

QUARE POETICS: BLACK MATERNITY AND THE ARC OF PROTEST
IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ELEGIAC TRADITION

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English and Comparative Literature
(African American and Multiethnic American Poetics).

Chapel Hill
2018

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ABSTRACT

Leroy Lamar Wilson: *Quare Poetics: Black Maternity and the Arc of Protest*
in the African American Elegiac Tradition
(Under the direction of Drs. GerShun Avilez and Neel Ahuja)

Quare Poetics argues that the African American elegiac tradition, often read through the surface valence of mourning, in fact, springs from writers' resistance against their blackness serving as the prototypical marker of outsidership, which a cadre of scholars have named queerness. This study draws upon the self-affirming exceptionality of the *quare*—a nominalism coined in the landmark text, *Black Queer Studies* (2005)—to propose a different natal lens for African American protest: the black maternal voice synonymous with the advent of African American literature and the American songbook. New epistemes eschewing the sexual identity politics and white and black male phallogentrism that shape most queer scholarship emerge as *Quare Poetics* focalizes on black women's voices in canonical and forgotten African American elegiac texts from the mid-eighteenth century to the dawn of the Black Arts Movement. Historicizing the etymological importance of *quare* in African American poetics makes room for this dissertation to examine, one by one, the lyrics and lyricism of the protest tradition's mothers and some of their literary daughters and sons. Covering more than 260 years of African American literature, *Quare Poetics* maps the ways that black women personae's sexual and gender transgressions serve as insightful catalysts of dissent in the aftermath of chattel slavery and its cruel descendant, Jim Crow, throughout the global South. African American elegists make palpable the experiences that mark black women as forebears of a multiethnic American consciousness, complicating the relationship that their progeny, conceived under duress at best

and by force at worst, have with their sexualities and what Hortense Spillers calls “the power of ‘yes’ to the female within” (*Diacritics* 17:2, 80).

Two centuries before African American men such as Richard Wright and his scions foregrounded the black male psyche and its rage, Lucy Terry Prince and Phillis Wheatley Peters at once affirmed Puritanism and challenged its racist fictions about blackness. Like them, the nameless harbingers of the Negro Spirituals torqued Judeo-Christian narratives of slavery and oppression in poems of traditional meter and rhyme to create the African American blues aesthetic. Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson and Jean Toomer blended that aesthetic with a modernist, surrealist free verse that gave an unblinking view of the misogynoir that undergirded the sexual exploitation of the poorest women in the Reconstruction era in urban centers and the Deep South. Bob Kaufman and Nina Simone took that surrealist lens on black maternity to its multigeneric zenith and reframed the African American migration narrative, setting the stage for the gender-blending, racial hybridity, and sexual fluidity that countered a contemporaneous project to make “Black Art,” rooted in a charge to make “poems that kill ... the nigger.”

Quare Poetics culminates with a dissection of the homophobia and misogynoir that led Amiri Baraka to distance himself in that poem from the feminized, homosexual personae he fashioned as LeRoi Jones by parsing his troubled relationship to the black maternal, and it takes a glimpse into the oeuvre of recent U.S. Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey, who exposes the fault lines in the “Black Art” project and heralds a quare futurity that is transforming the landscape of American poetics in this century. From the moment Terry Prince and Wheatley Peters exposed the mendacity of Christendom’s racist abjections onto indigenous Americans and Africans bearing the alleged “mark of Cain,” they posed the question *Quare Poetics* tackles: How does one love the “nigger,” the motherless child, the diasporic/multiracial Other, within?

For Noretha Long Wilson, Edell Williams Barnes Smith,
and other foremothers I never met,

for Mary Elizabeth “MaMary” Long Wilson,
the mother who raised
Leroy Ebenezer Wilson Jr. and Annell Smith Wilson,
guardian angels on Earth for me and so many,

and for all God’s children, especially “the kids”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My committee members, past and present, have been patient and encouraging every step of this eight-year journey. Much gratitude goes to my directors, Drs. GerShun Avilez and Neel Ahuja, and Drs. James Coleman, Rebecka Rutledge Fisher, Minrose Gwin, Karla F. C. Holloway, Fred Moten, and Ruth Salvaggio. Even as your lives have taken you across the country and back, you have raised insightful questions to ensure this ambitious project doesn't founder from cracks in its foundation and pocks in its arguments. I've had other amazing mentor-friends in my corner dating to my earliest encounters with African American literature. Drs. Genyne Boston, Mary Kemp Davis, Emma Dawson, and Beulah Hemmingway (FAMU); Gena Chandler-Smith, Virginia Fowler, and Nikki Giovanni (Virginia Tech); and Trudier Harris (The University of Alabama) have encouraged me as I traversed dark corridors and thorny terrain on the path to this plateau. You're all the best; here's praying this apple doesn't land far away!

