

FIGHT FOR EDUCATION, FIGHT FOR FREEDOM:
FROM OBJECT TO SUBJECT IN FREEDOM NARRATIVES

by

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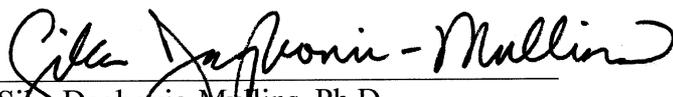
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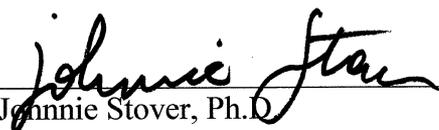
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Sika Dagbovie-Mullins, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt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

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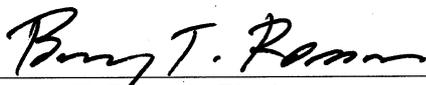

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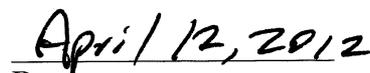
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ABSTRACT

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The three novels examined in this thesis do not deal with the subject of slavery directly; however, I argue that, much like slave narratives, they all depict oppressive master/slave relationships and feature protagonists who fight for freedom through literacy and/or education. This thesis outlines three contemporary novels that take place during or after the Civil Rights Movement, what I call “freedom narratives,” that not only signify on, but pay tribute to, the slave and neo-slave narrative tradition. These novels borrow from the tradition, not only in terms of structure, but also in terms of plot, point of view, theme, and resolution. Additionally, through the novels, one can see how the trauma of slavery in America permeates contemporary American homes, both White and Black. This thesis focuses on *PUSH* by Sapphire, *The Darkest Child* by Delores Phillips, and *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison to illustrate the significance and the impact of the traditional slave narrative and the trauma of slavery on contemporary novels and American people.

FIGHT FOR EDUCATION, FIGHT FOR FREEDOM:
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Introduction	1
Critical Conversation.....	5
Rationale for Texts	6
Chapter Outlines.....	7
Chapter 1. The PUSH for Education: From Object to Precious Subject.....	9
Master/Mistress	10
Precious as Property	15
Education as Freedom	18
Chapter 2. <i>The Darkest Child</i> – The Brightest Child: Education as the Key to Freedom.....	26
Rozelle Quinn as Master	28
Tangy Mae & Frederick Douglass	36
Hunger for Food/Hunger for Education	40
Chapter 3. Critical Literacy as Freedom in <i>Bastard Out of Carolina</i>	47
White and Black	47
Bone as “Other”.....	50
“Daddy Glen” as an Oppressor.....	57
Critical Literacy and Education.....	59

Conclusion	67
Works Consulted	71

INTRODUCTION

Slave narratives are the literary documentation of “the slave experience of Africans in America... [meant to] balance the myth of the ‘Old South’ with the brutal realities of racial oppression” (Waters ix). The slave narrative can be defined generally “as the recollecting voice of a slave, and in its broadest sense as the re-creation of a self previously a slave but now co-extensive with its contemporary world” (35). Certainly a unique genre, the slave narrative is a “peculiar amalgam of autobiography, narrative, ideology, propaganda, Bildungsroman, picaresque, narrative, and spiritual discourse” (25). While slave narratives are a vital documentation of the history and experiences of former slaves in America, neo-slave narratives primarily are categorized as fiction, but are historical as well since they most often engage slavery as a subject. In “Black Subjects Re-forming the Past through the Neo-Slave Narrative Tradition,” Venetria K. Patton outlines the different definitions of the neo-slave narrative: Bernard Bell is credited with the initial definition of the neoslave narrative as, “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). However, Rushdy offers a slightly different definition for his term, which refers to texts that “assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative” (3). Yet, Beaulieu offers a broader definition: “[c]ontemporary fictional works which take slavery as their subject matter and usually feature enslaved protagonists” (xiii).

The use of this term “neo-slave narrative” limits novels that can be considered part of this genre to novels written about slavery, regardless of the time period. The term “neo-slave narrative” does not include contemporary novels that borrow heavily from the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative in terms of structure, plot, first person narration, and other elements, while at the same time establishing a completely new kind of text in which antebellum slavery is not the subject. While a wide variety of texts fall under the neo-slave narrative categorization, including Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, these texts deal with antebellum slavery as their subject matter, while the texts I wish to work with do not.

In this thesis, I will examine Sapphire’s *PUSH* (1996), Delores Phillips’s *The Darkest Child* (2004), and Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) to illustrate what I call the freedom narrative, a term I use to describe contemporary texts that not only borrow from, but pay tribute to and signify on, both slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. Similar to slave narratives, education not only remains the key to freedom in these texts, but, in fact, is the primary way in which the narrators can break free from being treated as objects and transition to subjects utilizing agency. By classifying these texts as freedom narratives, I will illustrate how these contemporary novels published in the last twenty-five years make the explicit connection between attaining education and breaking free from ownership. These freedom narratives speak to and signify on both neo-slave and slave narratives because the protagonists’ relationships with their parents or parental figures are directly reminiscent of the oppressor/oppressed relationships from the antebellum plantation era. They do so by engaging with the past and by responding to the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative.

The legacy of slavery informs all three novels; each author portrays domestic spaces that reverberate with the trauma of slavery. In all three of these texts, domestic spaces should be safe and warm places for the narrators to seek refuge from the challenges they face from living in different, yet all difficult, times and places. Instead, their homes are hotbeds for further abuse, neglect, and torture. All three of the teenage protagonists in question struggle in relationships with their mothers, and are all abused by one or more of their parental figures. It is only after each girl seeks out and finds education through the form of traditional literacy, education, and critical literacy that they can free themselves from the hold of their abusive parents. My thesis argues that freedom narratives demonstrate that the horrors of slavery have permeated many American homes. I assert that these novels affirm that many Americans are the descendants of slaves or slaveholders. My thesis also examines the ways in which these novels critique the very idea of freedom. Although these protagonists are not actual slaves (and the novels take place well after antebellum slavery is over), their lives are ruled by bondage in different forms.

I understand that drawing comparisons between contemporary texts and slave narratives may be met with some opposition. However, some scholars have drawn the connection between contemporary texts that take place in the twentieth century and slavery. For example, in the *Encyclopedia of Slave Resistance*, when referring to *The Color Purple*, Clara Palmiste writes, “the theme of oppression is omnipresent in the novel and can be interpreted as an allegory of slavery. Indeed many situations in *The Color Purple* are reminiscent of the slavery period: Celie’s rape by her stepfather, the theft of her children, Celie’s marriage, her hard work and constant abuse, her need of

literacy as a way to get her freedom” (126-7). These aspects of the novel are not just common hardships from the slave-era, but these represent common themes from the slave narratives. Palmiste continues, “the novel proposes unconventional ways of resistance to oppression” (127). Like *The Color Purple*, the novels examined in this thesis explore themes that reflect not only the antebellum slave period, but also the slave narratives written at that time. Similarly, in Nghana Lewis’s “Neo-Slave Drama: Narratives of Resistance in Alice Childress’s *Wedding Band*” Lewis explores a contemporary drama in which the elements reflect “a time of heightened racial, class, and gender conflict in America to expose the persistent legacy of institutionalized slavery” (80). As Lewis writes, “Though set in the aftermath of the Civil War when slavery is illegal, *Wedding Band* deploys a range of rhetorical and dramatic devices to illustrate the legal, social, and cultural mores that sustained de facto slavery in the American South throughout the modern period” (81). While this thesis will not classify the texts as allegories of slavery or as neo-slave narratives, it is important to establish a precedence of scholars who have explored these similar issues and have viewed contemporary texts as paying homage to, or recalling, antebellum slavery.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *The Signifying Monkey* explores the concept of African American authors borrowing from other forms. He writes, “to rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify” (xxiii). In his discussion of literature, Gates points out that “distinct literary canons need not necessarily segregate critics—indeed, that shared critical approaches can define a canon of criticism [...] [in fact,] it [is] necessary to draw on the black tradition itself to define a theory of its nature and function” (344). He discusses Zora Neale Hurston’s use of the term “Talking Book” that first “appears in

James Gronniosaw's 1770 slave narrative, and then is revised in at least four other texts published between 1785 and 1815" (345). By pointing out that slave narratives are forms of the "Talking Book," and recognizing that this has been repeated and duplicated in many different forms, Gates also is identifying the significance of this repetition and revision. He explains that "texts written over two centuries ago address what we might think of as common subjects of condition that continue to be strangely resonant, and relevant" (128). Gates also explores music, including jazz, and the way artists signify on each other's work. When he discusses Count Basie he outlines a different form of signifying. He explains how "Basie alludes to styles of playing...[that]... include ragtime, stride, barrelhouse, boogie-woogie, and the Kansas City 'walking bass' so central to swing in the thirties" (124). By pointing this out, Gates is describing the influences that musicians (and writers) pay tribute or homage to through their own creative expressions. He continues, "[Basie] has recapitulated the very tradition out of which he grew and from which he descended. Basie, in other words, is repeating the formal history of his tradition within his composition entitled 'Signify'" (124). Just as Basie uses the traditions and forms that were created before him as influences in his compositions, the authors in this thesis also are influenced by and pay homage to earlier traditions.

Critical Conversation

The critical conversation surrounding *PUSH* (1996), *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1995), and *The Darkest Child* (2004) focuses largely on familial abuse. Concerning *PUSH*, the critical attention certainly has increased since the release of the motion picture *Precious: Based on the Novel PUSH by Sapphire* (2009). The overwhelming

body of work related to the novel is based around education and literacy, and while most scholarship offers a critique of the education system, critics never have recognized how the fight for freedom that directly coincides with the fight for education recalls the neo-slave narrative. Instead, there is much attention given to the overwhelming familial abuse in the text. In a 1995 Harper's article, "Making the Incest Scene," *PUSH* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* are discussed in the same context. In the article, Katie Roiphe discusses both how incest is a subject Americans want to read about and the overwhelming drive by publishing companies to distribute novels centered on the subject. Critics generally ignore *The Darkest Child*, but all reviews center on the disturbing effects of traumatic abuse and neglect including physical, verbal, emotional, mental, sexual (Cannon 136). While I agree that this critical conversation about familial abuse is important, this will serve as part of my approach in examining these novels as freedom narratives.

Rationale for Texts

PUSH, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, and *The Darkest Child* are seemingly very different texts; one takes place in Harlem, one in South Carolina, and one in rural Georgia, all in different time periods. However, all three of these novels are told in the first person and center around young girls coming of age. While the protagonists in *PUSH* and *The Darkest Child* are African American, the protagonist in *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a poor, White, southern girl. Although the traditional slave narratives and neo-slave narratives typically are written by African American authors with African American narrators/characters, I intend to demonstrate that the race of the narrator in *Bastard Out of Carolina* in the context of the novel, considering elements such as

geographic locale and socioeconomic positioning, invites readers to make connections between this novel and novels of slavery. In fact, Bone, the protagonist in *Bastard*, is racialized by her own family. She is physically very different from the rest of her family and constantly is cast as an outsider based on her physical appearance. It is only through her attainment of critical literacy and her deep understanding of the South and the way the society and family she is a part of operates, that she is granted freedom from her abuser and realizes her agency as a young woman. The protagonists in *PUSH* and *The Darkest Child* are both African American girls struggling to free themselves from the ownership of their mothers. In both novels the girls are abused and treated as property. Both of these characters receive an education and literacy in the more traditional form. From attending school and learning to read and write, they achieve freedom and are able to escape their abusive “owners.” All three of the novels can “... be read as testimony of defilement: the [characters’] representation and reversal of the master’s attempt to transform a human being into commodity” and the “strength in the refusal of the characters to accept that as their fates” (Gates 128).

Chapter Outlines

In the first chapter, “The PUSH for Education: From Object to Precious Subject,” I will examine *PUSH* by Sapphire. I will examine the role of Precious, the novel’s narrator, and the similarities between Precious and the narrators of slave narratives. The role of literacy and the desire for education as a key to freedom also plays an essential role in proving that *PUSH* ought to be considered a part of this freedom narrative genre.

In the second chapter, “The Darkest Child, the Brightest Child: Education as the Key to Freedom,” I examine *The Darkest Child* by Delores Phillips. I will examine the familial relationships in this novel, including the relationship between the protagonist, Tangy Mae, and her abusive mother Rozelle. Education serves an important role in this novel as well, as Tangy Mae wants to receive an education but is constantly kept out of school by her mother. Abuse and neglect are central themes in the novel, as is Tangy Mae’s insistence on receiving the education she wants.

