by the white man who seduced her and whom she adores. The female protagonists of these stories are always presented as helpless virtuous women who are white men’s prey. In the end, after losing their chastity and being betrayed, they inevitably die. 124

However, Jacobs’ treatment of this subject is different from that of the seduction novel. While *Incidents* shares the subject of woman’s sexual oppression with that genre, the responses of Jacobs’ protagonist to the tyranny of the man who persecutes her are not the same as in popular sentimental fiction. *Incidents*, Yellin argues, presents a more complex heroine. Her tale is not about a naïve maiden who falls victim to the unscrupulous man and then dies.125 She rejects the stereotype of the tragic mulatta, a woman of mixed race, who is betrayed by a white man. While she reports that she was indeed betrayed by the father of her children, she does not focus on his rejection of her, but on his betrayal of their son and daughter. She is disappointed because Mr. Sands promised to end the enslavement of his children, and repeatedly broke his promises to emancipate them.126 And unlike the tragic heroines who die out of shame, she wishes to liberate herself from her seducers by gaining her legal freedom. 127 This is most obvious in the scene in which Linda speaks to her grandmother’s old mistress Miss Fanny, who

wished that I and all my grandmother’s family were at rest in our graves, for not until then should she feel any peace about us. The good old soul did not dream that I was planning to bestow peace upon her, with regard to myself and my children, not by death, but by securing our freedom (78).

Linda’s decision to willingly become a mistress of a white man, which results in her loss of virtue, and her decision to fight for freedom rather than to die places her outside the parameters of the conventional heroine. She does not only survive her ‘impure’ state, but she also uses her liaison to secure her future. Jacobs’ narrative is

---

124 Cf. Yellin, “Introduction”
125 Cf. Yellin, “Introduction”; Foster, 103-104
126 Cf. Yellin, “Text and Contexts”, 274
127 Cf. Yellin, “Introduction
unique in its subversion of a major narrative code in sentimental fiction: death, as preferable to loss of innocence is replaced by ‘Death is better than slavery’ (63).\textsuperscript{128}

Yellin suggested another reversal of stereotypes. Although at a first reading, Jacobs’ story of her seven-year self-imprisonment shows connections with the metaphor of ‘the madwoman in the attic’, the popular alter ego of ‘the angel in the house’ who inhabited much of nineteenth-century fiction, unlike this fiction, Jacobs’ narrative focuses on a woman in the attic who is perfectly sane, and who chooses the crawl-space in her grandmother’s storeroom in order to avoid sexual exploitation by her master. The reason for Linda’s hiding is not insanity and self-destruction, but a desperate wish for security and freedom. Instead of being a place of imprisonment, her garret makes her independent of her master and makes her escape to freedom possible.

We can conclude that lacking an appropriate form for her revelations, Jacobs did use the style of seduction novel, and presented her story as a confessional account of sexual error and guilt. However, by creating Linda Brent as a narrator who presented her private sexual history as a subject of public political concern, Jacobs moved her book out of the sphere of conventional nineteenth-century polite discourse.\textsuperscript{129} Jacobs’ rejection of the tragic mulatta stereotype allowed her to manipulate the genre of the sentimental narrative and move away from the literary convention which rendered the black female subject mute, unable to express her unwillingness to participate in the acts of ‘seduction’. In order to tell her story, she rewrote the classic plot that objectifies black female sexuality and romanticizes the sexuality of the mulatta.\textsuperscript{130}

Although in some parts of the narrative Jacobs employed the techniques of sentimental novels, the closing pages of Incidents suggest a disruption of literary expectations. The story does not end with a marriage, as it is usual in the conventional domestic novels, but it ends with Linda’s achievement of freedom for herself and her children:

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are free from the power of the

\textsuperscript{128} CF. Carby, Reconstruction of Womanhood, 59
\textsuperscript{129} CF. Yellin, “Introduction”
\textsuperscript{130} Cf. Henderson, 50
slaveholders, as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition (201).

Achievement of freedom here serves both as a dramatic conclusion to Jacobs’ story and as a rhetorical strategy for closure. With its break from the conventional closure of marriage in sentimental fiction, *Incidents* asserts what Tate calls ‘political autonomy for maternity’.\(^\text{131}\) Due to her position as a slave, it is impossible for Linda to end her tale with a happy marriage. Instead she re-defines her womanhood by her transformation from a runaway slave to a free woman, whose greatest desire is to obtain a home of her own for herself and her children.

However, there is an intentional contrast between the usual happy-ending of slave narratives and the closure of Jacobs’ narrative. Even though she and her children are legally free, Linda’s feeling of triumph is not there. Her family is split up: her grandmother and uncle are dead, her son and brother are in California, and her daughter is in boarding school, and Linda herself is bound to her mistress who purchased her freedom. Thus she says: ‘God so orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side’ (201). She feels that she was robbed of her victory because by letting her employer buy her in order to set her free, she indirectly gave her concession to slavery.\(^\text{132}\)

The fact that Jacobs wrote about sexual exploitation made her readers uneasy with her text. Even though she acknowledged the obscurity of the taboo subject of sexuality in the nineteenth-century United States, she was determined to address this issue. She insisted that the forbidden topic of the sexual abuse of slave women be included in public discussions of the slavery question. In one of her letters to Amy Post she wrote:

> I have tried for the past two years to conquer [my stubborn pride] and I feel that god has helped me or I never would consent to give my past life to any one for I would not do it with out giving the whole truth if it could help save another from my fate it would be selfish and unchristian in me to keep it back (Yellin,"Introduction").

\(^{131}\) Cf. Tate, „Allegories of Black Female Desire“, 110-111  
\(^{132}\) Cf. Foster, 104
By pointing out the similarities between her own story and the seduction novel plots with which her readers were familiar, Jacobs expected her audience to identify with her suffering, and comprehend the ways in which slavery converted the qualities of virtue and beauty into liabilities. However, since Jacobs was aware that her social position and her material conditions were different from those of her white readers, the sentimental fiction genre was not quite inappropriate for Jacobs’ purposes. As Smith points out, Jacobs’ readers were accustomed to a certain degree of propriety in fiction and in speech. The tension between the conventions of the sentimental fiction and the slave woman’s situation underscored how inadequate these fictional techniques were in telling Jacobs’ story.\textsuperscript{133}

Although Jacobs’ account includes the techniques and conventions of not only sentimental novel but also of the slave narratives, both of these genres failed to meet the demands of Jacobs’ situation. While the male context of slave narratives renders the black slave woman invisible, the middle-class domestic fiction marginalizes her. However, by interrogating the two genres and negotiating her way around their limitations, Jacobs was able to reinvent the space from which she spoke.

For instance, the struggle of Linda to retain some control over her sexuality climaxes in a confession of her loss of virtue. It is at this point of the narrative that Jacobs most directly confronts conventional codes of morality. In order to retain narrative authority and to preserve a public voice acceptable to an antebellum readership, Jacobs carefully negotiates the tension between satisfying moral expectations and challenging an ideology that would condemn her as immoral. Jacobs’ confession is at once both conventional and unconventional in form and tone. The narrator declares in a direct address to her readers that the remembrance of this period in her ‘unhappy life’ fills her with ‘sorrow and shame’ and she makes no reference to sexual satisfaction, love, or passion, as such feelings were not meant to be experienced or encouraged outside marriage. Yet Jacobs did not follow convention in other ways. In contrast to the expected pattern of the confessional passage, which called for the unconditional judgment of readers, Linda’s act of sexual defiance is described as one of ‘deliberate calculation’, of a slave girl actively choosing one fate as opposed to another. With all this Jacobs tried to remind her readers that the conditions of a slave

\textsuperscript{133} Cf. Smith, xxxiii
woman’s life were different from theirs. White women were free to choose the objects of their affection, and Jacobs tried to claim the same right to assert some control over her existence.

4.5.2. Literary styles and narrative voice

Jacobs was experimenting with fictional techniques, and in her text we find a few contrasting literary styles which reflect the conflictive nature of the female protagonist and her experiences. Writing in the first person, she recounts incidents in her life as a naïve slave girl, but the narrative voice is clearly that of a free, mature woman. Presenting her struggle for freedom as a heroic slave mother, Jacobs uses straightforward language, but when she is addressing the reader directly in connection with this subject, she uses standard abolitionist rhetoric in order to offer political instruction and urge her audience to become involved in political action. However, when she is addressing the reader on the issue of her sexual past, she pleads for forgiveness in the melodramatic style of popular fiction. The elaborate diction of the sentimental novel is nowhere more obvious than in those passages. At times she also uses what Foster calls a ‘pseudo-slave dialect’ in order to achieve better characterization and effect. The voice that in the end dominates the narrative is a voice of a woman who, although she cannot discuss her sexual experiences without expressing conflict, nevertheless addresses this painful subject in order to politicize it.134

An essential element in Jacobs’ literary strategy was her adoption of what Karlyn K. Campell has termed a ‘feminine rhetoric’. According to Campbell, such discourse is usually grounded in personal experience. In most instances, personal experience is tested against the pronouncements of male authorities […] It may appeal to biblical authority […] The tone tends to be personal […] tends to plead, to appeal to the sentiments of the audience […] to invite female audiences to act, to draw their own conclusions and make their own decisions, in contrast to the traditionally ‘masculine’ style that approaches the audience as inferiors to be told what is right or to be led (Campbell, 440-441).

134 Cf. Yellin, “Introduction”, Foster, 97-103
Given the fact that Harriet Jacobs was a black woman writing to white women and race often created distrust, she adopted ‘feminine’ rhetorical strategies such as reliance upon personal experience and appeals to biblical authority, that most suited to her purposes as a writer and her status as a black woman.

4.5.3. Silences, omissions and the need for secrecy

Many slave authors changed the names of people and places in their narratives to protect those who were still in bondage. However, Jacobs’ need for secrecy in the act of writing meant that her pseudonym Linda Brent functioned as a mechanism of self-protection. Jacobs’ treatment of sexual issue in slavery challenged the moral and sexual conventions, and the creation of Linda Brent as a fictional narrator allowed her to manipulate the conventions which threatened her social existence.

According to Hazel Carby:

Jacobs knew that to gain her public voice, as writer, implicated her existence as a mother and a woman [...] She also knew [...] that the white people of the North were not completely free from the power of the slaveholders, or from their racism. To be bound to the conventions of true womanhood was to be bound to a racist, ideological system (Carby, Reconstruction of Womanhood, 50).

*Incidents* records numerous acts of physical and mental abuse and sexual exploitation of black slaves on the Southern plantations. Since the slave laws failed to protect black women from rape, and since white slave owners generally denied the existence of such acts, rather than admitting the complete sexual victimization of women, Jacobs omitted the details when talking about the sexual experiences of female slaves. She carefully avoided using explicit expressions which could be offensive to her middle-class readers and encoded her descriptions of the cruel reality of slave life for black women in order to preserve her own authority.\(^\text{135}\)

Concerned about the sensational elements of her story surrounding her sexual history, she consciously left out whatever she thought might jeopardize her authority. What resulted from this self-protective code of silence are narrative oclusions, discrepancies, ruptures, suppressions and elements of ambivalence that are masking the truth. The reader is then forced to read between the lines in order to find out what really happened.

\(^{135}\) Cf. Foreman, 79-80
Regarding the silences and omissions in the slave narratives Toni Morrison reminds us that even as the writers were presenting their personal experiences as a general racial slave experience, they were always careful not to reveal too much and to keep the protective veil over their interior lives:

In shaping the experiences to make palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe (Frances White, 153).

However, we must not ignore the major problem with the narrative strategies of omission and silence: although they protected African-Americans from scrutiny, they nevertheless contributed to the erasure of their presence from American literary tradition and history.

4.5.4. The importance of Jacobs’ work

Besides being one the major slave narrative, *Incidents* is also a major work in the canon of writings by American and specifically African-American women. Jacobs’ text represents a development in women’s literature because it emphasizes the natural rights of women, personal autonomy, and moral and personal empowerment.

Its importance for African-American literature lies above all in the fact that it is a forerunner of post-bellum literature by African-American women, which with the elimination of slavery makes possible a conversation of women across the color line. Moreover, *Incidents* anticipates the literary and ideological position of subsequent generations of black women writers, who found inspiration in Jacobs’ work.136

Both the composition and the publication of *Incidents* marked special moments in the history of women’s literature in America. Jacobs was one of the rare African-American slave women who were able to read and write. Most black women at the time lacked access to polite letters, and their literary contributions were made within the oral tradition. Harriet Jacobs’ multi-layered and complex narrative was written in

---

136 Cf. Foster, 116
a nineteenth-century American tradition, but it also challenged the popular literary conventions.

Although some critics, such as Yellin, think that Jacobs’ narrative is written in a conflictive fashion, because the conventional forms which Jacobs used did not fit the unconventional perspective of the book, they cannot deny the importance of Jacobs’ work. On the contrary, they suggest that formal problems were the proof that new forms, structure and language were needed, if literature wanted to express the fullness of black female’s experience.\footnote{137}

Yellin noted that Jacobs was one of the first authors who transformed the black woman as fictional object into a fictional subject, and as such she may have influenced Frances Ellen Watkins’ pioneering novel *Iola Leroy, Or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), which shaped the writings of Zora Neale Hurston and other foremothers of black contemporary writing. She also notices that *Iola Leroy* recalls *Incidents* not only in its focus on the struggle of a woman who has been subjected to sexual harassment in slavery, but also in its choice of names and locations: Harper’s characters come from North Carolina, and their names are Harriet and Linda.\footnote{138}

Unfortunately, the transition from slave to free women did not liberate the black woman from the ideological limits imposed on her sexuality. The consequences of being a slave woman did not end with the abolition of slavery, but they haunted the texts of black women throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. As Carby observed, subsequent generations of black women writers continued to write according to Jacobs’ model and to adapt dominant literary conventions as well as to challenge racist ideologies. They explored a variety of narrative forms in an attempt to establish the public presence of black women and find ways to invent black heroines who could transcendent their negative stereotypes and comparisons with white heroines.\footnote{139}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{137}{Cf. Yellin, „Text and Contexts“, 276-277}
\item \footnote{138}{Cf. Yellin, “Introduction“}
\item \footnote{139}{Cf. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, 61}
\end{itemize}
5. Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In this chapter I will focus on Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and examine the importance of Hurston as a literary figure of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the impact that her works had on the contemporary generation of African-American female authors. In my analysis of the novel’s language, structure, themes and images I will especially concentrate on the aspects that are connected to black female growth and empowerment and difficulties of gaining a voice in a male-dominated society.

5.1. Zora Neale Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance

5.1.1. The life and personality of Zora Neale Hurston

As a talented novelist, outstanding anthropologist, skilled collector of Black folklore, journalist, dramatist and critic, Zora Neale Hurston was one of the most prolific black female writers in America. In her thirty-year career she wrote four novels, an autobiography, two books of folklore, and over fifty short stories, essays, and magazine articles, as well as several plays and librettos.

Although there seem to be a great many personality sketches and literary studies written about Zora Neale Hurston, there is a range of contradictory information about her complex personality, which still remains a mystery. While some saw her as a highly reserved and serious writer, others viewed her as a loud, outrageous and eccentric woman.\(^{140}\) Her autobiographer Robert Hemenway describes her as a woman with a high tolerance for contradiction and a natural actress who could play many roles. He writes that Hurston recognized the opposites and complexities of her own personality and that she came to delight in the chaos she sometimes left behind.\(^{141}\) What we do know for sure is that Hurston was a controversial, outspoken, independent and determined woman and writer, who was not afraid of being herself: ‘She was outrageous, heroically larger than life, witty in her self, and the cause of wit in others’ (Bloom, 4).

\(^{140}\) Cf. Washington, “A Woman Half in Shadow”, 7
\(^{141}\) Cf. Hemenway, 5-6
It is, however, very strange that nobody, not even her closest friends knew her correct age because she manipulated her personal dates, events and places throughout her life. In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942), Hurston claims that she was born on January 7th in Eatonville, Florida, but she is not precise about the year. Due to the contemporary research on Hurston’s life, we know that she was born between 1891 and 1903 in Notasulga, Alabama, where her father grew up, and not in Eatonville, as she claimed.\(^{142}\) Her father was the mulatto tenant farmer, carpenter and Baptist preacher John Hurston, who later became the mayor of Eatonville. His colorful sermons were an important influence on Hurston’s style. Her mother, Lucy Ann Potts, was a schoolteacher and a daughter of a relatively wealthy landowner. She was the sixth of eight children and she grew up in a large house in Eatonville, where her parents moved shortly after her birth.\(^{143}\) In rich source of black cultural traditions, Eatonville, Hurston experienced the folk-life she would later study as an anthropologist. The town of Eatonville was the first all-black town in the United States, organized and self-governed by African-Americans. There, she attended the local school and grew up listening to the folktales, stories and ‘lying sessions’ told by men on the front porch of Joe Clark’s store.\(^{144}\)

However, her happy childhood ended when her mother, who encouraged her daughter to ‘jump at the sun’, died in 1904. Her father remarried soon after that and Hurston was sent to Jacksonville, Florida to attend school. She would later write that it was in Jacksonville she learned that she was ‘colored’.\(^{145}\) In Eatonville, Hurston was sheltered from the early contact with prejudice that has marked most other African-American writers. This separate-but-equal experience deeply affected her attitudes on racial issues, as well as her approach to the African-American novel.\(^{146}\) Because her father failed to pay for tuition, Hurston returned to Eatonville, but found herself neglected by her father and stepmother. In order to make her way in the world, she left home at the age of fourteen, and began working as a maid in several households and as a wardrobe girl for the Gilbert and Sullivan theatrical troupe. Eventually, she ended up in Baltimore, Maryland, where she attended Morgan Academy (now Morgan State University). After

---

\(^{142}\) Cf. Lowe, 98
\(^{143}\) Cf. Campbell, 1; Bone, 126
\(^{144}\) Cf. Howard, 13; Campbell, 2
\(^{145}\) Cf. Campbell, 2
\(^{146}\) Cf. Hemenway, 9; Bone, 126
graduation in 1918, she entered Howard University in Washington, D.C., the most prestigious black university in the country, where she received an associate degree in 1920.147 At Howard, Hurston published her first short story, “John Redding Goes to Sea” in the literary magazine *Stylus* sponsored by Alain Locke. As a result, Charles S. Johnson, who founded *Opportunity Magazine*, contacted Hurston for more work to publish.148 At Howard she also met and fell in love with Herbert Sheen, a fellow student, whom she married in 1927, and divorced in 1931, because she believed that her marriage interfered with her work and career.149

