

BLEEDING ROOTS:
THE ABSENCE AND EVIDENCE OF
THE LYNCHED BLACK FEMALE BODY

by

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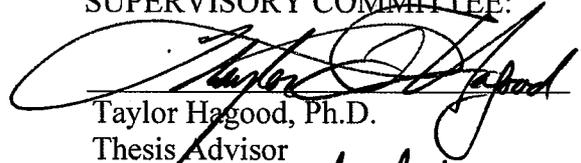
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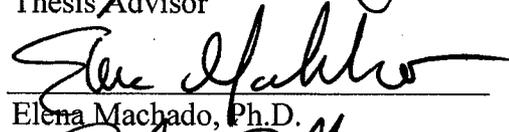
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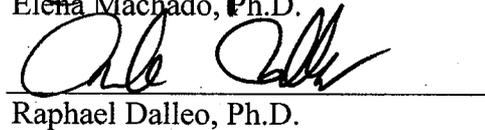
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Taylor Hagood, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

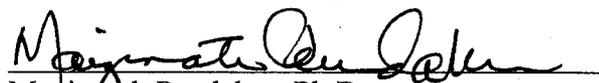
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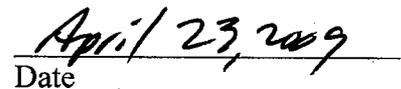

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ABSTRACT

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Scholars of the literary depictions of lynching have given the majority of their attention to the emasculation of the black male, but the representation of the black female lynch victim has been overlooked. My thesis examines the deaths of black women that had the same effect as lynching practices used against men. This specific literary form of lynching will concentrate on two plays: Mary P. Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919) and Marita Bonner's *Exit: An Illusion* (1929) and two novels by Toni Morrison, *Beloved* and *Sula*. Considering the contours of these black female deaths we can expand the traditional definition of lynching to include the black female lynch victim. The aspects that make her death a lynching are encased in more subtleties than a traditional definition of lynching allows for, and less visible.

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORY OF LITERARY LYNCHING

“In one sense the black female victim is the ultimate metaphorical version [...] of American literature and art: cut off, abused, misunderstood, and all the more truthful and beautiful for it”

Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism*

Black women and black men have worked to resist all forms of oppression and violence from the era of slavery to the present. Chief among these forms is lynching. Regardless of the many treatments of lynching in history and fiction, however, most accounts of the history of lynching have silenced black women by omitting the representations of violence against the black female body. Between the years 1882 and 1927 there were approximately 4,951 people lynched in the United States. 3,513 were black and 76 were women. While history provides us with the bare facts about these murders, the representation of the black female lynch victim is lacking in the arena of literature and criticism. My goal in this thesis is to discuss and examine the deaths of black women that had the same effect as lynching practices used against men but that do not fit the traditional definition of lynching. My examination of this literary form of lynching will concentrate on the work of Mary P. Burrill, Marita Bonner and Toni Morrison.

Masculine Legacies of Lynching

For years the emasculation of the black male through lynching has been a site of much investigation and intrigue, not for the grotesque pleasure of literary voyeurism, but to be studied and preserved in the memoirs and symbolism of American history. As contemporary readers, we can and do associate specific items in close hate-filled proximity with the legacy of lynching; items such as the noose, burning crosses, white robes, etc. all of which are symbols of how the black male has been tortured and abused, mainly by white racist patriarchy. The Harlem Renaissance and preceding generations were filled with writers and activists who were ready with pen in hand to take up the cause. Some of the renowned authors who adopted this cause were Charles Chestnutt, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, William Wells Brown and Langston Hughes. While these men were more than up to the challenge of taking on a whole era with their revolutionary writings, it was women who were the backbone of the anti-lynching movement. For example, Ida Wells-Barnett was a chief anti-lynching crusader, editor and journalist. Her efforts were crucial in creating a transcontinental awareness to the plight of the black people both men and women. She called upon white women to take responsibility and speak out against the false white male chivalry that became the corner stone of lynching justification. Relentless in their search for justice, Ida Wells-Barnett and others continued their quest for justice through various venues.

Although historians and sociologists have documented both male and female lynch victims, scholars of the literary depiction of lynching have been more one-sided in their approach. For generations scholars of lynching have favored socioeconomic explanations as the basis for their discussions on lynching and its position in history.

An example of this research is Tolnay and Beck's *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*. In their book they investigate the political, social and economic factors that contributed to the 2,805 victims of lynching deaths in ten southern states. Tolnay and Beck's method is a comparative one. Information about multiple lynchings from multiple categories is used to decipher patterns within the mob violence; W.F. Brundage also previously employed this method in his *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930*. Others compose collections of detailed historical documents about lynching, such is the case with Ralph Ginzburg's *100 Years of Lynchings* and Christopher Waldrep's *Lynching in America: A History in Documents*. On January 14, 2000, came a shift from stated fact to a more visual approach with James Allen's *Without Sanctuary* that serves as a pictorial wake-up call for the realities of lynching in the United States. All of these treatments of lynching, however, focus almost exclusively on lynching as something perpetuated against black men.

Trudier Harris's *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* explores the historical and literary parallels of lynching again focusing primarily on the lynching of black men. Harris examines how this ritualized form of violence is portrayed in African American literature. She views lynching as more than a consequence of socioeconomic control: indeed, she sees it as the final step in the emasculation of the black male. Harris focuses on the mythic black beast rapist, the stereotype that locked black men into the persona of insatiable sexual creatures that wanted to "rape" white women. The black male writers she analyzes not only reflect historical reality but "identify personally with their representations of that

reality” (xii). Specific writers that Harris deals with are Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. Harris concentrates on Wright’s use of literal and metaphoric lynching and how she believes his preoccupation with the subject is a direct result of him writing during the 1920’s and 1930’s when the concern over the brutality of lynching was at its peak. When Harris speaks of metaphorical lynching she is referring to actions and situations that render the black male powerless, physically and psychologically, but are not actual lynchings.

Another critic who examines Ellison and Wright and the male perspective of lynching is Carol E. Henderson in her book: *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*. Henderson revisits the black male psyche and argues to view the work of these male writers in “terms of the landscape of the body” (86). She draws from Harris’ assertions that lynching was designed to show that black people had nothing for white people to respect, and that black males were made to feel that they had no right to, and incapable of, taking care of their families. Henderson argues that through the writings of Wright and Ellison the ritualized actions of violence are refigured and transformed. Through these literary “testimonies” the black male body is elevated to symbolic proportions because “the lynched and castrated figure—silenced during the ritual itself—is again given a voice” (87). Restoring voice to the black male body is how Henderson negotiates the reconstruction of the black male identity.

Castration is an inescapable reality when treating literary lynching. It is far more than a physiological occurrence it is a loss of dignity, ability and complete humanity. The emasculation of black men was a vital theme in the writing of African

American male writers who feared the political and literal castration themselves.¹ The ineffectualness of the black male goes beyond his relationships with white society. Historically, black men in relationships with white women would fear deadly retaliation; however, even black men in relationships with black women were at times forced to become subservient to white men. One example of this scenario is in Jean Toomer's "Blood Burning Moon." The story depicts two men, one white, Bob Stone, and one black, Tom Burwell, who are both seeking the affection of a black woman named Louisa. Bob Stone initiates a fight with Tom Burwell when he catches him with Louisa. Tom kills Bob then is caught and burned by an angry white mob. The fight not only lead to the lynching of Tom, but emasculated the small society of observers: "Negroes who had seen the fight slunk into their homes and blew out lamps" (Toomer 35). The lynching of Tom Burwell is an unpleasant but not an unfamiliar consequence during this turbulent period in literary history.