In the third chapter, “Critical Education in Bastard Out of Carolina,” I examine *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison. As in all the chapters, I will examine the narrator’s fight for freedom throughout the text and the resolution that occurs in the end only as a result of the critical literacy Bone attains throughout the novel. It is her newfound understanding of the society and family she is a part of that allows her to break free from her oppressors. Additionally, it is her overwhelming feeling of marginalization and the label of “White trash” she carries that is relevant to this study.

CHAPTER 1. THE PUSH FOR EDUCATION:
FROM OBJECT TO PRECIOUS SUBJECT

The novel *PUSH* is both twisted and disturbing. Told from the first person point of view of an illiterate sixteen year old girl, the reader is fittingly “pushed” into a world of intense sexual and physical abuse and pure hatred from every angle of the story. Precious’s father rapes her and as a result, her mother both hates her and abuses her. Precious, in turn, is filled with hate for everyone around her, not only for her father and mother, but also for every person with whom she comes into contact. Most disturbingly, Precious hates herself. Completely invisible to the surrounding world, Precious is ignored and cast aside by the very systems set in place to help her. Examining Precious’s family and home life, it is impossible to think of her as a free person, able to live her life the way she wishes. Instead, Precious is a modern day slave, raped and impregnated by her “master,” her father Carl, and abused by her “mistress,” her mother Mary.¹ The novel *PUSH* can be read as a freedom narrative, a contemporary text that not only borrows from, but pays tribute to, both slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. It is the story of a slave girl given no sense of freedom until much like the slave narratives of the past, she uses literacy and knowledge as a tool to tell her story, to break free from her shackles, and to escape to a life of liberty.

¹ Although Carl and Mary are both African American, their actions and behavior oppress their daughter in a manner reminiscent of white slave owners. Later in the chapter I discuss the complexities of this oppression.

Published in 1996, the novel *PUSH* is a controversial story of abuse. Told from Precious's point of view, *PUSH* takes the words straight from her pen onto the page and into the reader's consciousness. Although fictitious, the autobiographical nature of the novel not only lends itself to believability, but also mirrors the style of a slave narrative. Reading accounts of trauma "written in the first person...raise[s] the stakes involved in the process of reading violence, because neither aesthetic form nor literary convention (though both are present) protects the reader from the victim's unrelenting, excruciatingly detailed account of her pain" (Horvitz 51). Just as *PUSH* tells the story of Precious as she fights and eventually succeeds in her escape from captivity, "a slave narrative is the life-story of a former slave who has somehow gained freedom, usually though many trials and hardships" (Hernton 1). Like a slave narrative, *PUSH* has "a beginning, a middle and an end" that begins with a hopeless situation, is marked by the middle in which the slave has realized freedom is not only something he or she desires, but something that can be attained, and ends with the resolution of freedom, no matter how limited (2). Precious begins her story much as a slave narrative would. She takes us through a day in her life, showing the reader what it is like to exist as Precious. Like a witness to the brutalities on the plantation, we see "cruelty, violence, and human frailty so repugnant that we find it difficult to believe or imagine" (2). We then see her progress into a woman aware of her limitations, but with a desire to change, followed by the ending filled with hope and redemption.

Master/Mistress

Not only is the structure of *PUSH* strongly reminiscent of a slave narrative, but the content itself certainly pays homage to the struggles written about by former slaves.

The reader is drawn into Precious's world, forced to witness scenes of evil and destruction with no capability of looking away. Precious's father, Carl, is much like a master both to his mistress, Precious's mother, Mary, and to his "slave," Precious. He doesn't live in the same place as Precious, but instead invades the "safe" space of her bedroom to rape and abuse her, much like a master coming into the slave quarters to rape his slaves. He sexually abuses and rapes Precious from the time she is just a small baby still in diapers. He also mentally abuses Precious, yet fantasizes about and verbalizes to her his dream of marrying her, "'I'm gonna marry you' he be saying" (Sapphire 24). Much like a master with his slave, this would be an impossible feat, but seems to further prove that her father, like a slave owner, fails to recognize the horror and deep revulsion that he should feel in his act of raping another human being.

When Precious's father shows some rare recognition of her humanity, it serves to feed his needs and desires. It is human nature that "in order for one to know that s/he exists, one has to be recognized as an independent being by another" (Horvitz 48). However, here, it is not Carl's recognition of Precious that validates her. Instead, Precious validates what Carl believes as his superiority. The master has a deep "need for acknowledgement, even affirmation from the slave....if the master or dominator reduces his victim to non-person status, he defeats his own purpose" and is "actually alone" (48). For Carl, part of the satisfaction he gets from abusing Precious is derived from the mere recognition of his role as the abuser from his "slave," Precious. While Precious of course despises the sexual abuse she faces from her father, her body betrays her and she orgasms during sex with him. Similar to the ideas of human nature dictating the need for human recognition, Precious clings to her identity as an abused person as

well. Precious, like a “slave will grasp at that identity because, as a prisoner, she has no other” (48). Much like a master’s delusions that any slave would be willing, happy, and even privileged to have sex with him, Precious’s father takes this uncontrollable physical reaction from Precious as a sign of enjoyment and pleasure when he says, ““See, see...see, you LIKE it! You jus’ like your mama- you die for it”” (Sapphire 24).² Precious’s rapist and master has convinced himself that the sex crimes he commits are perfectly acceptable and, in fact, that they are a part of his right as her metaphorical owner. Referring to antebellum slavery Catherine Clinton asks, “[c]ould a slave claim rape by his or her master?” (Clinton 205). Clinton asserts, “[w]ithin the Old South, a slave woman was denied power of consent by legal definition: she could not be raped” (206). This mirrors Precious’s rapes in that her rape is not recognized as such by her mother, father, social workers, or hospital staff. When Precious is pregnant as a result of rape, she never is offered help or sympathy. Instead, she is only given looks of disgust and disapproval. The principal of her school asks, “This is your second baby?” (Sapphire 8). Clinton reports that in some cases if someone other than the slave owner raped a slave, “he was charged with ‘assault and battery’ and, in the case of conviction, damages were paid to her owner, as would be the case in any other ‘property damage’” (Clinton 207).³ Precious is treated like property and denied the right to consent. She doesn’t protest during sex, not because of her physical reaction and inability to tell pain from pleasure, but because “[s]he was denied her right of consent and...her own body”

² I am not arguing that masters were unaware their advances were unwanted. However, as texts like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* suggest, some masters were shocked by slaves who attempted to reject sexual advances.

³ This is not to suggest that the rape of a slave was always punished. Clinton seems to be commenting on the absurdity that the worst possible punishment received for raping a slave was the same as if the rapist had committed property damage.

(Clinton 207). She is taught to see herself as property, as a possession belonging to her mother and father. Property does not have consent, and while Precious, as a human being, is not actually the property of anyone, she is not yet aware of her ability to choose, to protest, or to consent. She says, “I feel so stupid sometimes. So ugly, worth nuffin’. I could just sit here wif my muver everyday wif the shades drawn, watching TV, eat, watch TV, eat. Carl come over fuck us’es” (Sapphire 35).

Precious’s father impregnates her twice, but of course does not claim her children as his own. Like a child slave sold away for monetary gain, Precious’s first child is taken away from her and lives with her grandmother, separate from both the mother and the father. Precious’s mother receives money for the child under the false pretense that the baby lives with both Precious and Mary, thus profiting financially from the offspring of slave and master. The reader is never made to believe that Precious’s father has ever even had contact with their children. Just as the child of Precious is given away without her consent, “the offspring of the female does not ‘belong’ to the Mother, nor is s/he ‘related’ to the ‘owner,’ though the latter ‘possesses’ it” (Spillers 269).

The familial structure in place for Precious is reminiscent of the structure in place for slaves. Throughout the novel Precious wonders why her mother doesn’t love her. She wonders about “warm kindness...[she] never feel[s] from Mama” (Sapphire 18) and hopes that “Mama and Daddy would recognize...[her] as Precious” (125). Her parents never recognize the familial bonds because Precious is treated like a slave, or a possession. For a slave, “kinship loses meaning, since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by property relations” (Spillers 269). While slaves might

“maintain the powerful ties of sympathy that bind blood relations in a network of feeling, of continuity,” Precious is not looked at as an equal by her parents (269). She is their property, their possession. They have no more emotional tie to her than they would for any other commodity. Just as a master who rapes his slave ignores the classification of a slave woman as property so that he may view her as a sexual being and not only desire her but, in the case of Dr. Flint in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, become obsessed with the idea of having sex with her, Precious’s mother and father must ignore the fact that Precious is their daughter in order to treat her the way they do. Not only must they ignore their bloodline in order to oppress her, keep her uneducated, and keep her captive, they also must ignore their familial connection to her in order to have sex with her.

Precious lives the life of a slave in her own home, and knows no taste of freedom. Her mother, her “mistress,” uses her for every task she either is unable, or unwilling, to do herself. Precious serves as the cook and is required to make all of the food her mother demands in large quantities. Not only is she forced to make the food, but her mother also insists on exercising control and power over Precious at every moment she can, so Precious also is forced to eat large quantities of food even when she is no longer hungry and doesn’t wish to eat. Sapphire writes:

I carry Mama a plate, set it in front her on TV tray. ‘Where’s yours?’
Mama shout. ‘I’m not hungry,’ I tell her. Devil red sparks flashes in
Mama’s eyes, big crease in her forehead git deeper. I’m scared... ‘Go get
a plate and stop acting stupid ‘fore I do hurt your shoulder.’ I go back to

the kitchen and fix myself a plate.... Greens, corn bread, ham hocks,
macaroni 'n cheese; I eat 'cause she say eat. I don't taste nothin.' (19-20)

In Harriet Jacobs's widely read slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, similar cruel acts of control are demonstrated by both master and mistress. The mistress in the novel would "spit in the kettles and pans that had been used for cooking....to prevent the cook and her children" from eating anything other than "what she chose to give them." Similarly, if the food prepared was not to his liking, the master would then force the cook "to eat every mouthful of it in his presence" (Jacobs 10). Controlling one's food can be a very powerful thing. Having no freedom and no control over her own life, Precious then finds herself seizing control where she is able and overeats on her own to prove a sense of agency to both herself and perhaps her mother. A victim of sexual abuse from both her mother and her father, Precious is taking control over the one aspect of her body that she can.

Precious as Property

With no thought of Precious's humanity, her mother sexually abuses her regularly. She looks at her daughter as a nameless, faceless body able to be used and abused at her will. She never recognizes Precious on a human level, and inflicts physical pain at any sign of resistance from Precious. Much like the mistresses described in slave narratives who knew slaves their whole lives, but still treated them like property, Precious's mother seems to fail to recognize the familial bonds that should exist between mother and daughter. She takes advantage of Precious's submissive behavior and fear for her mother as her owner or mistress. Clinton reminds us that while "all rapists arguably might be masculine and all violated are feminized...

not all violations are performed by men” (206). While obviously a woman, and therefore given less power as a mistress than a master, Precious’s home seems to complicate the patriarchal system of power and instead relies on “a system of penarchy” (208). There clearly is power associated with masculinity however, “whereas patriarchy defines sexual categories as reflections of biological functions (mother/father) and power relationships are modeled on family roles (father/son or mother/daughter), penarchy emphasizes sexual categories which reflect relationships and their sexual manifestations” (208). Therefore, Mary feels the need to exercise her sexual power in her relationship with Precious because first, she does not relate to Precious in a mother/daughter fashion and second, because she needs and craves power for herself as well. When Precious feels her “Mama’s hand between [her] legs,” she is submissive and pretends to be asleep (Sapphire 21). She understands that her mother is demonstrating control over her property in the way her family structure operates. The relationship between Mary and Precious recalls the relationship between Harriet Jacobs and her mistress in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In the slave narrative, the mistress also takes on this penarchal power. At night, Jacobs continuously wakes up to find her mistress, Ms. Flint, bending over her, whispering seductively into her ear (Jacobs 34). While she is on the surface trying to trick Jacobs into believing that the mistress is actually the master in order to catch her in her deviant behavior, as Hortense J. Spillers argues, she more fittingly seems to be exercising this sexual desire and power. Spillers writes, “the ‘jealous mistress’ here (but ‘jealous’ for whom?) forms an analogy with the ‘master’ to the extent that male dominative modes give the male the material means to fully act out what the female might only wish” (273). She requires this sexual act so that

she may feel more powerful than the slave. She “enacts a male alibi and prosthetic motion that is mobilized at night, at the material place of the dream work” (273). Both Mary and Mrs. Flint feel most liberated to perform this act of power while the victim, or slave, appears to be sleeping.