When Hurston arrived in New York in 1925 she was virtually penniless, but the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing, and she was determined to succeed as a writer. In 1926, she collaborated with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman on the editorial board of the magazine *Fire*.150 During her early writing period between 1925 and 1932, Hurston had three rich patrons who financially supported her work. At the first *Opportunity* awards dinner in 1925, Hurston won a second prize for her short story “Spunk” and met two of her white patrons, best-selling novelist Fannie Hurst, who hired Hurston first as her secretary and later as her chauffeur, and Annie Nathan Meyer, a founder of Barnard College. Meyer arranged for Hurston to attend Barnard on a scholarship, where she graduated with a B.A. in 1928. During her studies of anthropology she came to the attention of Dr. Franz Boas, noted anthropology professor at Columbia University, who trained her and hired her as an apprentice.151

In 1927, Hurston went to Alabama and Florida to do a research on African-American folklore, which became the basis for her career. Her fieldwork was highly original and she came to the attention of Charlotte Osgood Mason, a powerful and wealthy white New Yorker, who was a patron to many black writers such as Langston Hughes, Alain Locke and Claude McKay. In 1928, Hurston signed a contract with her so-called ‘Godmother’ Mason granting her a monthly allowance for collecting folklore in the South for two years. However, Mason was an extremely controlling woman who encouraged dependency from those under her patronage and demanded obedience in return for money. Since Mason had a full control over the material she gathered,

---

148 Cf. Campbell, 2
149 Cf. Hemenway, 94
150 Cf. Bone, 126
151 Cf. Campbell, 4
Hurston suffered much under this dependency. She did not have the peace of mind or creative energy she needed to successfully complete her first book of folklore, so when she failed to complete a printable draft of *Mules and Men* Mason cut off her funds.\(^{152}\)

Once freed of the influence of patronage, Hurston’s most successful period of writing began. During the patronage period Hurston published only one significant work, a compilation of folklore and voodoo traditions from New Orleans called “Hoodoo in America”. However, in the thirties, she published six books, a series of essays and a large number of reviews, short stories, and essays. In an effort to become self-supporting she also staged and produced several plays and wrote dramatic sketches such as *Fast and Furious*. She even hired her own theatrical troupe and staged a show called *The Great Day* on Broadway, but that attempted proved unsuccessful. Eventually, she returned to Eatonville, where she began working with Langston Hughes on the play called *Mule Bone*. Unfortunately, the collaboration was unsuccessful and it led to a rift in their longtime friendship.\(^{153}\)

In 1933 her short story “The Gilded Six-Bits” was published in *Story* magazine, which lead to an invitation from Lippincott’s to do a novel. The result was Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, which was based on the lives of her parents.\(^{154}\) In 1935, she enrolled as a graduate student in Columbia’s graduate program in anthropology, and published her first book of African-American folklore *Mules and Men*, based on the materials she collected in Florida and Louisiana. The collection introduced the rich cultural and oral heritage of African-Americans and the world of lying contests, tall-tale sessions, tales, songs and folkways of black people in the rural South.\(^{155}\) However, none of her publications alleviated the financial difficulties that plagued Hurston throughout her life. In 1936 and 1938, she received a pair of Guggenheim Fellowships to undertake fieldwork in the West Indies. The result of this was her second book on folklore, *Tell My Horse* (1938), a study of voodoo and folk life in Haiti, Jamaica and Bermuda.\(^{156}\)

In 1937 Hurston’s best and most celebrated novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was published. After that she taught for a short time at the North Carolina College and

---


\(^{153}\) Cf. Campbell, 5-6

\(^{154}\) Cf. Bone, 126; Campbell, 6


\(^{156}\) Cf. Campbell, 6
during that time she wrote her third novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, a re-creation of the Moses myth with black folk characters, which was published in 1939. That same year Hurston married Albert Prince III, but in 1940 she sued him for divorce. He countersued her, claiming that she had practiced voodoo and black magic on him. In 1941, Hurston briefly worked as a staff writer for Paramount Pictures in Hollywood and a year after that her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, was published. In the book she used all sorts of manipulative tactics to avoid any self-revelation.\(^{157}\)

In 1942, Hurston moved to Daytona Beach, Florida, where she bought a houseboat. From 1946 until 1948 she was in British Honduras conducting anthropological research, and there she began writing her last novel *Seraph on the Suwannee*, which was published in 1948. *Seraph* was a shock for many readers because all the major characters are white. Hemenway claims that by abandoning the source of her inspiration- the black cultural tradition- Hurston also submerged her creativity.\(^{158}\) In 1948, she was arrested in New York and charged with abusing a ten-year-old boy. The case was completely absurd since Hurston was out of the country during the time of the supposed crime. Although the case was soon dismissed and the boy was found to be psychologically disturbed, black newspapers such as *The African American* released sensational articles and Hurston was terribly demoralized and hurt.\(^{159}\)

The fifties were a hard time for Hurston. She was ill, had very little money and few means of self-support. She returned to Florida, where she worked as a maid for white people, and continued to write essays, short stories and journalistic articles. She worked at a variety of jobs near the end of her life, e.g. as a librarian and a part-time teacher. Hurston’s final major project was her novel on Herod the Great, but she was unable to secure its publication. In 1959, she suffered a stroke and was forced to enter the Saint Lucie Welfare Home. Three months later, on January, 28, 1960 Zora Neale Hurston died of heart disease in Front Pierce, Florida. She died penniless, lonely and without fame or wealth that such a talent would seem to have earned. She was buried in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery in Fort Pierce, ironically called the Garden of Heavenly Rest.\(^{160}\) In 1973, the novelist Alice Walker searched for Zora’s grave and she placed a

\(^{157}\) Cf. Washington, “A Woman Half in Shadow”, 15-20; Campbell, 7-8

\(^{158}\) Cf. Campbell, 8-9; Washington, “A Woman Half in Shadow”, 20-22

\(^{159}\) Cf. Washington, “A Woman Half in Shadow”, 21

tombstone on the approximate place of her burial. Hurston’s final resting place is a symbolic granite grave marker which reads:

Zora Neale Hurston
“A Genius of the South”
1901-1960
Novelist Folklorist Anthropologist

Although no headstone can sum up a life full of courage and extraordinary talent, this marker is Walker’s homage to her spiritual kinswoman and sister in race and arts. 161

5.1.2. Hurston and the ‘New Negro Movement’

The early twentieth century brought about many changes for the African-American population. While African-Americans still faced tremendous economic and social obstacles, there were more opportunities for their education and participation in American culture than ever before. From the end of World War I and until the 1930s Great Depression an unprecedented flowering of creative activity among African-Americans occurred in all fields of art. Beginning as a series of literary discussions in the section of upper Manhattan known as Harlem, this African-American cultural movement became known as ‘The New Negro Movement’ or ‘The New Negro Renaissance’ and later as the Harlem Renaissance. During this period, Harlem became the center of the black world, where jazz and blues and black literature blossomed.

However, the Harlem Renaissance was more than just a literary and cultural movement. It was the spirit of the age, which included social revolt against racism that exalted the unique culture of African-Americans and redefined African-American identity and expression. The Harlem Renaissance brought black experience within the general American cultural history. The Harlem Renaissance was part of a historical process which changed the status of black people in America. For the first time in the history of the United States the general culture began adopting as its own the elements of black culture and African-Americans were making their way not only in art, literature and

161 Cf. Hemenway, 3; Campbell, 9
music, but also in politics, science and every other aspect of American life. A rebirth of black culture was based on going back to the roots in order to move forward and achieve greater racial consciousness. An extraordinary number of works by black authors was published and African-Americans were encouraged to celebrate their heritage, especially storytelling and spirituals, which were a source of inspiration of the artists.162

One of the factors contributing to the rise of the Harlem Renaissance was the demographic shift called the Great Migration. Between 1919 and 1926 almost one million African-Americans from the rural South emigrated to the industrial northern cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington D.C. Black urban migration combined with trends in American society toward experimentation in the 1920s and also the rise of black intellectuals contributed to the particular styles and success of black artists during the Harlem Renaissance period.163 The major figures of Harlem Renaissance include sociologist and critic Alain Locke, who coined the term ‘The New Negro’ in 1925, Marcus Garvey, the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and leader of ‘the back to Africa’ movement, W.E.B. Du Bois, editor of The Crisis magazine and one of the founders of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as well as writers and poets such as Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson and Sterling Brown. All of these authors and scholars manifested an awareness of the possibilities of a black aesthetic and formulated methods for exploring and writing about the ‘black experience’. They believed that the bridge between white and black races depended upon the arts and they were proud of their African roots and their black heritage.164

Although the Harlem Renaissance proclaimed a new race consciousness of African-Americans and encouraged greater appreciation of black culture, it also reflected the wide division between blacks and whites, as well as between the black masses and the Harlem intellectuals, or as they called themselves, the ‘New Negroes’. The majority of African-Americans left the South to escape from the lynch laws, the poverty of sharecropping and racial prejudice, violence and oppression and they hoped that the integrated North would offer better jobs and more racial equality. However, racist

162 Cf. Campbell, 3-5; Hemenway, 35-47
163 Cf. Huggins
164 Cf. Kramer, 2-3
policies and sentiments even in the North still separated white and black Americans in all aspects of life. Even though many African-Americans could find good jobs with decent pay, most were forced to become domestics or factory workers with little chance for advancement. The city life that had promised so much did not deliver and as a result tensions arose between the middle class and the poorer blacks. Middle class African-Americans thought that the uneducated blacks were holding back their race by remaining ‘common’ or ‘niggerish’, while the second group accused the former of trying to erase their blackness by becoming the mimics of whites, wearing their clothes and using their sophisticated manners.

Controversies surrounded Hurston and her career from the first day she came to New York in 1925. Shortly after her arrival in Harlem her short story “Spunk” was published in Alain Locke’s famous anthology The New Negro (1925), which declared the birth of the ‘New Negro’ Renaissance and which was taken as a racial manifesto of the era. According to Lowe, Hurston represents many of the movement’s best qualities although she was a part of the Harlem literati for only a few years. She was identified as one of the most productive and finest writers of the group and she brought a special Southern resonance to the movement. Her fellow artist Langston Hughes described Hurston as one of the most amusing personages of the period. Her contagious sense of humor, her dramatic appearance, and her folktales, anecdotes and jokes made her a favorite at Harlem parties and salons.

Her work, however, was different from most of the works of the Harlem Renaissance. While black urban writers tried to put as much distance as possible between their work and the rural Southern traditions, Hurston turned to the South for literary material and depicted the lives of simple black folk. Most of her stories and novels are set in her hometown Eatonville rather then in the Harlem of the black literati. Unfortunately, Harlem Renaissance artists and critics often denied that rural blacks were suitable representatives of the black race and this stance began to affect their views of Hurston herself, as well as her works. The established bourgeois position was that blacks should avoid reinforcing racist stereotypes by refusing to portray the lowest elements of the race. At first charmed by her wit and her refreshing ‘down home’ qualities, her colleagues began to resent the stereotypes of blacks that were lurking in her tales and to scrutinize her fiction. She was often accused of compromising her own dignity by
deliberately playing the role of the primitive, swinging ‘happy darky’ in order to sustain
the financial support of wealthy white patrons, and of avoiding the condemnation of
racism in order not to offend her rich white friends.\textsuperscript{165}

Du Bois, Hughes, and Locke were among the most influential intellectuals of the
Harlem Renaissance who offered an official definition of the ‘New Negro’ and
expressed the aesthetic aspirations and goals of the ‘New Negro’ movement. For Du
Bois all art was propaganda and for Locke the purpose of the artist was to further the
betterment of the race. While artists were encouraged to be aware of their folk origins,
they were also expected to do so with the future of the race in mind. Locke stated that
elite artists should speak for the masses by expressing the race spirit, and eventually art
was identified as the product of the articulating artist for the inarticulate race. This
attitude placed a burden on Hurston, because she tried to reject the bourgeois values and
identify with the common folk. She was interested in folkloric fiction and not in
treatment of racial questions, and she felt that racial propaganda would compromise her
art. Therefore, she began to formulate a personal aesthetic which would reflect both the
folk experience and her own artistic tendencies. She often expressed views on race
issues that were contrary to the opinions of the majority of the black population and
made fun of the Renaissance artists associated with the NAACP and the Urban League,
whom she referred to as a bunch of ‘Negrotarians’, and she commented that she was
‘sick of the race problem’.\textsuperscript{166}

Despite the fact that Hurston was a very individual and controversial personality who
was somewhat scornful of literary movements, it cannot be denied that she had her share
in the historical and cultural forces that made the Harlem Renaissance an identifiable
moment in American history. Although she tried to follow her own road and refused to
separate herself from the common people, she still belonged to that segment of educated
black Americans whom Du Bois had called ‘the talented tenth’, and who shaped the
aesthetic assumptions of the era of the ‘New Negro’.\textsuperscript{167}

The ‘New Negro’ movement was shattered when the Great Depression caused the
economic and social problems of the 1930s. America grew less interested in African-

\textsuperscript{165} Cf. Lowe, 284; Washington, “A Woman Half in Shadow”, 9-12
\textsuperscript{166} Cf. Hemenway, 35-42
\textsuperscript{167} Cf. Hemenway, 36
American arts and artists, but the Harlem Renaissance remained a symbol of black culture, urbanity and vitality and a focal point for blacks over the world. Many of the ideas of the Harlem intellectuals were carried over into following decades, and some of them reach down to present.\footnote{168}

5.1.3. Criticism and rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston’s works

Some critics such as Awkward and Hemenway suggest that literary scholars have distorted Hurston’s art by classifying her as a Renaissance writer. It is true that Hurston maintained a vivid presence during the Harlem Renaissance, but her work did not achieve maturity until the 1930s and 1940s. Her two major achievements *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes* that confirmed her reputation as an important American writer were published during the Great Depression, and that was the time when Hurston achieved artistic success.

However, the 1930s was the time when Hurston and her work would be both highly praised and severely criticized. With the exception of her final published novel, Hurston’s fiction was well received by mainstream American reviewers and critics. However, a few prominent black male scholars such as Alain Locke, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison considered her work problematic. At the time when the dominant idea of black aesthetics was that the African-American writer has a responsibility to speak for his race and when naturalism, race problem, and political protest ruled the literary scene, Hurston’s universally human characters and her lyrical symbolism were seen as superficial. Hurston, who chose to write about the positive side of the black experience and to ignore the violence and brutality of oppression, was accused by a number of black critics of writing only what white audience wanted to read and of selling out her race in order to make money and promote her books.\footnote{169}

Washington argues that Hurston refused to depict blacks as humiliated, degraded, or victimized figures, because she did not experience black people in that way. In her autobiographical essay “How it Feels to be Colored Me” she wrote:

\footnote{168} Cf. Kramer, 2-3  
\footnote{169} Cf. Awkward, New Essays, 22-23
I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negroid who hold that nature somehow was given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it [...] I do not weep about the world— I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife (Hurston, “How it Feels”, 153).

In contrast to Richard Wright’s characters, who are hunted, economically deprived and psychologically crippled people, Hurston’s characters laugh, celebrate, love, suffer and struggle. But racial protest literature set the model for the African-American literature of the period and while Wright’s books were bestsellers, Hurston suffered critical and popular neglect. Hemenway observes that many scholars failed to acknowledge the gender and racial policies that are obvious in Hurston’s works. He points out that Hurston was a woman who rejoiced about the beauty of being black and who tried to preserve and celebrate black cultural practices throughout her career. She spent her lifetime refusing to accept the roles prescribed to black women intellectuals and she always remained faithful to the honest portraiture of her race.

The controversy over Hurston’s work and personality spread in the 40s and 50s as she continued to make ambivalent and contradictory assertions on racial issues. In the last decade of her life she developed a strong political conservatism, which was interpreted as anti-black. While she was one of the most widely acclaimed black female authors between 1925 and 1945, in the decades following this period her work fell into obscurity and was largely out of print. Washington suggests that this partly happened because critics tended to evaluate Hurston’s work on the basis of her personal life. The attention on Hurston’s controversial personality and lifestyle inhibited objective critical analysis and often led to inadequate assessment of her work. Moreover, Washington points out that Hurston lived in an era when mainstream African-American scholars were all men who tried to remove the traces of their rural black origins and who could not adequately appreciate her talent and her celebration of the traditional black folkways.

---

171 Cf. Hemenway, 6-7
The appearance of Hemenway’s excellent literary biography *Zora Neale Hurston* and the publication of Alice Walker’s volume *I Love Myself When I am Laughing* in the 1970s were important steps towards the reappraisal and reevaluation of Hurston’s neglected work. Today Zora Neale Hurston is one of the most widely taught black women writers in the canon of American literature. A new wave of black women writers claimed her as the pioneer black female writer and their literary foremother and her timelessness and genius made her works central to the canon of both African-American and Women’s literatures.

5.2. Formal aspects of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

5.2.1. Structure and plot

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is structurally divided into three segments, which are marked by marriages of the novel’s protagonist Janie Mae Crawford. The novel opens at the end of the narrative as Janie Crawford returns from Everglades to Eatonville, Florida, after burying her third husband Tea Cake. All of the townspeople are standing around watching and ready to judge her. Only her friend Phoeby has a ready ear for Janie and Janie starts recounting the story of her life to Phoeby. She begins her tale with a flashback to the time when she was a child, living with her grandmother, Nanny, a domestic servant for a white family, the Washburns.

At the age of sixteen, Janie’s sexuality awakens as she watches the bees pollinate the blossoming pear tree in her backyard. She longs for the kind of union that would make her feel the fullness and delight of blossoming being. As a result, Janie kisses Johnny Taylor, a neighborhood boy who just happens to pass by. When Nanny sees her granddaughter with the ragged boy, she decides to marry Janie to a widowed farmer, Logan Killicks. Despite the fact that Killicks is much older then Janie, he seems like a good catch to Nanny because he owns sixty acres of land, a mule and a house. Janie has no affection for Killicks and refuses to marry him, but Nanny demands the marriage as a protection for Janie, because she fears that when she dies there will be nobody to look after her granddaughter. Janie marries Killicks, thinking that with the time she will learn to love him. Shortly after her wedding Nanny peacefully dies, believing that Janie
is secure and taken care of. At first, Killicks tries to please Janie, but later he starts treating her as if she were a piece of property. He perceives his wife as someone to serve him and work for him on the farm. When Killicks buys a second mule with the intention of having Janie work with it in the fields, her only desire is to leave the farm.