Observers such as those involved in Tom Burwell's lynching were not uncommon; in fact the spectacle was a major element of traditional lynching. Jacqueline Goldsby's *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* works to uncover the "cultural logic" of the spectacle of lynching through the representation of novels, poems and short stories alongside case studies of historical victims such as Emmett Till. She defines "cultural logic" as being a matrix, the cultural practice of spectacle that was made more visible through American modernity. Goldsby rationalizes that lynching thrived during the nineteenth century

¹ See Wright's "The Ethics of Jim Crow."

because the death “toll of African American lynch victims could be both shocking and ordinary, unexpected and predictable, fantastic and normal, horrifying and banal” and the violence could be integrated “secretly” in the routine of American life (27).

Goldsby makes groundbreaking assessments and contributions to lynching scholarship, but her analysis and definition are fed through the same gendered vein as Harris, Henderson, and their predecessors. The components that make up the classification of lynching are numerous. They range from castration to shooting, hanging to burning, dragging to drowning and so on. Jacqueline Goldsby asserts that although “the term ‘lynching’ has been a part of America’s lexicon of violence since the late-eighteenth century, the ranges and types of violence referred to by the term vary widely” (10). The definition of lynching has evolved through the decades, but the tradition of assigning lynching as a male specific crime has not changed. Critics are steadfast in their determination to keep the identities of lynching and rape exclusive to the assigned gender categories.

Unsung Heroes: Women and Lynching

As can be seen in the forgoing, most of the critical attention given to lynching, from historical, sociological and literary perspectives has been focused on the black male. As a result, the cases of black female lynching have been largely overlooked. In fact it is to the detriment of our historical understanding of lynching that the lynchings of black women are not considered. Instances of female lynch victims were recorded and mentioned by those involved in the anti-lynching movement, but as a catalyst to help debunk the theory of the mythical black beast rapist. The NAACP and other anti-

lynching organizations dedicated a great deal of energy to purging the vision of the black rapist from society. The time devoted to black female lynch victims by these various organizations was in effort to try and label white lynch mobs as barbaric for slaughtering women rather than heroic for ridding the world of black men. John Markovitz's chapter on "Antilynching and the Struggle for Meaning" presents examples of how James Weldon Johnson in a memo to support the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill mentions female lynch victims, "*From 1889 through 1921 64 women (11 white, 53 colored) have been lynched. Certainly, no charge of rape could have been the cause of these lynchings*" (22). Johnson's statement is an indication of the common sentiment in dealing with black women who were lynched. Rarely were these women mentioned without the rhetoric about "exploding" the allegations of the black beast rapist. The memos, pamphlets and advertisements that bore their statistics were an effort to eradicate the notion that lynching black men was chivalrous, not to defend the women who had been lynched.

Nevertheless, the occurrence of the black female lynch victim is fact not speculation. Several female victims are listed in pictorial and government documents such as *100 Years of Lynching* and *Without Sanctuary*. The most discussed example of a black female lynch victim is that of Mary Turner. Kathy Perkins opens her introduction to *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women* with the explanation of one of the most notable female lynch victims:

In May, 1918, a white plantation owner in Brooks County, Georgia got into a quarrel with one of his colored tenants and the tenant killed him. A mob sought to avenge his death but

could not find the suspected man. They therefore lynched another man named Hayes Turner. His wife Mary Turner, threatened to have members of the mob arrested. The mob therefore started after her. She fled home and was found there the next morning. She was in the eight month of pregnancy, but the mob of several hundred took her to a small stream, tied her ankles together and hung her on a tree head downwards. Gasoline was thrown on her clothes and she was set on fire. One of the members of the mob took a knife and split her abdomen open so that the unborn child fell from her womb to the ground and the child's head was crushed under the heel of another member of the mob; Mary Turner's body was finally riddled with bullets (15).

Much has been written about this occurrence. In Leon Litwack's *Trouble in Mind* he documents observations made and published by the Associated Press that "Mary Turner had made 'unsavory remarks' about the execution of her husband, 'and the people, in their indignant mood, took exceptions to her remarks, as well as her attitude'" (289). Christopher Waldrep's chapter "Limits of Progressive Reform" documents Stephen Graham's experience with the lynching of Mary Turner. Graham a Scottish travel writer remarked that the point that struck him most was the "pleasure that which was taken by the mob in the sufferings which it was causing" (198). Historians and sociologists were not alone in finding Mary Turner's lynching fascinating. There were also several literary mentions.

In her 1920 short story “Goldie,” Angelina Grimké depicts the lynching of Mary Turner in a more gothic manner. The scene was revisited when “Victor Forrest [who] is a college graduate who lives in a northern city” visits his sister and brother-in-law in the rural south (Goldsby 37). Forrest arrives only to discover “two terribly mutilated swinging bodies’ hanging lifeless above ‘a tiny unborn child, its head crushed in by a deliberate heel” (Goldsby 37). Grimké’s story was published in the *Birth Control Review*. Critics have speculated that this version of the lynching within a more gothic setting would be more palatable for a white readership.

Another literary depiction of Mary Turner is written by Jean Toomer. In *Cane* there is a version of Mary Turner’s death in the story “Kabnis.” The character of Layman recounts the lynching of Mame Lakins to Kabnis:

They killed her in th street, an some white man seein th risin in
Th rise her stomach as she lay there soppo in her blood like any
cow, took an ripped her belly open, an th kid fell out. It was
living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So he jabbed his
knife in it an stuck it t a tree. An then they all went away
(Toomer 92).

This retelling is footnoted in *Cane* as an actual lynching account as told by members of the NAACP. Toomer historicizes the lynching of Mame Lakins/Mary Turner to center his argument of a racially turbulent south. This lynching is introduced and frozen as the plot continues. Unlike Grimké’s version of Mary Turner in “Goldie,” the recreation in “Kabnis” is fleeting and serves more as support for the previous lynching in “Blood Burning Moon.” The two lynchings provide the structure that frames the

inhumanity of the racist ideals in the south. The lynching of Mame Lakins was not meant to serve as an analysis surrounding the social and psychological effects of having a black female lynch victim, but as a socio-political transition into the rest of the story.

Numerous accounts of Mary Turner have been cited, quoted, reproduced and “honorably” mentioned, but sadly that is where the discourse stops. Male targeted murders and social injustices have been labeled or reconfigured as lynching, while women who suffered under the same or similar conditions have been ignored. Considering the ambivalence toward the acknowledgement of the black female lynch victim I feel that it is crucial to categorize certain black female deaths as lynchings that do not fit into a traditional definition of lynching. By considering the contours of these black female deaths we can expand the traditional definition of lynching to include the black female lynch victim. The aspects that make her death a lynching are encased in more subtleties than a traditional definition of lynching allows for, and less visible.

In the chapters that follow, therefore, I work to expand the definition of lynching to include specific physical and psychological black female deaths that would otherwise not be classified as lynching cases. Chapter 1 focuses on the black female lynch victim through the genre of drama. Mary P. Burrill and Marita Bonner are pioneers in the era of black playwrights. Their plays deal with socio-economic and socio-political issues that were faced in the black community. The plays *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919) and *Exit: An Illusion* (1929), what I classify as neo anti-lynching plays, share two common factors that outline the impending lynchings. First the

setting is inside of the black home and second the idea of black masculinity and manhood is challenged. Most lynching dramas written by black female playwrights use realism of a domestic setting to depict everyday life of the black family, but what is unique about my analysis is that I reconstruct the home to serve as a symbolic vehicle of death that is driven by societal constructs of racially motivated hatred. While the domestic setting is a similarity that the two plays share the challenged black masculinity is on opposite sides of the equation to further solidify my analysis.

Toni Morrison has commented that race and lynching are metaphorical; keeping her comments in mind, chapter 2 is focused on two of her novels. While chapter 1 focuses on lynching within the private sphere in this chapter I will focus texts of Morrison's *Beloved* and *Sula* around the tradition of spectacle lynching. *Beloved* encompasses the most visual similarities of a traditional lynching through flash backs, symbolism and the traumatic effects on the female psyche. *Sula* allows me to examine the aspect of spectacle within the constructs of black-on-black lynching.