Precious’s mother, like a jealous mistress, hates her daughter for having sex with the master, her “husband,” and punishes her for it on a daily basis. She not only blames Precious for becoming pregnant with her father’s baby, but beats her endlessly for it. As Jacobs explains in her narrative, “the mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage” (Jacobs 27). She certainly does not recognize the sex acts and rape between Precious and the “master” as abuse. Much like a mistress, she believes that Precious wants and desires the “master,” her own father, for herself. She even accuses Precious saying, “you steal my husband!” (Sapphire 74). In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the slave, Linda, is fearful of her mistress who has learned of the master’s sexual advances towards her. She even “began to be fearful for [her] life” (Jacobs 34). The only reason Jacobs’s mistress does not kill her is for fear of exposing her husband, the master (35). What both women fail to realize is that they, as mistresses, have more in common with the slaves than they do with the masters. In both scenarios, “neither could claim her body and its various productions” (Spillers 273). Both mistresses and both slaves in *PUSH* and *Incidents* are held captive by their unfaithful husbands and the failure to maintain the relationships they desire.

Precious’s mother sacrifices Precious over and over again for Carl. Not only does she allow the sexual abuse to take place and the pregnancies to continue for her

financial gain, but she also prevents Precious from breast feeding as a baby so that her husband may have the breast milk instead. This act is reminiscent of nursing during slavery when slaves would breastfeed the White babies with milk meant for her children. In the slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs, she discusses this very pattern when she says, “My mother’s mistress was the daughter of my grandmother’s mistress....they were both nourished at my grandmother’s breast. In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, [so] that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food” (3). While Precious’s mother certainly plays the role of the mistress in her interactions with Precious, she seems to play a subservient role when with Carl. Carl appropriates the power so that he can be the most powerful in the household.

Education as Freedom

Precious’s life seems destined for failure and she is, of course, expected to repeat the cycle of neglect and abuse with her own children. With no opportunity, no one to help her out of her personal hell, and no knowledge of anything else in the world for her, Precious seemingly floats through life, detached from her body and herself as much as humanly possible. As a result of her second pregnancy, she is forced to leave the school that she attends as an invisible figure, somehow getting through to 9th grade without being able to read. She becomes a student at an alternative school, Each One Teach One, and her life begins to change. She begins to learn the tools of communication and expression through literacy, a skill she had been deprived of for sixteen years of her life. Much like an illiterate slave kept in the dark because of the slave owner’s fear of the power and agency knowledge brings, Precious is not even taught the alphabet, let alone the power that words can hold. As soon as Precious begins

school she starts to recognize that education and literacy are the keys to changing her life. While being abused she detaches from the experience, but instead of previously imagining herself as someone she is not, the White people on television, or “a advertisement girl on commercial” she now starts to focus on her ABCs and the abilities she now holds, and the opportunities they will present her (Sapphire 35).

Precious’s teacher at Each One Teach One, Ms. Rain, focuses on writing and expressing feelings as a therapeutic practice. Ms. Rain encourages Precious to write through her pain constantly. She says, “if you just sit there the river gonna rise up drown you! Writing could be the boat carry you to the otherside” (Sapphire 97). As Precious begins to transform her “nightmare into narrative,” she herself transforms as well (Horvitz 43). She ceases to be a powerless, illiterate girl enslaved by her parents and her lack of knowledge. Instead, she begins to tell her story, a skill she was previously incapable of, and begins to heal as well. By constructing her own story, she takes control and ownership of both her body and her mind back from the previous owners. Like a slave unable to previously communicate effectively, Precious breaks the silence and finds a world of words and a source of power. While she was previously kept down and made to feel inferior and stupid by her parents, learning how to read, write, and express herself has allowed her to elevate herself to a level far beyond their reach. Precious particularly puts value into truth. She says on the first page of the novel, “[s]ome people tell a story ‘n it don’t make no sense or be true. But I’m gonna try to make sense and tell the truth, else what’s the fucking use? Ain’ enough lies and shit out there already?” (Sapphire 3-4). Precious seems to understand that “remembering and

telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of social order and for the healing of the individual victims” (Horvitz 40).

With the power of literacy, Precious is able to read about the world of opportunity that awaits her. She even begins to read novels to which she can relate, such as *The Color Purple*, and starts to recognize that there are other people like her. When meeting with her social worker, Precious is no longer satisfied with being told what is best and what will happen to her in her life. At the start of the novel, before she becomes literate, Madhu Dubey asserts, “she feels bewildered by official documents and institutions dealing with the urban poor” (Dubey 86). Her file is a source of frustration and anger for her because it is something out of her range of understanding and she reacts with anger: “[w]hite cunt box got my file on her desk. I see it” (Sapphire 7). Like a slave attached to ownership papers, her file formerly had represented the continued lack of agency in her own world. She was being followed constantly by a file containing her life in words that she couldn’t even read, let alone change. She thinks, “I wonder what exactly file do say. I know it say I got a baby....I don’t know what file say. I do know every time they wants to fuck wif me or decide something in my life, here they come wif the mutherfucking file” (28). When she steals the file, suddenly Precious contains the power not only to read her file, but to discard it based on the ability to change her life. This suggests that “literacy offers Precious a means of moving out of dead-end jobs and of lifting herself and her children out of poverty” (Dubey 86).

In *Each One Teach One*, Precious forms strong friendships and familial bonds with Ms. Rain and the other women in school. She draws strength from these other women in their shared experiences and their unfailing love for each other. The people in

Each One Teach One are all female. Sapphire seems to have made this choice deliberately. Perhaps she follows Alice Walker's definition of "womanist" as "outrageous, audacious, courageous, or willful behavior.... A woman who loves other women...Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility...and women's strength" and hopes for Precious to echo those characteristics (Hernton 6). Sapphire seems to be suggesting that the class is united in their shared status as ex-slaves. Spillers asserts, "the quintessential 'slave' is not a male, but a female" and it is not uncommon for Black to be feminized (Spillers 267). Sapphire demonstrates this notion through gendering the literacy class. While Precious was certainly from a horrible home in which she was held captive and tortured, it seems through reading the class project "Life Stories," that all of the women were in one way or another slaves to someone or something in their lives. Through their shared trauma and then shared gain of knowledge and literacy, the class forms a support network and path for escape. The women use each other as a lit passageway to freedom, providing food and shelter, and strength for one another along the way. They provide moral support, physical support, nourishment, and emotion. A symbolic modern day Underground Railroad, this network of strength is Precious's path to freedom.

Becoming literate gives Precious the power and agency to question her own life and situation. While literacy does not give her the power to erase the life she has lived, it gives her the ability to come to terms with it and eventually put an end to it. She uses her words to tell the truth about her life. When she has her second baby, she finally tells the social worker that her first child lives with her grandmother, not her mother like they previously believed, because she was "tired of the game, lying" (Sapphire 67). As

soon as Precious is able to use her newfound knowledge of words and expression, she becomes visible. She frees herself from the oppression and form of slavery she has previously faced in her life. She moves out of her mother's house, gets her own truly safe living space, and also breaks the cycle of slavery and abuse by demonstrating real love in her relationship with her second child. She understands that "them words everything" and that literacy and knowledge are the keys to freedom so she begins reading to him at birth (67). Precious also begins to understand that she "didn't meet a boy 'n fall in love, sex up 'n have a baby" (68). She was raped. She begins to draw the parallel between the rape of her body she experiences with the rape of a life filled with knowledge and love. Precious's years of silence were ideal for her "owners." Precious's silence was less dangerous for them as far as legal ramifications were concerned. Her silence kept her from protesting her treatment, from telling a teacher, an authority, from freeing herself.

With Precious, Sapphire seems to be commenting on the pattern that began "with the increasing exploitation and abuse of black women during and after slavery" in which "black women's sexuality is ideologically located in a nexus between race and gender, where the black female subject is not seen and has no voice" (Hammonds 487, 488). Sapphire draws the parallel between Precious's ability to express herself and simultaneously take control of her body and sexuality. Historically, "[i]n tandem with the notion of silence, black women writers have repeatedly drawn on the notion of the 'invisible' to describe aspects of black women's lives in general and sexuality in particular" (Hammonds 489). By speaking out, Precious is beginning the rehabilitative process of healing. It is important to note, however, that "trauma works to subvert, if

not entirely prevent, precisely this rehabilitative process, especially when its victims are traumatized again by being silenced.” Much like a slave penning a narrative, Precious’s own writing “becomes a meta-story centered upon the protagonist’s search for and acquisition of story” (Horvitz 40).

Towards the end of the novel, we find out that “Carl has the AIDS virus” (Sapphire 85). While we subsequently discover that neither one of Precious’s children have been infected with the disease, we are left wondering why the author chooses to leave Precious with a permanent reminder of her abuse when she has come so far in her quest for literacy and freedom. The explanation ties back to the scars of slavery left on generation after generation of African Americans. Indeed, “the smack of the whip will reverberate in the ears of generations to come. In fact, the anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue, take on the objective description of laboratory prose... these undecipherable markings on the captive body...” leave marks not easily erased (Spillers 260). And then “we might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually transfers from one generation to another...” (Spillers 260). While Precious’s children have been spared the permanent markings of their mother’s suffering in terms of the AIDS virus, it is a disease that could have been transmitted from mother to child through birth and/or breast feeding. Further, it is a clear indication that no matter how far Precious has come or will go in her life, like a slave who has escaped to freedom, it is impossible to erase the scars that oppression and abuse leave. Of course, “in every case of rape, whether the mark is invisible or permanent, life or death, a mark remains: the memory of a violation—force without consent” (Clinton 205). For Precious and her children, they never will be able to escape the painful

memories that filled their lives. Additionally, it is fitting commentary that while freedom certainly is better than being enslaved, hardships still lie ahead. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* Jacobs writes, “when victims make their escape from the wild beast of Slavery northerners consent to act the part of bloodhounds, and hunt the poor fugitive back into his den” (36). While the North is full of promises of a happy and safe life, there still are evils left to avoid.

While *PUSH* as a slave narrative is deeply disturbing, it cannot be ignored that in slave narratives there is the trope of “white oppressing blacks and the blacks surviving and struggling to overcome that oppression” (Hernton 5). In *PUSH*, however, Carl and Mary adopt the role of White master and mistress and thus the novel primarily focuses on Black people oppressing other Black people. While some critics believe that Sapphire is irresponsible in her portrayal of the Black family and that “white characters are always portrayed as caring. There to help. Never shown as contributing to the oppression of African Americans,” I argue that the opposite is true (Reed A25). Sapphire’s use of Carl and Mary’s behaviors over which they seem to have no control stays within the slave narrative genre, and, in addition to condemning their horrendous behavior, the novel also critiques the White power structure that allows for Precious’s invisibility. These issues are nothing new as “the history of rape is a history of racism as well as sexism, and the interplay of those concepts is as clear a guide to the allocation of power in American as any” (Estrich 171). Precious says, “I cry for Mama what kinda story Mama got to do me like she do?” (Sapphire 96). Even as a victim of the most horrific and unspeakable abuse, Precious recognizes that her mother had to have been victimized herself in order to continue the cycle.

Sapphire's critique is multifaceted and complex. While Carl is an oppressor within Mary's apartment, he also is oppressed by White society outside of the home. Additionally, dating back generations, "slavery systematically fostered patterns of sexual violence, with consequences which have clear impact today" (Clinton 206). It is, after all, Carl's penis that ends up being the weapon to nearly destroy Precious, at the same time giving her the gifts of her children, through which she is finally able to experience pure love and break the cycle of abuse. The brutality included by Sapphire in *PUSH* is her attempt to show that "being Black encompasses...experiencing white domination" (Hill Collins 27). Mary and Carl are monsters but they are also victims of oppression.

CHAPTER 2. *THE DARKEST CHILD* – THE BRIGHTEST CHILD:
EDUCATION AS THE KEY TO FREEDOM

“We...are gradually being sucked back into slavery” (Phillips 140). Delores Phillips writes these words in her novel, *The Darkest Child*, a novel set in the Civil Rights era in rural Georgia. In this particular scene, a young Black man is speaking in church, trying to inspire the congregation to fight back and take a stand against the racial injustices of the time. *The Darkest Child* is a story of a little girl and her fight for education in an oppressive time, community, and household. By use of plot, style, structure, and characters, this contemporary text honors both slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. I will examine how, similar to *PUSH* and *Bastard Out of Carolina*, education not only remains the key to freedom for the narrator Tangy Mae, but in fact is the primary way in which she breaks free from being treated as an object and transitions to a subject utilizing agency. By classifying this text as a freedom narrative, I will prove how this novel, among others classified as freedom narratives, makes the explicit connection between attaining education and breaking free from ownership. *The Darkest Child* enters into an intertextual dialogue with neo-slave and slave narratives, especially the narrative of Frederick Douglass; the characters’ relationships with each other are directly reminiscent of the oppressor/oppressed relationships from the antebellum plantation era, and the resolution of the novel is the narrator’s ultimate achievement of the freedom she seeks throughout. By juxtaposing Frederick Douglass’s texts and *The*

Darkest Child, one clearly can see the connections between Phillips's text and the well-known slave narrative.