To the intellectual giants on whose shoulders I stand, which includes far too many ancestors and senior scholars to name outside this dissertation's citations, I owe my quest for integrity and rigor in every sentence to that which your work models. To Drs. Joshua Bennett, Duriel E. Harris, Meta DuEwa Jones, Keith Leonard, and their editing staffs, thank you for publishing parts of Chapters Three and Four of this dissertation in recent or forthcoming issues of *Callaloo* and *Obsidian*. To Anaré V. Holmes, Omilaju Miranda, and Drs. Destiny Birdsong, La Marr Jurelle Bruce, Lauren Cardon, Jameela Dallis, Joanne Gabbin, Wiljeana Glover, Hilary Green, Sharon P. Holland, Tracey R. Hucks, Cajetan Iheka, E. Patrick Johnson, Bettina Judd,

Donika Kelly, Utz McKnight, Marie-Eve Monette, Mairin Odle, Jessy Ohl, Adra Raine, Robert Earl Randolph Jr., Riché Richardson, Sheryl McGriff Roulhac, Evie Shockley, Rachel Stevens, Cassander L. Smith, and Alex Weheliye, you've listened intently to my ever-evolving ideas—and the challenges of sorting them out—from this dissertation's infancy to its defense. I'm eternally grateful. Dearest Randall Kenan, thank you for fine dining, hearty, irreverent laughter, and embraces of agape brotherhood. I hold memories we've shared very close when doubt and despair threaten to distract me. Gabrielle Calvocoressi and Alan Shapiro, it's been great having fellow poets down the hall and up the street, sending love as only poets can. To my Affrilachian, Callaloo, Cave Canem, Hurston Wright, and Watering Hole kin, *I see you*. My profound appreciation also goes to the administration at Davidson College and The University of Alabama and the Institute for Minority Excellence and Graduate School at UNC-Chapel Hill for their generous support of research and conference travel throughout the United States and abroad, particularly Joel Brouwer and Drs. Shireen Campbell, Leslie Lerea, Hoi Ning Ngai, Robert Olin, Carol Quillen, Wendy Raymond, Roger Sidje, Kathy Wood, and Zoran Kuzmanovich.

And the last shall be first, always, in my heart. Here, then, I honor my parents and dearly departed grandmother, great-aunt, maternal aunt, and mentor: Leroy E. Wilson Jr., Annell Smith Wilson, and the late Mary E. Long Wilson, Eldorado Long Smith, Margaret Smith Ledbetter, and the Honorable Judge Roy L. Roulhac. You have remained my most fierce, loyal cheerleaders here and Over There. When others count me out or act as if I'm a corpse they must inspect on occasion as a curiosity, you help me piece together life's shards and demonstrate just how invigorated my blood and imagination remain. Any good I do on this side of forever, I aim chiefly to make you proud of your investment. To my beloved sister by blood, Twana R. Wilson McDaniel, and my prayer-warrior sisters in the Spirit, Carina Callier Brown, Katti Gray, Twyla

Roulhac, and the late Regina Tyren Stone, you've created safe spaces for me to muse when I've all but given up on the possibility of completing this project. T, you opened your home in the summer of 2016 and checked in daily this past summer to make sure I was staying on task in my Montmartre perch, my carrel at La Biblotechque Nationale de France, and various sites in Atlanta and Birmingham, where final edits coalesced. I thank my other blood and soul siblings, too, for their well wishes along the way. Finally, I honor the Ones with So Many Names and all Their ambassadors, the Yahweh, Jehovah God, and Jesus of the Jews and Christians who raised me and the Supreme Beings my ancestors knew before they arrived on U.S. shores. I owe special gratitude to Babalú Ayé, who has helped me carry my many afflictions, and Olokun, who holds the secrets so many African bones in the bottom of the world's ever-shrinking oceans and seas hold. May they drink until we thirst for and plumb the true depths of their suffering and cry for atonement. The words that follow are my humble charge to us all.

L. Lamar Wilson

Dec. 25, 2017

Marianna, Fla.

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INTRODUCTION
TOWARD A NEW THEORY OF THE QUARE
IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN ELEGIAC PROTEST TRADITION

Prelude: A Focal Shift to Mothers in the Era of Black Lives Matter

Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* has reinvigorated an intersectional, multidisciplinary project that had lain dormant for nearly two decades. Riffing on Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003) and other texts, Sharpe challenges scholars invested in charting African diasporic resistance and radical cultural production in the Americas to revisit the site of initial, systemic, and irreparable rupture—the black mother's womb—and meditate upon the cycle these survivors of chattel slavery face daily:

Reading together the Middle Passage, the coffle, and, I add to the argument, the birth canal, we can see how each has functioned separately and collectively over time to dis/figure Black maternity, to turn the womb into a factory producing blackness as abjection much like the slave ship's hold and the prison, and turning the birth canal another domestic Middle Passage with Black mothers, after the end of legal hypodescent, still ushering their children into their non/status, their non/being-ness. To confirm this we need to look no farther than the postmodern orthographies of the wake—transmitted through Twitter timelines, Facebook feeds, websites, Tumblrs, Instagrams, and other online and traditional media, each organized to spectate the mothers bereft from the murders of their children, each mother forced to display her pain in public. (74)

Given this paradoxical existence for black mothers and their progeny, Sharpe's text not only details instances of abjection in the reports of a host of stories that have gained international acclaim in which slain or abused black children, men, and women cycle into and out of the global consciousness as evidence of black lives *not* mattering, but also underscores evidence in contemporary poetics and in black people's reaction to these reports of black resistance to

abjection. In each case, she demonstrates the refusal of erasure and queerness/Otherness that has become each black child's birthright, encoded in their DNA in their black mothers' wombs.

What makes Sharpe's return to the black maternal all the more compelling is that she names her project an "anagrammatical" one, reanimating a call African American scholars began making at the turn of this century to focus the study of black resistance on the project of self-naming and self-making that blacks have championed since they arrived in America.