CHAPTER 1

THE FINAL ACT: LYNCHING BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

“Lynching dramas provide fertile ground for creating a new approach to the study of American theatre and culture. They offer us a fuller picture of how theatre reflects the intersection of artistic and social movements”

Judith L. Stephens, “Lynching Dramas and Women: History and Critical Context”

Various anti-lynching activists used the stage as an alternate means of protest. While black playwrights’ themes varied from the fantastic to the serious the lynching drama remained grounded in the historical. Individual playwrights examined lynching through a variety of different lenses such as themes of oppression and injustice. Historical basis added credibility to their cry for justice and call to action upon the pressures of the post Jim Crow era. Judith Stephens notes that “[l]ynching plays are both a dramatic record of racial history in the United States and a continuously evolving dramatic form that preserves the knowledge of this particular form of racial violence and the memory of its victims” (4). Contributors to the genre carefully focused on American motifs and characters to depict the severity of the incidents and the locale. The earliest recorded black playwright is Williams Wells Brown; his play *The Escape; Or, A Leap for Freedom* (1858), made references to lynching but did not solely base the premise of the play around the subject. Our contemporary understanding of the lynching drama did not begin with Williams Wells Brown, but

began when specific lynchings became the central theme of plays. Through the medium of lynching plays black playwrights, particularly women, were able to showcase not only their talent and intellect but a sense of political and cultural awareness that was pivotal in the fight for equality. Black female playwrights held a unique position within the genre of the lynching drama. In her paper “Lynching Plays by Mary P. Burrill and Angelina Grimké,” Kathy Perkins notes that “When black women first picked up the pen as playwrights they chose to speak out against the atrocities of lynching” (4). Black women were at the forefront of the anti-lynching tradition in all areas literary, campaigning and speaking. Ida B. Wells-Barnett is the face of the crusade against lynching; her associations were pinnacle in creating awareness surrounding the injustices of lynching.

Notably one of the most recognized black female playwrights is Georgia Douglas Johnson. Although a prominent playwright, poet and dramatist, none of her anti-lynching works were ever performed in her life time. Author of “approximately twenty plays, making her one the most prolific of black women dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance” (Brown-Guillroy 7). She wrote lynching plays such as *Safe* (1990), *Sunday Morning in the South* (both the black and white church versions, 1974), *Blue-Eyed Black boy* (1989), and *And Yet they Paused*. Her plays were crucial to the development of the genre of lynching drama; they evoked sentiments of frustration, sympathy and anger.

Another pioneer in the genre was Angelina Grimké, she offered a sentimental view point of the consequences of lynching and the effects it has on the family. Commenting on Grimké’s play *Rachel* (1916), Kathy Perkins suggests that the play

“deserve[s] a special place in American theatre for revealing the psychological impact of racism on the lives of black Americans” (Perkins 24). *Rachel* details the lives of the Loving family. Mrs. Loving reluctantly explains how Rachel’s father and eldest brother were lynched. Rachel vows never to have children and bring them into a world of hatred and death. The sentimentality in *Rachel* does not go unchallenged by contemporary critics. The play has been characterized as having “no conflict and [...] a main character who approaches an authentically tragic identity” (Perkins 24). It is necessary, as most critics understand, to approach and evaluate Grimké within her historical context. Taking into consideration her background and classical education she created characters as she saw necessary for the turn of the century. As dedicated as these black female playwrights were, however, none of their lynching dramas focuses on black women.

In this chapter I am less concerned with the presence of the lynched black female body as I am with the social constructs that make it possible for the lynching of the black female to take place. Traditional lynching practices generally occurred within the public space; however, the lynchings I examine in Mary P. Burrill’s *They That Sit in Darkness* and Marita Bonner’s *Exit: An Illusion* occur in the private, domestic space of the black home. The premise of lynching plays usually revolves around the family dynamic in which women are head of the household. The women are often flawed due to an ailment either physically or emotionally that leaves them incapable of physically stopping any violence around them. Audiences are left to believe that women play a supporting role in lynching and are the main actor in rape

which leaves a wide gender separation within the specifics of the crime. But what about when women are the lynch victims?

Birthed into Darkness: Castration of the Black Family

They That Sit in Darkness appeared in a special issue of the *Birth Control Review* titled “The New Emancipation: The Negroe’s Need for Birth Control, As Seen by Themselves.” Burrill’s revolutionary play stresses the importance combating the government that perpetuates the cycle of poverty through institutionalized racism. Although current scholarship on *They That Sit in Darkness* treats it as a straight forward play on the ills of the government, it actually offers a powerful example of a black female lynching.

They That Sit in Darkness was written for the September 1919 edition of the *Birth Control Review*. The play is a commentary on government policies that prohibited black women the right to birth control and the detrimental effects these laws had on the black community. The play depicts a day in the life of a poor black family living in the rural south. The characters are: Mrs. Malinda Jasper, a mother of ten children; Lindy, her eldest child; Miles her second oldest child; and Miss Shaw, the white visiting nurse. Mrs. Jasper and Lindy, while attempting to control the six rambunctious, and malnutrition-ed children, labor over the laundry of Mrs. Jasper’s employer. The Jasper family’s seemingly only chance for betterment is through Lindy, who is preparing to go to Tuskegee on a scholarship. Mrs. Jasper is obviously ill, her heart has been weakened after the birth of her last child and Miss Shaw comes to check in. After the two women briefly discuss birth control, Mrs. Jasper dies off stage

and Lindy is forced to give up her dream of pursuing an education at Tuskegee to stay at home and raise her siblings.

Mrs. Jasper's death was a legally organized form of lynching, not in the tradition of a spectacle lynching with a mob of angry white men and women, but in the most private sense. The institution of the American government had created and sanctioned laws that proved to be a disservice to African Americans. Laws that overlooked the welfare of poor blacks in southern society in effect were a movement for cultural genocide. The Comstock Act of 1873 stated that contraceptives were obscene and illicit and made it an offense to distribute through the mail or across state lines. In 1916 Margret Sanger opened the first birth control clinic and was arrested 10 days later. The fight for legal birth control continued. The general fight for women's rights to birth control was coupled with the segregation laws of Jim Crow. Sanger's controversial statements and reasoning for black women to be included in the battle was that if "ethnic mothers had birth control they could rise to the scientific standards of motherhood and prevent disease, delinquency and dependency among their children" (McCann 57). If these laws had remained in place, the probability of any African American obtaining any type of credible success beyond minstrelsy would have been negligible.

Government restrictions and laws were contributing to preventable deaths throughout the black community. Billie Holiday expressed "that her father had been lynched by the South's racism" because of the Texas segregation laws (Perkins 17). The laws in 1937 prevented her father Clarence Holiday from being admitted into a white hospital and as a result he died from a preventable death. Billie Holiday who

gained recognition with her 1939 rendition of Abel Merepool's poem "Strange Fruit" was deeply concerned with the plight of lynch victims and the death of her father prompted her to look beyond the physicality of the "black bodies swinging in the southern breeze" to understand the larger picture. Through that larger picture of lynching is how we have to analyze a drama such as *They That Sit in Darkness*. In order to position *They That Sit in Darkness* as a neo anti-lynching drama I must outline how Mrs. Jasper and the black family are lynched. Three ways that connect these events to create a lynching are: segregation and socio-economic conditions of the black community, the castration of the black male, and absence of the black male.

Malinda Jasper's lynching takes place in stages, which have already been set in motion as *They That Sit in Darkness* begins. The context and impoverished situation of the Jasper family is a symbolic representation of the castration of the black family as a whole. In her chapter "Fear of Castration: A Literary History" Trudier Harris notes that throughout the American literary tradition one of the favorite images is "the powerless old darky who [...] appears seeking favors from his master or praising his goodness" (Harris 29). This classic stock character represents the ineffectualness of the "tamed" black male who poses no threat to the white patriarchy. Malinda Jasper's lynching relates to the castration of the black family because she is the foundation of the family; all things are built upon her strength and presence in the absence of the father. Without her the family structure does not survive. Without money for food they rely on the white Nurse to help sustain the family on scraps. Lindy says to her mother "p'rhaps Miss 'Liz'beth will bring some milk fo' de baby when she come in lak she

did yestiddy” (Burrill 69). Mrs. Jasper has to seek the kindness of her nurse in order to provide food for her new born baby without having anything for the rest of the family. Mrs. Jasper’s character mirrors Harris’ image of the powerless “darky” because regardless of all of her efforts to provide for family she is subjected to looking for “praise” and “favors” from her nurse. When outside perceptions of the black family and community are tainted and weakened and the community begins to accept these stereotypical personas as fact then suffer psychologically.