While scholars largely have overlooked *The Darkest Child*, it has been reviewed in *Publishers Weekly*, *The New York Times*, and *The ABNF Journal*. In 2004, Delores Phillips was awarded the "First Novelist Award" by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association Literary Awards. One reviewer writes that Phillips creates a world in her novel that "serves as a microcosm of a world on the brink of change" (Zaleski 232). Other reviews commend Phillips for her insight into "aspects of African American culture that may be unfamiliar to many" (Cannon, Davis, Hendricks, Baker, Jenkins 387), but put the most value on Phillip's ability to "ponder the psychological and personal ramifications for victims and villains" (387). Phillips is credited with "provid[ing] a realistic example of psychological scarring that can occur from years of living under the shadows of past traumatic experiences" (387) and the reviews focus largely on the abuse and neglect in the novel. In *The New York Times* book review, Lizzie Skurnick recognizes the ties that Phillips creates to her "spiritual progenitors" simply by writing a book about "a young black girl's coming-of-age in adverse circumstances" but believes that Phillips pays homage by granting a "rhythmic nod" to *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye* in titling her debut novel, *The Darkest Child* (1). While this title perhaps reflects homage to influential novels, I think the title choice had more to do with paying homage to the tradition that reflects slave narratives than the novels themselves than with simply giving a rhythmic nod. Phillips's novel, while barely mentioning slavery at all, still seems to reflect many of the same themes, issues, and conditions present in slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. While there

certainly are connections to Morrison, Walker, and other seminal writers, Frederick Douglass and his slave narrative are the earliest and most important literary progenitors.

Rozelle Quinn as Master

Both Charles T. Davis and James Olney separately have outlined criteria for the traditional slave narrative. Using the criteria set forth by these two scholars, one can see how *The Darkest Child* immediately begins to signify on these earlier forms. Both scholars reference the intense “description of a cruel master, mistress” (Waters 54). In *The Darkest Child*, it is made clear to the reader from the beginning that “something is wrong” (Zaleski 232) with Rozelle Quinn, the mother of Tangy Mae, the narrator. Tangy Mae describes her mother: “at the age of thirty-five, our mother was tall and slender with a head of thick reddish-brown hair. Her face, with its cream-colored skin and high cheekbones beneath dark gray eyes, was set off by a gleaming white smile accented by dimples. I thought she was beautiful, despite my acquaintance with the demon that hibernated beneath her elegant surface” (Phillips 1-2). The idea that a demon lives beneath her pretty exterior seems to illustrate the idea of a very cruel mistress. Phillips’s description of Rozelle Quinn seems to signify on the images of masters presented in slave narratives. Her cream-colored skin seems to imply that her skin is much lighter than her children, whom she treats as possessions.

At the start of the novel, Rozelle is pregnant with her tenth child from ten different men, and is ferociously abusive to each one of her children. While Rozelle is at the center of the novel, the fathers play a very small role. As in the times of slavery, when some slaves did not know their parents, Rozelle’s children do not know who their fathers are. As Frederick Douglass explains of his own parentage in *My Bondage and*

My Freedom (1855), “I say nothing of *father*, for he is shrouded in a mystery I have never been able to penetrate. Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families....The name of the child is not expected to be that of its father, and his condition does not necessarily affect that of the child....He may be a *freeman*; and yet his child may be a *chattel*” (*My Bondage* 151). Douglass does not know his father well, but describes his mother’s physical and mental demeanor as “tall, and finely proportioned; of deep black, glossy complexion; had regular features, and among the other slaves, was remarkably sedate in her manners” (*My Bondage* 152). In contrast, Tangy Mae describes her mother as a beautiful woman “with cream colored skin” (Phillips 1) “whose erratic mood swings, heart-wrenching cruelty, and deep emotional distress leave an indelible mark on all of her children” (Zaleski 232). Portrayed as a monster with no remorse for her actions, Rozelle “is so color-conscious that she has categorized her 10 children by their shades of blackness: her white children (because, like her, they were so light-skinned, they could pass for white), her Indian children (whose skin was darker) and her darkest child, Tangy Mae, the person from whose point of view this story is told” (Spratling 1). When referring to her brother Sam, Tangy Mae says, “What set him apart from the others was his light complexion and the sandy-brown color of his hair. He looked like, and was often mistaken for, a white man, although everyone in Parkersfield knew he was Negro. Probably the only person who didn’t know he was colored was our mother” (Phillips 16). Rozelle has learned to attach significance to skin color. This significance of color discrimination began during slavery; “historical evidence indicates that whites placed greater economic value on slaves of mixed percentage and used skin tone or degree of visible white ancestry as a

basis for the differential treatment of bondsmen” (Herring and Keith 761-762). In her own life, Rozelle was punished and resented by her mother for her own light skin and then began to resent her children that were darker than her. Although her resentment is derived from the fact that her darker children more closely resemble the parents that never truly wanted her and serves as a reminder of her pain on a daily basis, she also “take[s] pleasure in categorizing her children by ‘race’” (Phillips 16), suggesting her behavior is reminiscent of racial taxonomy during the slave era.

Rozelle’s mother, Miss Zadie, became pregnant with her after being brutally raped and beaten by three White men. When telling the story of Rozelle’s birth to Tangy Mae, Miss Zadie explains, “that baby come into this world white as one of God’s clouds and wit’ the devil’s own gray eyes. It was born a mockin’ me, and I knew it. John took care of it, took care of ever’thing” (Phillips 190). This story helps put Rozelle’s life choices into perspective. As the only child of a mother who hates and resents her and the way in which she was conceived and of a White biological father she never knew (and it can be assumed that she was never given details of the way she was conceived), she is raised by a man, John, with whom she has no biological connection. In fact, it is at the age of thirteen that she “put the liar’s finger on John and it hurt him real bad” when she confronts him about not being her father (Phillips 190). This episode eventually leads to Rozelle’s departure, not only from her family’s home, but from her family entirely, as she takes on a new last name “Quinn” and disassociates from the family in general. Rozelle never shares any of this family history with any of her children. Perhaps as the product of an anonymous rapist and a mother who resents her, Rozelle constantly seeks revenge on her own history. To bear children, or to “make

generations, as Janice Harris has pointed out, means making love; but making love for the purpose of making human evidence turns what should be an act of love into an act of historical vengeance. As Harris says of this crippling contradiction: ‘The goal of lovemaking subverts the act; the end denies the mean’” (duCille 452). As the mother of ten children from ten different fathers, Rozelle’s intentions likely involve creating a bond between mother and child that she never felt with her own mother. Instead, the cycle repeats itself, and Rozelle’s mixture of love and hatred for herself and her children leaves her to abuse them and treat them as possessions rather than as humans, much less her own children.

From the first chapter, there is no mistaking the sense of ownership Rozelle feels over her children, specifically Tangy Mae. From the very first page, Tangy describes, “she had only to speak and I would do anything she asked” (Phillips 1). Like *PUSH*’s Mary Jones, Rozelle Quinn makes it very clear that her children are possessions and she exercises her ownership over them regularly. When speaking about Tangy Mae’s sister Martha Jean, who is deaf and does not speak, she exclaims, “I birthed her and she belongs to me” (118). In the same scene, while exercising her ownership over her daughter, “her fingers curled and tightened into fists as she landed softly on her heels, and she began to jab. With artistic precision, she opened gashes, loosened teeth and viciously rearranged my sister’s face” (118-119). As in this scene, she is physically abusive for no reason, inflicting serious injury and pain upon the children for whom she is meant to care. She gives her children severe beatings that are described in detail. To further ensure that the ownership over her children is understood, Rozelle even brands her own child. After running from girls who were beating her violently and calling her

“Tar Baby,” Tangy Mae runs into her mother’s arms, hoping to be comforted and consoled. Instead, her “mother brings the searing fire iron down onto [her] leg” (52). As she begins to swoon with pain, Tangy Mae hears her mother say, “I done branded you a Quinn, girl” (52). The absolute control over her daughter, the intense and unwavering obedience is not enough to satisfy Rozelle. She needs to physically inflict a symbol of her ownership on her own flesh and blood. This branding scene is directly reminiscent of masters branding their slaves to prevent them from running away (ensuring they could be returned) and escaping to a life of freedom.

Rozelle’s cruel behavior towards her children is not just abusive, but has larger implications that call for recognition. Because this novel takes place in the South in the 1950s, the effects of slavery would have been very significant and tangible. The opportunities available to African Americans were extremely limited and the tensions between the White community and Black community were so high; it was obviously a time of extreme unrest. In the novel, Hambone says, “We’re living in a town where Negroes are afraid to walk on the same side of the street as a white man. I think there’s something wrong with that, don’t you?” (Phillips 140). It is important to note that this observation is made about the community outside of what one would think would be the safe place, the home. Thus Tangy Mae faces oppression in both her home environment and her community. Rozelle has not made her home a safe place from racism and inequality. In fact, she has echoed plantation behavior and the extreme injustices of the 1950s South, and transferred this fear into her own children. The domestic space she has created is one filled with terror, violence, and inhumanity.

Rozelle is often illustrated as master in similar ways that Frederick Douglass describes Mr. Gore, an especially cruel and cold-hearted overseer. Douglass describes, “When he whipped, he seemed to do so from a sense of duty, and feared no consequences. He did nothing reluctantly, no matter how disagreeable” (*Narrative* 30). After shooting a slave, “he argued that if one slave refused to be corrected, and escaped with his life, the other slaves would soon copy the example; the result of which would be, the freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites” (*Narrative* 30). Rozelle Quinn often is portrayed in very similar terms. She refuses to let her children leave her home because if they leave, she won’t have anyone over whom to exert power. When one of her oldest sons gets married and wants to move away, she flies into a rage: “You stupid son-of-a-bitch! She screamed. Is this what I spent my life working for? I raised you, Harvey... You still my child. I’m gon’ beat some sense into you... Mama ripped Harvey’s shirt and, as he tried to get away, clawed at his back, and damned him to Hell for all eternity” (Phillips 151-152). She even tells Tangy Mae, “But when you leave, if you leave, I’ll still have Laura, and I can always go back and get Edna” (347). She rationalizes that if one leaves, she still will have nine children left to abuse. Her children are not significant in her life because of the love she feels for them. Instead, they are property, and if one must leave, she rationalizes that it does not matter because at least she still can exercise control over the others.

While Rozelle does not exactly live the privileged life of a “master,” she takes on many of the traits, characteristics, and behaviors associated with the plantation masters during antebellum slavery. For example, when Rozelle comes home one day, Tangy Mae narrates the scene by saying, “Mama swept through the doorway of her

castle and plopped down on her throne-- the only bed in the house. Laura and Edna immediately knelt, removed her shoes, and began to rub her feet” (Phillips 9). After being so devastated that her son, Harvey, left her home to be with his wife, she commits the ultimate crime against her children. On the Fourth of July, a holiday that is meant to signify freedom, pride, and festive celebrations,⁴ Rozelle kills her youngest child.

Tangy Mae says:

Mama stood at the edge of the porch dangling our baby sister over the side by one arm. As Martha Jean rushed toward them, Mama swung out once, twice.... With my hands to my throat, I waited for a third swing that never came. Mama, staring blankly into space, opened her hand and released Judy. I saw my baby sister sail through the air, flipping and jerking, as she began a descent that took her over the rocky incline and down into the gully. (175)

Even after the sheriff comes to question the family, the death of Baby Judy is ruled as an accident. Douglass very specifically outlines in his narrative “that killing a slave, or any colored person...is not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community” (*Narrative* 31). In the case of Rozelle killing her baby, the same can be said. Not only did the courts not punish her for her crime (she was never arrested, arraigned, or held responsible by the law officials), but she was given sympathy by the community in prayers and well wishes, as the death was ruled an accident and none of the Quinn children ever came forward with the truth.

⁴ The Fourth of July is a holiday that is frequently referenced in slave narratives such as *Dessa Rose* and *Kindred*.