Quare Poetics aims to demarcate the oft-unacknowledged role of black maternal voices in the development of black art forms and the political identities and critical positions they enable. Thus, this dissertation explores the protest encoded in the lyrical ballads of black mothers throughout African American poetics. In her 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers deconstructed how America's oppressive "grammar book" has shaped the pathologies linked to the black maternal and challenged scholars to interrogate the plausibility of an intellectual path outside it. *Quare Poetics* takes up that charge and reframes African Americans' literary and musical effusions as tools that make an inexorable connection among artistic expression, gender and sexual transgression, and religious syncretism. Since its advent, African American literature has sustained a tradition of protest in which mourning mothers serve as avatars of syncretic faith practices, inspiring their orphaned, haunted progeny to re-envision the sensual as sacrosanct space necessarily outside heteronormativity and gender identities as tightropes on which all can weep, juke, jive, and volley dissent.

Making use of the aural, choral, and literary protestations of black mothers and their children, *Quare Poetics*, which focuses primarily on under- or poorly theorized works in African American literature, affirms that art fashioned in the elegiac tradition creates spaces for black people to flout racist assumptions and expose physical, psychological, and sexual abuses.

Particularly successful, this project argues, are the sociopolitical commentaries of Lucy Terry Prince and the balladeers of the Negro Spirituals; the exegetical interventions and nuanced testimony of Phillis Wheatley Peters's charge to the Calvinists and Puritans who established colonies that would become the United States; the gender blurring in Alice Dunbar Nelson's and Jean Toomer's blues and ecopoetics; the mad genius and visionary matrilineage in Bob Kaufman's and Nina Simone's jazz poetics; and the divergent futures posited in LeRoi Jones's and Natasha Trethewey's blues verses. These writers conjure a preternatural Africanist presence of maternal witnessing that indicts racism in masterful, insightful ways. Close readings of these writers' oeuvres underscore the goal of *Quare Poetics*: self-affirmation of blackness bearing impugning power that remains central to its ever-evolving protest. Particularly in the mid-twentieth century, writers' elegies abandon efforts to elicit white liberals' empathy and instead transliterate and transfigure their experiences with white nationalist violence through the performance of rage, wherein what Du Bois theorized as a "double consciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, explored in detail later in this introduction alongside Spillers's essay and others reframing the maternal) becomes multivalent, unapologetically black, unequivocally American, *and* intentionally dangerous and fugitive as the century draws to an end. This study demonstrates that the earliest African American elegiac poets sang and wrote with an awareness of their liminal subject position with relation to whiteness and Africanness and that over the succeeding centuries black writers increasingly used this liminality to indict the hypocrisy of the ideologies that still undergird literary criticism.

But why, you may ask, quare, and why now?

The nominalism *quare* allows this project to draw attention to the spectral and other in-between life forms leading us to futures where blackness can resist white supremacy and assert

self-reflexive subjectivities. Four of its inflections offer valences of inquiry throughout this project's arguments. First, you will find its birth in the Middle English word *kweer*, as I explore the notion that African Americans' individual lyrical ballads and collective act and manner of performing songs have functioned as a Greek Chorus in the face of the white supremacist mendacity of American Calvinism and Puritanism during and after the chattel era. Next, you will see again and again the ways in which African Americans *embrace* conceptions of blackness as strange, fugitive, fungible, and necessarily outside a Western rubric of respectability in order to expose the duplicitous insanity of white supremacist acts of violence, oppression, appropriation, and exploitation. (Adjectival uses introduced by the oppressed Irish make *quare* apt for examining this celebrated fugitivity.) Third, *quare* provides a linguistic path to call attention to proto-feminist and queer theories of the past half-century that have emerged alongside Julia Kristeva's theories that center an embrace of the maternal in stark contrast to her notions of the expulsion of the maternal *chora*. Finally, the term makes room to unseat patriarchal readings that have shaped the canonization of African American literature. Black women's fraught intimacies with blackness and whiteness alike make them uniquely equipped to imagine a *quare*, mixed-race futurity where ontologies of blackness defy threats of white supremacist terrorism. These four valences in *Quare Poetics* ultimately contemplate and temporize a presemiotic relationship with the maternal that African American artists have sustained and nurtured rather than abjected.

Thus, studies of the *quare* allow scholars to fill gaps in intersectional studies of race, gender, and sexuality that studies of queerness have left uncharted. They make room to explore the complexities of interracial, intraracial, same-sex, gender-bending, and transnational, and familial intimacies that were created by chattel slavery as black flesh was trafficked from the African continent throughout the global South. More importantly, they empower us to ponder the

ways these intimacies became even more complex once blacks were able to escape the lash in the Southeastern United States and entangle with systems of racial subjugation in the U.S. North, American West, and throughout the African diaspora, particularly in their circum-Atlantic journeys in the Caribbean, Canada, Europe, and the continent they would come to call “the Motherland.” *Quare Poetics* challenges theorizations of blackness, black performativity, and African American literary canonization that have examined the impact of the absence of black fathers at great length while overlooking the role of the black maternal, its haunting presence, and the mourning that shapes African American artistry in the wake of its absence, work womanist scholars and creative writers have done for at least the past four decades.