While the female figures may be drawn as the antithesis of the stereotypical black female, unfortunately, Burrill’s male figures reinforce the negative stereotypes. The women maintain the household on their own. Burrill’s plot makes it clear that without the support of a balanced household the aspirations of upward mobility are unrealized. The strength between the black man and the black woman has systematically been broken down through the cultural trope of lynching. This extralegal process of conditioning black society into complacency has further assisted the cycle of marginality, vulnerability and poverty. The two adult male characters in the play are Miles, the sixteen year old son, who is described as “*a good-natured but shiftless looking boy,*” and Mr. Jasper, who is never seen or heard on stage (Burrill 69). From the view point of the audience, Miles is unaffected by his family’s poverty. Miles’ guitar is a phallic symbol. The blues tradition has the guitar categorized as “virtuous bodies to be defended at all cost, antipodes of the shattered degraded bodies produced by lynching” (Gussow 140). The pleasure that Miles received from strumming his guitar may have been the only comfort he could maintain within a

world of limited options. When Mrs. Jasper's condition takes a turn for the worst Miss Shaw sends Miles to the home of his neighbors to call the doctor. He returns to find his mother deceased:

Miles. (*Rushing in breathlessly, with his guitar under his arm.*)

De Hopes ain't—

Miss Shaw. (*Placing her hand tenderly on his shoulder.*) Never mind now, Miles, your mother is dead.

Miles. (*His guitar crashing to the floor.*) Dead!

Burrill makes a point to show the reader that Miles in each scene is guarding his guitar. When Miss Shaw tells him that his mother is dead he lets go, his manhood is shattered. Miles is castrated, powerless and vulnerable. Historical lynching took place when mobs felt as though they needed to teach black society a lesson and to force them to remain in a stagnant static position. Miles is forced into a state of cloudy subservience without his mother and his guitar. As Miles goes to be at the bed-side of his deceased mother Miss Shaw says to him "Come, Miles, you had better bring in the clothes before it gets dark" (Burrill 73). He does not attempt to override Miss Shaw's command and pay his respects to his mother; all that is left is duty and no emotion. There is no mourning process for the poor. The government sanctioned segregated society that Burrill wrote for did not nurture and support the idea of black family. The black man was continually being stripped from the home and emotionally unavailable for his family. Burrill shows us that as a result of the lynching of Mrs. Jasper, who has been simultaneously the mother and father figure, the family is left vulnerable.

Miles is castrated and recycled into the system as another eunuch laborer harmless, ineffectual and removed from the home.

A key component to have a black female lynch victim is the absence of the male protector. Mrs. Jasper's husband is briefly mentioned but is not present. Not only is he unavailable to the audience he is unavailable to the family, Brown-Guillroy states that "one strong point that Burrill makes is that poverty strips many black parents of the ability to nurture their children, especially spiritually" (9). Mrs. Jasper is forced into her fatal circumstances because she has to be everything to her family—supplemental provider, emotional stabilizer, mother and father. Miss Shaw is not surprised when Mrs. Jasper tells her that her husband is not present, because history dictated that the common perception of the black man was that "[h]e is not expected to feel for his family in the same way that whites care for theirs" (Harris 35). Slavery began this problematic cycle; men and women were sent to the fields to work and toil until they were exhausted and only had enough strength to eat, sleep and produce more children, more children that were born into the commerce of the slavery system.

The institution of slavery had a stake in the health of their slaves, now that slavery ended the government played a new role. Miss Shaw, the white nurse symbolizes the governmental authority that sends her to provide service. The role of Miss Shaw is to uphold the state sanctioned laws that "prevents health care professionals from providing information that would save women's lives," black women's lives specifically (Demastes 97). Miss Shaw's position and lack of willingness to break the law spoke to the larger problem of silent bystanders. The

manner in which Burrill outlined Miss Shaw's internal struggle to go against judiciary standard "underscores the complex network of unseen authorities that conspire to maintain the darkness of impoverished lives" (Demastes 97). Some would say the underlying point that Burrill makes is that even though Miss Shaw is prohibited by law from advising Malinda on the methods of birth control she could have made the choice in preventing another systematic lynching of a "coloured sister." The context in which the situation was handled in the play most likely attributed for whom was the intended audience. The readers of the *Birth Control Review* were a predominately white readership and if Burrill had blatantly lambasted the only white character in the story her plea would have fallen on deaf ears and may reaffirmed the black female stereotypes running rampant in current society. Miss Shaw was just as at fault as the government and the other white nurses that Malinda speaks of:

Miss Shaw. (*Gently.*) God is not punishing you, Malinda, you
are punishing yourselves by having children every year.
Take this last baby—you knew that with your weak
heart that you should never have had it and yet—

Mrs. Jasper. But whut kin Ah do—de chillern *come!*

Miss Shaw. You must be careful!

Mrs. Jasper. *Be Keerful!* Dat's all you nu'ses say! Ah
been keerful all Ah knows how but whut's it got me—
ten chillern, eight livin an' two daid! You got'a be tellin'
me sumpin' better'n dat, Mis' Liz'beth (71)!

The help that Miss Shaw provides is superficial at best. Not only is there a huge a difference in the level of education between these women as most critics mention, but there is a direct cry for help from Mrs. Jasper. Miss Shaw observes the slow death of Mrs. Jasper and still does nothing to stop it or at least in good conscious resolve to never let it happen again. There is a chasm where the bond between women should exist; instead of being a helpmate for Malinda Miss Shaw allows her to be drug off to her death by the powers that be.

The death of the matriarch was a lynching due to the failure in conscious and the success of poverty. The silence of those witnessing lynching is what allowed it to go on for so long and the destruction of the black familial system runs along the same path. The Jasper household was not part of a patriarchal system because the men were psychologically restrained and politically emasculated. Mrs. Jasper, the head of the household is the only stability the family had, but in the tradition of the women who were historically lynched she suffered because her male counterpart was unavailable.

An Illusion of Innocence: Lynching and Intimate Violence

Exit: An Illusion was published in a 1929 edition of the *Crisis*. Bonner's plays were welcome submissions to the paper because of her uninhibited and imaginative expression of anger towards social injustice. Bonner's surrealist drama focuses on the issues of color plaguing black sexual relationships. While, current scholarship on *Exit: An Illusion* concentrates on the intraracial dynamics of color, my treatment of Bonner will expand upon that theory to analyze black female lynching as part of an intimate violence.

Marita Bonner, best known for her allegorical play *The Pot Maker*, produces a surrealist play influenced by African American color consciousness in *Exit: An Illusion*. *Exit: An Illusion* depicts a young black couple living in their small apartment. Dot is light enough to pass for white while Buddy has a brown complexion. The play opens with Dot, who is terribly sick, awakening quickly from her sleep to get ready for “date” with “Exit Mann” an obviously made up name to make Buddy jealous. When Buddy discovers that “Exit” is “white” the discovery incites an argument full of racial tensions specifically in regard to miscegenation. Buddy forces Dot to continue to prepare for her date at gun point. When “Exit,” who is actually the physical representation of death, appears in the apartment, Buddy shoots Dot and then awakens believing it was all a dream to discover she is dead. Superficially the play deals with the rage and jealousy of her lover Buddy, but ultimately represents the destruction of Dot by Buddy’s self consumed hatred of her white ancestry.