Joe/Jody Starks, who comes down the road one night, offers her a new start. He is a quick thinking and ambitious man with big dreams, on his way from Georgia to a newly founded all-black town in Florida called Eatonville, where he plans to make his fortune, and he wants to take Janie to be his ‘lady’-wife. For Janie, Jody represents change, movement and new horizons and she decides to run off with him. She commits bigamy by marrying Jody, but she soon finds herself no better off than before. True to his ambition, before long Jody becomes the most powerful man in Eatonville. He buys land and sells it as lots to local people and opens up the only store in the city, which becomes the social center of the community, and later he becomes the town’s first mayor. However, also Jody treats Janie as his possession, and builds a cage around her in which he keeps her like a pretty baby-doll, a prize object for others to admire and envy him. He spends most of his time being important, ‘big voice’ as Janie calls him, and intends Janie to be an ornament for him and a model for other women. He does not allow her to speak in public or to socialize with the townspeople, and expects her to be grateful for marrying her and making a queen out of her. Once more, Janie finds herself in a marriage with a man who demands that she serve him. After a while Janie stops expecting anything and finds herself just ‘marking time’. She lives a comfortable life as far as material comforts are concerned, but deep inside she feels empty. One day, however, when Joe brutally calls Janie old in front of the townspeople, she publicly speaks up and puts Jody down. Janie’s assertion of self completely destroys her already disintegrated marriage with Starks, and shortly after this Jody becomes ill and dies, without ever knowing the real Janie.

Janie plays the role of the respectable town widow, until her third man, Vergible Tea Woods, comes into her life. Tea Cake is different from Janie’s two former husbands: he is a free-spirited laborer and a cheerful guitar-playing singer who allows Janie to be herself and treats her as an equal. He sets no limits on her and often challenges her to try new things, e.g. he teaches her different games, how to fish and how to shoot. With Tea Cake Janie finally experiences the love for which she was searching her whole life
and Janie’s dream of the perfect union of the bee and the pear tree comes true. The two of them leave Eatonville and go on the ‘muck’ to the Everglades to work together on the bean and cane fields. Although Janie has enough money, she willingly goes to work with Tea Cake, because they cannot bear to be apart from each other for too long. Unfortunately, their happiness does not last for long. While trying to flee from a flood caused by a terrible hurricane Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog. Driven mad by the disease Tea Cake goes after Janie with a gun, and she is forced to shoot him in order to save her own life. After a trial in which an all-white jury found that Janie acted in self-defense, she buries Tea Cake in great style and returns to Eatonville. The novel ends at its beginning as Janie passes through the town and hears spiteful tongues of the townspeople, who condemn her. People think that she is defeated, but she comes back victorious because she has lived her dream and found love. Only her friend Phoeby comes to her door and Janie tells her the story of her life. The novel ends with Janie being alone in her house, but she feels fulfilled, thinking that her memories of Tea Cake will keep him alive as long as she is capable of feeling and thinking.173

5.2.2. Language and narrative techniques

The story is told both from the point of view of the heroine, Janie Crawford, and an omniscient, third person narrator. As a result, the narrative voice moves between black vernacular diction and Standard English literary structures. By using these two different narrative strategies Hurston navigates between two distinct narrative traditions: the black oral folk tradition characterized by the call-and-response behavior which encourages active interchange between storytellers and participatory listeners, and the written Western narrative practice, where the author composes and the reader reads in isolation from the author.174 John Callahan explains Hurston’s employment of different narrative strategies in the following way:

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston breathes into her third-person narration the living voice of a storyteller. Implicitly, she puts her personality on the line. For the fashionable value of authorial control she substitutes rhetoric of intimacy developed from the cooperative habit of call-and-response […] Because of her intimate yet impersonal form, Hurston invites

173 Cf. Rosenblatt, 29-30; Peterson, 39-42; Campbell, 59-62
her readers to respond as listeners and participants in the work of storytelling (Callahan, 117-118).

Other critics argue that Janie’s consciousness and the narrator’s consciousness fuse into one throughout the novel. Through the voice of the omniscient narrator Janie speaks herself into being and what Hurston offers, in effect, is the text of liberation of her own authorial voice.\(^{175}\)

Hurston’s narrative technique was very innovative at the time, because she was one of the first authors who incorporated black expressive storytelling principles into the genre of the novel, and by doing so she anticipated the future African-American dialect novel. Janie presents herself as storyteller who reveals the story of her life to her friend Phoeby, offering what Gates calls ‘a speakerly text’.\(^{176}\) Gates wrote that no writer in African-American literary tradition has been more successful than Hurston in registering the range and timbres of spoken black voices in written form.\(^{177}\)

In addition, Hurston’s metaphorical and lyrical language had a radical effect on the tradition of African-American women’s fiction. Rooted in black vernacular English and different from the conventional language of the novels of the times, Hurston’s language is full of metaphors and images that derive from nature and emphasize the connection between the natural world and the possibilities of harmonious inner and social life.

### 5.3. Themes, motifs and characters

Earlier critics generally regarded *Their Eyes* as a love story, probably because the novel’s main character Janie after two unsuccessful marriages finally finds love and fulfillment in her third marriage. Along with the theme of love and marriage, they also emphasized the importance of language, folk elements and the autobiographical elements in the novel.

The love story scenario between Janie and Tea Cake is partly drawn from Hurston’s own life, for she had a rather stormy affair with a younger man prior to writing the

\(^{175}\) Cf. Awkward, *New Essays*, 51-68; Racine, 283
\(^{176}\) Cf. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 174
\(^{177}\) Cf. Gates, *Z. N. H.*, xii
novel. She first met this man in New York in 1931, and later he was a member of the cast for her show *The Great Day*, but this relationship was doomed from the beginning, because Zora could not abide to give up her work and marry. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she revealed that ‘The plot was far from the circumstances, but I tried to embalm all tenderness of my passion for him in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*’ (*Dust Tracks*, 260). Huston claimed that the story had been dammed up inside her, and that she had released it, in seven weeks, during her folklore-gathering trip to Haiti. She obviously used her writing for therapeutic purposes as she was trying to capture ‘the quality of the emotion’ of this relationship, the ‘tenderness and intensity of its passion’ and the ‘essence of a love affair between an older woman and a younger man’.  

In contrast to Hurston’s contemporaries, who mostly overlooked the gender victimization of the protagonist, more recent critics have focused on the personal growth of the main protagonist Janie Crawford, her relationship to the community and her struggle to achieve voice in a male-dominated society. On the simplest level, Hurston’s novel is about a woman with dreams who is determined, despite many errors and obstacles, to realize her to dream and to settle for nothing less. On a much deeper level, the novel portrays a black woman’s quest for identity, self-reliance and self-fulfillment and follows her journey to self-definition, autonomy and empowerment. Thus, the novel does not only depict Janie’s needs and expectations as a woman, but also offers an insight into specific problems of African–American/mulatto women, who are oppressed both on account of their gender and their race.

In *Their Eyes* we encounter two other topics that are recurrent in the writings of female African-American authors: the power of experience and the power of dreams. In order to understand the world and herself Janie needed to learn from her own experience. In her final comment to Phoeby she expresses the importance of experience for personal growth:

> Phoeby, you got tuh go there tuh know there. Yo papa and yo mamma and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh themselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find about livin’ fuh themselves (183).  

178 Cf. Hemenway, 231
Janie Crawford not only believes in the power of experience but also in the power of her dreams. She has a vision of experiencing the perfect union with a man, and when her first two marriages fail to offer fulfillment, she does not give up on the dream, but she continues struggling to keep her dream alive, until after a long search, she finally lives her dream and finds what she was looking for: love and fulfillment.

June Jordan observes that *Their Eyes* is a typical black novel of affirmation, because in spite of hard times and death, it speaks for life. Janie’s strength gives power to the novel, which speaks for the self, for equality and the pursuit of happiness, for a way of life uncluttered by tradition, stereotypes, materialism, and violence.179

5.3.1. Janie’s notions of sexuality, love and marriage

In *Their Eyes* sexuality is established early in the life of the main protagonist as a symbol of her growing maturity. When she is sixteen Janie’s sexuality awakens as she witness the ‘union’ between the blossoming pear tree and the dust-bearing bee in her grandmother’s backyard:

> She saw a dust bearing bee sink into the sanctum of bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid (24).

This sexual imagery taken from nature symbolizes Janie’s emerging sexuality and her romantic vision of love and marriage as an organic and harmonic union that produces a shiver in Nature itself. From that moment on Janie identifies with the pear tree and begins to carry this romantic fantasy inside of her: ‘Oh, to be a pear tree-any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world’ (25).

However, the intensity of her desire blinds her to reality and her search for the right bee to pollinate her buds lasts for nearly thirty years. This search for ideal love begins when Janie, looking ‘through the pollinated air saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor, tall and lean. That

was before the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags and her eyes (25). Then
she kisses the neighborhood boy, who in her imagination is transformed to a beautiful
young man. Johnny Taylor, who stands for playfulness, innocence, youth and passion,
remains one of the most important persons in Janie’s life, because his kiss has a crucial
impact on Janie’s idea about love: ‘Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when
you sit under a pear tree and think’ (43).\footnote{Cf. Howard, 95-96}

5.3.2. Nanny as a tragic victim of slavery

Janie’s grandmother’s view of marriage is essentially different from Janie’s. Her
response to Janie’s emergent womanhood and her kiss with Johnny Taylor is her
command that Janie marry a well-to-do middle-aged farmer, Logan Killicks. Nanny,
who was born into slavery, sees marriage as a means of achieving security and
protection and escaping from poverty and abuse:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don’t tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin’ fuh it tuh be different wid you.’ (29).

Nanny’s greatest wish is that Janie finds a respectable husband with property and money
so that she will escape the typical black woman’s place in the world and so that she is
not treated as the ‘mule of the world’.

Nanny stands for the black female ancestral voice and a tragic tale of slavery that needs
to be absorbed and overcome. She tells Janie the story about how she was raped by her
white master and how she bears him an illegitimate daughter. In his absence her mistress
threatens to whip Nanny to death and sell the child. Nanny runs away with her child and
hides in the swamps until Emancipation is proclaimed. After the Civil War she moves to
Florida, but when Janie’s mother is seventeen, she is raped by a black schoolteacher.
After that she goes slightly mad and runs away, leaving Nanny to bring up Janie. In an
attempt to protect Janie from a similar destiny, Nanny arranges for her sixteen-year-old
granddaughter to marry Logan Killicks, and when Janie protests, Nanny slaps her violently. To Nanny it does not matter that Janie does not love Killicks and that he looks like ‘some ole skullhead in de grave yard’; all that matters to her is that his land and house offer security: ‘Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection’ (30). Feeling that life cheated her, Nanny wants for her granddaughter everything that she had been denied as a slave. She wants an easier and better life for her granddaughter, free of abuse, the servile role women were forced to play, and the illegitimate half-white children they were forced to bear. She wants Janie to sit ‘on high ground’ and enjoy the happiness she herself has never known:

Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin’ on high, but they wasn’t no pulpit for me … Ah been waiting a long time, Janie, but nothin’ Ah been through ain’t too much if you just take a stance on high ground lak Ah dreamed’ (41).

But seeking to realize her aspirations through her granddaughter, Nanny fails to allow Janie to live her own life and follow her own dreams. In the days before her marriage, Janie keeps her metaphor about marriage secret, and hopes that Nanny is right when she tells her that love for Logan will come after they were married. After Nanny dies, Janie is waiting for love to come, but in less than a year she realizes that ‘marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead so she became a woman’ (43-44). Ironically, by choosing Killicks as a husband for her granddaughter, Nanny makes a great error and surrenders Janie to the very fate she was trying to protect her from. She pushes Janie into a marriage with a man who treats her like the livestock on his farm and she becomes ‘the mule of de world’ after all.181

5.3.3. Jody Starks

Joe Starks, or as Janie later calls him, Jody, is a handsome man who is ‘kind of portly like rich white folks’ (32). He is confident, energetic and self-assured and although he does not ‘represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees’ of Janie’s dream, he at least speaks for ‘far horizon’, for ‘change and chance’ (28). Janie runs off with Starks to escape from her servile mule role and her miserable marriage with Killicks, but unfortunately she changes one prison for the other. Starks arouses Janie’s interest by

181 Cf. Howard, 96-97; Callahan, 128-131
offering her a position, and comfort in life: ‘A pretty baby doll lak you is made to sit on de porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you’ (28). Unfortunately, like Killicks, Starks is primarily interested in property, prestige, and security. Both of her husbands are obsessed with material things and possession in the form of land, money, or power. Instead of giving Janie love and understanding, they try to win her heart with materialistic goods. When they realize that they are losing her, instead of revising their materialism, they try to make Janie subservient to them. In effect, the relationship in Janie’s first two marriages consists only of order, control, and materialistic success.

Joe is completely consumed by his desire for property and by his egotism. He loves being Mr. Mayor and he expects Janie to act and speak at his command and to be grateful for being his wife: ‘You oughta be glad ‘cause dat makes uh big women outa you’ (43). However, Janie does not wish to sit high and be ruled. She is unhappy because Jody does not give her the love she yearns for, and because he keeps her apart from the townspeople: ‘A feeling of coldness and fear took hold of her. She felt far away from things and lonely’ (44). As time passes by, Janie learns to hush her voice and sustain her womanhood, and becomes a passive showpiece of Joe’s store, absorbing the stories of Eatonville’s oral culture, but not participating in it.

After they are married for seven years, Joe’s and Janie’s relationship reaches a turning point. One evening, as the meal does not turn out right, Jody slaps Janie. Janie discovers that the two of them are really strangers to each other, and that her perception of Jody has been illusory:

Her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it was never the flesh and blood figure of her dreams: just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over […] She found that she had a host of thought she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about (67-68).

As her marriage with Jody continues to deteriorate, Janie begins to observe herself, and she identifies a split between her inner and outer selves. She feels that while her body makes a show of obedience, her imagination roams free:

Then one day she sat and watched the shadows of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself
sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes […] She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them (73).

This process of self-division in Janie’s interior consciousness marks the starting point of her internal change, because at this point she begins to gain more control over her life. On the surface she is still Janie Starks the mayor’s wife, but on the inside she is plain Janie Crawford, a woman with dreams. She reinvents and redefines herself in order to keep her sanity and she start living for the day when her two selves will come together into one.182

5.3.4. Tea Cake Woods

Janie’s achievement of self-realization and independence is in part made possible by her third husband Tea Cake. Their loving and passionate relationship takes Janie back to Johnny Taylor’s kiss and her initial recognition of love and passion. She falls in love with young, dark-skinned and vivacious Tea Cake, because he is not interested in money or material possessions, and he does not expect her to act in a specific manner. Their age and class differences do not bother Janie, because Tea Cake shows her a non-materialistic existence of love between two people who are not in a constant state of competition and control. He includes Janie in his play as well as in his work, and in this marriage Janie fells more respected than ever before. He lives for the moment, and for Janie he represents ‘a bee for her bloom’. With him Janie feels alive, vital, wanted and needed and while he cannot offer Janie a sense of security, he brings the joy of simple things back in her life and promises the infinite possibilities of horizon.

Although Tea Cake’s positive influence on Janie’s growth and perception of life are significant, it must be noted that he is far from the ideal mate. Lillie Howard suggests that Tea Cake’s vagabond way of life and his pursuit of pleasure make him seem like a person who lacks a sense of reality and responsibility.183 The short period of their happiness is also filled with distrust and jealousy. Like her other husbands, Tea Cake has also internalized much of his culture’s belief about masculine and feminine roles, and in many instances in the text he shows signs of traditional sexist male attitudes

182 Cf. Peterson, 41
183 Cf. Howard, 105
concerning women. For example, he leaves Janie alone and goes drinking with his friends while she waits for him at home, or he encourages advances of another woman. However, the most troubling element of his behavior is that he strikes his wife in an attempt to ward off a potential rival:

Before the week was over he had whipped Janie. Not because her behavior had justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beatings at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss (140).

This violence is analogous to the violence that occurs in Janie and Starks marriage. It is a sign of Tea Cake’s insecurity, his obsessive jealousy, and his need to possess Janie. It seems that nothing much has changed for Janie. She is still the victim of men’s desire to control her.

The only reason why she thinks of him as the personification of her dream of an ideal and essentially flawless mate, which she conceived during her sexual awakening in Nanny’s backyard, is that her imagination allows her to do so. After the disappointment of two unfulfilling marriages, Janie makes herself believe that Tea Cake is the fulfillment of her dreams:

She couldn’t make him look just like any other man to her. He could be a beer to a blossom- appear tree blossom in spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God (101-102).

Even after her self-defensive murder of a rabid Tea Cake, she forgets her husband’s bad sides and remembers only what she loved and cherished in him. In her eyes, Tea Cake is elevated to the status of a God-like creature that will always live in her heart and her mind: ‘He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace’ (183-184). However, Hurston warns about the seductiveness of Janie’s dream and about the consequences for both males and females that placing of the partner on a pedestal can have.

184 Cf. Awkward, New Essays, 17-18
5.3.5. Janie as the questing heroine

In *Their Eyes* Hurston portrays the personal development of beautiful mulatta Janie Crawford and describes her journey from passivity, materialism and self-doubt to self-realization, autonomy and self-respect. In spite of the male-dominated society which attempts to force her into narrow, confining roles, Janie achieves self-fulfillment and independence thanks to her own spirit, experience, and the power of her vision. Janie’s true identity begins to take shape when she rejects the false images and roles which have been thrust upon her.

All her life Janie was searching for love and fulfillment while other people who controlled her life: Nanny, Logan Killicks and Jody Starks were interested only in material things and the respectability that property and wealth bring. After two unhappy marriages in which she played a subservient role, Janie finally achieves her dream by marrying Tea Cake. Although he is not an ideal partner, Tea Cake not only shows Janie the far horizon Joe Starks promised, but he also makes her feel like the pear tree in bloom. Even if the happy days with Tea Cake do not last for long, at the end of the novel she is triumphant, and ends in what Cook calls ‘an accomplished solitude’. With the power of her dream and experience she manages to transcend Nanny’s and Joe Starks’ image world and develops into an independent and self-defined person.\(^{185}\)

What Janie needed was not wealth and the big white house that Jody built for her. All she ever wanted was to live her own life, explore the horizon and experience love. She hated her grandmother for taking away ‘the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon’, but she was able to forgive her because she did that ‘in the name of love’. Even the fact that Janie forgave her grandmother for limiting her possibilities and destroying her dreams shows that she developed into a mature and self-assured person.