Moreover, many gaps remain in the historiography of African American mourning, inextricably tied to its music, and these lyrical/sonic elegies are woefully under-analyzed. Thus, *Quare Poetics* presents a centuries-long literary historiography of the African American elegiac tradition as one of simultaneous resistance, a tradition that intersects with the equally long, ever-evolving arc of the African American songbook. This tradition’s sonic historiography has evolved from the slave songs, commonly known as the Negro Spirituals, to primitive blues to various iterations of jazz, rhythm & blues, soul, and hip-hop. The last category includes the contemporary bass-heavy music that features digitized and Auto-Tuned wails and moans from “the trap,” the colloquial name for urban and rural spaces where fugitivity breeds a creativity that thrives despite State governance that ghettoizes black lives and subjectivities. These spaces—collectively functioning as Édouard Glissant’s “womb abyss” to “generate the clamor of [black] protest” that Sharpe, Moten, Alex Weheliye, and others underscore as central to black constructs of potentiality—are as complex as any plantation, and the musical storytelling that emerges from them are as astute in their transmutation of trauma for multiple audiences as any slave narrative.

Thus, its performers' wails and moans confound and resonate with various audiences as keenly as the first ones that emerged from the Americas' chattel slave system. (For example, meditations on the long-celebrated "trap" that is Compton, Calif., have shaped West Coast rap since the 1990s, particularly in the works of N.W.A, Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, and Kendrick Lamar.) The earliest works in this elegiac tradition and its formalists engage the traditional Aristotelian criteria for the elegy in his *Poetics* more adroitly; however, most fulfill the great poet Horace's rubric in "Ars Poetica"¹ for works that "bear away the soul of the auditor whithersoever they please" by their authors' expressing "the passion of grief" through nontraditional, subversive means, deploying ironic juxtaposition, satire, ribald humor, and ultimately unbridled rage in lyrical utterances that blur the lines between the sacred and the profane. In retracing a genealogy for African American poetics and its elegiac tradition, this dissertation proposes African American literary and musical works as philosophical texts theorizing that blackness is as necessarily fugitive as it is fungible. It posits the genesis of this radical protest tradition in the eighteenth century with its mothers—Terry Prince, the Negro Spiritual slave *kweer*, and Wheatley Peters—as progenitors.

Through this natal lens of the trauma of complex relationships with the black maternal, this project resituates the work of Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, David Walker, Richard Wright, and others on a continuum of protest. In sum, this dissertation argues that the elegaic tradition in African American poetics, long read through a surface valence of mourning, in fact springs from many writers' articulation of and protest against their blackness serving as the prototypical marker of queerness. It is slave mothers' ambiguous sexual agency and complex intimacies with white flesh that mark their flesh and that of their children queer, and African American elegists have attempted to deconstruct this fetishization and imposition of difference upon blackness in their work and rename themselves what can call quare. Most often, this

dissertation posits, the elegiac tradition in African American poetics points to the legacy of black mothers' traumas at every station and major port of the circum-Atlantic slave trade in the global South. As I rehistoricize protest in African American poetics from its advent in the eighteenth century to the present, I also examine how writers use black women personae because they are the most affective harbingers of post-traumatic protest in the lingering aftermath of chattel slavery and its cruel descendant, Jim Crow. These personae allow African American elegists to make palpable the experiences that make black women forebears of a multi-ethnic consciousness that complicates the relationship generations of their sons' and daughters' sons and daughters, conceived under duress and by force, have with black maternity and their own sexualities.

From *Kweer* to *Quare*: The Sound of Blackness as Elegaic Protest

E. Patrick Johnson's "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother" was a pioneering essay who blazed a path for rehistoricizing a term that had been deemed pejorative before white theorists began in the latter half of the twentieth century to *reclaim* it. They used *queer* as a tool to de-center heteronormative readings of literature and underscore alternative sexual and gender identities and practices in culture dating to antiquity. In his 2001 essay, Johnson explores how Southern African American women's dialectical substitution of the term *quare* for *queer* resonates with the homophonous meanings of strangeness and inquiry that have roots in the idiomatic discourse of the "Black" Irish, who arrived in the United States working alongside the first African-born black slaves on plantations as low-wage indentured servants. Building on Johnson's work, Mel Chen's 2012 book *Animacies* returns to the etymology of *queer* to explore its mainstreaming in queer subculture and politics. However, Chen elides the fact that *queer* and *quare* share an origin in choral performance. *Quare Poetics* aims to recover this link to song and the liberating,

incisive power of African American lyricism. Investigating homophonic resonances of *quare* in African American poetics underscores an African diasporic consciousness not implicit in *queer*, and it lays claim upon a global citizenship to the spaces that African Americans' circum-Atlantic journeys have taken them. Similar to African American scholars' use of *womanism* to respond to a racially unmarked feminism, *quare* opens a new critical perspective.² Scholars continue aligning *black* awkwardly with *queer* and *feminist* so that it has become both metaphorically and literally a dangling modifier to movements for gender and sexual liberation, in the process reinforcing ideologies that have made African American academicians' interventions appositional props and talking points for a guilt-ridden gaze on the pervasive denigration of black life. All the more ironic is the fact that *black* is not only coincident with *womanist* and *quare* but all are inextricably linked.