Rozelle thinks of her children as mere possessions that she owns and has the right to sell or trade. After killing her youngest daughter, she agrees to sell her daughter Martha Jean to another man, Velman, for a car and some cash. Once Velman has taught Rozelle how to drive the car, and given her a small sum of money along with the car itself, she agrees to let her daughter go. After being accused by her son, Sam, for selling Martha Jean for a car, Rozelle protests, "It ain't like that, Sam... It was more than just a car. I got money, too" (Phillips 182). As Douglass describes, slaves on the plantations often were sold and traded without any second thought. He writes, "My old master (Anthony) had determined to let me go to Baltimore, to live with Mr. Hugh Auld, brother to my old master's son-in-law, Captain Thomas Auld. I received this information about three days before my departure" (*Narrative* 33). Just as Douglass was sent off to live with a new master on short notice, the Quinn children are treated the same way, as property with no regard to their humanity. When Rozelle's son challenges her sense of humanity, she defends herself by explaining that she was given more than cash. She is not capable of thinking of her actions as cruel or inhumane, she is concerned only with the business side. Douglass's owner would not be concerned with the way he treated Douglass. He is concerned only with getting the best deal.

Rozelle's commodification of her children includes sexual commodification when she begins to force Tangy Mae into prostitution when she is barely a teenager. When Tangy Mae voices her own protest, her mother responds, "You gon' do this...if you don't do it, Tangy Mae, I ain't got no need for you. I'd just as soon chop you in pieces and leave you out here in these weeds for the buzzards" (Phillips 262). Although Tangy Mae is one the brightest students in school, and maintains a love for education

and reading, she is forced to miss school constantly and to prostitute her young body at her mother's command. The ownership Rozelle exhibits over her children is evident in the way she abuses them as well. She forces Tangy Mae regularly to visit the farmhouse, the place where prostitutes rent rooms with paying men. Rozelle arranges clients for Tangy Mae and, on one particular night, a client, Chadlow, says, "Rozelle's been telling me all about you... says you've been giving her a rough time, and that you're lazy, you won't help her out at the house...I told your mother I would help her straighten you out. And I will, by God, I will" (Phillips 332). Chadlow then proceeds to gag, handcuff, and beat Tangy Mae until she is near death. According to Patton, when referring to the various approaches taken by postmodern slave narratives, these texts share a "narrative/ideology of resistance in the face of oppression" (Patton 21). Tangy Mae's survival in the face of such extreme abuse and oppression speaks to the enormous strength of the character.

Tangy Mae & Frederick Douglass

By describing the branding scene, and drawing other comparisons to slave narratives, Phillips pays homage to and reflects the slave narrative tradition by mirroring Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. In the narrative, he gives very specific accounts of the environment in which he was forced to be a part. In Chapter II he begins by outlining every detail that makes up his everyday life. He describes the family of his master, the monthly allowance of food, the yearly clothing they were given, the sleeping conditions they were forced to endure, and the overall conditions that make up the life of a slave. Similarly, in the second chapter of *The Darkest Child*, the narrator Tangy Mae begins to

describe the life she lives in very similar terms. While she does not address all aspects of her oppressed life, she does describe her physical environment. She says, “Our house stood alone on a hill off Penyon Road, about half a mile outside the city limits. It was old, crippled, and diseased- an emblem of poverty and neglect... Erosion had left the house slanted at an odd angle, help up on the east side by thick, round poles lodged into tilted, unstable earth... All of my life home had been these three drafty rooms under the same rusted tin roof” (Phillips 7). Tangy Mae’s description gives the reader one of the first glimpses into the poverty Tangy Mae and her family face. Her house seems to serve as a metaphor for her life with her mother. There is nothing healthy or endearing about life in this disturbed domestic space. It seems to be rotted from the outside in. Even the location of the house, isolated, forces the reader to understand this family’s place on the outskirts of the community, not just in locale but in social standing. She begins to describe each one of her siblings individually. She says, “Tarabelle was sixteen and almost as tall as Mama. She had long jet black hair, a copper-colored complexion, and the cold, black eyes of a dead poker player” (8). She then describes her sisters Edna Pearl, Laura Gail, and Martha Jean. Continuing in the same format and vein that Douglass did, Phillips outlines and describes each detail of life for Tangy Mae in the house on Penton Road, the same way Douglass describes life in detail on the plantation. While technically Rozelle may not be her White master, her actions and the way she treats her children reflects a master/slave relationship in antebellum slavery times. Phillips intentionally seems to follow the same format that one of the most well-known slave narratives did. Perhaps similar to Douglass’s abolitionist attempts to

educate Whites ignorant about slavery in the south, Phillips educates readers unaware of horrific domestic spaces that exist like Tangy Mae's.

It is significant that Douglass describes the clothing that the slave children were given to wear in his efforts to expose the mistreatment of slaves. He writes, "The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year"

(*Narrative* 21). I am struck by the fact that both Douglass and Tangy Mae detail lack that is associated with protection (clothing, sleeping spaces) in the second chapter of both texts. Following the same format, Phillips also takes great care in describing the clothing given to the Quinn children. She writes, "Martha Jean wore a brown and purple plaid dress that was at least three sizes too large.... She wore knee-high socks, and I watched as her heels bobbed up and down in a pair of hand-me-down Buster Brown loafers that were also too large. She was not wearing a coat because she did not own one, but she wore one on top of the other, two wrinkled, navy blue sweaters, each of which had seen better years" (12). It is clear that Tangy Mae's family's poverty does not approximate the absolute poverty of a slave. Still, Tangy Mae's description of her sister's meager, inadequate wardrobe underscores the fact that the siblings are neglected and maltreated. It is interesting to note that while Douglass describes lack and nakedness, Tangy Mae describes garments that are too big. In Douglass's description, children have few garments, while in Tangy Mae's description, her sister layers old

clothes. Martha Jean's too-big dresses and shoes suggest that, like a slave, she isn't allowed to be a child.

Tangy Mae describes her daily life as harsh and cold, both literally and metaphorically. When Phillips paints a picture of the sleeping conditions the Quinn children were forced to endure, it is described as dreary. Tangy Mae narrates, "I rolled over on my pallet and touched the bottom of the stove, feeling only a hint of last night's warmth. My right side, from the waist down, was soaked with urine, and my gown clung to my legs as I crawled up from the floor. My teeth chattered in the morning chill, and I cursed Laura for her weak bladder, or kidney, or whatever caused her to routinely ammoniate my body" (Phillips 27). While Tangy Mae's mother sleeps in the only bed in the house, Tangy Mae and all of her siblings sleep together in one room, side by side, with one blanket each, only the faint heat from the stove to warm them, and thin, worn pallets to pad the cold, wet ground. Douglass's description of his sleeping quarters is grim and dismal. He explains, "There were no beds given the slaves, unless one coarse blanket be considered such.... Old and young, male and female, married and single, drop down side by side on one common bed, --the cold, damp floor,--each covering himself or herself with their miserable blankets" (*Narrative* 21). It is interesting to me that both narrators describe their sleeping quarters as being cold, hard, and communal. It seems that the cold, harsh reality of slavery was reflected even at night during times of "rest."

There are many disturbing scenes in *The Darkest Child*, but it is especially disturbing when Rozelle kills her own infant daughter. It is significant that Tangy Mae frames the story of her sister Baby Judy's death by describing it as being on the Fourth

of July. On July 5th, 1852, Frederick Douglass gave a speech at Rochester titled, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” In this speech, Douglass points out that he and other Black men and women are “not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary!” (*My Bondage* 431). He explains, “Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you this day rejoice, are not enjoyed in common” (*My Bondage* 431). In his speech, Douglass explains that because he is not treated as an equal American, and because he does not know the same freedoms that White Americans know, he cannot rejoice the way others can. In fact, Douglass aligns death with the Fourth of July. He says, “The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn” (*My Bondage* 431). Judy’s death on the Fourth of July is meant to juxtapose freedom and independence with the life that Tangy Mae and her siblings really lead. The irony of celebrating a holiday of independence when one is not granted the same rights and freedoms as other Americans is glaring and significant.

Hunger for Food/Hunger for Education

The connection between food and knowledge in *The Darkest Child* is made throughout the novel, as both of these elements are yearned for, hidden, stolen, and used as bargaining tools. In *Hunger Overcome? Food and Resistance in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*, Andrew Warnes discusses food and its connection to resistance in African American literature. Warnes writes that authors have a “tendency to view hunger as an avoidable condition imposed from above, and to their association of this physical void with the equally solvable and equally debilitating emptiness of

illiteracy—a condition that, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has argued, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and other slave autobiographies depict as a prerequisite of racial subordination” (1). As Warnes writes, “Equally often [autobiographies of slaves] refer to acts of resistance—to moments of food theft and foraging, to surreptitious self-education, and to other individual rebellions that challenged such circumscription” (2). In *The Darkest Child*, when Rozelle tells Tangy Mae that she will not return to school, but will instead begin to work, they are in the kitchen of a home they clean to make money. Instead of fighting her mother and asserting her desire to go to school and learn, Tangy Mae stays quiet but thinks,

There was plenty I wanted to say. Words were choking me. I covered my mouth with my hand so that Mama could not hear the words that might seep out. *Mama, you promised M. Pace that you would let me go to school one more year. You promised me the ninth grade. You promised! Mr. Pace thinks I'm smart. Please Mama, let me go to school!* (Phillips 3)

However, instead of saying any of this, Tangy Mae remains quiet. Her mother’s insistence on robbing her of an education is paralleled only by her insistence on robbing the house they are cleaning of food. Immediately following the decision to keep Tangy Mae from going to school, she also instructs Tangy Mae to “put a bit of coffee and sugar in some wax paper. And, Tangy Mae, don’t make it noticeable” (3). These paralleled acts of food theft and education deprivation are directly reminiscent of slave narratives. According to Warnes, “what these acts suggest is that, within the plantation, the almost constant ability of slaveholders to control access to foods and words

coincided with the occasional ability of slaves to disrupt this calculated distribution”

(3). Rozelle exhibits her sense of ownership over her daughter by deciding she no longer will receive an education. She then exhibits control over her own fate by deciding to steal food from the affluent people she works for; however, it is important that instead of doing it herself, she controls Tangy Mae and her access by forcing her hand instead.

Rozelle exercises her ownership over her children by controlling their food intake throughout the novel. She tells her children that they never will go hungry living in Georgia. She explains that there are “too many trees bearing nuts and fruits. Corn and bean stalks running out to the road for the taking. Bushes of berries and vines of grapes. No way to be hungry” (Phillips 30). The children believe their mother because that is how they are taught. It takes years for Tangy Mae to realize that she is starving for food. She says, “I’d be sitting in school with my stomach making all sorts of noise, and everybody looking. I’d keep telling myself how it couldn’t be hunger because people in Georgia don’t get hungry. At lunchtime, I’d go off by myself so I wouldn’t have to smell the food” (30). Convincing her children that they are not hungry is another form of control and deception in keeping her children obedient. Again it is interesting and telling that Phillips pairs the feeling of hunger with the act of trying to attain an education.

Because of the control Rozelle exercises over her children, food never is made available without her presence. The small amount of food that was given was controlled as with every aspect of their lives. During the time of slavery, “slaveholders could abject their African property by banishing them from their Edenic orchards, then [the]

slaves could launch Brer Rabbit-like forays that, by lifting the ‘hardy apple’ and the ‘delicate orange’ from predestined white mouths, reaffirmed their own humanity” (Warnes 3). When Rozelle is in the hospital having another child, Tangy Mae and her siblings feel a sense of freedom not previously known. Because she was not in the house, the children were able to eat as they wanted, and as Warnes describes, “reaffirm their own humanity.” Tangy Mae says, “In the absence of our mother, gluttony threatened to be our downfall. Martha Jean, encouraged by Sam, cooked a huge pot of grits and fried over a dozen thick slices of bologna. We gathered in the kitchen and ate until every grain and morsel was devoured. We were undaunted by the prospect of repercussions, even as we consumed the last of a load of bread. We sampled, savored, and digested the sweets of freedom” (Phillips 44). Again we see the taste of freedom literally being attributed to food. It is only when the oppressor, Rozelle, is out of the way that the children can eat what they want and feel free to do so. However, Warnes points out, “if every food slaves secretly ate and every word they secretly read eroded the edifice of plantation life, then every withdrawal by slaveholders of these materials rebuilt it” (Warnes 3). While Tangy Mae and her siblings could enjoy these slight tastes of freedom, their mother was coming home eventually and now with another child to use and abuse.