Washington argues that Janie is one of the earliest black heroines in African-American literature who ‘assumes a heroic stature not by externals, but by her own struggle for self-definition, for autonomy and for liberation from the illusion that other have tried to make her live by or that she has submitted to herself’ (Washington, “A Woman Half in Shadow”, 16).

\(^{185}\) Cf. Cooke, 146-149
5.3.6. Power of speech vs. lack of voice

One of the most dominant themes in African-American women’s writing is the struggle to articulate the silenced female’s voice, which is also present in Their Eyes. Janie spends forty years of her life trying to assert her voice, but even at the end of the novel it is not really clear if she managed completely to move from silence into speech, from object to subject, and if her voice becomes what bell hooks would call a ‘liberated voice’. 186

While some critics seek to demonstrate that Janie acquired the power of voice at the end of the novel, others raise the question about Janie’s lack of voice in Their Eyes. Critic Robert Stepto claims that Hurston creates only the illusion that Janie achieves her voice and that her strategy of having much of Janie’s tale told by a third person narrator rather than by a first person narrator undercuts the development of Janie’s voice. 187

Part of Janie’s dilemma in Their Eyes is that she is in a paradoxical position between a subject and an object. Although by the end of the novel she achieves liberation and autonomy, she is often passive when she should be active, deprived of speech when she should be in command of language, made powerless by her three husbands and trapped in her status as passive female when she should express her female power and break free. 188 There are crucial moments in the narrative, when the reader expects to hear Janie’s voice, but she is curiously silent. As Stepto notes, Janie’s lack of voice is particularly disturbing during her trial for murder. In the courtroom scene, which comes at the point when Janie has presumably already developed her capacity to speak, her story is told entirely in the third person. In fact, we do not hear Janie speaking in her own voice until she returns to Eatonville and starts telling her tale to her friend Phoeby.

Racine, however, argues that one reason why we do not hear Janie’s voice during the trial is that narrators and Janie’s voices fuse. She claims that Janie speaks through narrator and that her voice is effective for she is released. She adds that Janie’s act of self-defense as well as her choosing of life over death is the ultimate act of voice,

186 Cf. Wall, 10-11
187 Cf. Stepto, 164-167
because ‘voice is more than speech; it is a state of mind - a positive sense of self’ (Racine, 291).

Janie’s silence is largely connected to the men in her life, their need to control her and their inability to express their feelings. Johnny Taylor is a reflection of young and innocent Janie. At the time when they kiss, both of them are voiceless teenagers without control over their actions. Logan Killicks, on the other hand, is a propertied man who has achieved material success and can provide his young bride the protection and material security. However, his material success contrasts with his emotional inadequacy. In a way he is also a man without a voice, because he is unable to express his hurt or disappointment to a sixteen-year-old Janie. Killicks’ and Janie’s conversations focus on daily activities and are never intimate, because neither of them is capable of expressing their true emotions. For Janie, passion is a fantasy and for Killicks it has been suppressed in the drive for security. Due to Killicks’ inability to express himself, Janie has no perception of his emotions. While the reader sees the vulnerable part of Killicks and comprehends his emotions through the narrator, his wife never hears his voice, and sees him as an one-dimensional husband. 189

When Jody comes along and takes Janie to Eatonville, he starts controlling both Janie’s voice and the course of the narrative, but his voice is mostly dependent on shutting up hers. For instance, when he is elected the mayor of Eatonville, Janie is asked to say a few words, but her husband never gives her the chance to speak by saying:

    Thank you fuh yo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home’ (40).

Thus, Janie’s life is completely directed by Starks. With his big, powerful voice he controls not only Janie, but the whole community: ‘he loves obedience out of everybody under de sound of his voice’ (46). However, even Jody is not proficient in expressing his inner thoughts, emotions and insecurities to his wife. Janie notices that Killicks and Starks are unable to ‘share themselves’, because ‘they d not know how’ (104). The voices of Janie and her husbands are limited, because they are unable to have an intimate communication and articulate their feelings.

189 Cf. Racine, 283-291
In spite of Jody’s need to control her, Janie’s voice and independence grow with time. Barbara Johnson suggested that there is a connection between Janie’s ability to speak and her ability to recognize her self-division. She pointed out that once Janie is able to separate her mind and her spirit from her physical surroundings, she takes a step toward acquisition of her own authentic voice. One day she publicly challenges Starks with words and destroys his public image. With one cutting sentence she robs Jody of his voice and humiliates him in front of all the men in the store, making it clear to him that he has never completely subdued or dominated her. She tells him not to talk about her looking old because: ‘When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life’ (75). Since the ‘change of life’ refers to a woman’s menopause, Janie robs Jody of ‘his illusion of irresistible maleness’ (75). With this sexual metaphor she emasculates her husband and unable to respond to her verbally, he slaps her. In the pursuit of her voice, Janie wins her last fight over Jody as he lies on his deathbed: ‘you ain’t de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You’se what’s left after he died […] Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for your in me’ (82). In the end, it is Starks’ voice that is being suppressed by Janie’s.

On the other hand, Tea Cake, despite the fact that he is financially and socially inferior to both Killicks and Starks, has the ability to express his feelings for Janie more openly than either of the other men. Although Janie’s voice becomes more powerful with time, she never becomes truly independent. She acquires the power of speech which allows her stand up to Jody, but she is unable to stand up to Tea Cake. When Tea Cake physically abuses Janie, instead of speaking up, she remains silent. The beating is seen through the eyes of the male community, while Janie’s reaction is not given. This slap represents Tea Cake’s inability to express his feelings of frustration verbally, but the people within Tea Cake’s and Janie’s community seem to perceive the slap as a socially acceptable expression of love and authority. Both Jody and Tea Cake beat Janie because they do not know how to verbalize their fears, but in contrast to Jody, whose actions are motivated by his wish to exhibit the extent of his authority over Janie, Tea Cake’s act results from his uncontrollable jealousy and possessive love.

190 Cf. Johnson, 204-219
191 Cf. Racine, 287-288
192 Cf. Racine, 289
5.3.7. Storytelling and the black community

*Their Eyes*, like most of Hurston’s works, draws from the black folk tradition of the rural South. Much of the story takes place in Hurston’s hometown Eatonville, Florida, which being an all-black town, was a goldmine for folklorist, a rich storehouse of authentic tales, songs, and folkways of black people. Contemporary critics such as Awkward argue that Hurston’s work demonstrates her faith in African-American people and in the strength and beauty of their culture.\(^{193}\) June Jordan characterized *Their Eyes* as ‘an affirmation of Black values and lifestyle within the American context’ (Awkward, 15) and Addison Gayle called it ‘a novel of intense power that evidences the strength and promise of African-American culture’ (Awkward, 6).

*Their Eyes* has often been described as a novel about a woman in a black folk community, but Mary Helen Washington asserts that it could be more accurately described as a novel about a woman outside of the community.\(^{194}\) From the beginning, Janie’s relationship with the community is problematic. Her marriage to Joe Starks, who prefers to keep his wife at a distance from the ‘common folk’, deprives Janie of her participation in the life of the community and ensures her alienation. Singled out for her extraordinary beauty and her position as the mayor’s wife, Janie cannot get close to the townspeople in spirit. Only after she marries Tea Cake and goes with him to the muck where they work together on the fields does Janie become a part of a community which has been denied to her in her earlier marriages. However, during her trial for Tea Cake’s murder, Janie is once more betrayed by her people. In the courtroom scene she is alienated from other blacks and she remains an outsider.

When Janie returns to Eatonville after the death of Tea Cake, her vital, self-assured presence is like an assault to the townspeople. The description of how men and women see Janie evokes the social and moral life in Eatonville and marks the limitations of the small community:

> The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets, the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plum, then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind

\(^{193}\) Cf. Awkward, *New Essays*, 5-7

\(^{194}\) Cf. Washington, “I Love the Way”, 98-104
what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day (2).

Although Janie has now achieved self-respect and self-reliance, she is still viewed as a sexual object by the men of Eatonville. The men figuratively undress her with their gaze, while the envious women want to reduce her value by focusing on her simple fieldworker’s clothes. 195 All the people are standing around, looking at her, ready to condemn her: ‘They passed nations through their mouths. They set in judgment’ (1-2). Although Janie remains unconcerned about the evil tongues of the townspeople, Washington asserts that having returned to a community that rejected her, Janie is left in a position of isolation that almost seems like another form of confinement. Unable to achieve a full integration into society she calls into question her culture’s treatment of women. Her rebellion against the social values and norms ensures her status as an outsider but also makes her seem even more heroic by contemporary standards. 196

The act of storytelling is crucial for Janie’s struggle for autonomy and voice. Although Janie’s narrative is based on the traditional oral call-and-response patterns between individual and community, her act of storytelling is an intimate, autobiographical narrative to her only true friend, Phoeby. Due to Janie’s position as an outcast, the men and women of Eatonville are unwilling and unfit to listen or respond to Janie’s story. Therefore, Phoeby, who is Janie’s only audience, becomes a bridge between the storyteller and the estranged community. Janie is unthreatened by Phoeby’s double identity as her friend and a fully accepted member of the community. 197 In her proud, confident autonomy she only seeks an intimate, open and honest listener for her story that is willing to take part in the storytelling act. Phoeby’s hungry listening and her responsive silence help Janie to tell her story, and uplift Phoeby spiritually. She admits that: ‘ah done growed ten feet higher jus’ listening’ to you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’ (183-184). In this context then storytelling symbolizes the uprising of black consciousness.

195 Cf. Callahan, 121-122
196 Cf. Washington, “I Love the Way“, 105-106
197 Cf. Callahan, 118-127
5.3.8. Janie’s response to patriarchal power and the symbols of her liberation

Since the 1970s many critics of Hurston’s work have focused on the feminist impulses that are delineated in *Their Eyes*. They analyzed Janie’s responses to patriarchal attempts to limit her to unfulfilling roles, and the degree to which her movement toward self-actualization is successful.

In his essay “Zora Neale Hurston and the Nature of Female Perception” Lloyd Brown examines the opening paragraph of *Their Eyes* in which the third person narrator, who could be interpreted as the voice of the author herself, is touching upon the differences between men and women in contrasting the way in which men and women dream. The narrator tells us that unlike men, who are mocked by Time because they passively wait for dreams to come true, women fight for their dreams and act upon them:

Ships at distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail over on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. They act and do things accordingly. (1).

According to Brown, this paragraph makes rather bold claims about the perceptual differences between men and women. In the novelist’s view, it is a typical male characteristic to accept the thwarting of dreams and resignation, in contrast to women, who have an ability to transcend the reality with the help of their dreams. Brown also suggests the sophistication of Hurston’s thought as he observes the similarities between Hurston’s representation of the nature of female perception and Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that ‘it is a female trait […] to use dreams as a means of transcending rather than resigning to reality’\textsuperscript{198}

Lillie P. Howard also reflects on the female-centered elements in *Their Eyes* and she notes that the novel has universal implications for women in that it protests against the restrictions and limitations imposed upon them by masculine society.\textsuperscript{199} In *Their Eyes*

\textsuperscript{198} Cf. Brown, 39
\textsuperscript{199} Cf. Howard, 93
Hurston describes a black woman’s rebellion against patriarchal power and her search for a meaningful place in a male-dominated world. Janie’s attempts to achieve a sense of self in a variety of Florida’s black communities in which women are viewed as men’s possessions and expected to act in a certain stereotyped way. Her efforts exemplify the black woman’s fight against male superiority. Sally Ferguson observes that Janie’s decision to run away with Joe Starks signals her early determination to defend herself against assaults on her loving nature. She argues that in escaping from Killicks she foreshadows her ability to triumph over patriarchal oppression.\(^{200}\)

However, once Jody Starks takes Janie to Eatonville, he starts controlling both Janie’s life and the action of the plot. Jody’s behavior stands for a sexist society in which men believe that ‘somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows’ and tell them what to do, because ‘they sho don’t think none theirselves’ (67). Women do not think, ‘they just think they’s thinking’, says Joe Starks on one occasion.

One of the major features of Janie’s plight is the fact that she is denied access to the expressive rituals and traditions of the community because of her gender. Like other women in the town, Janie is excluded from the town’s discussions, story-telling, and lying sessions. Women in Eatonville are expected to keep their mouths shut and leave the talking to their husbands because, men believe that they ‘see one thing and understand ten, while women see ten things and understand none’ (67). Hemenway suggests that *Their Eyes* is a record of Hurston’s discovery of: ‘one of the flaws in her early memories of the village: there had usually been only men telling lies on the front porch of Joe Clarke’s store’ (Hemenway, 232). In Eatonville, it is men who posses the power of speech, and women are subjected to the obligation of silence. Thus, in order to keep her dream alive, Janie has to struggle not only against the empty materialism of her husband, but also against the limitations of patriarchal society.

In order to describe Janie’s journey to empowerment and liberation, Hurston uses two images from nature that symbolize Janie’s quest: the blossoming pear tree and the horizon. While the pear tree in blossom represents Janie’s sexuality and fulfillment in union with a man, the horizon stands for the open road and represents the outside world.

\(^{200}\) Cf. Ferguson, 187
the world of new opportunities, adventure and journeys that would allow Janie’s real self to shine.

Another image that Hurston uses in connection to Janie is the image of hair, which is one of the oldest symbols of femininity and feminine beauty. Janie is a very beautiful and extremely feminine woman. Her light skin and long, luxurious hair attract a lot of attention in the black community. While women envy her, men are irresistibly attracted to her. Out of jealousy, Joe Starks insists that Janie covers her hair with a head rag. Forcing her to hide her hair, Joe is trying to rob Janie of her sexuality and make her unattractive to other men:

This business of the head rag irked her endlessly. But Jody set on it. her hair was not going to show in the store […] That was because Joe never told Janie how jealous he was […] She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others (51-52).

Immediately after Jody’s death, Janie tears off the head rag which was a symbol of her imprisonment. Looking at herself in the mirror, she feels liberated, strong and beautiful:

‘The young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. She took careful stock of herself, then combed her hair and tied it up again’ (83).

This moment of self-reflection, in which Janie starts to develop a growing sense of independence, is one of the most significant turning points in Janie’s life. No more her husband’s baby-doll, she is on her way to becoming an autonomous subject.

Nellie McKay observes that the relationship with Tea Cake helps Janie to shape her self-knowledge, but that it is after his death that she is free to discover security in herself and ‘the courage to speak in her own black woman’s voice, no longer dependent on men’(McKay, 63). When she shoots Tea Cake, she chooses herself over the dominant society of men, and it is then that she becomes an independent and complete woman no more divided between an inner and outer self. When Janie comes back to Eatonville, wearing overalls instead of the blue satin dress she wore when she left the town, the townspeople wonder what has happened to her. Her overalls, Howard argues,
are just like the removal of her head rag, a symbol of her emancipation and liberation. She has explored the horizon and on the way she has found herself.

5.3.9. African-American identity and racial prejudice

Although a number of critics emphasize the novel’s universal quality and the fact that Janie’s quest for liberation and independence can represent any woman’s struggle for autonomy, the novel is at the same time a significant contribution to the delineation of the particular difficulties encountered by an African-American woman within the racist and sexist social institutions. The essence of the black woman, her sexuality, and her conflictive sexual and social relationships with men form the kernel of this novel.

There are a number of places in the novel that remind us that Janie’s struggle is a struggle of a black woman to achieve voice and self-definition. For example, Janie’s comments about her childhood are essential for the understanding of her fight as a black woman against female and racial oppression. Telling the story of her life to Pheoby, Janie explains how in her early childhood she did not know that she was black. Growing up without the presence of her parents, living with her grandmother in ‘de white folks backyard’, and playing with white children, she is completely unaware of her race until she sees a photograph in which she is included. She looks for herself in the picture and sees ‘a real dark little girl with long hair’ whom she does not recognize: ‘Ah couldn’t recognize dat dark chile as me’ (9), because she sees herself in the image of her white companions. Hurston renders the scene of Janie’s racial discovery with great delicacy and complexity. Not social prejudice, but affection leads to Janie’s awareness that she is black. The girl who does not know her face has also no specific name. Janie’s nickname as a child was alphabet, which could stand for any name or all names.

Contrary to the view of some critics that Their Eyes takes place in an ahistorical world, there are racial overtones in the novel which suggest social and racial tensions. For instance, Nanny’s tale of her forced concubinage and the threats of her mistress follow the historical context of black women’s experience. Nanny’s slave experience parallels

---

201 Cf. Howard, 107
202 Cf. Cook, 140
the experiences of exploitation and abuse of other female characters in the writings that I am examining in this study. As we have already seen in the last chapter, Linda Brent from Jacobs’ *Incidents* received similar treatment as Nanny during the slavery period, and as we shall see in the next chapter, so did the Corregidora women from Gayl Jones’ novel *Corregidora*.

Although Nanny lives a fairly independent and autonomous life, she carries the burden of slavery which colors her limited point of view. Nanny’s entire moral code has developed in reaction to white pressure and she longs for white respectability that she never had. She becomes the spokeswoman for materialism and she hopes that her daughter will fulfill her dream of racial uplift, but after this possibility is ruined, Nanny transforms her ambition to her granddaughter and names Janie the successor of her dream. As Janie retells Nanny’s tale to Phoeby, she finally overcomes the burden of her grandmother’s expectations. When her spirit reemerges after her marriages with Killicks and Starks, Janie finally rejects Nanny’s ‘parable of race’ in favor of her own dream to be a pear tree in bloom reaching for the far horizon.\(^203\) Having tried to live Nanny’s way of life, Janie now determines to live her own. She explains to Phoeby:

\[
sittin’ on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing to her [Nanny]. Dat’s what she wanted for me-don’t keer what it cost. Git upon uh high chair and sit dere. […]. So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but Phoeby, Ah done nearly languished tuh death up dere. Ah felt lak de world wuz cryin’ extry and Ah ain’t read de common news yet (172).
\]

Although some critics argue differently, Janie is neither a conventional romantic heroine of seduction fiction nor a stereotypical tragic mulatta out of the turn-of-the-century mulatto novel.\(^204\) She escapes the typical destiny of a romantic heroine by killing the only men she loved, Tea Cake, and choosing to live on and remember only the good times. The repression of romance and the reassertion of the heroine’s quest at the end of the novel emphasize Hurston’s critique of the patriarchal values and norms that govern women. Barbara Christian asserts that:

\[
\text{Hurston’s Janie not only revised the previously drawn images of the mulatta, the author’s rendition of her major characters beautifully revealed the many dimensions of the black woman’s soul as well as the restrictions}
\]

\(^{203}\) Cf. Callahan 118-130

\(^{204}\) Cf. Washington, “I Love the Way, 106-107
imposed upon her by her own community— that she, like all others, seek not only security but fulfillment (Christian, *Black Women, Novelists*, 59).