The words that would lead to contemporary definitions of *queer*—intermittently spelled, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, *kweer* and *queere* in the singular and *queris* and various allomorphs in between in the plural—first prominently appeared in Reformation pioneer John Wycliffe's 1382 Middle English Bible, the first in the language, a translation of the fourth-century Latin Vulgate. (The OED notes one earlier reference in historian Robert of Gloucester's 1325 *Chronicle* of the Brits and Normans.) As a counter-narrative to Chen's claim that "*queer* did not seem to exist consistently as a noun before the twentieth century," this early *kweer* described the lead singers in a church, the plural spelling specifically associated with cantors in a Jewish temple (60). In this way, *kweer* evolved through centuries, essentially retaining its core meaning, until it became the contemporary *choir*. By 1390, this word for non-Europeans' performance of religious verse had taken on verbal forms (*quaere* and *queering* primarily) and had come to define the act of questioning or critical thinking. Chen forgoes an exploration of this

part of *queer*'s narrative and instead gives great attention in "Queer Animation," the second chapter of *Animacies*, to its adjectival ancestry. Chen aptly notes that the "segregation of *queer* into two lexemes" has been useful to Nikki Sullivan and other theorists looking to have "good fun with the play between the notions of fraudulent capital and illegitimate sexual bodies" (61).

Chen's grammatical and sociolinguistic insights are among the most daring in recent studies of race, gender, and sexuality. Most prescient is Chen's exploration of theorists' "de-adjectival verbalization" of *queer*, in order to "shift meaning to the side of a normative interpretation, away from meaning associated with the notional center" (69), and the "deverbal nominalization" of the word, which functions "to detemporalize [the word] so that it refuses a dynamic reading" and becomes a static catch-all (74). For too long, Chen proves, *queer* has been an umbrella nominalism for any acts outside the broad, capricious rubric of "normal" or any sexual intimacies and gender-bending self-expressions that defy the broader, more capricious rubrics of "heterosexual" or "missionary." What Chen's work does not underscore—and what *Quare Poetics* intends to demonstrate—are implications of *queer*'s homophones endowed with self-affirming possibilities, not solely reactionary, subversive, play in various parts of speech. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, for example, *queir*, *query*, and *quare* entered the idiolect as adjectives, describing those of odd, eccentric, or dubious character, those inciting suspicion. However, the Irish dialect's introduction of *quare* is significant because its emphasis on strangeness offers positive connotations, underscoring intensity and exceptionality in quantity and quality, all the more impactful because it emerges from Britain's least "white" denizens.

In *The History of White People* (2010), Nell Irvin Painter notes that the poorest of the Irish were "judged racially different enough to be oppressed, ugly enough to be compared to apes, and poor enough to be paired with black people" (134). Consequently, as Chen and

Johnson show, the nuances the Irish encoded in *quare* are ironically and especially resonate with the tragicomic and melancholic ones that the word bears when deployed in the U.S. Southern dialect, particularly by working-class African American women, whose ethos has infused much of African American poetics and whose vocal timbre is synonymous with American song, especially dating to the late eighteenth century. Johnson's correlation of the link between "Black" Irish and African American vernacular focuses on the term's use in the Southern lexis he knew growing up, which complemented his early scholarly exploration of Alice Walker's womanist critiques of feminism in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). In his essay, Johnson celebrates the folk wisdom gained on his homophobic grandmother's front and back porches about the quare connoting "something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American rituals and lived experience" (126). He echoes a clarion call that had been made again and again in the generation of African American feminist scholars before him, particularly by Mae G. Henderson, his *Black Queer Studies* co-editor, for discourse that accounts for black women's "multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality" (as qtd. in Johnson 126). In citing Henderson's 1989 essay "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," Johnson extends her theorizations of glossolalia, heteroglossia, and the discursive silences black women's works hold as well as the black maternal voices therein, which are liminal, quare, and particularly equipped to imagine a world free of the white supremacist terrorism and violence they know intimately. Johnson's essay, like others in *Black Queer Studies*, has blazed a path for a more expansive lens on the quare that takes into account a more temporally vast theorization of black maternal voices' power.

Throughout *Quare Poetics*, my readings put this important discourse from Sharpe, Chen,

and Johnson in conversation with sound studies that Moten and Nathaniel Mackey have initiated. I reanimate black feminist and womanist epistemologies of black maternity in order to unearth sediments of knowledge about the strange meaning of the quare not yet parsed in critical race and queer studies since the 1980s. Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Siobhan Somerville, Robert McCruer, and José Esteban Muñoz have led the way in examining epistemologies of postmodern and postcolonial non-white being marked queer. Yet, non-essentializing theories about blackness have not engaged with African American poetics—even after *Black Queer Studies* and the subsequent work of Sharon Holland, Rinaldo Walcott, Dwight A. McBride, Roderick Ferguson, and others, who continue to take up the anthology’s effort to “*quare queer*³—to throw shade on its meaning in the spirit of service to ‘blackness’ ” (Holland 7). This wordplay underscores African Americans’ rejection of their assumed role of performing black suffering, rage, and mourning in ways that affirm white supremacy. However, most scholars have avoided nuanced conversations about the inherent quareness of blackness—almost always framed as the representational opposite of white heterosexuality, intellect, and forestalled subjectivity—*because* of the term’s long-standing homosexual implications. Nonetheless, blackness has always been synonymous with strangeness and thus produced ontologies of the quare. Chattel slavery and other manifestations of racism, underscored time and again as strange⁴ in African American literature, exploited the nation’s binary fictions of race, gender, and sexuality and positioned black Americans to use their moans, wails, and cries to plod a path progressively freer of these fictions as well as the chains, lashes, bits, and other chattel-era tools of white male supremacist terrorism and violence. On the precipice of the third decade of the twenty-first century, then, *Quare Poetics* aims to add to the conversation Du Bois initiated early in the last century as he theorized “the strange meaning of being black” in *Souls*.