Traditionally, a characteristic of lynching dramas is an alternative medium of music, prayer or poetry. The alternative medium provides an essential counter balance to the dialogue. In *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, Judith Stephens quotes Margaret Wilkerson as explaining that this aesthetic tradition “help[s] to express the rage, irony, and profundity of Black American life in tonalities and colorations absent from conventional western speech” (10). The alternative medium in *Exit: An Illusion* is the Blues. When we think about the blues and its environment a picture comes to mind of a dark, steamy bar in the rural south alive with music, drinking and jovialness; but what about the relationships within that atmosphere? What consequences come from the racially unstable environment steeped in this

tradition? In this section I will examine how Bonner's *Exit: An Illusion* treats Dot as the black female lynch victim by analyzing: the black blues subject, the jook and the black female as the object of castration.

Dot's lynching is demonstrated by her being the cause and consequence of Buddy's metaphoric castration. Marita Bonner has been praised for her divergence from the realism that most of her contemporaries presented. *Exit: An Illusion* is no exception, the play is a surrealistic presentation that observes the "destructiveness of the intraracial dynamics of color with Buddy, a 'blackly brown' male [who] possess [...] his 'pale' mulatto mistress Dot" (Harris). Buddy's jealous and racist behavior leads him to kill Dot. To help solidify Bonner's work as a lynching play we must outline the components that make it more than a murder. First allow me to explain Buddy's positioning as what Adam Gussow describes as the "black blues subject."

In *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, Adam Gussow takes in an in-depth look at the "black blues subject." The manner in which these subjects are connected in his study is by "being enmeshed in the disciplinary, retributive, and intimate violences [...] particularly characteristic of Jim Crow South" (6). Lynching is a form of disciplinary violence, a cultural violence as Gussow describes. This culture of retributive and disciplinary violence originated from the time after the emancipation proclamation when the monetary value of the black man plummeted to zero after he gained his freedom. Instead of southern white society having reverence for the black man he confronts him with disdain, as property lost, stolen from him and perfectly justified in killing him if he "stepped out of line." Intimate violence slightly differs from disciplinary violence because disciplinary

violence usually originates from an interracial conflict, while intimate violence is black-on-black. Intimate violence is “the gun-and-blade-borne damage black folk inflict on each other” (Gussow 4). To sustain the ideology of both disciplinary and intimate violence in the realm of the “black blues subject” in context we have to connect the second part of Gussow’s argument. The black blues subject and “their participation in a blues culture that, although marked by these violence’s, offered blues subjects a badly needed expressive outlet, a way of conjuring with and redressing the spiritual wounds that such violence had engendered in them” (Gussow 6). The blues subject must interpret each instance whether it is through real action or fantasy; the release of his inner turmoil and pain comes to pass in the blues setting. The participation in the blues culture is not just signified by this behavioral outlet alone it is accompanied with the blues environment as well. The jook is the ultimate expression of black freedom within the blues tradition. We see an example of the jook or jook joint in numerous counts of African American fiction. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eye’s Were Watching God* are both examples of the power of the jook as place of expressive freedom for the black subject. Gussow argues that the black jook had a “wide-ranging of expressive freedom: the freedom to sing, dance, curse, boast [...] and—not least fight with and kill other black folk without undue fear of the white law, which considered black life cheap” (Gussow 6). This label stating that black folk can kill without undue fear was not always played out in African American texts. We see the jook through a variety of lenses. One fact that is agreed upon is that atmosphere of black expression is at the heart.

Buddy is not the traditional black blues subject. Bonner sets the play in a small apartment where Buddy and Dot live. We never see them actually leave or enter and there is no music or a jook. So, how is it possible that I position Buddy in the category of the black blues subject? Although we never see Buddy in a jook he alludes that is where Dot has been with her white lover:

Buddy. [...] Been hanging around you at all the cafes and
dances and on the streets [...] so no count he got to
come in nigger places, to nigger parties [...] looking at
you—hanging around you—dancin’ with you (202)!

Buddy visualizes the circumstances that Dot has been meeting Exit Mann in. She is violating a taboo by accompanying a white man into a black jook and she is flaunting him around Buddy’s friends with no regard to Buddy. As I mentioned earlier the jook is a safe haven for black folk to enjoy themselves without “consequence.” For Dot to supposedly bring a white man into a black jook is an insult to Buddy’s pride because she is announcing that within a certain type of public space she prefers the company of a white man over him.

Bonner presents Buddy’s speech in classic blues stanzas. A key factor that differentiates the blues from other styles of music is the formation of the vocal structure. The blues elements are “(the AAB stanza or equivalent repetitions) and the witnessing first person ‘I’ (Gussow 19). Gussow gives examples of the AAB stanza with songs such as Bessie Smith’s, “Mama’s Got the Blues”

Some people say that the worried blues ain’t bad
Some people say the worried blues ain’t bad

But it's the worst old feeling that I've ever had.

The AAB lines do not have to be identical but close. Buddy's lines are structured in very similar ways throughout the play

Buddy. Naw I ain't lettin' you alone! Naw I ain't lettin' you
alone! This is the guy the fellers been tellin' me about!

We see the pattern most when Buddy is experiencing rage:

Buddy. (*cursing*) He ain't coming here! He ain't coming here!
I'll knock his head clean off his shoulders if he comes
here (202)!

This classic form of repetition is specific to Buddy's lines and increase with his anger. As with the traditional blues form Buddy is speaking about their lovers' quarrel and violence spawned from love gone awry. Most black blues subjects were faced with harsh economic and social circumstances typical of their environment and time period. Buddy expressed spite for Dot being out with this "feller" while he was "working to keep" her. But there is more to the blues and blues artists than the stanzas and the jook, they are also reporters.

Generally speaking, instances of "fact" reported through a third party are simple hearsay, but when presented in a blues song they are moments of truth and fantasy. Gussow quotes Paul Garon as writing the "most vital sense in which the blues singers act as "reporters" is the way they become reporters of the mental processes [...] what the songs contain may be 'reflections' of reality, but they might also contain images projected with the purpose of overcoming reality" (Gussow 192). When we look at the character Buddy we should take note that the position he speaks from is a

blues song. He references back to the black jook, he speaks in blues stanzas and through the stanzas he is reporting information about Dot's supposed infidelity while speaking of himself in the first person. When he speaks to Dot he is reporting the information that he obtained from his friends as if it is first hand information. Buddy tells Dot "Guess there's something after all in what the fellers been saying 'bout you anyhow" (Bonner 202). Buddy seems to be reflecting back onto to real situations that he encountered with his friends speaking about Dot, but advances their speculation to fact and we know he believed them when he awakens and realizes that he murdered Dot. Bonner's surrealist drama works in dreamscapes and within that dreamscape she positions Buddy as the hero within the workings of his own mind.

A majority of Buddy's anger originates from Dot's "whiteness." He says to her "You ain't fixin' to go out passing are you" (Bonner 202). Buddy's mentioning of passing mirrors back to Bonner's description of Dot being "pale as a sheet." Buddy's anger grows with every utterance of lightness and ability to pass. In *American Women Playwrights 1900-1950* it is mentioned that Buddy's "last lines reveal the ambiguity of the black male toward a woman who can pass and go out with white men" (432). Dot "belongs" to Buddy, dating back to slavery black men never had control over black women or themselves; and the constant arguing over black and white in the play speak the deep seeded issues of masculine control over whiteness. The more he speaks of Dot's whiteness the more he begins to see her as white. The white part of her ancestry is what drives him to insane rationalizations. Buddy completely incensed screams "Naw I don't love you! Half-white rat! (203). His response signals an alarming reflection on the condition of the black-on-black relations in respect to mixed ancestry

at the beginning of the century. At this moment she is white and Buddy feels justified in his actions. In Jerry H. Bryant's *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the Afro-American Novel*, he states, "in the most morally simplified cases, white violence against blacks produces a victim, black violence against whites a hero" (3). There is no hesitation in his thought process to kill her and Exit. He seeks retribution for the insult he endured. If we relate Bryant's quote and Buddy's mental condition back to historical lynching we see that the objectives are parallel. Even if it is a minor offense a "Taboo has been violated, and order must be restored" (Harris 71). The excuses for lynching lack a substantial quality of reason but either way the lyncher (black or white) appears to be a hero to the spectators whom seek retribution.