In her novel Hurston not only rejects the literary stereotypes of black women, but also satirizes African-Americans who think that they are superior to other blacks because of their lighter complexion, Caucasian-like features, thin lips and pointed nose. Mrs. Turner is the incorporation of the snobbish blacks who idealize Caucasian traits and look down on other blacks because of their ‘Negroid’ characteristics. She admires Janie for her coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair, while she can not stand Tea Cake for his dark skin, because she believes that black people should ‘lighten their race’ through marriage:

> Ah jus’ couldn’t see mahself married to no black man. It’s too many black folks already. We oughta lighten up de race […] Ah can’t stand black niggers. Ah don’t blame de white folks from hatin’ ‘em ‘cause Ah can’t stand ‘em mahself. ‘nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid ‘em […] De black ones is holdin’ us back […] Any one who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was in her criteria […] she was cruel to those to those more Negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroness […] She didn’t cling to Janie Woods the woman. She paid homage to Janie’s Caucasian characteristics as such. And when she was with Janie she had a feeling of transmutation, as if she herself had become whiter and with straighter hair (134-139).

Although Janie is a light-skinned mulatta, who with her anglicized beauty and her silk hair could easily pass for white, she does not think that mulattos should establish a separate caste and that they are better than other blacks because of their mixed blood. She loves Tea Cake for what he is, and he loves being in company with other black people. However, she remains silent to Turner’s comments that Tea Cake is not good enough for her, and that she should have married some lighter-skinned African-American like herself, because such people have greater social prestige. Instead of taking her stand and defending her husband, all that Janie does is offering a cold shoulder to Mrs. Turner to show her resistance to Mrs. Turner’s attitudes.

Another comment on racial problems occurs during the aftermaths of the hurricane, when the white leaders of the community demand that all white storm victims be buried in pine boxes, while black victims should simply be heaped together and covered with quick lime. This incident shows that Hurston did not completely ignore racial problems.
5.4. Reception and importance of *Their Eyes*

Although *Their Eyes Were Watching God* received several positive reviews from black critics such as Sterling Brown upon its publication in 1937, some important black figures within the African-American literary circles, such as Locke and Wright, expressed the view that it was a seriously flawed text. Despite the fact that Hurston’s contemporaries acknowledged *Their Eyes* as an affirmation of her talent, they viewed the novel as an over-simplification of the African-American situation.

Awkward argues that the attitudes towards racial politics and numerous attacks on Hurston’s character strongly affected the approach to *Their Eyes* and made an unbiased evaluation of her work impossible during her lifetime. Contemporary scholars assert that Hurston has often been judged only on the basis of her personality, ‘her racy adoption of happy darkie’ image (Awkward, *New Essays*, 6), which has nothing to do with the strategies of her writing. For instance, in his harsh response to *Their Eyes* Richard Wright strongly criticized Hurston by saying that the novel ‘carries no theme, no message, no thought’ (Awkward, *New Essays*, 11). Wright’s and his contemporaries’ vision of African-American literature as a weapon to be used to expose the effects of racism upon African-Americans, along with their gendered bias and interpretative blindness rendered them unable to appreciate Hurston’s subtle critiques of materialism, sexism and racism in American society. Awkward points out that the previous obscurity of Hurston’s novel was a result of the difficulties that African-American and female writers generally encountered in having their work taken seriously by critics and of Hurston’s ideological differences with other members of the literary community. He claims that the re-discovery and re-evaluation of *Their Eyes* resulted from the emergence of feminist literary criticism as an important interpretive strategy and the development of the culturally specific forms of analysis of African-American texts.  

After years of neglect and marginality, Hurston’s second novel has since the late 1970s achieved a position of prominence within the American literary tradition. *Their Eyes* has come to be widely considered not only Zora Neale Hurston’s best and most successful work, but also one of the most important American novels of the 20th century. Although it sold poorly during Hurston’s lifetime, in the last 30 years the novel has proved a

---

205 Cf. Awkward, *New Essays*, 2-12
commercial success well. The novel is now viewed by a multitude of readers as remarkably successful in its complex depiction of its African-American female protagonist’s search of identity. Robert Bone offered a glowing praise of Hurston’s novel by calling it ‘a Classic of Black literature, one of the best of the period’ (Bone, 128) and Hemenway described it as ‘one of the most poetic works of fiction by a black writer in the first half of the twentieth century, and one of the most revealing treatments in modern literature of a woman’s quest for a satisfying life’ (Hemenway, 6).

Hurston’s greatest importance probably lies in the fact that she moved the image of the black woman beyond stereotype, and offered a new way of looking at mulatta and African-American woman preparing the way for the twentieth century female writers. Many black feminist scholars believe that ‘in its radical envisioning of the self as central and its use of language as a means of exploring the self as female and black, Their Eyes Were Watching God is a forerunner of the fiction of the seventies and eighties’ (Christian, Black Feminist Criticism, 175). According to Gates, several black women writers, among them some of the most accomplished in America today, are repeating, imitating or revising her narrative strategies. African-American female authors such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara and Gloria Naylor all seem to have grounded their fictions in the works of Zora Neale Hurston.206

6. Gayl Jones: *Corregidora*

6.1. Portrait of Gayl Jones

The author of four novels, a collection of short stories, and several volumes of poetry Gayl Jones has been praised as a major African-American writer by such literary figures as John Updike, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou. The intensity of Jones’ fiction is mirrored in her enigmatic personality and life.

Born to Franklin and Lucille Jones on November 23 in Speigle Heights, a turbulent neighborhood in Lexington, Kentucky, Jones’ connections to the South are reflected in her personal life as well as her writing, which often portrays Kentucky culture and characters. Much of her desire to write came from her maternal grandmother, Amanda Wilson, who wrote plays for church productions, as well as from her mother, Lucille Jones, who wrote short stories, many of them in order to entertain Gayl and her brother Franklin Jones Jr. In elementary school, several of Jones’ teachers acknowledged her talent and encouraged her to write. After finishing high school, Jones moved to Connecticut and attended Connecticut College. Her education there was funded through scholarships and in 1971 she received her Bachelors of Arts degree in English. She was accepted into Graduate studies creative program at Brown University, and two years later she earned her Masters degree and saw her first play, *Chile Woman*, produced. By 1975, she had earned her Ph. D. of Arts degree in creative writing.

During her years at Brown, Jones caught the attention of Professor Michael Harper, who introduced Jones’ work to Toni Morrison, who was then an editor at Random House. As a result Jones’ first novel *Corregidora* was published in 1975. Following her graduation, her second novel *Eva’s Man* was published in 1976. After that, Jones began teaching at Wellesley College and later took a position as an assistant professor of English and African-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan. While teaching at Michigan, she received fellowships first from the National Endowment for the Arts and another from the Michigan society of Fellows. She also met and married Robert Higgins, a politically active student, who eventually took his wife’s last name. Jones remained at Michigan until 1983, publishing works of fiction and poetry. Although she is best known for her novels, Jones also wrote a collection of short stories called *White*.

In the early 1980s Jones and her husband left the United States to escape charges Ann Arbor police brought against Higgins for making threats with a shotgun at a rally. The couple fled to Europe, where they lived in self-imposed exile for several years. During this time, Jones published another novel, Die Vogelfängerin (translated as The Birdwatcher) in Germany as well as a collection of poetry Xarque and Other Poems (1985) in the United States. Her first book of criticism, Liberating Voices: Oral tradition in African American Literature (1991) was soon published after Jones and her husband returned to the United States due to the illness of Gayl Jones’ mother.

After living very privately at Lexington for ten years, Jones came again into media spotlight due to the release of a new novel, The Healing (1998), which was a finalist for the National Book Award. Unfortunately, the success of Jones’ new novel was overshadowed by the media attention given to another confrontation involving her husband and police. The publicity surrounding the publication of The Healing led to the discovery of the Ann Arbor warrant against Jones’ husband. An armed standoff with police ended in her husband’s suicide, and Jones was committed to a psychiatric treatment in a mental institution. She was under watch for a short time, but she was soon released. Just one year later, her most recent novel Mosquito (1999) was published. Jones now lives in seclusion in her hometown, Lexington, Kentucky and continues to write.207

Jones’ work has always stood at an oblique angle to the mainstream of American literature mostly because in her novels she works against an imposed definition of herself as a speaker for her race. In an interview with Claudia Tate, Gayl Jones admits that she sees herself outside the conventional roles of wife and mother. She says that she is mainly interested in Brazilian history, in making relationship between history and autobiography, as well as in what she calls ‘abnormal psychology’. She has often been criticized for creating characters that do not conform to ‘positive race images’ of black women and men, but are rather unusual, complex and complicated personalities.208 In response to this criticism Jones answers that she is not sure how to reconcile the things

\[207\] Cf. “Gayl Jones-Biography”, 1-2; Smith, African American Writers, 235-244; Thadius Davis, 128-135

\[208\] Cf. Tate, “An Interview”, 146-147
that interest her with ‘normal characters’ and ‘positive race images’: ‘How would one reconcile an interest in neurosis or insanity with positive race images?’ (Tate, “An Interview”, 147).

Generally, Jones does not deny that political strategy may be helpful to a writer, but she is alarmed by its potential rigid constraints, warning that a political agenda can also ‘tell you that there is a certain territory politics won’t allow you to enter, certain questions politics won’t allow you to ask-in order to be politically correct’ (Jones, “About My Work”, 233). Corregidora anticipates the question posed by Jones in her essay “About my Work”:

> Should a black writer ignore [problematic black] characters, refuse to enter ‘such territory’ because of the ‘negative image’ and because such characters can be misused politically by others, or should one try to reclaim such complex, contradictory characters as well as reclaim the idea of the heroic image? (Jones, “About My Work”, 233).

Even though she argues that she does ‘not have a political stance’ (Jones, “About My Work”, 234), her writing is political in its refusal to be compartmentalized as African-American work that depicts the ‘positive images of race’, and in its denial that an African-American woman can only be one kind of artist.209

Although her literary accomplishments have often been contested because of her controversial subjects and her personal life, her brutal and violent stories of abuse continue to awe the readers with their complex style and depth of emotion. She draws many of the themes in her stories from her African-American heritage as well as her own personal life and struggles.210 She has been described as a radical writer, who is as equally enigmatic as any of her literary creations, ‘a freedom fighter dressed up in provocative novelist’s clothing’, whose work is ‘her weapon of choice’ (Burn, 2). Greg Tate characterized her as a ‘dark, devious, scientific, folkloric, mass-culture-savvy, book-smart’ and said that when Jones published Corregidora and Eva’s Man, ‘she arrived at the head of the class of late-20th-century American novelists who happen to be black, female and brilliant’ (Greg Tate, 1). Further, he asserted that Jones is a sort of ‘modern-day Zora Neale Hurston’ who simultaneously projects the image of country

---

209 Cf. Gottfried, 569
210 Cf. “Gayl Jones - Biography - Criticism”, 4
girl and cosmopolite. She is both a race woman, and cultural anthropologist, who knows and loves African-American culture ‘to the degree that she won’t simplify, apologize for, or demystify it’. 211

Jones, whom literary scholar Imani Wilson called ‘the Only Real Black Woman Writer’ is not a typical black intellectual. She is a very reclusive woman from Kentucky, who has been compared to J.D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon for her way of life. According to her friends and colleagues, she has always been very shy and reserved, but after her husband’s dramatic suicide and her own subsequent detention in a mental health facility, she even started refusing to talk on the telephone and started communicating with her publisher only via mail.212

Prominent social critic and Harvard professor Cornel West describes Jones as a model of a ‘black intellectual as critical, organic catalyst’, or ‘black insurgent intellectual’. He compliments Jones’ work by saying that her fiction achieves much of what he seeks from fellow artists and intellectuals. And what West expects from black insurgent intellectuals and artists is to demystify, deconstruct, and decompose the ‘prevailing Euro-American regimes of truth’ and ‘enrich future black intellectual life’ (West, 313). He calls for a higher ideal in American life which, according to him, can only be achieved by applying Jonesian fearlessness and honesty.213 West’s expectations seem to echo the Corregidora women’s demand for the ‘making of generations’ and telling of their own story, so that the slave master’s story will not be accepted as the truth.

6.2. Policy of gender and sexuality in the 1970s fiction

In the late 1950s and 1960s African-American writers often emphasized the importance of the black communities and culture as a prerequisite for self-definition and self-understanding. The ideology of the sixties stressed the necessity for African-Americans to rediscover their blackness as well as their racial unity. Although this attitude had positive consequences for the empowerment of the community, one side effect was the tendency to idealize love relationships between black men and women, and to blame sexism in the black community solely on racism.

211 Cf. Greg Tate, 1-2
212 Cf. Burn, 2
213 Cf. West, 313-315
In the early 1970s, however, black women writers’ stance toward their communities began to change. The black community was no longer seen only as a source of black empowerment, but also as a major threat to the empowerment of black women. African-American women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones vividly depict the gender victimization of their heroines and expose sexism and sexual violence in their communities, in which women must struggle against definitions of gender. They insist on the idea that sexist and racial stereotypes which black communities internalized radically affect the lives of black women and cause their destruction. In these works it is the black community which is shown as directly responsible for the tragedies of the major characters.

This direct critique of the black communities is what makes the black novels of the 1970s different from the protest novels of 1940s, which only focus on oppression from outside black society. In the novels of the seventies, there is always someone who learns that not only the white society must change, but that the black communities’ attitudes toward women must be revised as well. The heroines of the mid-1970s are socio-political actors in the world. They are rebellious and beyond the constraints that society tries to impose on female sexuality. Yet, they are wounded heroines, partly because they cannot accept their communities’ view of women as mothers or lovers of a man only. The motif of motherhood and maternal ancestry that was often present in the works of early African-American female writers is also one of the major themes in the mid-1970s fiction. There is also a new effort of re-imagining slavery and of the blues aesthetics. Although the heroines of these novels are critical of their communities, they nevertheless come back to them and work out their resistance in that territory. It is rather within the context of black communities than in the world of women that they struggle against the crude definitions of race and gender.

By the mid-seventies, African-American women writers, like Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gayl Jones had not only defined their cultural context as distinctly African-American, but they had also explored the interrelation of sexism and racism in their society. They demonstrated that sexism was a very strong force in black communities which influences and controls black women’s lives, and they challenged the prevailing stereotypes and definitions of black women in American society,
especially in relation to motherhood and sexuality. They explored the complexities of love between black men and women and personal family histories of black heritage. Moreover, they insisted not only on the centrality of black women to African-American history, but also on their significance to present-day social and political developments in the United States.214

6.3. The analysis of Corregidora

Gayl Jones’ first novel, Corregidora (1975), has been described as a bizarre and disturbing book, which contains sublime beauty that lingers in the reader’s consciousness long after one has finished reading it. Confrontational in nature, it astonished the black literary community upon its publication, because it is an extraordinary work that ‘provokes whilst it educates’ (Burn, 4).

In the novel, Gayl Jones creates a bluesy world in which she addresses some of the most problematic issues in the lives of black women. She uses the historical framework of slavery to explore the intrusion of the racial realities of American history into the most intimate personal relationships. Corregidora reflects upon the brutality of slavery and the dark historical events that shaped the identity of African-American people. John Updike comments that ‘Corregidora persuasively fuses black history, or the mythic consciousness’ with ‘the emotional nuances of black contemporary life’ (“Corregidora Editorial Reviews” 2). Although she exposes ugly historical truths, Jones achieves a humanization of history by focusing on family dynamics and love relationships. Furthermore, Corregidora asks how a woman can renegotiate her sexual desire if she descends from a long line of sexual exploitation. Besides reflecting on the effects of enslavement and sexual abuse on the self-definition and sexuality of generations of African-American and mulatto women, Jones also explores the way gender domination and institutionalized racism have influenced the nature of the doubly oppressed black woman. According to James Baldwin, ‘Corregidora is ‘the most brutally honest and painful revelation of what has occurred and is occurring, in the souls of Black men and women’ (“Corregidora Editorial Reviews”, 1). It describes a black woman’s quest for self

---

214 Cf. Christian, Black Feminist Criticism, 177-180
and transcendence, and her journey from the alienated and sexually oppressed victim to empowered and liberated heroine.

6.3.1. Plot

Corregidora is simultaneously a tale of the personal trauma of blues singer Ursa Corregidora and a tragic saga of the slave experiences of her maternal ancestors. The story begins in 1947, when Ursa’s husband, Mutt Thomas, throws her down a staircase during a fight, which results in the loss of her baby and her uterus. After Ursa renounces her husband, she soon enters into a relationship with Tadpole McCormick, the owner of the Happy Café, a bar in which she performs as a blues singer. Since Ursa marries Tadpole only out of her need to feel secure, her second marriage is doomed to failure.

However, Ursa’s abusive and sadistic relationships with men are not her only trouble. Her second burden is that she is charged with continuing the familial legacy of ‘bearing witness’ and passing on the history of slavery and abuse of her maternal ancestors. Ursa descends from a line of women who were slaves in Brazil, and who migrated first to Louisiana and then to Kentucky. Generations of Corregidora women are consumed by hatred of the nineteenth-century Portuguese/Brazilian landowner and slave-master Simon Corregidora, who raped them and used them as breeders and concubines. After the abolishment of slavery, ‘old man Corregidora’, who fathered both Ursa’s grandmother and her mother, destroyed all the documents that detailed his cruel treatment of slaves, but according to Ursa’s female relatives, the historical memory of slavery could never be erased if all Corregidora women ‘make generations’ and re-tell the story to their daughters. Thus, ever since she was a little girl Ursa has been taught that she must ‘leave evidence’ in order for future generations to remember the atrocities of their cruel ancestor.

Throughout the novel Ursa struggles to overcome the burden of the memory of her family’s slave past, and at the same time she is trying to cope with the trauma of her personal past and her inability to have children. Her painful past and her own sexual victimization render Ursa unable to feel sexual pleasure and two lesbian characters, Cat and Jeffy, make Ursa wonder about the nature of female sexual desire. Although her infertility robs her of the ability to ‘make generations’, Ursa finds a way of attesting to
the historical memory of slavery through her blues. Singing the blues is not only Ursa’s means of support, but also a way of expressing her pain and getting over her suffering. Twenty -two years after her accident and divorce from Mutt, Ursa is reunited with her first husband. As she performs fellatio on him, Ursa inverses the power relations that have always defined the relationships of Corregidora women and their men.