Analyzing this tradition from its advent to the present, this study re-historicizes the link between racial and gender performance and sexuality's contravening power and the African American elegists who blur the lines that allegedly delineate the masculine and feminine, taking into consideration the complexities of blackness across the sexual spectrum. Somerville's *Queering the Color Line* (2000) also made this intervention possible. Somerville deconstructs "how sexuality might also intersect with multiple categories of identification and difference" (5) and serves as "a historically and culturally contingent category of identity":

As such, 'sexuality' means much more than sexual practice per se. One's sexual identity, while at times linked directly to one's sexual activities, more often describes a complex ideological position, into which one is interpellated based partly on the culture's mapping of bodies and desires and partly on one's response to that interpellation. (6)

Quare Poetics enters to document a tradition of interpolation and chart individual, self-defined sexual choices outside the confines of heteronormative signposts throughout African American literature. Thus, this project probes gaps in the current historiography to herald texts that challenge the very ways that sexual identity politics shapes queer studies. With intention, this study bridges the palpable divide in black studies between scholarship about writers whose works reify accepted signifiers of heteronormativity and those whose private sexual lives marks them and their works as "LGBTQIA." No longer should scholars play into the tradition of sexual identity politics in deciding whose work is queer. As the gaze of white male heteronormativity queers African Americans, all African American writing is quare in its declaration of independence from stereotype and illumination of blackness' multivalent ontologies and phenomenologies. This study is of particular importance in the underexplored field of African American poetics, where the reinvention of the elegy remains ripe for discoveries about the impact of blacks' experimentation on the American literary canon, and its genres and movements, writ large. As African American elegists shine concave and convex mirrors on the

white supremacist gaze that marks black flesh queer, they expose its assumptions of blacks' stasis and emotional legibility, its impositions of subhumanity and sexual, economic, and social disenfranchisement, and the resultant traumas.

When scholars view blackness through the lens of the quare, in which the trauma of slavery and the gifts of Africanist, woman-centered consciousness mark all black sexualities as non-heteronormative *and* transformative, African American poetic elegies manifest not as neutral, sentimental, imitative forms, but reveal themselves to be sociopolitical tools through which their harbingers grapple with being black and thus with being marked as *kweer* (choral witness) and *queer* (strange, Other, self-affirming presence that exposes the fictions of white male supremacy). It is through their lyrical ballads, words and song combined, that they name themselves and thus become quare. These elegists articulate a keen awareness of their positionality to write subversive verse that transmutes African American vocal performance in song and dance to comfort on one hand and unsettle on another *because* blackness unjustly bears the archetypal markers of foreignness, omen, and hypersexual deviance. In addition, these elegists contend with defining their own standards for aesthetic beauty, intellect, and reason outside the Western rubric that essentializes their very existence as a site of antithesis and abjection.

The African American Elegy: From 'Inanimate Effigy' to the Black Mother's Womb

As this field's interrogation of sexuality and mourning has begun to bloom in this century, Sharon P. Holland has led the way in turning scholars' attention to African American elegiac writing. Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000) calls attention to the chasm between African American studies, feminist studies, and LGBTQ studies throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Her close readings of four mid- and late-twentieth-century

novels by African Americans and a Native American, the music of an all-white male feminist hip-hop group, and a blockbuster African American film gesture toward what she later would define in her introduction to *Black Queer Studies* as the quare. In her book, one can sense early ruminations of what she would concretize in that introduction. In *Raising the Dead*, she points out Butler's marginal engagement with race and class in her 1990 text, *Gender Trouble*, and draws upon Spillers's work to make the case that African American studies has relied on a "gender/sexuality binary it has borrowed from feminism" (122). Concluding her close reading of Randall Kenan's 1989 novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, Holland declares: "Black queer subjectivity is the body that no one wants to be beholden to. ... [I]n order to speak, queer black bodies have to search in outrageous places to find voice—they have to come back from the dead to get the recognition they deserve" (120). *Quare Poetics* adds to the dialogue on the interstices of African American, LGBTQ, and feminist studies that Holland calls "dangerous" with the intention of "catapult[ing] us into a past we prefer to remain ignorant about" (121). (With this book, I simply elide the need to reify the masters' language—*queer*, and, to some degree, in the way they employ it, *black*—and use *quare*, the term Holland and others offered us to name ourselves.)

Holland acknowledges that much of her work intersects with that of theater scholar and cultural theorist Joseph Roach. His theories of *surrogation* and *effigy* are of particular use, in tandem with Holland's interventions, in this dissertation's differentiation between queer and quare theories and this project's engagement with black elegiac protest. In *Cities of the Dead* (1996), Roach makes a correlation between these two terms, first defining surrogation as a

process [that] does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric [into which] the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates. (2)

Roach frames this process as a system of failures among those who experience African

Americans' performance without fully grasping the complexities of what they witness beyond the racist fictions about blackness they have internalized as facts. He theorizes that "performed effigies" are created by "communities [as] a method of perpetuating themselves," even as dominant culture-curators fashion them as "inanimate effigies" (36). Thus, for these culture-curators, black elegiac practices are "the performance of waste," and black flesh becomes a monolithic inanimate object to pity at best and to abject at worst (41). As Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1997) proves, to see evidence of Roach's inanimate effigies, one only has to read the last few centuries' canonical texts in which white protagonists' and speakers' self-actualization hinges black bodies' deaths. (Chapter Two explores how the modernist text *Cane* grapples with African Americans' birthright to black death and abjection, a response, I argue, to contemporaneous effigies of blackness through very different meditations on intimacies among black bodies, the blues song, and the natural world.)