Now that I have identified how Buddy as the black blues subject, how is Dot the object of castration and lynched? The relationship between Dot and Buddy seem to embody Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject. Noëlle Mcafee explains Kristeva's abject as, "what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself [...] What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness" (Mcafee 46). When Buddy learns of the "white man" in Dot's life he immediately turns on her and wants to exclude her violently from himself. There is no room for rational explanation simply time for a mortal extraction. Mcafee goes on to say that the abject "remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self. The abject is what does not respect boundaries" (Mcafee 46). Dot threatens Buddy's manhood because she disrespects him in public by running around with another man while he works hard for her. Dot is the part of him that he regards as unclean. She must be cut-off. Her "whiteness" offends him and

haunts what we know as his existence but he cannot escape his attachment to her. Bonner creates the setting by writing the stage directions as “*The room you are in is mixed. It is mixed.*” Mixed references to not only the condition of the room with clothes and shoes mixed in with the dishes and Dot being of mixed ancestry but the relationship of Dot and Buddy being mixed. They are inextricably connected and according to what Bonner has put in place the only way to separate them is death. Buddy purging himself of Dot is losing part of himself. They are “mixed” and the murder of her is equivalent to him destroying part of himself.

An important element of having a black female lynch victim is the lack of male protection. When an explanation to a lynching was offered, what was given was the usual one—protection of white female purity. The black man was historically stripped of his ability to protect the black female or himself in the manner that a white man could. In *Exit: An Illusion*, Buddy has the opportunity to protect Dot and he chooses to murder her instead. Dot is the single female mentioned by Bonner and she is “surrounded” by men, both black and “white” and no one protects her. Her femininity is ripped from her and cast aside with not even death to protect her body.

In the lynching of Mary Turner it would not have been sufficient for the relentless mob to know that she had gone into hiding, silence would not have pacified them, only the vision of the mutilated corpse stained in their memories soothed their blood thirsty nerves. Dot represents an independently willed woman whose path was disrupted by the internalized racism of her jealous boyfriend. Her whiteness gave the false perception that she was attracted to whiteness, which, lead to distrust in the mind of Buddy and ultimately her demise. Dot’s body being presented and framed is of

significant importance because “the corpse also *embodies* the abject; it is a specialized kind of object that has been pressed into service as a way of bodying the abject forth into the visual field so that it may do its haunting work” (Gussow 130). Buddy’s attempt to rid himself of Dot was in vain because the ingrained mental image of her body is a permanent fixture. The abject is part of oneself that cannot be completely separated or repressed from consciousness. The racism that Buddy embodies has manifested itself with the hatred and love he has towards Dot. Bonner created the image of the corpse who was already “pale as a sheet” in life to haunt the audience as well as Buddy. Analyzing Dot’s murder as a lynching fits the model Bonner has put in place for the audience, because lynching “haunts black southern blues subjects by producing dead black bodies more destabilizing, in psychological terms, to black spectators” (130). Dot has been the catalyst and the victim, her body produces haunting images that renders the once masculine Buddy into a state of adolescent frailty, “(and he leans over her and begins to cry like a small boy)” (Bonner 205). She is removed from his life but not his consciousness; there is a connection between the living memory that he destroyed and the ritualized corpse that lay in his arms.

While the body of Mrs. Jasper lies quietly in a closed bedroom, Dot is lying on the floor in her flat. Mrs. Jasper and Dot acting as both the phallic symbols and the victims of lynching their characters speak to the blurring of the private and public space. Lynching and rape are traditionally categorized into the public and the private space. The questioning of the gender and special explanation of these racialized forms of violence are reported by Ida Wells-Barnett, “by contesting and refiguring the boundaries between public/private, male/female, black/white, *Southern Horrors* made

visible information about sex and power hidden within the conventional lynching story” (Brundage 302). In Wells pamphlet she speaks about the black women that suffered more than psychological effects of lynching, but physical death and psychological injury.

CHAPTER 2

DARK LEGACIES: (UN)TRADITIONAL LYNCHING IN

TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED* AND *SULA*

“Although the term ‘lynching’ has been a part of America’s lexicon of violence since the late eighteenth century, the range and types of violence referred to by the term vary widely”

Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*

Toni Morrison is no stranger to the idea of metaphorical lynching. In her *Racing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*, she wrote that “lynching is a metaphor itself.” The scandal between Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill was described as a “high-tech lynching.”² Outside of the Thomas scandal some critics have viewed some of Morrison’s writings to border very close to the ritual of lynching. Trudier Harris examines *Tar Baby* and the persona of the black beast rapist. She discusses how Son who is unable to escape the trappings of society “is tied to a certain part of his history and how susceptible he would be to lynching and burning if Morrison had chosen a

² In an examination of the sexual harassment allegations by Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas said “From my standpoint, as a black American, as far as I’m concerned, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas, and it is a message that, unless you kow-tow to an old order, this is what will happen to you, you will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by a committee of the U.S. Senate, rather than hung from a tree” (Markovitz 111).

different approach in the development of her novel” (162). Morrison has a deep respect for history and demonstrates that respect within the settings and characters in her novels. There are many allusions to lynching and burning rituals throughout her texts, but the female victim is the concern of this project. *Beloved* and *Sula* will offer evidence of the lynching of the black female body, the novels provide two different types of lynchings: *Beloved* is a white-on-black lynching, while *Sula* is a black-on-black lynching’s that adds another twist and depicts a unique type of female-on-female lynching.

Scars of an UnBeloved Past: Symbolic Representations of Lynching

Sethe, is *Beloved*’s living representation of a lynched body. *Beloved*, set in Ohio nearing the end of reconstruction, Sethe, the protagonist chooses infanticide rather than sending her children back into slavery. Morrison’s novel examines the post traumatic effects bred from the inhumanity and violence of slavery. Haunted by the “baby ghost” of her murdered child, Sethe and her daughter Denver are mental as well as physical prisoners of 124 Bluestone. When Paul D, “the last of the Sweet Home men,” and Sethe’ s fragmented memories collide the novel is set in motion and Morrison gives the first glance of the tree, “I got a tree on my back...What tree on your back? Is something growing on your back? I don’t see nothing growing on your back...who told you that?” (18). Paul D’s questioning of Sethe is very literal; in a world where ghosts and evil are as real as the person standing next to you, he searches for an actual tree. The reader learns Sethe’s informant is a “[w]hitegirl. That’s what she called it. I’ve never seen it and never will. A Chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches,

and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves” (18). Sethe has a vivid perception of what the Chokecherry tree upon her back looks like even though she had never seen it. Her mind’s eye has created an imprint in her brain based on the information given to her by a white girl in the woods. The text suggests that the psychological ramifications of this white “savior” informing Sethe of her lynched condition has permanently reverted Sethe back into a state of mental slavery. Since the chains of this servitude are invisible and there is no resistance from the bearer of this burden, it is a more complete bondage, more so than any physical chains could ever be. A part of Patricia Hill Collins’s Black Feminist theory states that “Oppression and resistance remain intricately linked such that the shape of one influences that of the other [...] Oppression is not simply understood in the mind—it is felt in the body” (274). Collins’ observation gives credence to the idea that Sethe’s mental bondage is connected to the white girl’s idea of the truth. Regardless if Sethe is running to escape slavery her mind is not yet free.

Paul D’s refusal to see the tree on Sethe’s back lends to the idea that his years of wandering has made him ready to shed the racist ideologies and free himself mentally. The morning after his and Sethe’s first sexual encounter Paul D notices that “the wrought-iron maze he had explored in the kitchen [...] in fact a revolting clump of scars. Not a tree, as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew” (25). It is an important fact that Paul D does not acknowledge the scars on Sethe’s back as a tree because this is his rejection of the label that has been ingrained in her. However, his denunciation of the symbol is in vain because he does not communicate this to Sethe. Sethe did not know how to understand freedom, even

when she found it “a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well, now *that* was freedom” (191). Paul D appreciates the value of Sethe’s sentiment, but is unable to explain his thoughts about her tree. The text leads the reader to believe that tree remains a prison for Sethe as long she allows it to be.