6.3.2. Ancestral legacy of slavery and communal memory vs. individual experience

The story of four generations of the Corregidora women can also be classified as a neo-slave narrative, because it is rooted in the terrible practice of systematical rape of black slave women during the slavery period. The legacy of slavery is one of the central themes in the novel, which is a testimony of the evils of slavery and of the impact that slave experiences have on present generations of African-Americans. Ursa’s foremothers are committed to the oral repetition of the horrifying tales of their enslavement and sexual exploitation, and they are determined to keep the story of their oppression alive because there are no official narratives that acknowledge their history. They are charged with ‘making generations’ – giving birth to children who will continue the obsessive repetition of the slave master’s atrocities in order to remember the wrongs of the past. However, Corregidora’s victims continue his abuse and re-enslave themselves and their daughters by memorizing the slave-owners atrocities and passing down the horrible history of rape and incest. Although Great Gram and Gram speak vengeance through their stories, their memories of Corregidora’s evils perpetuate his violence.

Simon Corregidora is a paradoxically absent and present figure in the novel. Although he is long dead, the stories of Great Gram and Gram resurrect him. He is an ever present figure in the sub-consciousness of the narrator, and with time all the men in the novel start resembling him. Corregidora is presented as the progenitor of all evil, whose atrocities live on in the memories of the Corregidora women:

Corregidora. Old man Corregidora, the Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger […] He fucked his own whores and fathered his own breed. They did the fucking and had to bring him the money they made. My grandmamma was his daughter, but he was fucking her too (9-10).
Ursa grows up with stories of hate and she is taught that the task of each Corregidora woman is to give birth to a daughter who must memorize, retell and ‘leave evidence’ of the family history shaped by slavery and rape. Telling of the abolition of slavery, Grandma explains the need for this human evidence: ‘the officials burned all the papers cause they wanted to play like what happened before never did happen’ (79).

Ursa is also expected to continue her family legacy and to play the role of the guardian of memory. However, the burden of memory of her ancestral past cripples Ursa. Her consciousness is frozen in the tragic past of Corregidora women that seems to repeat itself infinitely, thus suspending the present and Ursa’s personal experience: ‘It was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora, was her memory too, as strong with her own private memory, or almost as strong’ (129). Her individual, intimate experience of the present seems to be married to her ancestral past, which is at the same time the past of her community: ‘My veins are centuries meeting’ (41).

Ursa’s familial legacy of passing judgment is also responsible for her name. As Melvin Dixon notes, ‘corregidore’ means ‘judicial magistrate’ in Portuguese and observes that Jones makes Ursa ‘a female judge charged by the women in her family to correct (from Portuguese verb corrigir - ‘to make right’) the historical invisibility they have suffered’ (Dixon, “Singing a Deep Song”, 239). Ironically, Ursa in Latin mean ‘bear’. Rendered infertile after her husband pushes her down a staircase, she cannot fulfill her family legacy of ‘bearing witness’, but tries do so through her blues. The only formal name that Jones gives to Ursa’s female ancestors is the slave owner’s name Corregidora. Although the women keep their name as another evidence of their abuse, the name reinforces their sense of enslavement. The lack of Great Gram’s, Gram’s, and Mama’s proper names symbolize the representative nature of their lives and experiences. Hence, they become archetypal figures of black women’s slave experience, and the name Corregidora becomes an emblem of violence, sexual abuse and suffering.

Since Ursa and her mother are not directly affected by the brutality of slave master Corregidora, Ursa has a need to find out about what happened between her parents. This need to know and to feel connected to something urges her to visit her mother: ‘I couldn’t be satisfied until I had seen Mama, talked to her, until I have discovered her
private memory’ (104). Through this visit Ursa hopes to find out who she really is and to understand the force that has kept the Corregidora women connected and dedicated to keeping the family story alive. However, she realizes that the only thing that the three women share is a biological connection based upon reproduction and bearing of female children.²¹⁵

The absence of a paternal figure in the novel highlights the fact that the slavery system and racial inequality prevented black men from assuming many of the privileges of normative manhood as well as central roles in the African-American families. The text delineates the black men’s inability to protect black women from sexual violence they experienced at the hands of whites men, which often resulted in the birth of illicit children and the rise of female-dominated families.

Ursa feels disconnected from the women in her family, because of her inability to have children, but after she talks to her mother she realizes that Mama, like herself, felt this same disconnectedness:

They’d tell me, they’d be telling me about making generations, but I wasn’t looking for no man. I never was out looking for no man. I kept thinking back on it, though and it was like I had to go there, had to go there and sit there and have him watch me like that (112).

Even though Mama is not a victim of rape or incest she succumbs to her family’s historical legacy because she feels that the pressure of the ancestral obligation is stronger than her own desires. Identified by her mothers as a walking womb she believes that her body wants a daughter, while she does not want ‘his fussy body, not the man himself’. Ursa reflects that Mama had: ‘gone out to get that man to have me and then didn’t need him because they’d been telling her so often what she should do’ (101). Denied a sense of self as private and sexual being, Mama always hears the angry voices of her foremothers telling her what to do.²¹⁶

In contrast, Ursa feels removed from the brutality of the slave experience and develops a need to create her own story. She thinks that what happened between her parents is far

²¹⁵ Cf. Dubey, 260
²¹⁶ Cf. Gottfried, 564-565
more important than what happened with Corregidora: ‘What happened to you was always more important. What happened to you and him’ (111). But her mother says that: ‘Corregidora is responsible for that part of my life. If Corregidora hadn’t happened that part of my life never would have happened’ (111).

Throughout the novel Ursa struggles to overcome the trauma of this communal past together with the trauma of her own personal past and present. Since the stories and recollections of three generations of Corregidora women have been passed down to Ursa for her to preserve them, guard them and transmit them, Ursa’s consciousness contains ritualized memories of her Great Gram and Gram’s relationship with Simon Corregidora, her mother’s memories of Martin and her own private memory of Mutt:

My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn’t live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were supposed to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we’d never forget (9).

The fusion of the past and present, which is represented in the novel by the lack of temporal boundaries, makes it difficult for Ursa to recognize boundaries between different women’s stories and experiences, as well as between their bodies: ‘It was like I didn’t know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora’ (184). The historical memory of slavery is mapped onto Ursa’s and Mutt’s relationship. In some instances they become allegorical figures representing slave and slaveholder. The past and present reflect each other until they become indistinguishable.

6.3.3. Sexuality and notions of womanhood

Corregidora reflects on the fact that the institution of slavery and white supremacist ideology degraded black bodies in order to control them. The slave owner Corregidora exerts absolute control over the bodies of his female slaves, and turns their sexuality into a product. He does not only use them as breeders, but he also turns them into his and his friends’ concubines. He first rapes Ursa’s great-grandmother, the African woman, whom Ursa calls Great Gram, and she gives birth to a daughter, Grandmama. Then Great Gram flees the plantation for some time, and when she returns for her daughter, she finds out
that she was subjected to the same treatment and that she is pregnant with Corregidora’s child. On Corregidora’s plantation slaves are only objects of exchange, and ‘a woman’s vagina equals her economic value and that economic value equals her essence’ (124). The text reinforces the identity of Great Gram, who is regarded by Corregidora’s as his ‘gold pussy’ or ‘little gold piece’, as an abused piece of goods, and her daughter’s identity as an incest victim.

Although Ursa and her mother were born in Kentucky, the memory of the horrible experience of abuse and incest leaves a visible scar on their identity and sexuality. The Corregidora women’s self-definition as tragic victims of slavery leads to what Gottfried calls their ‘political self-objectification’. Although Great Gram and Gram transform, they do not fully abandon Corregidora’s objectifying code. According to their logic, a woman is solely defined by her womb and her ability to bear children. Unfortunately, their political agenda severely limits their sexual identities. Initially defined by Corregidora as sexual objects, they are now self-defined as wombs. For them, woman’s body is no longer a sexual commodity, but it becomes a political commodity and sexuality is hidden beneath the political veil. 217

Ursa’s problems of self-definition as a woman are largely influenced by her family legacy and the identification of the Corregidora women with motherhood. Her foremothers saw child-bearing as their only source of power. When her infertility robs her of the ability to ‘make generations’, something that she is taught is the essence of being a woman, Ursa is tortured by the ‘silence in [her] womb’ and the idea that she can no longer fulfill her ‘purpose’. Her family code of objectification reinforces Ursa’s belief that she is somehow flawed as a woman and leads to her inner conflict. She cannot ignore the ‘space between [her] thighs. A well that never bleeds’ (99) and fears that she has lost her identity as a woman together with her womb. Her sterility precipitates a multidimensional crisis in Ursa’s consciousness. She feels sexually neutered, emotionally betrayed, and above all, psychologically traumatized. Her inability to reproduce also influences her relationship with men.

In Corregidora, Jones emphasizes the importance of the body and explores sexual pleasure and desire in the lives of the victimized black women. Sexual violence and

---

217 Cf. Gottfried, 559-561
their need to bear witness significantly limit the Corregidora women’s sexual pleasure. Gottfried notes that their repression of sexual desire for political reasons can be read as a response to slavery’s control of black woman’s sexuality.\footnote{Cf. Gottfried, 562-564}

In her analysis of sexual desire of the Corregidora women Gottfried refers to the works by Gayatri Spivak and Hélène Cixous and argues that Jones’ physically oriented focus upon female sexual pleasure and the novel’s emphasis upon the body tie in with Spivak’s and Cixous’ perspectives on female desire.\footnote{Cf. Gottfried, 562-564} Spivak’s statement that ‘the man retains legal property rights over the product of a woman’s body’ intersects with the experiences of black slave women and the novel’s emphasis upon property and production. As Spivak notes, a system of ownership leaves no room for sexual pleasure. She adds that the recognition of woman’s sexual desire alongside their value as reproducers is one way of empowering them as subjects of pleasure rather then passive objects.\footnote{Cf. Spivak, 78-152}

Corregidora’s violent legacy has also limited Ursa’s sensation of sexual desire and pleasure. Although she does not fully renounce her familial identity of woman as a womb, she is not able to realize her sexual self until she resolves this legacy of abuse. Unlike her mothers, Ursa focuses her sexual pleasure upon her clitoris rather then her womb. She localizes her desire at one point by realizing that: ‘\textit{those times he didn’t touch the clit, I couldn’t feel anything}’ (89). She does not feel any real sexual desire and she knows that she cannot please a man. This fact blows up in Ursa’s face when she catches Tadpole in bed with another woman and when he wounds her with: ‘She’s got more woman in her asshole then you in your cunt’ (89).

Spivak’s and Cixous’ observations about the specificity of the female body are also useful for understanding Ursa’s located reclamation of sexuality. Spivak claims that sexual pleasure has nothing to do with reproduction and she describes the clitoris as something suppressed in the interest of defining ‘woman as sex object, or as means or agent of reproduction’ (Spivak, 151). In centering her pleasure on her clitoris, which Spivak identifies as ‘women’s excess in all areas of production and practice’ (Spivak, 82), Ursa exceeds both Corregidora’s racist appropriation and her female ancestor’s
political objectification of the female body. In doing so, she takes her first step toward claiming her entire body from initially racist, politically motivated agenda. In contrast to Spivak, Cixous locates female sexual pleasure all through the woman’s body rather than focusing only just one point - the clitoris.\textsuperscript{221} Her emphasis upon the multiplicity of female pleasure works against Ursa’s narrowing sense of sexual desire. Although locating her pleasure on the clitoris is a sign that Ursa rejects her female relatives’ self-imposed definition of women as wombs, as long as Ursa confines her pleasure to a singular location, she is still limiting her desire, and defining her sexual self in narrow terms. The difficulty to feel sexual pleasure haunts Ursa throughout the novel, and is largely responsible for destroying her two marriages.

Although the enforcement of a singular, fixed meaning upon their sexuality would seem to eliminate desire from the lives of Corregidora women, Jones’ careful questioning about their simultaneous feelings of hate and desire suggests that the issue of pleasure and hatred is not so clear. Jones examines the issue of the coexistence of pleasure and abuse both through the slave women’s relationship to Corregidora and Ursa’s relationship to Mutt. Mama tells Ursa that her husband Martin ‘had the nerve to ask what I never had the nerve to ask […] how much was hate for Corregidora and how much desire’ (132). While Ursa’s mothers speak freely about sexual abuse, sexual desire appears only in the seams of their narrative. Ursa often puzzles over her Great Gram’s and Grandmama’s desire: ‘What did they feel? You know how they talk about hate and desire. Two humps on the same camel? Yes. Hate and desire both ridding them’ (102). The slave-master relationship, which is a critical aspect throughout the novel, is directly related to the desire-hate paradox. In the novel love is presented as an ambiguous, contradictory emotion, a combination of pain, pleasure, serenity and hostility. Jones comments on the use of the theme of contradictory emotions in an interview with Claudia Tate:

I’m always interested in contradictory emotions or emotions that coexist. I do think that there is probably a kind of sexual tension in Corregidora both in the historical and in the personal sense (Tate, “Interview”, 145).

In hinting that desire can exist even in the most abusive situations Jones offers a radical idea that can be bothering to some readers.

\textsuperscript{221} Cf. Cixous, 309-320
6.3.4. Homosexuality and Homophobia

The other rather radical and rarely discussed issue that Jones’ touches upon in *Corregidora* is the issue of homosexuality. Although the representation of homosexual desire in *Corregidora* is peripheral to the plot, the fact that there are two lesbian characters in the novel puts light on another aspect of black female sexuality and explores the multiple aspects of female desire.

Sexual relationship of the teenage girl Jeffy and the middle-aged woman Cat Lawson is never described explicitly, but it is marked in rather subtle and allusive terms. Jiffy is Cat’s neighbor and when her mother is working night shift, she stays with Cat. When Ursa briefly moves into Cat’s house after her accident, Jeffy tries to make a sexual advance upon Ursa while Ursa is sleeping. Although this incident scares Ursa, she stays at Cat’s house until one night she overhears Cat and Jeffy having a sexual conversation and what seems to be sexual activity. The discovery of Cat’s and Jeffy’s sexual relationship precipitates Ursa’s move out of Cat’s house, and intensifies her homophobia. Streeter suggests that Ursa’s phobic reaction to lesbian desire can be understood in the context of the ‘insecurity that being barren causes her to feel vis-à-vis her own sexuality’ (Streeter, 23), but it is also a consequence of general black homophobia.

In the decades of 1930- 1960, during which the story takes place, homosexuality was a taboo topic among African-Americans. People generally viewed homosexuality as an abnormality, or a sin, and they preferred not to discuss that topic. These negative attitudes to homosexuality as a deviance which were inherent in many black communities are also to be found in *Corregidora*. In the text, homosexuality is pathologized through is its association with a range of negative metaphors such as insanity, abusiveness and death, or it is simply not named. For example, Cat says that she knew Jeffy was ‘like that’ (39) and that’ they say Jeffy’s daddy, something was wrong with him’ (43). This statement shows how black homophobia made people believe that homosexuality is not normal and that it is a consequence of some sort of illness.
Streeter notes that the reason why Jones deploys lesbianism in the novel is to highlight the constraints of heterosexuality for women, providing a critique of their enforced passivity in intimate relationships with men that feeds woman’s subordination in gender relations. Lesbian sexuality is represented as providing liberating options for women who want to be active sexual agents. Cat explains her sexual affair with Jeffy as a consequence of ‘being tired of feeling like a fool in bed’ with men (64) and Ursa reflects on the problem of the male expectations of women being sexually passive when she says: ‘a man always has to say I want to fuck, and the woman always has to say I want to get fucked’ (89). She remembers how she also felt like a fool on one night she spent with Mutt:

Yes I know what it feels like […] I remembered that night I was exhausted with wanting and I waited but he didn’t turn toward me and I kept wanting him and I got close to him up against his back but he still wouldn’t turn to me and then I lay on my back and tried hard to sleep and I finally slept and in the morning I waited and still he didn’t and I thought in the morning he would but he didn’t and I waited but the clock got him up and he went off to work and I lay there still waiting […] Yes, I could tell her what it feels like (64-65).

Although Ursa rejects lesbianism as an alternative to homosexuality, she can understand how Cat feels because of her own frustration about a woman’s prescribed passive role in sexual relationships with men.

### 6.3.5. Female victimization and domestic violence

The problem of black women as passive agents leads to the discussion of another important issue in the novel, namely Ursa’s responses to patriarchal power. In *Corregidora* Jones offers not only a strong critique of sexism, female victimization and domestic violence, but also explores how sexual violence committed against black women during the slavery period affected later generations of African-American men and women.

---

222 Cf. Streeter, 21-23
The way in which Ursa’s husbands assert their patriarchal power and constrain Ursa’s rights in order to achieve sexual domination over her is analogous to the way in which whites secured their supremacy during and in the aftermath of American slavery. Corregidora’s definition of black women as a piece of property surfaces in Ursa’s first marriage. Possession based on sexual domination informs her relationship with Mutt Thomas, in a similar way in which Corregidora’s relationship with his female slaves was based on ownership. The fact that Mutt views Ursa as his sexual possession and in this respect resembles Corregidora, who totally disregarded the humanity of his slaves, can be observed in Mutt’s sex talk: ‘Let me in between your legs. It ain’t pussy down there, it’s a whole world. Talking about his pussy. Asking him to let him see his pussy. Let me feel my pussy’ (46). Great Gram’s identity as her slave-owner’s ‘gold piece’ resonates in Ursa’s identity as her husband’s ‘pussy’.

As we can see the language of the characters is often vulgar and abusive. Although early in their marriage, Mutt’s use of vulgar words embarrasses Ursa, soon she learns ‘to flare back at him with his own kind of words’, telling him, ‘I guess you taught me. Corregidora taught Great Gram to talk the way she did’ (153). Thus, violent words such as ‘fuck’ and ‘cunt’ are taught to the novel’s victimized women by their abusers. Although the circumstances of Mutt’s and Ursa’s relationship are different from the exploitative master-slave relationship of Corregidora and his ‘lovers’, Mutt speaks to his wife as if she were a whore. Mutt’s verbal abuse, in addition to his general insensitivity, contributes further to Ursa’s victimization and her inability to feel and express love.