Tangy Mae’s love for school, education, and all things pertaining to knowledge plays a large role in the novel from the very start. She pleads with her mother, “please, Mama, let me go to school” (Phillips 3), but knows from her siblings that came before her, “at the age of twelve, my mother’s children were expected to drop out of school, get a job, and help support the family” (3). At the close of the first chapter, with her fate

already decided by her mother, Tangy Mae clearly states her goal of attaining freedom: “I was determined to discover from the pages of my schoolbooks, how to break the chains that bound me to my mother” (6). As in slave narratives, slaves are only able to attain their freedom and “break their chains” by finding their way to education, literacy, and knowledge. Rozelle constantly uses Tangy Mae’s love for school and education against her and as a way to control her behavior and obedience. After receiving a beating from a man with whom her mother forces her to have sex, Tangy Mae tells her mother in a moment of rare defiance, “I hate what you’ve made me do, and as soon as I’m old enough, I’m moving out of here” (348). Rozelle responds, “You ain’t moving nowhere, Tangy Mae. Who do you think gon’ let you stay wit’ them when all you wanna do is go to school, go to school, go to school.... You say one more thing to me, and I’ll pull you outta that damn school tomorrow” (349). Rozelle uses school as a bargaining tool to keep Tangy Mae from disobeying her and especially from leaving her. Rozelle does not want her daughter to go to school for the same reasons slaves were not allowed to learn to read and write. As Douglass writes in his narrative:

Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, ‘if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world....As to himself it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make his discontented and unhappy. (*Narrative* 37)

Just as the White slave owners used a slave's supposed "happiness" as an excuse to prevent the slave from learning to read, Rozelle tries to convince Tangy Mae that it is in her best interest not to learn. However, both the slave owners and Rozelle knew that education and literacy were the keys to learning how to break free from ownership. Just as Tangy Mae explains that she "was determined to discover from the pages of my schoolbooks, how to break the chains that bound me to my mother" (Phillips 6), it is this moment that causes Douglass to understand "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (*Narrative* 38).

It is only through her own resistance, and the drive she maintains to stay in school, that Tangy Mae eventually is able to graduate from high school with a degree. On her graduation day, Tangy Mae looks into the mirror and categorizes her looks by the way she can hide the physical scars her mother's treatment has left her. She says, "my warped finger was not on the hand that would reach for my diploma, but on the hand that would shake Mr. Hewitt's. The scars on my back were hidden beneath a lovely, new dress, and the brand on my leg was barely discernible through nylon stockings" (Phillips 379). On the very day that Tangy Mae is set to graduate from school, her sister Tarabelle intends to kill her mother Rozelle and burn the house down with her. When Tangy Mae and her sister Mushy reach the burning house, they find their mother with "her arms...outstretched as she whirled around like a child enjoying a spring rain" (381). Instead of killing their mother, it is their sister Tarabelle who perishes in the fire, along with the house full of horrible memories. While grieving her sister, Tangy Mae, who has missed her graduation, receives her diploma that same day. Immediately after receiving it, she packs a bag for her and her sister Laura and leaves. It

is no coincidence that the very day Tangy Mae receives her formal education in tangible form, her past crumbles in ashes all around her. On the day of her graduation, Tangy Mae finally is able to free herself from her Mother's control and possession. While she never has spoken to her mother with anything but obedience and respect, she finally is able to say the things she has longed to say for many years. After telling her that she is leaving and encouraging the ghosts of her mother's past to haunt her, she finally is free from the control her mother has had over her and her siblings. It is the very next day that Tangy Mae takes only her diploma, her little sister, and a change of clothes, and leaves her mother, the abuse, and the entire state of Georgia behind her. Her diploma literally becomes her ticket out of the torture and abuse she has endured for her entire life. Just as Tangy Mae predicts, the knowledge she finds in her books eventually is what breaks the chains the bound her.

CHAPTER 3. CRITICAL LITERACY AS FREEDOM IN

BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA

While my thesis primarily focuses on novels written by African American authors with African American protagonists, *Bastard Out of Carolina* describes the life of a poor White southern girl, written by a White author. My inclusion of *Bastard Out of Carolina* raises an important series of questions: Can one read a twentieth century “White” American novel as having connections to slave narratives and neo-slave narratives? Can a White character be read as “blackened?”⁵ Can we approach *critical* literacy as the key to freedom? I understand that race plays a very significant role in the slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, and I do not wish to diminish that importance in any way. However, through my examination of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, I wish to illustrate how Dorothy Allison’s novel about a poor, White, southern girl, signifies on, and pays homage to, slave narratives and neo-slave narratives through her use of plot, structure, and character.

White and Black

While some may argue that it is impossible to draw comparisons between a text about a White southern girl growing up in the 1950s and slave narratives, I argue that even though the protagonist of *Bastard* isn’t enslaved in the same way that slavery was experienced by African Americans in this country, there are connections that can be

⁵ This terminology comes from Christina Sharpe’s book *Monstrous Intimacies* that describes non-Black characters. I will analyze and utilize this idea later in the chapter.

found. Like the other novels in this thesis, the narrator in *Bastard Out of Carolina* is treated as a possession, abused, and given no sense of freedom or individuality until she gains a sense of critical literacy that directly frees her from the oppression with which she is faced. Again, while she is not literally enslaved, her experiences truly call attention to the oppression slaves experienced. While typically we might attribute silencing only to the more traditionally “Othered” groups in literature, it is also the voice that comes through loud and clear that deserves to be examined because of the story that needs to be told.

In Tim A. Ryan’s *Calls and Responses: The American Novel of Slavery since Gone with the Wind*, he challenges “the common assumption that there is only a stark binary opposition between authentic, contemporary, subversive, black-authored fiction about slavery on one hand, and a traditionalist, monolithic, racist historiography created by whites on the other” (4). He continues, “Where some scholars see black and white writers as essentially isolated from and entirely at odds with one another, I draw attention to the potential for productive exchange between them” (4). While contemporary authors (White or Black) certainly cannot attest to the horrors experienced by slaves in America through first-hand experience, it is entirely possible that writers can create meaningful fiction influenced by the subject of slavery by drawing from other resources including slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. These prolific genres have an impact on literature that reverberates through the ages and continues to influence contemporary fiction. Locating Bone and *Bastard Out of Carolina* in a specific time and place allows us to see that Allison’s text is informed by

the horrors of slavery just as much as Sapphire's *PUSH* and Delores Phillips's *The Darkest Child*.

My reading of Bone draws on Christina Sharpe, who uses the term "blackened" to refer to people "who because of a proximity to blackness (specifically a proximity to the shame, violence, etc. that black bodies are made to wear) are covered by the shadow of blackness" (190-1). She goes on to explain,

Blackened then allows for the overlap of self-identified and imposed; it is a marker of proximity that positions one as not properly white or nonblack....As well as indicating those whose material conditions and circumstances position them with blackness, blackened can also mean those African-descended people who have moved away visually from blackness. (191)

I offer in its entirety, an anecdote Sharpe includes in her book when discussing this idea of being blackened as it relates to *Bastard*:

In 2004, I taught Dorothy Allison's fictionalized autobiography *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) to a group of students who had never heard of it or her. Despite my work to locate the book in time and space before the first class meeting in which we would discuss the text and Allison's description of the Boatwright family, one-third of the class believed the Boatwrights were black. That is, the Boatwrights were "blackened" in their location as "poor whites," and also because in those students' imaginations it was inconceivable that this family living in and with a particular kind of poverty and violence, living in what are considered

pathological...ways, could be white, that they could be anything but black. (191)

By using Sharpe's definition of "blackened" and to whom she refers when discussing "post-slavery subjects," I hope to expand the view of which characters in literature are seen as "Othered;" not necessarily based on race, gender, or sexuality, but also perhaps based on class or socio-economic status. Similarly, the anecdote that Sharpe provides allows the reader to see that while the Boatwrights might be poor White southerners, for the purposes of this novel, race and identity perhaps are more fluid than one would imagine. The Boatwrights's classification as poor White southerners does not afford them much privilege, but instead "Others" them as well.

Bone as "Other"

Since the publication of *Bastard Out of Carolina* in 1992, scholars have focused largely on the idea of "White trash" and "White trash shame" as in J. Brooks Bouson's "You Nothing But Trash- White Trash Shame in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*," where he argues that it is the "white trash shame" that oppresses Bone until she is able to free herself of its constraints. Many scholars have focused on the horrific abuse and the trauma theory. None, however, have examined the way that Dorothy Allison pays tribute to, and signifies on, the slave narrative. Critics and scholars alike largely ignore the subject of race relations and the role it plays in the novel.

Dorothy Allison's portrayal of race relations in the South in the 1950s and 1960s becomes evident throughout the novel when the narrator, Ruth Anne Boatwright (called Bone) discusses her community and her family. The Boatwrights, and the people with whom they surround themselves, are overtly racist. Bone says, "People were crazy on

the subject of color, I knew” (54). When she discusses Black families living near her family, she explains that they did not interact, and their presence was not welcome. Her Uncle Wade says, “Running off with a man’s children, living in that dirty place with niggers all around. My little girls having to go up those stairs past those nigger boys [...] Uncle Wade’s sunburned face was thinner than usual and dark with outrage” (86). Born to a fifteen year old mother, Bone’s birth comes after a terrible accident that renders her mother unconscious for several days. With no father known, Bone’s birth certificate is stamped “illegitimate,” and she is forever deemed a bastard child. Beginning with this “stamp” that separates Bone from the rest of her family, Bone is consistently “Othered” throughout the novel. Although Bone is a young White girl, and it is “African, Asian, Mexican, and Native American, as well as Homosexuals” (Ducille 105) that are typically referred to as “Othered” groups, Bone is portrayed as so different from the rest of her family, and she is racialized continuously throughout the novel. While the entire Boatwright family is fair, with blonde hair and blue eyes, “Bone is marked different because she, unlike the fair-haired Boatwrights, has the blue-black hair and the black eyes of her great-grandfather, a Cherokee Indian” (Bouson 107). She is constantly made to feel different, not only from the rest of the southern culture of which she is a part, but even more so, from her already ostracized family, for being “different” and “dark.” Her grandmother repeatedly tells her about her great-grandfather in an attempt to explain the differences that exist between Bone and the rest of her family. She explains, “no one but you got that blue-black hair” (Allison 27). When Bone questions her background and heritage to her uncle, he seems to feel the need to convince her that she is even a part of the family when he says, “You’re a Boatwright,

Bone, even if you are the strangest girl-child we got” (27). Even in convincing Bone that she belongs, her own family seems to reinforce her “strangeness” or “Otherness.” As a result of the stories and explanations of Bone’s marked physical difference, she internalizes this difference between her and the rest of her family and relies on it for a source of strength. She says, “Every third family in Greenville might have a little Cherokee, but I had been born with a full head of black hair. I’ve got my great-granddaddy’s blood in me, I told myself. I am night’s own daughter, my great-grandfather’s warrior child” (207). Bone only thinks of herself in terms of darkness and blackness. She doesn’t recognize any of herself when viewing her family. She is seen, and in turn sees herself, only as an outsider. When she is speaking of her mother and her Aunt Raylene, the two women to whom she is closest, she sees no similarities between herself and the women. She says, “they seemed so different from me... I wished then that I could be more like them, easier in my body and not so angry all the time” (190). She finds differences between herself and her female relatives, not only in their physical features, but even in the way they appear to feel in contrast to the way she feels in her own skin. She is uncomfortable in her body, and longs to feel more at ease.

Bone’s name also connotes her “Otherness.” Bone’s birth name, Ruth Anne, has Biblical associations. The name “Ruth” is a biblical name, and more specifically “calls to mind the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi. Naomi has two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. After all three husbands die, Naomi plans to return home to Bethlehem. Despite Naomi’s protests, Ruth insists on leaving her native Moab and following her beloved mother-in-law” (King 127). The story is one of unbreakable bonds between mother and daughter, regardless of bloodline. The irony of the name is that Bone’s

mother Anney does not exhibit any of the qualities one would expect from a mother. In fact, Anney stays with her husband Daddy Glen even though she knows he is abusing Bone, and even goes back to him and essentially chooses him over Bone even after he has brutally raped and beaten Bone. The fact that Allison chooses to name her “Ruth-Anne,” a combination of her mother’s name and the name Ruth, suggests Bone’s name is ironic. According to Theresa Norman, “Anne...means gracious, or full of grace” (300). Anney often is portrayed as a weak woman who chooses her abusive husband over her daughter. Bone, however, often is strong and shows restraint throughout. Like Ruth-Anne, the name Bone also contributes a strong sense of irony. When thinking of a visual representation of a bone, one would primarily think of a white or ivory colored object. Bone’s name is the only time “whiteness” is ever associated with Bone. Every time Bone is described, it is in terms of blackness, darkness, and night. How ironic then, to go by a name always connected with the color white? Similarly, with both names, Ruth Anne and Bone, Allison seems to further draw strong connections between Bone and the African American community. According to Geneva Smitherman in “Word from the Mother: Language and African Americans,” Smitherman notes that “...redbone... became [a] reference to light-complexioned Africans” (3). In being called Bone, she further is connected to and associated with the African American community.