In order to make a coherent argument it must be discussed how in fact Sethe was lynched. In Jacqueline Goldsby’s *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature*, she explains that “[u]nlike the actual murders and social histories of lynching, literary depictions often leave the residue of its ineffability—its secret—in their formal structures” (35). So we can assume that a body swinging from a tree is not the only evidence a lynching, three ways that assign Sethe’s attack and mark as a lynching are: the spectacle of the event, the beating, and the symbol she bares.

One main attribute of lynching is that it was not always a secretive event; in the earlier years there was no fear of repercussions for the lynch mob, so there was not any need to hide the matter. The first stage of Sethe’s lynching was her sexual assault, Sethe tells Paul D “those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it” (19). The sexuality of the feeding on her breast milk is an intense mode of dehumanization. As in the castration of a male lynching victim there is something sacred taken away, he is emasculated. Trudier Harris explains that the image of the emasculated slave was “without sexual consciousness or ability, eyes forever on the tip of the master’s shoe, a ‘yessuh’ forever on the tip of his tongue, this character soothed white consciences and justified their claims to superiority” (29). Applying Harris’ observations to Morrison’s text, the

two suggest that Sethe was reduced to a nothingness that put the slave master's conscience at ease. Sethe was treated as property and nothing more; the attack far surpassed that of the physical world and left her scarred emotionally. She was not the only character affected by this first phase, the spectacle of lynching is not only for the enjoyment of the crowd and the lyncher's but used as a lesson to the other blacks as a warning. Sethe learned from Paul D that her "husband" Halle was watching the incident: "[t]hat something broke him. Not a one of them years of Saturdays, Sundays and nighttime extra never touched him. But whatever he saw go on in that barn that day broke him like a twig [...] He saw. Must have" (81). Halle was castrated along with Sethe. The emasculation of the black slave by the white man was to further the white man's feeling of superiority and reassuring him that black people are less than human and therefore, the treatment justifiable. Morrison would suggest that intense feeling of helplessness is what drove Halle away from Sethe. Sethe and Halle were both castrated by the hand of Sweet Home.

Sethe's whipping and the combination of the symbol left behind provides the reader a different perspective to see lynchings. The spectacle did not end with stealing of the milk because the beating that took place after Sethe informed her mistress of the robbery is what leads us to the next incident. Sethe explains that she told on them and the "[s]choolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree" (20). It is implied that the event did not take place in a private venue but rather in front of at least the offenders under the command of the schoolteacher. This lends to the idea that the lynch mob's thought process is derived from one person, but needs many to facilitate the act; it is a performance of cowardice to say the least. The message

transmitted by the whipping was meant to last a lifetime; the evidence is branded upon her back. Harris points out that “[t]o be ‘severely lynched’ could mean an individual had received one hundred lashes. Or that he had been whipped” (6). As Amy, the white girl, who helped Sethe give birth to Denver, told her “[y]our back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder. I had me some whippings, but I don’t remember nothing like this” (93). The Chokecherry tree on Sethe’s back will serve as reminder for all those who try to get close to her as well as mental imprint to herself about the ills of slavery. By comparing her own “whippings” and saying to Sethe “what God have in mind,” Amy is implying that Sethe deserved the punishment she received. Even though Amy is caring for Sethe, a slave is still a slave and must have been deserving of any punishment the master handed her. Alexis Brooks De Vita in her book *Mythatypes: Signatures and Signs African/Diaspora and Black Goddesses*, reasons that “the chokecherry tree flowering on Sethe’s back becomes the sign of Sethe’s ownership of her motherhood and its cosmographic qualities and prerogatives” (40). While a valid response in most circumstances, I argue that the brutality of slavery and the extension of warning are more probable, than the beauty of motherhood which was what they attempted to take away from Sethe by reducing her to status of an animal.

It is poignant that Sethe is the female character chosen to bare the symbol and be the lynching victim. The very reason that she was “lynched” to begin with is because she acted against her master. Patricia Collins in her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* states that “When one Black individual dared to violate the restrictions, he or she was used as an example to

reiterate to the entire race that the group would continually be held responsible for the actions of the individual” (219). Sethe broke a vital code by trying to “betray” her master. She over stepped her boundaries as a slave because she searched for retribution. Milking Sethe like someone would milk a cow illustrates how the slave owner perceives the black slave as being subhuman. She was whipped and not killed so that the scar she bore served as an example to any other slave who might attempt to be recognized as a human being. Lynching served white society as a means of asserting power and control over blacks. The black people who were tortured and allowed to live were a physical symbol of white privilege and authority. Sethe’s chokecherry tree scar is meant to be a reminder of her subhuman status. Morrison points to the reality that even though a slave woman was thought to be on the same plane as a common farm animal, she also served a sexual purpose to her owners. Collins quotes Angela Davis as saying:

the controlling image of Black men as rapists has always ‘strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the black woman as chronically promiscuous [...] once the notion is accepted that black men harbor irresistible, animal-like sexual urges, the entire race of ‘animals’ can be treated as such—as victims or pets. ‘The mythical rapist implies the mythical whore—and a race of rapists and whores deserves punishment and nothing more. –

Angela Davis (Collins 147)

Sethe’s position on Sweet Home represented everything that is exactly opposite of what, according to white ideology, the black woman was supposed to be. She was pure and faithful, her wanting a traditional wedding was another clue of this, “I found out

there wasn't going to be no ceremony, no preacher. Nothing. I thought there should be something—something to say it was right and true" (70). Her "innocent" presence broke the disillusionment of the slave owners and touched the compassion of the reader. Her demonized past began to overrule the initial response to her being an unsympathetic character. Morrison's text is so life like that the audience travels through the pain a long with Sethe. Step by the step each stage of the lynching the reader bares the burden of spectator and is forced to meditate on each situation.

A Peaceful Matricide: Women and Black-on-Black Lynching

Matricide is typically a "straightforward" murder of one's own mother; however, in *Sula* matricide becomes a much more astonishing crime. Morrison's text focuses on the tragic death of Hannah Peace, but by applying song, biblical text and various literary critics to my analysis we will better understand her death as a lynching. The fantastic event of Hannah Peace's lynching functions in three ways: Burning, divine retribution and black-on-black lynching.

Many critics classify the death of Hannah Peace in *Sula* as "accidental," while for some critics it is a supernatural occurrence. Harold Bloom calls it a "perfection of judgment;" judgment, retribution, and punishment all words that are used to describe the reasons for a lynched body. One of the most recognized practices of historical lynching is burning people alive. Hannah Peace burned for all to see. *Sula* traces the story of two girls, Sula and Nel, who grow up in an all black community called Medallion, or the Bottom. The novel examines their lives as well as the tragedies and secrets that surround them. Sula's mother Hannah Peace was lynched. Hannah was

burned alive, the “flames from the yard fire were licking the blue cotton dress, making her dance” (75). The circumstances are much more than an accident, the setting of the text has subtle allusions to Billie Holiday’s song “Strange Fruit.” Eva, Hannah’s mother jumped out of her bedroom window to attempt to save her daughter, she missed and:

They found her on her stomach by the forsythia bushes calling Hannah’s name and dragging her body through the sweet peas and clover [...] The blood from her face cuts filled her eyes so she could not see, could only smell the familiar odor of cooked flesh (77).