Moreover, Roach's *Cities of the Dead* astutely turns scholars attention to the fallout of colonialism and its "sales of human flesh at public auction and the concomitant commerce in images and representations of such exchanges that complicate the meaning of *effigy* with that of *fetish*" (41, emphasis in original). While Roach's *Cities* examines theatrical and other public performance, the linguistic violence that aforementioned writers and others exact proves just as toxic in perpetuating the harmful images of blackness in three ways he underscores. This violence is:

- 1) never senseless but always meaningful, because ... in human culture, [it] always serves, one way or another, to make a point;
- 2) excessive, because ... to make its point, it must *spend* things (emphasis in original);
- 3) performative, for the simple reason that it must have an audience—even if that audience is only the victim, even if that audience is only God (41).

In congress, this dissertation aims to unpack ways African American elegists transform the gaze

on the violence black bodies have suffered and the violence black and other non-white bodies are forced to enact in the service of white supremacy. It catalogs how these writers satirize whites' tendency to effigize black artistry and the acts of protest implicit in the resultant surrogation of black performance. It underscores how African American writers aim to combat inanimate effigies, which indoctrinate images and ideas of black bodies and minds as nation-state property and hapless victims of violence for any behavior deemed fugitive. Yet, offering a counter-tradition of protest, this study posits that scholars no longer view the African American elegiac tradition—in literature and other art forms—solely as *responses to* the inanimate effigies that privileged white men create. *Quare Poetics* investigates at the physical and linguistic/literary levels the violence of the hegemonic, patriarchal gaze of whiteness on black flesh, particularly that of women, even as it moves beyond this inquiry to rehistoricize a poetics of resistance.

Over the past half-century, critical race studies, black feminism, womanism, and their ancillaries have emerged to attenuate the chasm between ontologies that mark blackness as always/already faced with certain death and white maleness as the ultimate state of supremacy. Black mothers' wombs are the most potent sites to imagine the possibility of self-affirming subjectivities, pointing scholars to moments of agency and resistance throughout the historical record across the diaspora. Queer theory, however, has emerged as a field dominated by white men—with a few prominent white feminists responding to the androcentrism and phallogentrism of their discourse. *Quare Poetics* constellates the discourse Johnson, Chen, and Sharpe have mapped and aims to answer the following: How has black maternity, its narratives of trauma and triumph, positioned black elegists to thrive as they limn ancestral memories to tap the affective power of kinship with the syncretic, spectral, and non-white conceptions of the divine throughout the diaspora? What is possible if scholars embrace and deepen ontologies rooted in mourning

and fugitivity while they reframe resistance and protest as an already/always proactive posture of the quare rather than a series of reactive, momentary responses to white supremacist violence that is dependent upon mendacious lies about blackness as a “problem,” with all due and forthcoming respect and homage to W.E.B. Du Bois?

Remembering Mama: The Heart of African American Poetics and Its Protest

Put simply, the black maternal voice is the foundation of African American poetics and focalizes its elegiac protest tradition. In the wake of the Black Arts Movement, black feminist and womanist creative writers and scholars have made what was always true too prescient to ignore. In “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” Johnson challenges those invested in queer theory’s discourse on nonheteronormativity to ponder the ways it excludes him and other black scholars “for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity” (2), and he invites others who do not see race and gender as simply additive valences for intersectional inquiry about African American sexualities to chart a new lineage outside the white male queer canon to this rich tradition pioneered by black women. While his aforementioned deference to Alice Walker’s womanist theories is apropos, a keener look in the archive finds the centrality of black maternity in African American poetics championed at least five years earlier, in 1977, in the third issue of *Chrysalis: A Magazine of Female Culture*, with the publication of Audre Lorde’s “Poems Are Not Luxuries,” now highly anthologized as “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.”

With this lyric essay, Lorde portends a shift in the study of African American poetics and LGBT studies writ large to enter a liminal space of possibility and agency for the “Black mother” (her capitalization). More succinctly than most texts, the essay debunks gender binaries and declares gender a mutable construct for intimacy and atonement nearly two decades before

Judith Butler troubled queer and gender studies. In a world that imagines ontologies of black maternity rooted only in endless burden and pain, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” envisions boundless aural and sensual pleasure as a birthright for *anyone* who connects with the revolutionary power of the black maternal in performance. Lorde concretizes a truth asserted in African American poetics: America’s utopian ideals are co-determinant with a reverential embrace of this “Black mother” power within, of honoring black female voices not as those of mammies alone, their presence no longer merely in service. Unlike succeeding theories such as Butler’s, posited as reactionary to -isms foreclosing full subjectivity to those living outside the confines of white male heterosexuality, Lorde privileges the black maternal as an alternative site of origin for African American writers to “european” patriarchy:

The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep ... the distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover their desperate wish for imagination without insight. (23)