Because the only person she is ever told she is connected to in her family is a long-deceased man, Bone has no choice but to identify with people outside of her family with whom she feels more of a connection. In a conflict with her best friend, Shannon Pearl, an albino girl with “white skin, white hair, and... pale pink eyes,” Bone

grows very agitated at Shannon's use of the word "nigger." She explains, "The way Shannon said 'nigger' tore at me, the tone pitched exactly like the echoing sound of Aunt Madeline sneering 'trash' when she thought I wasn't close enough to hear" (Allison 170). While the use of the word "nigger" would not have been surprising for a white southerner in the 1950s, Shannon's use of the word agitates Bone so strongly because she feels much less connected with Shannon, a girl who is so White that one could see "fine blue blood vessels [that] shone against the ivory of her scalp" (155) than she does with the people Shannon speaks so hatefully about. At a family picnic, Bone overhears Daddy Glen's brothers discussing her, her mother, and her sister, when he says, "Look at that car. Just like any nigger trash, getting something like that... Her and her kids sure go with that car" (102). Rather than longing to be accepted by the family, Bone's reaction instead is one of defiance and disconnection with the family. She thinks, "I pushed my black hair out of my eyes and looked in at one of my wide-mouthed cousins in a white dress with eyelet sleeves looking back at me, scratching her nose and staring at me like I was some elephant in a zoo- something dumb and ugly and impervious to hurt.... You're no relative of mine, you're not my people, I whispered to myself" (102). Allison continuously places Bone in direct correlation with racially "Othered" groups. In fact, as illustrated by her conflict with Shannon Pearl, and distaste for her cousin in the white eyelet dress, she also is put into direct opposition with people characterized by whiteness. As Hazel Carby states, it is sometimes important for a reader to view "whiteness as well as blackness in order to make visible what is rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence: the (white) point in space from which we tend to identify difference" (193). Carby explains that in order to see

things clearly, we must view both whiteness and blackness together, not one in the absence of the other, because one informs our view of the other. The juxtaposition of Bone, constantly described in terms of darkness, with her enemies who consistently are associated with whiteness, calls attention to the vast differences between Bone and other children her age who are meant to live in similar situations.⁶

At one point in the novel, over the span of several pages, Bone's fascination with her cousins' new Black neighbors is outlined through the many observations Bone makes about the family. Bone describes her visits to Aunt Alma's house by the progress her cousins and her have made with the Black children who live next door. When she first sees one of the children in the window next door she describes the child in physical terms:

I couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl—a very pretty boy or a very fierce girl for sure. The cheekbones were as high as mine, the eyes large and delicate with long lashes, while the mouth was small, the lips puffy as if bee-stung, but not wide. The chocolate skin was so smooth, so polished, the pores invisible. I put my fingers up to my cheeks.... (Allison 84)

Bone, who also is described as having both high cheekbones and long lashes, finally seems to see someone to whom she relates, in at least a physical way. The way she examines the child by looking at features she has examined within herself and the subtle touching of her own cheek seem to imply that Bone feels physically connected to the

⁶ Although Bone doesn't always seem to long to be a part of White hegemonic society, at some points, her desire to be someone other than herself is evident. She does strive to be more like the images she sees in books: "I wanted to be more like the girls in storybooks, princesses with pale skin and tender hearts. I hated my short fingers, wide face, bony knees, hated being nothing like the pretty girls with their delicate features and slender, trembling frames. I was stubborn-faced, unremarkable, straight up and down, and as dark as walnut bark" (Allison 206).

child in the window. She longs to speak with her, to play with her, and interact with this mysterious person. She thinks:

I had heard all the hateful jokes and nasty things people said about “niggers,” but on my own, I had never before spoken to a colored person in anything more than the brief, careful “sir” and “ma’am” that Mama had taught us. I was as shy with those kids as they seemed to be with us. As nervous as the idea made me, I wished that girl would come out so I could try to talk to her, but she never did more than look out the window at us. Her mama had probably told her all about what to expect from trash like us. (86)

According to Bone, it is not the racial tensions and the racist undertones that reverberate through her family that are keeping the children apart. Instead it is her own status as trash that causes the girl in the window to avoid her. Because of the intense connection Bone seems to feel with people located outside of the White hegemonic privilege, she doesn't share the racist thoughts of her friends or family. In fact, as disconnected as she seems to feel from her family, both mentally and physically, she seems to be that much more connected to this girl in the window.

Bone continuously is exploring her attraction to and affinity for gospel music, a form of Black cultural expression. In fact, Courtney George argues that Bone feels an intense connection to the music and “feels saved by the music” (George 133). One day, Bone hears music coming through the cottonwoods: “Gut-shaking, deep-bellied, powerful voices rolled through the dry leaves and hot air. This was the real stuff. I could feel the whiskey edge, the grief holding on, the dark night terror and determination of

real gospel” (Allison 169). Upon realizing that the music is coming from a “colored church,” Bone freezes. According to George, this is the instant that “Bone realizes that race, like class determines where community is “placed” in the south-- on the margins of society unable to grasp political or economic power” (George 133). According to Kelly Thomas, “Bone’s enthusiasm [for gospel music] transcends a racist and racially segregated society” (Thomas 181) and George concurs, “for Bone, gospel music joins black and white southerners in a resistant community” (George 133). However, I would argue that the gospel music gives Bone even more of a connection to the Black community of which she so obviously already feels part. Although Bone had heard White gospel music before the day in the woods, it is only when she hears the music coming from the “colored church” that she seems deeply moved, enough to stop her in her tracks. It is as though she has heard the music for the first time.

“Daddy Glen” as an Oppressor

Bone’s role in her family and in her novel signifies on the slave narrative tradition in the relationship between Daddy Glen and Bone. While he does not treat her as a slave in the traditional sense of the word, he manages to dehumanize her, rob her of her identity, confuse her, and treat her as his property. “Daddy Glen” plays a very important role in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Like a slave narrator’s accounts of inhumane treatment, Bone describes being beaten and abused by her stepfather “Daddy Glen” throughout the novel. The first time she is beaten, Daddy Glen exclaims, “You bitch. You little bitch. I’ve waited a long time to do this, too long” (Allison 106). Instead of Bone’s mother being repelled by this act of violence, as in Sapphire’s portrayal of Precious’s mother in *PUSH*, she also “revictimizes her daughter by excusing Glen’s

brutality” (Bouson 107) and by asking her daughter “what did you do?” (Allison 106). Bone quickly comes to expect the violence from Daddy Glen, and plays her role as “Other” within her own family, a family that is already “Othered” in southern society and culture.

“Daddy Glen” oppresses Bone throughout the novel. His persistent abuse of her begins when she is just small girl, and instills a deep sense of fear in her. She is so afraid of him that her “insides started to shake with fear” (Allison 47). The first time he sexually abuses her, they are in the car outside of the hospital while Bone’s mother, Anney, is giving birth to her child with Daddy Glen. Bone is just a young girl; too young to understand what has happened. His act of abuse towards Bone confuses her and causes her to question herself. She says, “I remembered those moments in the hospital parking lot like a bad dream, hazy and shadowed. When Daddy Glen looked at me, I saw no sign that he ever thought about it at all. Maybe it had not happened. Maybe he really did love us. I wanted him to love us. I wanted to be able to love him” (A52). His behavior towards Bone causes her to lose her sense of identity. Even during the acts of sexual abuse, he confuses her by telling her “that he loved [her], that [they] were all going to be so happy. Happy” (46). It is this behavior that further complicates the way Bone views herself and Daddy Glen. After bruising Bone by grabbing her too hard, he says, “But Bone knows I’d never mean to hurt her. Bone knows I love her” (70). It is this juxtaposition of pain and love that shapes Bone’s consciousness. Instead of understanding that Daddy Glen is abusing her, she instead questions her own responsibility in the acts of cruelty. Speaking of Daddy Glen’s hands, she says, “My dreams were full of long fingers, hands that reached around doorframes and crept over

the edge of the mattress, fear in me like a river, like the ice-dark blue of his eyes” (70). Just as Carl abuses Precious and believes in his delusions that she welcomes it and enjoys it, Daddy Glen seems to operate the same way. He has convinced himself, and possibly Bone, that these acts of abuse actually are acts of love.

Bone begins to digest the abuse she receives by fantasizing about her beatings. She says, “I was ashamed of myself for the things I thought about when I put my hands between my legs, more ashamed for masturbating to the fantasy of being beaten than for being beaten in the first place. I lived in a world of shame” (Allison 112-113). She begins to associate pleasure with pain and says, “I loved those fantasies, even though I was sure they were a terrible thing. They had to be; they were self-centered and they made me have shuddering orgasms” (113). Just as Precious feels ashamed when her body reacts to her father’s abuse, Bone feels confused about her fantasies of violence. Daddy Glen’s continued abuse not only breaks Bone’s bones, but also takes her mental strength to its limits. She has the opportunity to express what Daddy Glen has done to her when Aunt Ruth asks her, “Bone, has Daddy Glen ever... well... touched you?” (124). Even as she flashes back to the horrible incidents, her shame and fear cause her to deny the abuse. Daddy Glen has managed to fill Bone with such a sense of disgrace for what he has done to her that she cannot come forward, even when given several opportunities. His abuse has not only oppressed her, but has robbed her of her innocence, her childhood, and her sense of freedom.

Critical Literacy and Education

Bone’s freedom is only possible through her own informal education, her attainment of critical literacy. While the term “critical literacy” is a very broad one that

would mean very different things to different people based on the culture and society of which one is a part, at the most basic level, being critically literate is required for survival. It is basic knowledge that one must learn in order to process any information or situations one is in. In Bone's world, she never is taught to understand, process, and essentially "read" the situations she is put through. It is only through her relationship with Aunt Raylene that Bone is able to attain critical literacy, and it is this very attainment that allows her to gain freedom.

While it is literacy and education in slave narratives that eventually allow for the narrators to free themselves from oppression, in *Bastard*, it is her attainment of critical literacy that frees Bone. In "Dismantling 'The Master's House' Critical Literacy in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," Martha Cutter uses educational theorists Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo to suggest that: "individuals who are critically literate can begin 'transforming the social and political structures that imprison them in their culture of science'" (209). She writes, "for slave narrators like Harriet Jacobs, the real struggle is not learning to read and write the word, but learning to read and write the world" (210). As Cutter points out, "it is crucial that [enslaved people] read the word and the world, and that they come to see that language can be used either to transform, or to serve, the dominant social order" (211). While there is no mention of Bone's formal education, it is apparent throughout the novel that Bone is learning how to read the world. She observes the social order of things and learns not to accept it, but instead to fight against it.

Bone's environment is largely patriarchal. While the women in the novel are at the center of the story, it is the men who are valued and it is only through the men that

the women gain any sort of validation. Regardless of the seemingly strong relationships that exist between the women, “they cannot counteract the powerful interpellative effects of the surrounding society’s discourses on femininity, sexuality” (Baker 121). While the Boatwright women do exert a sense of matriarchal power every so often, it always is short lived. Even when they leave their husbands because of the poor treatment they receive, they always go back, only reinforcing the heteropatriarchal society of which they are a part.

Because Bone’s mother Anney refuses to leave her husband, even when she is painfully aware of the abuse Bone faces at the hands of Daddy Glen, she sends Bone to spend more and more time with other members of her family. Her relationship with her Aunt Raylene is peppered with stories of family and of her own wild past in the South. It is only through her relationship with this female figure in her life that she attains the critical literacy she needs in order to survive. Aunt Raylene, Bone’s aunt who is a lesbian, “resists becoming a subject in, and being subjected to, capitalist and heteropatriarchal ideologies” (Baker 122). Instead of the constant shame that Daddy Glen causes Bone by abusing her both physically and mentally, Aunt Raylene manages to build her up and instill pride in Bone and the Boatwright name. It is only “Raylene’s place overlooking the Greenville River [that] affords Bone a space in which oppositional discourse reverberates, calling into question dominant ideologies” (Baker 123). The stories of Raylene’s past, filled with adventures and portrayals of the Boatwright family in a positive light, leave Bone with a sense of self she previously was lacking. She constantly had questioned her looks, her place in her family, and her place in society, but Raylene gives her the opportunity to see all of these things as positive.