Caught up in her family’s political agenda, Ursa initially allows Mutt to identify her as his possession, but only up to a certain degree. The tensions arise when she tries to resist his patriarchal prerogatives. The novel opens with Ursa’s description of the ongoing argument with Mutt because she will not give up her singing and allow him to support her. Mutt resents Ursa’s independence and becomes increasingly possessive and jealous of the men that listen to her sing in Happy’s Café. Mutt is conscious of Ursa’s sexual attraction and he cannot stand the men’s eyes filled with lust that watch her singing. In the exchange that precedes her fall two of them argue about the way men look at her. Mutt says: ‘I don’t like those mens messing with you’. Ursa protests by saying: ‘Don’t nobody mess with me’, to which Mutt replies: ‘Mess with your eyes’ (3). This dialogue

---

223 Cf. Gottfried, 560
illuminates the importance of the gaze and the way that looking alone may constitute an act of aggression. Mutt continually equates men’s looking at Ursa with sexual provocation: ‘He’s all eyes, too, and probably all dick’ (157). One reason why he maltreats Ursa, even though he loves her, parallels the reason why Tea Cake beats Janie. His jealous nature and his inner fears make him lose control. His possessiveness and his desire to dominate his wife result in catastrophic consequences. In a jealous act of rage in the opening passage Mutt Thomas pushes Ursa down the stairs, killing her fetus and leaving her sterile.

However, Mutt’s violent behavior can only in part be explained by his possessiveness. His violence is also an effect of the long history of enslavement and institutionalized racism experienced by African-Americans, particularly in regard to their sexuality. The fact that black slave men could not achieve or maintain their manhood due to their inability to protect black women from sexual violence is reflected in Ursa and Mutt’s relationship as well as in the relationship of Ursa’s parents. Martin also beats Mama until her face is blue and discolored, which painfully echoes the history of abuse in her family. Her identity as a victim and his own slave ancestry reinforce Martin’s sense of powerlessness and frustration as a black man. The tendency of men in the novel to take on a resemblance to Corregidora sheds light on both the sexual basis of racism and the tendency that oppressed culture sometimes have to take on the traits of imperialist hegemonies. The hierarchical relationships between women and men in the novel suggest that even within the communities born out of slavery there are relationships of enslavement.

Ursa expresses ambivalence in her response to patriarchal power through her relationships with men. On the one hand, she resists Mutt’s insistence that she should stop singing, but on the other hand, shortly after she rejects Mutt, she enters into a relationship with her employer Tadpole out of her need for stability. In response to his declaration of love and his proposal of marriage she reflects: ‘I said nothing. I was thinking I’d only wanted him to love me without saying anything about it [...] I was grateful he didn’t ask me the same question’ (55). It is obvious that Ursa’s marriage is not a product of love, but of Ursa’s insecurity and her desire to feel sexually attractive to men after the loss of her womb. Although Ursa’s friend Cat warns her of the danger of

---

224 Cf. Streeter, 21-22
marrying too quickly, commenting that Ursa seems to be moving into the relationship with him because he is ‘the first man that had looked at her (25), Ursa feels that she needs a man in order to feel more secure. She is rushing things with Tadpole because she is afraid that the hysterectomy has compromised her femininity and sexuality.

Initially, Tadpole really seems to care for Ursa; he helps her get through the difficult period when she comes out of hospital and keeps Mutt away from her, banning him from Happy’s, but their relationship changes as he notices that Ursa is unable to experience sexual pleasure with him. His male pride is hurt, and he gets involved with another woman, Vivian. When Ursa finds the two of them together, she realizes that one reason why her relationships with men always prove a disaster is because she is preprogrammed not to trust men. Her destiny has been linked with the destiny of her foremothers, and it seems that she cannot escape the curse of the Corregidora women.

Caught up in their family’s political agenda and marked by their history, Ursa and her mother can neither accept nor refute their foremothers’ rigid belief that all men are rapists and all women are victims. Historically, this code of binary oppositions between male and female has fed racist as well as sexist objectification. The men who marry Ursa and Mama try to fight against their imposed definitions as rapists, but their frustration over their wives inability to feel sexual pleasure leads to domestic violence. Mama’s familial agenda and her frigidity lead first to Martin’s frustration and then to violence. Mama knows that she is a subject to the violence engendered by Corregidora’s atrocities and she explains to Ursa: ‘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’ (120-121).

Ursa acknowledges the brutality in both her foremothers’ lives and her own and recognizes that her familial agenda and her family’s memories distort her sense of self and infect her marriages. Instead of refuting violence, she tries to transform it into art. Although Mutt and Tadpole are certainly accountable for their behavior, their victimization of Ursa is also a consequence of her inability to feel anything. In order to liberate herself from this circle of abuse and victimization that her mothers have passed
onto her, Ursa must resolve both the racist brutality of her mothers’ lives and the limitations of their response to that brutality.\textsuperscript{225}

\textbf{6.3.6. Colorism and relationship between color and sexuality}

In this novel Jones focuses on the mulatta characters, racially mixed women who are symbolic figures in literature because, as a product of miscegenation, they represent both the possibility of escaping the stigma of blackness and the traumatic experiences of enslavement and rape.\textsuperscript{226}

In previous chapters I already discussed the issue of ‘colorism’, the conferral of privilege based upon skin shade, physical features, hair color and hair texture that has been a topic of many historical and sociological discussions as well as one of the central themes in a number of African-Americans literary works, including Hurston’s \textit{Their Eyes Are Watching God}. Historically, there is no doubt that possessing light skin color and Caucasian features has been advantageous for many African-Americans. As a result of the skin color hierarchy people who could pass for white were often privileged in mainstream society and often inhabited higher social classes than other blacks.

As we have already seen by the example of \textit{Their Eyes}, there has been a tendency among both whites and African-Americans to regard lighter shades of skin and straighter hair as more beautiful. However, one should not forget that one of the great ironies of colorism is that the lighter skinned one is the more likely to be a product of sexual abuse. The paradox between the brutal history of slavery and sexual exploitation of black women and the physical beauty of the mulatto is at the core of Ursa’s story.

Although Ursa’s father was a brown-skinned African-American, with her light skin and long, fine, dark red hair, she resembles her mother, her grandmother and her great-grandfather Corregidora. Since standards of beauty are strongly influenced by colorism, her community views her as a very attractive woman. Even though one might expect Ursa to delight in her physical attractiveness, she in fact despises her light skin, because it is a living testimony of the atrocities that have been inflicted upon her ancestors by the

\textsuperscript{225} Cf. Gottfried, 564-565

\textsuperscript{226} Cf. Streeter 1-2
slave owner. At one point in the novel Ursa stares at a photograph of herself, realizing how her skin color determines her resemblance to her mother and grandmother:

I realized for the first time I had what all those women had. I’d always thought I was different. Their daughter, but somehow different. Maybe less Corregidora, I don’t know. But when I saw that picture I knew I had it. What my mother and my mother’s mother before her had. The mulatto women. Great Gram was the coffee bean woman, but the rest of us… (60).

It is also very interesting to examine the ways in which colorism influences notions of sexuality. For example, the word ‘red’ that is often used in descriptions of Ursa’s physical appearance is infused with sexual meanings. According to Caroline Streeter, in African-American communities the words ‘red’ and ‘redbone’ refer to skin and hair that are brown with reddish cast. These descriptive color terms point to the race mixture and have a multiethnic valence. When used to describe women, ‘red’ and ‘redbone’ indicate assertive sexuality, embodied by the type of female whom other women disapprove of.227 While men mostly see Ursa as an object of their sexual desire, women ostracize her and regard her as sexually provocative. Her physical appearance is read by other women as a threat, a fact that is made clear to Ursa by the local women during one of her visits to her hometown in Kentucky:

You red-headed heifer. That’s what that woman down in Bracktown called me. I wasn’t even studying her man. He looked at me, I didn’t look at him […] the last time I was in Bracktown, I went to the Baptist church with mama. Who’s that? Some new bitch from out of town going be trying take everybody’s husband away from them (72-73).

The fact that some African-Americans were trying to control the color of their offspring and ‘lighten up their race’ through marriage is evident when dark-skinned Sal Cooper explains to Ursa: ‘My mother married a light man so that her children could have light skin and good hair. But look what happened’ (72). However, in Ursa case the ‘bleaching of the race’ was not a conscious and deliberate act. The skin color of the Corregidora women is just a further evidence of the legacy of the slave-master’s sexual domination over the black women’s bodies. Her female relatives teach Ursa that: ‘they burned all the documents, Ursa, but […] we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that’s left to

227 Cf. Streeter, 5-6
bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood (72). Their skin and their mixed-blood is a visible scar of slavery and abuse.  

6.3.7. Power of voice and blues

The theme of finding the voice to express a self-defined black woman’s standpoint which is prevalent in both Jacobs’ narrative and in Hurston’s novel is equally important in Jones’ work. We know that historically sexual objectification not only constrained the sexual desires of black women, but also silenced their voices. Gottfried indicates that: ‘When a woman’s voice and power are equated solely with her reproductive capacity, she is rendered silent and powerless if she will not or cannot bear children’ (Gottfried, 567). Corregidora’s system of slavery tried to silence the voices of black women. However, Corregidora women undermined this silence through their political agenda of vengeance and through their oral narrative. Gottfried adds that Jones’ choice of an oral art form for her narrative shatters the silence of a black female identity.  

Although her sterility renders Ursa unable to ‘bear witness’ and pass down the story to the next generation, she finds a way of ‘leaving evidence’ of her familial narrative through the medium of the blues. By singing the blues, Ursa shatters her enforced muteness and finds her voice. It is a testimony of both the historical pain inflicted upon her family as well as her own pain and the brutality of love inflicted upon her. The words that she sings reflect her power of speech, because each word expresses her own emotions and calls her thoughts into being. This power can be traced back to what Janheinz Jahn refers to as the ‘concept of Nommo - the magic power of the word- as being the very basis of music’ (Davis, Angela, “Black Women and Music”, 6).

Although the blues is at the core of Ursa’s being, it seems that her connection to it becomes even deeper after the accident. Maybe precisely because she is barren, her blues is wonderfully prosperous. While staying at Cat’s and recovering from the hysterectomy Ursa begins singing again: Trouble in my mind I am blue, but I will not be won’t be blue always (44). Voicing her sorrow at the loss of her womb, she finds comfort in her blues. Hearing her sing, Cat comments on the transformation of Ursa’s voice:

---

228 Cf. Streeter 5-18  
229 Cf. Gottfried, 567
Your voice sounds a little strained that’s all. But if I haven’t heard you before, I wouldn’t notice anything. I’d still be moved. Maybe even moved more, because it sounds like you been through something. Before it was beautiful, too, but you sound like you been through more now (44).

Cat is moved not only by Ursa’s voice but also by her expression of pain through the blues. Joyce Pettis describes Ursa’s expression of the blues as ‘a transmutation of [her ancestral] sorrows and suffering as well as an indication of her own. The altered quality of her voice constitutes a barometer of her degree of pain’ (Pettis, 794).

Unable to have children and fulfill her charge to make generations, Ursa immerses herself in the blues as a way to ease her pain and come to terms with her family history. For her, the blues is at the same time a healing force and a vehicle that allows her to bear witness of her own life and suffering, thereby bearing witness to her family legacy. The blues becomes Ursa’s ‘surrogate daughter who bears witness to both Corregidora’s legacy and Ursa’s will to free herself from the tyranny of historical oppression’ (Tate, “Ursa’s Blues Medley”, 141). It fills her emptiness and allows her to reconcile with the emotional estrangement created by the loss of her womb. By singing her song she gives shape to an emotional response that might have otherwise been turned inward and become destructive. She bears witness to her ancestral past and gives life to her grief while at the same time she comes to terms with her place as the bearer of the Corregidora legacy and takes the first steps towards healing.230

Describing the blues condition in Shadow and Act, Ralph Ellison notes that the attraction of the blues lies in the fact that it expresses ‘both agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit’ (Dixon, “Review”, 72). For Ursa, however, the blues is much more than just her way of repeating the story of abused black women and articulating her own emotions of pain and rage. Her art is the medium through which she empowers and redefines herself. By singing the blues she separates herself from other Corregidora women and finally succeeds in seeing herself not as an empty womb, but as a powerful blues singer. Her blues frees her from the burden of her family’s incestuous past, which is not her own: ‘They squeezed Corregidora into me and I sung back in return’, and achieves her final victory: ‘Look at me, I am not Corregidora’s daughter’ (62).

---

230 Cf. Speller, 26-27
In the blues Ursa is searching a source of healing as well as a level of commonality with her listeners. She acknowledges her pain, absorbs it, and invites her listeners to share in her pain:

_They call it the devil blues. It ride your back. It devil you._ I bit my lip singing. I troubled my mind, took my rocker down by the river again. It was as if I wanted them to see what he’d done, hear it (50).

Her ‘song-story’ is the story of many and also her own private narrative. If we look at blues songs in general, we can see they express black communal experience and articulate shared wants, desires and sorrows of an entire people. The blues has developed out of the call-and-response patterns of the work songs, which have been described as a ‘complex interweaving of the general and the specific’ and of individual and group experience. It represents either communal historical events, or the present conditions of black social existence. Speller notes that through each line Ursa doles out a little bit of her pain, and her emotion, allowing this emotional exorcism to somehow become a communal experience. By sharing her pain with her audience Ursa ‘calls out to the magical powers of communal understanding that are couched deep in the blues’ (Speller, 28).

Ursa’s songs have another level of meaning. If we consider the blues songs of the women blues singers, we realize that traditionally they did not only articulate the contradictions of black displacement and the conditions of their social existence, but their songs were also a part of the sexual discourse within the black community. Women’s blues was the popular cultural embodiment of the differing interests of black men and women and their struggle for power and domination. While in some of their songs women blues singers voiced their feelings of loneliness or grief because of their broken heart or loss of their lover, in many of their songs they celebrated their own sexuality and articulated the responses of black women to male violence and infidelity. The typical response to male brutality, mistreatment or sexual abuse was the rejection of a man, rage or revenge against him.

The women blues singers such Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith were considered icons of female sexual power. In their songs they asserted women’s independence and sexual

---

231 Cf. Carby, “It Just Be’s”, 251
autonomy and voiced the possibility for women to end their condition of sexual and financial dependency and liberate themselves from patriarchal dominance. By breaking sexual taboos and asserting their own sexual desirability in self-referential and provocative lines, they undermined mythologies of phallic power, and established woman-centered sexual demands.  

Some female blues singers voiced their need to sing the blues so that women would feel that they could ‘explicitly celebrate their right to conduct themselves as expansively and even as undesirably as men’ (Davis, Blues Legacies, 21). This desire of the blues women to portray themselves and to give other women the courage to see themselves as sexual beings is the result of generations of African-American women being objectified and treated as possession. Dubey states that: ‘Ursa’s blues song […] seeks to express a black feminine sexuality that can at once contain and transcend the contradictory history of American slavery’ (Dubey, 252).

Ursa’s blues songs are very symbolical. In order to express her frustrations and her pain Ursa sometimes uses typical motifs and metaphors present in the blues songs, such as those of travel, train and bird woman. Carby notes that in the more traditional song the train and its seductive sounds, speed and power articulate the possibility of movement and symbolize freedom and the power of mobility. However, when Ursa sings about: ‘this train going in the tunnel, and nobody knew when the train would get out, and then all of a sudden the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist’ (146), she sings about sexuality. The fact that every man in the novel views Ursa as a visually appealing object of desire to be penetrated is suggested through the images of ‘holes’ and openings throughout the novel. One of such images is also the image of train tunnel, while other ‘hole’ images are those of nostrils, vaginas, mouths and wounds. In another song Ursa sings about ‘the bird woman who took this man and never returned him’ (146). In Dixon’s opinion, the imagery here suggests that women must use their power in order to wrench their identity and emotional independence from the degradation and inferiority that their history and their men have subjected them to.

6.3.8. Female liberation and empowerment

---

232 Cf. Carby, “It Just Be’s Dat Way Sometime”, 251-260
233 Cf. Speller, 29
234 Cf. Carby, “It just Be’s”, 253
235 Cf. Dixon, “Review”, 73
Ursa breaks her silence when she achieves self-realization, discovering her voice in the blues. She recognizes her power and frees herself from her painful past. Ursa’s assertion of voice is visible not only in her blues songs but also in her inner monologues, in which Ursa describes herself in metaphoric terms:

I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk. Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their temples. I will pluck out their eyes.

(77)

Here Ursa shows that in music she found her voice, and that she will not let anyone silence her again. Her growing sense of power can also been detected in her imagined dialogues with Mutt, in which she voices her dissatisfaction with her estranged husband:

“Come over here, honey”
“Naw”
“I need somebody”
“Naw”
“I said I need somebody”
“Naw”
“I won’t treat you bad”
“Naw”
“I won’t make you sad”
“Naw”
“Come over here, honey, and visit with me a little”
“Naw”
“Come over here, honey, and visit with me a little”
“Naw” (97-98).

In this repetitive pattern of imperative, pleading, and response, Ursa confronts her own sexual desire and conflicts of power and powerlessness.

In the ambivalent and shocking closing scene of the novel, Ursa resolves her legacy of abuse by embracing sexual pleasure. She finally separates herself from the long cycle of Corregidora women that endured pain, and she liberates herself to tell her own story. After twenty-two years Mutt and Ursa unite and Ursa’s thoughts are violent even during the moment of sexual intimacy. At this moment, she finally realizes which ‘mysterious act’ her great-grandmother performed on Corregidora:
It had to be sexual, I was thinking, it had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora. I knew it had to be sexual: “What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can’t get her out of his mind the next?” In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was, and I think he [Mutt] might have known too A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks skin (184).

Oral sex replaces oral transmission and although there is a perpetuation of a traumatic past, it is a repetition with a difference. During fellatio Ursa realizes that having the power to render a man sexless, releases her from pressure she feels because of her familial legacy and her own infertility. Fellatio’s disempowering closeness to emasculation allows Ursa to invert the power relations through this sexual act. She retreats from castrating Mutt, but the fact that she knows that she has the power to do so, liberates her. She reevaluates her role as victim by acknowledging her power to hurt.

The simultaneity of tenderness and brutality in this scene is, according to Gayl Jones, the basis of what she calls ‘blues relationships’ between men and women, i.e. ‘relationships involving brutality’. She explains that though the emphasis here is on brutality, the brutality enables the characters to recognize what tenderness is.236 Ursa recognizes the pattern of mutual abuse:

[…] was what Corregidora had done to her, to them, any worse then 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 (184).

She breaks this destructive pattern in that she opts for pleasure and not for pain. She says: ‘I wanted it too […] I got between his knees (184), and thereby she reclaims her desire and her body and empowers herself by becoming an active sexual agent.237

In the final call-and-response dialog of the novel it is evident that Ursa has finally found her own voice apart from the Corregidora legacy. Ursa and Mutt are in the Drake

236 Cf. Tate, “An Interview”, 147
237 Cf. Gottfried, 566-567; Speller, 33-34
hotel, as they were in the beginning of the novel, but now they are not the same people anymore:

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”
“Then you don’t want me.”
“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”
“Then you don’t want me.”