The vision of Eva dragging her body through the fresh flowers, coating them with blood and the only thing she could accurately notice was the smell of Hannah’s burning flesh; these details begin the connections to “Strange Fruit.” The lines in Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” read as follows: “Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh, then the sudden smell of burning flesh” (Davis 181). Even if Morrison did not intend on making such a claim, the text suggests that there are distinct parallels between the song and the scene describing the burning of Hannah. The next parallel is Holiday’s line “The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth” and Morrison’s “her face a mask of agony so intense that for years the people [...] shake their heads at the recollection of it” (76). These comparisons markedly gives the reader a jarring image of a horrific, tortured, death, but the final connection is Hannah’s body “twitching lightly among the smashed tomatoes” positions her as a “strange and bitter crop” (Morrison 76), (Davis 181).

Destiny gives us the reason that Hannah Peace burned; it was supernatural retribution for the burning of her younger brother Plum. Hannah did not kill Plum, but her mother Eva did and Hannah knew. Knowledge of other Morrison texts informs us that murderers do not always receive punishments for their crimes. Many of the Morrison texts the offenders go unchecked by the law such as Joe in *Jazz*, the Ruby men in *Paradise* and Pecola's father in *The Bluest Eye*. Or are we just led to believe that there is no judgment, simply because a sentence from a judge or a court of law is not given does not mean the individual did not suffer. In the case of Eva Peace, judgment came as divine retribution. Throughout Morrison's novels she uses multiple biblical references; sometimes they appear in the names of characters or at other times as allusions to parables. And in the situation of Hannah, Morrison has taken the lead from the book of Exodus, chapter 34:7 "[...] He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations." Eva's so called "mercy killing" of Plum doomed Hannah to a fiery death. The law from Exodus mandates that the children will pay the sins of the parent. Trudier Harris also makes a similar assessment of the "laws" of lynching, "if the guilty party is not found, a substitute, or scapegoat, will do" (12). Lynching defies all rules of logic and gives itself over to the bloodlust of the lynchers, "[t]herefore, in order to exorcise the evil and restore the topsy-turvy world to its rightful position, the violator must be symbolically punished" (Harris 12). The punishment handed down by unseen forces stripped Eva of the closest thing to her, her eldest daughter. The evil that was cast out of Medallion was not Hannah, but the evil residing in Eva's murder of Plum and perhaps other forces.

There were no white perpetrators in fact there was no one visibly responsible for Hannah's lynching/burning at all, so how can this be classified as a lynching if no one is responsible for it? First, this is not a historical claim but a literary and fictitious one, as Harold Bloom notes in his book *Toni Morrison's Sula* "Hannah [...] is seared to death in so tragic and senseless a way that supernatural omens are needed to justify it." (Bloom36). Sula, as Eva pointed out watched her mother burning to death and did nothing, "Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (78). Eva accused of Sula being visually involved her mother burning, Hannah's death could only be prompted by an extreme act of hate, a hate prompted by betrayal. Sula had heard her mother saying that she loved Sula but did not like her, "she only heard Hannah's words, [...] in bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of sting in her eye. Nel's call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from the dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight" (57). What dark thoughts could have Sula been thinking of that she would have needed to be jolted out of it?

Brian McHale explains that "the 'bottom,' the deep structure of the fantastic, is . . . ontological rather than epistemological. . . . The fantastic, in other words, involves a face-to-face confrontation between the possible (the 'real') and the impossible, the normal and the paranormal." (Bloom 13)

Involving the nature of the fantastic in full confrontation with reality, we can only imagine that Hannah's lynching was caused by the "evil" omens surrounding Sula. Morrison deconstructs the reader's view of the "real" in order to awaken the senses to

the possibility of the impossible, and thus leaving room for the interpretation of signs. The text reads that people of Medallion “did not believe death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate [...] The purpose of evil was to survive it” (90). The people of Medallion believed Sula was evil, that evil being enough to be the driving force behind Hannah’s burned body.

Revisiting the issue of how can there be a lynching when there were no white members of the Medallion community, statistical evidence proves that there were a fairly high percentage of black-on-black lynchings. The book *Under the Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, supports the idea that an interfamily lynching was not out of the question, the passage reads: “A special category of black-on-black lynchings involved the punishment of behavior that may be labeled as "offenses against the black family" (142). In fact familial lynchings were not an uncommon occurrence “roughly 16 percent of all incidents involving black mobs included victims [...] against other members of their family” (142). Sula’s dark personality invited self mutilation and interested observation of death, the dis-functionality of her household and the disavowal from her mother would be enough to motivate Sula to kill Hannah. There were several elements that were involved in the scenarios of intraracial lynchings that both mirror traditional white-on-black lynch mobs as well new personal elements that are drawn from a more private place. Sula’s reasoning to lynch Hannah came from one of those private places.

Sula as an adult is what gives the reader more clues as to her guilt and her remorselessness of Hannah’s death. During an exchange with Eva on her return to the Bottom, Eva tells Sula that she should honor thy father and mother, but Sula retorts:

Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days wasn't too long.

[Eva] God's going to strike you!

[Sula] Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?

[Eva] Don't talk to me about burning. You watched your own
mamma. You crazy roach! You the one should have been burnt!

[Sula] But I ain't. [...] Any more fires in this house, I'm

Lighting them (93)!

Sula's lack of respect for her grandmother and dead mother illustrate her sense of singularity in the world. By singularity I mean that the notions of life and community even family are worthless to her. As she said when she young "I want to make me," nothing in the world matters to Sula but Sula. The thought of murder was so inherent in her DNA that she told Eva "I ain't never going to need you [...] maybe I'll just tip on up here with some kerosene and—who knows—you may make the brightest flame of them all" (94). Morrison has no exclamation points or other notations that would lead us to believe Sula's statement was said in haste or with a harsh tone. The reader can only infer that her speech was very measured and precise. This was not a rash slip of the tongue from anger, Sula meant every word.

Sula's lack of respect, remorse and familial love leads the reader to believe she is capable of anything. Upon her return to the Bottom, the community coins the time as "evil days." In her book, *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature*, Sarah Appleton Aguiar, quotes Banyiwá-Horne as saying, "Sula elicits highly ambivalent responses, combining dread and appeal" (102). The men are simultaneously drawn and

repulsed by her sexually, while the women have contemptuous feelings for her.

Banyiwa-Horne continues by saying “. The mystery and almost palpable sense of evil exuded by Sula tempt the majority of the inhabitants of the Bottom to believe that she is everything evil, that, in fact, she is a witch” (Aguiar 102). Something so evil that murder and mutilation are not out of the realm of possibilities for this character. In “Love ‘em and Lynch ‘em: The Castration Motif in Gayle Jone’s *Eva’s Man*” by Carol Margaret Davison asserts that Sula is the “quintessential figurative emasculator,” the idea is that Sula is the model representation of castration or lynching through symbolic means only strengthens her capacity to “will” her mother’s burning. This “castration” motif for Sula begins at the early age of twelve when she “slices off her fingertip with her mother's paring knife, cautioning, ‘If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?’” (Davison). The boys she preformed this mutilation for were astonished and “stared open-mouthed” (54).

Sula, deemed evil and self serving to most who encounter her also lynched her mother for selfish reasons. Many critics have written about the trinity of women within the text, Eva/Hannah/Sula. That in fact they are linked each feeding off of the history and energy of the next, this being the case Sula’s eternal quest for singularity makes Hannah’s death more meaningful. Hannah’s death was the being of the end for Sula’s true connections to people and she said post mortem “there was not going to be any more pain [...] Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead” (149).

Beloved and *Sula* are both examples of how the female body is lynched. These

new examples of literary depictions of lynching allow the mind to expand upon the horrors that are implied. Jacqueline Goldsby writes that “literary depictions [of lynching] often leave the residue of its ineffability—its secrecy—in their formal structures. Thus, I seek out the gaps and silences [...] as evidence of how its dynamics extend lynching’s power to oppress” (35). The power to oppress is why it is the lynching of the female body is an important factor not to overlook. In all of these texts the participants were searching for freedom in one way or another: Sethe from the mental chains of slavery and Hannah and Sula freedom from confined identities. Oppression of the black body has gone on for hundreds of years it is vital that the black woman is not silenced from that story.

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