Prior to the time when Bone is sent to spend afternoons with her Aunt Raylene, Bone's sense of self and the way she views herself is skewed. Because of the consistent abuse and her mother's refusal to take action against her husband, Bone believes she is "evil" and deserves the treatment. She says:

When Daddy Glen beat me there was always a reason, and Mama would stand right outside the bathroom door. Afterward she would cry and wash my face and tell me not to be so stubborn, not to make him mad... Sometimes when I looked up into his red features and blazing eyes, I knew it was nothing I had done that made him beat me. It was just me, the fact of my life, who I was in his eyes and mine. I was evil. Of course I was. (Allison 110)

It is only through Raylene's portrayal of self-confidence and self-efficiency that Bone is allowed to begin to gain a sense of agency. Raylene inspires confidence in Bone and even tells her, "I'm counting on you to get out there and do things, girl. Make people nervous and make your old aunt glad" (182). It is affirmations such as these, as well as when Raylene explains to Bone, "Trash rises...out here where no one can mess with it trash rises all the time" (180) that allow Bone to resist the heteropatriarchal society she had accepted but not ever been given the tools to dismantle. While Raylene technically is referring to the floating river trash she collects for money, the message is not lost on Bone. As Cutter writes, "Critical literacy allows individuals to understand the social and historical reality, not of a given fact, but of a fact that is ongoing. Reality in this sense is the process of becoming" (223). Bone's acquired critical literacy allows her to understand what her family may be, but not what she necessarily needs to be. She can

become anything; she can create any reality of which she wishes to be a part. It is this understanding and attainment of critical literacy that sets Bone free.

Because of the confidence and new understanding that Raylene inspires in Bone, she finally refuses to go back and live with her mother and Daddy Glen. As a result of Bone's first real sense of self-assertion, Daddy Glen rapes and brutalizes Bone. Daddy Glen always has operated "from a position of presumed access: as a white southern husband and step-father he will order his new family of women according to the patriarchal image that is his birthright. When encountering Bone's resistance, Glen reasserts his power through sexual and physical violence" (Herringer 100) when he rapes and brutalizes Bone. Her refusal to accept his role in her life, and essentially her role in his patriarchal society, leads to a horrific rape and beating, but also leads to the only sense of freedom Bone has had thus far, the decision to live with her Aunt Raylene. In the last scene of the novel, Bone says, "when Raylene came to me, I let her touch my shoulder, let my head tilt to lean against her, trusting her arm and her love" (Allison 309). Similarly, when a picture appears in the newspaper describing her attack, she is "leaning against Raylene's shoulder" (293). In trusting Raylene's body to be stable and solid and support her when she needed it the most, Bone had learned to trust her.

According to Hegel, in the master-slave dialectic "selfhood is a social product that individuals crave; identity has to be constructed through contentious interaction with and relation to others; this process makes us dependent on others, and thus inclined to resent and fear them; and such dependence involves forms of psychological and social power that are distinct from physical force or the power afforded by superior

wealth” (538). It is this very tension that exists between Daddy Glen and Bone. Glen’s identity through the patriarchal society in which he participates is only validated through his exertion of violence, abuse, and control over the women in his family. His very sense of self is completely dependent on Bone’s lack thereof. It is only in the first moment of Bone’s self-actualization, when she tells him, “I don’t want to live with you no more...I can’t. I won’t” (Allison 281) that Glen’s sense of power and the identity that he derives from that power slips away. It is his last attempt to gain any sense of power he has left when he rapes Bone. He is repeating the words “I’ll teach you, I’ll teach you” (285) as he rapes her. It is as if he wants one last attempt to teach Bone never to upset the power system in place.

While the rape and beating is horrific, it is this violent sexual act that serves as the final straw that allows Bone to finally be free of Glen and her mother, and allows her to live permanently with her Aunt Raylene. Through her Aunt Raylene’s stories of the Boatwrights, her mother, father, and the people that came before her, she begins to adopt a sense of critical literacy and understanding of the world of which she is a part. She begins to trust Aunt Raylene and heals from that. Interestingly, through Bone’s attainment of critical literacy, she does not disassociate with being a Boatwright. Quite the opposite, Bone learns as part of the literacy she attains that she must accept and process her family and its history in order to overcome it. After being raped by Daddy Glen, Bone sees a picture of herself. After observing her appearance she decides, “I was a freshly gutted fish, my mouth gaping open above my bandaged shoulder and arm, my neck still streaked dark with blood. Like a Boatwright all right-- it wasn’t all my blood” (Allison 293). Throughout the novel we see Bone’s association with her family filled

with shame. When she is told she “is a Boatwright all right,” she associates with being “trash.” Here, for the first time, we see Bone assert her own identity with pride. She sees that she has some of Daddy Glen’s blood on her and is filled with a sense of pride at hurting him, perhaps even only a fraction of the way he had hurt her. She was a fighter, and that was part of being a Boatwright too. Even at the age of twelve, Bone has come to understand who she is, and the role she will play in society. She says, “I would be thirteen in a few weeks. I was already who I was going to be....I was who I was going to be...a Boatwright woman” (309). It is not that Bone intends to be part of this oppressive patriarchal society of which her mother and most of the Boatwright women have been a part, but instead that she has changed the very definition of what it means to be a Boatwright woman.

In Christina Sharpe’s book, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, she begins her in-depth analysis of post-slavery subjects with an examination of a scene in Frederick Douglass’s narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. In the scene, Douglass witnesses the beating and rape of his aunt; after describing the scene Douglass writes, “the slave is [made] a subject, subjected by others; [while] the slaveholder is a subject but he is the author of his own subjection” (Douglass *Narrative* 49). It is the reproduction of this scene that has been called into question by critics and scholars alike. Saidiya Hartman writes, “What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of dominant accounts?...What does the exposure of the

violated body yield?" (Hartman 3). Readers ask similar questions when reading *Bastard*. While some may wonder why it is necessary to contribute to the public's fascination with incest and portray disturbing and horrific abuse of a young child, the significance is far-reaching, beyond boundaries of race, gender, sex, etc. Sharpe points out, "Douglass's scenes of forcible sex and other violent subjections introduce the ongoing process of subjectification during slavery and into post-slavery to which all postmodern subjects are made subject.... Thinking about monstrous intimacies post-slavery means examining those subjectivities constituted from transatlantic slavery onward and connected, then as now, by the everyday mundane horrors that aren't acknowledged to be horrors" (Sharpe 3). While *Bastard* is a fictionalized account told from the perspective of a fictional, White, twelve year old girl, living in a time when slavery in its traditional sense long since had ended, Allison, like Sharpe, seems determined to "articulate a black (and blackened) body struggling with similar aftermaths of traumas of slavery, colonialism, segregation and independence, and freedom— but with different signifiers" (Sharpe 4). It is vital to recognize that those "black and blackened bodies become the barriers (through violence, regulation, transmission, etc.) of the knowledge of certain subjection as well as the placeholders of freedom for those who would claim freedom as their rightful yield" (Sharpe 4). Bone, who first is seen as a victim, through critical literacy, becomes an agent of freedom.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have explored freedom narratives that suggest domestic spaces are unsafe for girls. In *PUSH*, *The Darkest Child*, and *Bastard Out of Carolina*, domestic spaces not only are discussed in terms of their physical descriptions, but also are exposed as places of trauma and distress. A domestic space traditionally is thought of as a safe space where one can escape the injustices of the outside world; but in these three novels, the opposite is true. In these texts abuse most often takes place in the home, and even more specifically, the kitchen. In *PUSH*, the first account of abuse Precious endures takes place in the kitchen. Precious is washing dishes after dinner when her mother beats her so badly it sends her into early labor with her first child. She says, “Then she KICK me side of my face! ‘Whore! Whore!’ She screamin” (Sapphire 9). Additionally, there are several more descriptions of abuse that take place in the kitchen, including the scene in which Precious’s mother forces her to overeat. In *The Darkest Child*, all of the abuse between Rozelle and her children takes place in the main room of the house, which includes the kitchen. One of the most significant conversations between Tangy Mae and her mother Rozelle takes place in the kitchen. She asks her mother, “Do you love me, Mama?” but does not receive an answer (Phillips 349). In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the end rape scene, where Bone eventually is freed from both Daddy Glen and her mother, takes place in the kitchen. In these novels, the kitchen not only serves as the center of the house, but also as the center of abuse for all three of these characters. It is an important aspect of my argument that the trauma of

slavery reverberates strongly through America and that it has an impact on many homes or domestic spaces in this country. The kitchen is truly the center of most homes as it usually serves as a place for cooking, cleaning, eating, and gathering as a family. It is only fitting that the brunt of abuse in these novels would take place in the center of the home. These novels suggest that America's dark and disturbing past has infiltrated our most intimate, family-centered spaces. While it is likely that many Americans don't realize the effects of the nation's violent past on the present, these texts call these issues to attention. The authors of these texts consciously are recalling antebellum slavery in their novels. By relying so heavily on the tradition of the slave narrative, these authors are calling our attention to the past and how it informs contemporary times. As Americans, we are all connected to American history. Some people may be descendants of slaves and some of slave owners, and it is this inheritance of history that informs the present. These novels are not only informed by the tradition of the slave narrative, but also by the tradition of slavery itself. In "Cultural Trauma, Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity," Ron Eyerman writes that "Arthur Neal (1998) defines a 'national trauma' according to its 'enduring effects,' and as relating to events, 'which cannot be easily dismissed, which will be played over again and again in individual consciousness,' becoming understood, explained, and made coherent through public reflection and discourse" (2). These novels intimate that slavery is a national trauma that cannot be "dismissed" regardless of time or space.

In her book *Burnin' Down the House*, when discussing Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Valerie Sweeny Prince asserts that "the kitchen, then, becomes a mere tool [Mrs. Breedlove] uses, along with its accoutrements, to maintain her perceived

authority” (84). Like Mrs. Breedlove, Mary, Rozelle, and Daddy Glen all use the kitchen as a place to exert authority over their families and demonstrate their power. Just as “The Breedloves’ kitchen is not a place of soul food and singing” and is instead “the ceremonial backdrop for repercussions of routine episodes of drunkenness,” the abusers in the novels I have discussed have taken a place (traditionally) of comfort and joy and turned it into one that only serves to remind the character and the reader of the trauma of the past. It is important to note that “the kitchen is, of course, that place of domestic servitude within the white household assigned to the African American in the racist past” (Prince 132). Mary and Rozelle have taken these traumas from the past, “digested” them, and the result is a reformation of the kitchen as a place in which they have the power to act as the abusers. The national trauma to which Eyerman refers has a varying impact. Mary and Rozelle are Black mothers taking on the role of oppressors in their homes, abusing their own flesh and blood. Outside of their homes, they are treated poorly by surrounding society, forcing the women to go back and forth between the abuser and the abused, further complicating their own trauma and their daughters’ trauma.

Bastard out of Carolina’s Daddy Glen obviously is quite different than Mary and Rozelle. Still, the fact that he rapes Bone, a symbolic racial “Other,” in the kitchen recalls racial sexual violence against women, specifically racially “Othered” women, and slaves. For Daddy Glen, as a White southerner, he is reenacting abuse that has infiltrated his psyche. For Daddy Glen, when he abuses Bone, he is enacting his role of White oppressor, the only role in his life that makes him feel powerful. We do not know if Daddy Glen’s family owned slaves in the past, but based on his racist language and

violent behavior, we can assume that he too has been shaped by the legacy of slavery in America.

Just as Mary and Rozelle become oppressors in their own homes because everyone else in their lives treat them so poorly, Daddy Glen's behavior towards Bone can be attributed partially to his status as "White trash." Outside of the home, he is viewed as weak, stupid, and unimportant. Inside the home, he appropriates power over the only person he thinks will allow it, Bone. While the kitchen is traditionally "an interior site crucial to developing kinship within the place of the home," that "fosters connections that help alienated people like Bigger Thomas or the narrator of *Invisible Man* to feel at home" (Prince 132-133), in the case of these "freedom narratives" it certainly does the opposite.

As Eyerman states, "as opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" (2). In these novels, Mary, Carl, Rozelle, and Daddy Glen experience some of these traumas. They are unsure of their identities and the roles they play in society and in their own homes. Eyerman asserts, "it is not the experience itself that produces traumatic effect, but the remembrance of it" (3). While Mary, Carl, Rozelle, and Daddy Glen never experienced slavery, their behavior suggests that slavery's hegemonic power system has shaped their psyches. They certainly experience the aftereffects of slavery that have permeated the America they know. As a result, they traumatize their children.

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