He shook me till I felt against him crying. “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither.”

In this pivotal moment Ursa finally reclaims her sexuality from her family’s political agenda.

6.3.9. **Ursa as an unconventional heroine**

*Corregidora* is a radical and complex novel which instead of presenting resolved identities and harmonious communities that constitute ‘positive images of race’ presents fragmentation and multiplicity in black identities and communities. Ursa is not a stereotypical character. She does not undertake traditional woman’s work, but pursues her creative potential as a blues singer, a profession that places her at the margins of what is considered appropriate behavior for a black woman. Although Jones claims that: ‘None of my women are really heroines except in the sense that they’re the storytellers and the central figures’ (Tate, “An Interview”, 145), I would say that she is just being modest about her ability to offer a new kind of black female hero in African-American literature. Due to her contradictory character and her ambiguity Ursa is certainly not a typical representative of black womanhood, but she is a revised black heroine who is complex, unforgettable, and above all human.

The fact that Ursa is a blues singer is not a coincidence. Female blues singers have always occupied privileged but also ambivalent positions in African-American society. In her essay “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime” Hazel Carby explores the sexual politics of women’s blues and comments on the role of the blues singers within the black culture. She contends that the figure of the female blues singer has been reconstructed in fiction, poetry, drama, and art as an embodiment of social and sexual conflicts within black community. In many African-American fictional works, among them also in *Corregidora*, female blues singers appears as mythologized figures that reflect upon
conventional and unconventional sexuality and explore various possibilities of sexual existence.\textsuperscript{238} In that sense, Ursa is a representation of a woman who attempts to control her construction as sexual subject. Through the medium of the blues she voices black female sexual desire. By taking her sexuality out of the private and into the public sphere she breaks through the boundaries of respectability and convention. Her strong physical and sensuous presence is one of the crucial aspects of her sexual power. Thus, she reclaims the female body and sexuality from being an objectification of male desire to a representation of female desire. Painting a portrait of Ursa as a woman artist who sings the blues, Jones moves beyond the cultural and literary stereotype of black women as passive victims.

Streeter argues that by exploring the racially-mixed woman’s sexual agency and by deploying representations of lesbian desire, \textit{Corregidora} suggests a different role for mulattas. Through the depiction of Ursa Jones re-images the mulatta and offers a critique of race pride that relies upon stable categories and normative behaviors. By doing that, the novel moves beyond the racist standards of colorism and stereotypes of mulattas as troubling objects of desire in African-American communities.\textsuperscript{239} Dixon notes that with her skill and the strength of her prose Gayl Jones created a very new literary voice that lifts Ursa from the obvious to the unique and artistic character. Ursa provides a new identity of a black woman, who no longer wants to accept the conventions of race and sex that others have placed upon her.\textsuperscript{240}

\textbf{6.3.10. Language, narrative technique and use of blues aesthetics}

Gayl Jones’ first novel \textit{Corregidora}, published in 1975, is also not a conventional novel in terms of narrative technique. It does not revolve around a chronological sequence of events and it has rather little sense of fluidity of time, as I shall explain in detail later on. The plot line is non-lineal, and the dramatic action seems inconsequential, except in those instances in which it possesses psychological implications. Whereas this might suggest that the novel may lack cohesive structure, it actually possesses conscious

\textsuperscript{238} Cf. Carby, “It Just Be’s Dat Way Sometime”, 251-259
\textsuperscript{239} Cf. Streeter, 2-26
\textsuperscript{240} Dixon, 72-74
design and shows the narrative craft of Jones as storyteller. The carefully controlled creation of storytelling is characterized by the author’s determination to relay the story entirely in terms of the mental processes of the main character without any authorial intrusion. Although this technique has made many reviewers uneasy, Jones insists that her task is to record her observations with compassion and understanding and not to be judgmental.

The story is told in the first person by the main protagonist Ursa Corregidora and the narrative texture is like a screen unto which the consciousness of the narrator is projected. Narrative focus falls not on the relating of external events but on dramatizing Ursa’s inner conflict and the painful memories of her foremothers. The story of Ursa’s internal drama and her conflict with the slave heritage is mainly rendered through her recollections. Charged with passing down her family’s history of slavery and abuse, Ursa takes the role of a storyteller. In order to deliver her own story and retell the story of her foremothers she uses traditional storytelling techniques. Jones herself commented on her use of this type of narration in an interview with Roseanne Bell:

One of the things I was consciously concerned with was the technique from oral storytelling tradition which could be used in writing. A story is told to someone in much the same way when Ursa sings. She picks out someone to sing to. The book has layers of storytelling. Perceptions of time are important in oral storytelling transition in the sense that you can make rapid transitions between one period and the next sort of direct transitions (Bell, 285).

Through the use of flashbacks, dreams and stream of consciousness the reader enters Ursa’s mind and gets to understand her mental anguish. The characters are moving backward and forward through Ursa’s recollections and consequently, the remote present, the recent past and the dramatic present merge together.

Tate explains that the narrative structure of Corregidora is composed of a series of concentric stories which are related in a series of inner monologues. Ursa’s monologues which contain Great Gram and Gram’s ritualized recollections of their relationship with Simon Corregidora are italicized and rhetorically organized, while non-italicized monologues which concern external events and especially Ursa’s own private memory

---

241 Cf. Tate, “Urea’s Blues Medley”, 139-140
242 Cf. Tate, “An Interview”, 142
of the relationship with Mutt are related without strict rhetorical organization. These monologues reflect discontinuity of time, units of thought are fragmented and images appear in rapid succession, violating normal spatial and temporal limitations.  

This use of language and blues devices is crucial in Corregidora. In focusing on the sounds and repetitions of words, Jones calls attention to Ursa’s verbal nature and offers what she calls an ‘up-close perspective’, a direct relationship ‘between the storyteller and the hearer’ (Harper, 692). If one compares the language and the narrative devices of Corregidora with those of Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, one can recognize some similarities. The language of Jones’ novel is also a combination of Standard English and black vernacular speech, and just like Hurston, also Jones uses call-and-response patterns. She combines improvisational storytelling with sophisticated formal concerns. In the novel’s dialogues, there is a pattern of blues speech that Jones calls ‘ritualized dialogue’ (Harper, 699), which is characterized by repetitions and which emphasizes the ways in which language can transcend a rigid identity.

Jones has a very gripping and recognizable style. In his review of Corregidora for The New Republic Darryl Pinkney described the novel as ‘a fiercely concentrated story, harsh and perfectly told […] Original, superbly imagined […] genuinely imaginative’ (“Corregidora Editorial Reviews”, 3). Throughout the novel Jones uses devices of blues aesthetics such as call-and-response, repetition, redundancy and improvisation in order to tell the story of four generations of African-American women. In his review of Corregidora, Dixon writes that Jones’ novel heralds ‘a new continuum of the blues’ physic historiography and aesthetics’ (Dixon, “Review”, 72). According to Speller, by taking the underlying story of the Corregidora women and adding to that melody Ursa’s personal story, Jones transforms the novel into the equivalent of a blues improvisational piece. Ursa’s way of singing resembles the storytelling of her gram and great gram. Each time when the story is retold something is added to it, and in the same way Ursa adds to her songs every time she sings them. This adding mimics the way in which blues songs are typically improvised. The improvisation serves as a way for the blues singer to make the story or the song more real to the listener, thereby fostering a communal bond between the storyteller and the listener, or the blues singer and the audience.  

---

243 Cf. Tate, “Ursa’s Blues Medley”, 140
244 Cf. Speller, 30-31
The communal bond between singer and audience is also exhibited through the use of call-and-response, i.e. 'spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interactions between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s statements, or ‘calls’ are punctuated by expressions, or responses from the listener’ (Collins, 261). In the blues, this call-and-response is used as a way for the blues singer to sing about a shared personal experience. Jones use of call-and-response and repetitive patterns is most obvious in Ursa’s dreams and the imagined dialogues that she has with Mutt, which resemble blues songs, as well as in the final ritualistic dialogue.

Jones’ choice to use the devices of blues aesthetics enables her to depict ‘the simultaneity of good and bad’, since blues music ‘doesn’t set up any territories. It doesn’t set some feelings off into a corner’ (Harper, 700). Here she foreshadows Houston A. Baker’s observation about the blues, whose ‘instrumental rhythms suggest change, movement, action, continuance, unlimited and unending possibility’ (Baker, 8). The presence of the blues singer in the novel evokes the author’s presence as storyteller and blues singer herself. As Janice Harris notes: ‘Blues singing permits a remarkably open expression of being oppressed […] in its linguistic license and freedom to improvise’ (Harris, 4-5). Jones sings the blues when she insists upon improvising and asking difficult, even unpopular questions about black women’s sexuality. She creates a ‘blues novel’ whose multiple forms of oral expression and acceptance of both ‘good and bad’ allow the author to speak freely.
7. Conclusion

When a woman writer belongs to a community which, due to its race, has had a marginal status within the dominant culture, and which has been denied cultural, economic and political authority for four hundred years, she is expected to write in the name of that community. It is assumed that her works express the common problems and experiences of her race and she is regarded as a representative of her oppressed group. Although the works of the three authors that I have chosen to deal with in this study indeed express the problems which African-American people had to face in the course of history of the United States, they also focus on the delineation of the particular experiences of African-American women as individuals or a group that has been triply oppressed on account of their race, class and gender.

Examining these works I have come to a conclusion that although the sexuality discourse in African-American literature is still partly limited, the development towards a more open depiction of black female sexuality has taken place over the course of years. After their voices were silenced, ignored or considered of minor importance for a very long time, black women finally decides to raise their voice and tell the world the story of their emotional suffering and their sexual oppression.

As we have seen by the example of Jacobs’ narrative, the early African-American works often focused on the woman’s role as mother because of the negative stereotype of the black woman as mammy that pervaded in American society and white literature of the nineteenth century. Jacobs went one step further in her depiction of black woman as mother and shoved its complexity in that she presented herself as a heroic slave mother. Although in her narrative Jacobs never directly addressed the issues of rape but rather implicitly pointed out to the problems of sexual exploitation of black slave women, her work was nevertheless an important step towards a less restrained discussion of sexuality of black women. Jacobs’ narrative was the first work written by a former slave which dared to discuss the problems of black female sexuality. One must keep in mind that in the nineteenth century American society respected strict moral codes and that Jacobs revealed as much information about her sexual life as it was possible during that time.
Hurston, however, allowed herself to speak about issues of sexual awakening and sexual
desire more implicitly, but these issues were still hidden under the veil of symbolism
and under the layers of poetic language. It would take some more time for black women
to have the courage to speak up about their feelings of sexual frustration and pleasure,
abuse and victimization. Finally in 1970s Jones touched upon taboo topics that were
rarely seen in the works of African-American female authors. She addressed the issues
of homosexuality, of simultaneous feelings of love and hate, and she did that more
openly then one would expect after analyzing the first two works. *Corregidora* is the
best proof that black women are lifting the veil of their silence, and that they are trying
to make the world understand the true nature of black woman that goes way beyond any
racial or sexual stereotype.

During my examination of the three works by African-American female authors, I
encountered some parallels as well as differences between them. All three writings
express the torments that come with being black and female, but the female protagonists
respond to their oppression in different ways. While Linda Brent finds refuge from her
enslavement in free Northern states and in her motherhood, Janie Crawford tries to find
happiness in her relationships with men. Once she realizes that she the key of her self-
fulfillment lies in her own hands, she liberates herself from the limitations of patriarchal
society and finds her own voice. The most interesting and also the most conflictive
character, in my opinion, is Ursa Corregidora, because she is the most human one. Ursa
is stuck between two worlds: the ancestral world of her family’s slave past and her own
bluesy world of pain over the loss of her uterus. She escapes from her troubles in the
blues song, and demonstrates that the power of words can make the cruelest reality seem
more bearable.

I also discovered many similarities between the three female protagonists. All three of
them are exceptional women. They are strong but sensitive, vulnerable but brave,
threatened by their marginal position in the society, but willing to stand up for their
rights and beliefs. They are unconventional heroines who do not accept the present state
of things and try to change their position in order to discover who they really are and
reach happiness. Although they live in different historical epochs and their social
positions are slightly different, what they have in common is their search of freedom,
love, voice and self-fulfillment.
Another parallel between the three heroines is that all of them are mulattas, women of mixed blood who are regarded as symbols of black beauty and are therefore attractive to men, but envied and despised by women. On the other hand, the fact that they stand on the color line between black and white races makes their difficult position even more complicated because they often have to face identity problems and cope with the history of sexual exploitation.

At some point of the story all three characters fall in love but unfortunately none of them has an opportunity to live happily with a man that her heart has chosen. Their relationships with men are very problematic and their sexual victimization is one of the crucial issues in all three writings. Although these women show an enormous capacity to love, they are mostly maltreated and used by their men who regard them as piece of flesh and who do not respect them. They all face hard times and have to endure pain, abuse and harassment both on the part of men and on the part of the social system that puts them down, but they do not give up and in the end they prove that they are stronger than any of those men. Sabrina Sojourner once made a statement considering black women’s sexuality that sums up both what I and the works of the authors that I have chosen are trying to prove:

I want to recognize a woman’s right not to share or express her sexuality and be able to do so without fear of reproach […] it can be a place of healing, of intense spiritual growth, of caring and loving oneself sexually—whet ever we need and want this space to be, it can be (Jewell, 177).

Despite the fact that in the past few decades, literary achievements of African-American women authors have been extensively analyzed and the quality of these works has finally been given more critical attention, the body of work that focuses on the issues of sexuality of black women is still relatively small. The achievements of Africa-American female authors are still partly neglected and the sources and documentation about the history and the lives of black women are still limited. New patterns are needed for the study of black female experience and I hope that my study will be a small contribution to the investigation of problem of African-American female experience and that it will in some way increase the understanding of the complex relationships of gender, race and class in the lives of black women.
8. Bibliography

8.1. Primary literature


8.2. Secondary literature

8.2.1. Books


**8.2.2. Articles**


Hurston, Zora Neale. “How it Feels to Be Colored Me”. In: I Love Myself When I Am Laughing…and Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive A Zora Neale


9. Index

A
abolitionism 63, 68
abolitionists 35, 63, 64, 65, 70, 88
absence 8, 13, 17, 27, 28, 44, 115, 143
Addison Gayle J 60
aesthetics 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 107, 138, 164, 165
African-American experience 9, 10, 15, 28
alienation 55, 124
American dream 10
Amy Post 63, 64, 66, 88, 92
ancestral past 142, 156
anthropology 33, 100, 101
antislavery movement 68
art 31, 60, 66, 103, 106, 107, 152, 156, 161
Aunt Jemima 52
authenticity 70, 75
authorial intrusion 163
authority 12, 44, 45, 74, 75, 76, 82, 93, 94, 95, 123
autonomy 46, 51, 52, 60, 71, 73, 78, 84, 92, 96, 113, 120, 121, 125, 129, 158
Awkward 101, 107, 111, 112, 119, 124, 132, 169, 176
B
Baartman 31
Baker 165, 169
Baldwin 134, 139
Bambara 15, 133, 138
Barrett 20
Beale 21, 22, 173
Berzina 101, 107, 111, 112, 119, 124, 132, 169, 176
Black Arts Movement 15, 59, 60
black displacement 157
black family 38, 43, 45, 46
black female body 30
black female experience 13, 14, 15, 18, 52
black feminist theory 29
black feminists 16, 17, 18, 22, 29, 30
black masculinity 23
black vernacular speech 164
black womanhood 19, 21, 22, 27, 28, 47, 48, 50, 52, 77, 79, 83, 161
black women’s bodies 154
black women’s experiences 18, 22, 26
blacksness 12, 34, 57, 58, 59, 60, 105, 137, 153
blues 103, 138, 140, 141, 142, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 164, 165
bondage 25, 38, 67, 69, 72, 74, 80, 95
Bontempes 67, 68, 69, 75, 169
bourgeoisie 56
Brooks 13, 15, 16, 28, 175
Brown 54, 56, 68, 75, 104, 126, 132, 134, 173
brutality 40, 54, 69, 72, 82, 107, 139, 142, 143, 152, 155, 157, 160
C
call-and-response 111, 125, 157, 160, 164, 165
Carby 13, 14, 17, 18, 20, 23, 50, 70, 71, 78, 81, 82, 84, 86, 91, 95, 97, 157, 158, 161, 162, 170, 174
Christian 52, 53, 54, 130, 131, 133, 139, 170
Civil Rights Movement 26, 50, 66
Civil War 24, 65, 68, 72, 77, 115
Cixous 146, 147, 174
class oppression 19, 22
collective memory 9
colorism 153, 154, 162
community 23, 40, 43, 51, 55, 110, 113, 122, 123, 124, 125, 127, 128, 131, 132, 137, 138, 139, 142, 153, 157, 161
consciousness 10, 30, 104, 112, 118, 125, 139, 141, 142, 144, 145, 163
collection of the gender 18
conventions 31, 66, 70, 78, 81, 83, 88, 89, 93, 95, 97, 162
Cooper 14, 21, 24, 154
Corregidora 130, 134, 136, 137, 139, 140, 141, 142, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 169, 174, 175, 176, 177
D
davis 26, 43, 48, 135, 155, 158, 170, 174, 177
degradation 21, 37, 38, 40, 76, 78, 80, 82, 158
Dill 10, 40, 41, 43, 45, 46, 47, 51, 174
Dixon 142, 156, 158, 162, 164, 174
dominant culture 9
double jeopardy 21, 22
Douglass 24, 63, 68, 70, 72
Du Bois 10, 13, 26, 104, 106, 170
dual oppression 18, 21
Dubey 143, 158, 174
E
Eatonville 99, 101, 105, 109, 110, 111, 117, 121, 122, 124, 125, 127, 128
Ellis 32
Ellison 11, 107, 156
emasculating 42, 160
empowerment 96, 98, 113, 127, 137, 138, 158
empowerment, 96, 113
enslavement 21, 84, 90, 139, 141, 142, 151, 153
equality 17, 25, 24, 26, 41, 48, 51, 104, 114
erasure 11
estrangement 156
exclusion 8, 9, 12, 17, 27
F
family 18, 37, 38, 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 61, 80, 90, 92, 109, 139, 140, 142, 143, 145, 150, 151, 152, 155, 156, 161, 163
Faucet 14
female body 30, 146, 162
female desire 146, 148, 162
femininity 17, 27, 28, 35, 42, 48, 51, 53, 57, 59, 128, 152
feminist discourse 17

178