Here, Lorde’s words are revolutionary for two reasons. First, rather than her contemporaries’ attempt to “kill” or separate themselves from the white men whose Enlightenment ideals birthed European and European American literary theories, she acknowledges that African American thinkers cannot divorce themselves completely from their “white fathers.” Nonetheless, she also warns against Aristotelian imitation of writing rooted in white male anxieties about extinction that perpetuate racist, sexist, and homophobic “sterile word play” that lacks the “insight” writers of color and women can access through “distillation” of their own experiences. Tacitly, Lorde offers a different relationship to the maternal than Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories of the *chōra* in *La Révolution du Langage Poétique* (1974). Kristeva contends with these “white fathers”—from Plato and Heidegger to Lacan and Derrida, all of whom frame the *khōra/chōra*, this maternal space outside the bounds of the city/polis, in procreative service to its posterity—

by exploring an assumed expulsion of the semiotic, the discursive voices within. Lorde compels women of color to embrace this space's semiotic *and* symbolic potential and challenges all who claim to be feminists or womanists to find in it inspiration for language that predates even Plato's philosophies. What's more, her commentary emerges a decade before Spillers delved more deeply into the complexities slavery birthed into generations of black flesh in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

In the essay, Spillers not only stresses it is this space that black male writers particularly must locate and manifest in their art but she also challenges scholars to explore how all African American literary artists address their complex relationship to fashioning America as a "home" of exceptional opportunity when their ancestors suffered deprivation and unmitigated abuse that remains unaddressed. In Morrison's Nobel Prize-winning *Beloved*, published the same year as Spiller's essay, she, too, underscores that America will never live up to its ideals as a "home" of freedom and independence as long as it ignores the legacies of chattel slavery. Avery Gordon's analysis of *Beloved* in *Ghostly Matters* has made more prescient than any other scholarship that America, then, is one vast haunted house. Its countless, unresolved narratives of the legacy of chattel slavery constantly reanimate moments, where

... what's been in [our] blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost, as I understand it, is not the invisible or some ineffable excess. The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. (xvi)

Gordon is among a number of contemporary African American literary theorists and historians such as Donald Bogle, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Y. Davis, Trudier Harris, and Ajuan M. Mance who have posited these black maternal ghosts as sites of memory of this haunting in two divergent narratives that recur in African American fiction and film: those of the heterosexual,

“comfort women” (victim-survivor mammies) and those of the gender-bending, sex-positive Jezebels (vixens). Fewer scholars, however, have examined the ways in which black poets’ personae serve as harbingers of this haunting to force readers to face the complexities both inside and outside the performance of these stereotypical archetypes of black maternity.

Building upon the work of Spillers, Mae G. Henderson, Saidiya Hartman, Karla F.C. Holloway, April Langley, Gloria T. Hull, and other pioneering black feminists, this project proposes that the quare heralds black women voices’ simultaneous indictment of those who have exacted the traumas that haunt America and transfix African Americans in an elegiac state. Black mothers’ prayers, coos, moans, and wails indict markers of heteronormativity that exclude them and their progeny. Their vocalizations reaffirm their integral role in building a racially and culturally complex nation-state in which they and their progeny are not fully citizens. African American writers’ capacity to thrive in the Western literary marketplace—with the maternal specters of chattel slavery, systemic racism and poverty, and sexual predation forever haunting—marks their acts of protests necessarily subversive. An ever-expansive, illusive African American consciousness has consistently contradicted Western philosophy since Immanuel Kant ventured to build upon David Hume’s racist theories and erroneously declared in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764):

The Negroes of Africa have no nature feeling that rises above the trifling. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to cite a single example in which a Negro has shown talents, and asserts that ... not a single one was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any praiseworthy quality. ... *The blacks are very vain but in a Negro’s way, and so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other with thrashings.* (110-111, emphasis added)

While critiques of Kant’s absurd, racist claims are plentiful, this project aims to attend to that which Kant says must be beaten out of blacks: an unbridled discursiveness rooted in a pride that is at once singular (“vain ... in a Negro way”) and exacerbated in *kweer* community with others

who have an intrinsic sense of pre-chattel freedom to speak at will (“so talkative that they must be driven apart from each other”). While Kant does not use the word “queer” here, his reference to the “Negro’s way” marks it as odd, in direct opposition to the German’s way, which is, he argues, the most “splendid” in his sociocultural hierarchy. Thus, Kantian and contemporaneous philosophies informed subsequent ones that shape a hermeneutic of queerness out of which African American writers constantly protest as they craft alternative epistemologies⁵ of the quare, of this discursive performance of blackness, into their poetics. *Quare Poetics* challenges scholars to reconsider the ways in which African Americans in the global U.S. South blur the lines delineating genre and gender through the poetic elegy and elegiac prose, traditionally characterized by lament, adoration of the idealized dead, and consolation of those grieving.

This challenge of honoring the black mother within has haunted African Americans’ narratives of self-making since Olaudah Equiano rooted his earliest memories of joy, in his 1789 *Interesting Narrative*, in his experiences with his mother. Equiano’s deep sense of homelessness crystallizes as he describes being the youngest son and “favorite” of his mother and details his separation from the spiritual rituals she taught him, including paying homage at a shrine to her own mother and other ancestors. In many ways, his travels throughout the circum-Atlantic and global South—and the coincident seafaring intimacies with otherwise raced male and female bodies—unfold as an unsuccessful quest for a surrogate⁶ mother. Moreover, several of his *Narrative*’s most impassioned moments from his recollection of feeling complicit (if not forcibly a participant) in abuses exacted upon black girls and women, even as he is keenly aware of being powerless to prevent them. Similarly, Frederick Douglass emphasizes the psychic devastation of slavery by disclosing early in his 1845 *Narrative* how being chattel created an emotional chasm between him and his mother and grandmother, Harriet and Betsy Bailey, and rendered his Aunt

Hester a cryptic reminder of the sexual brutalization that could befall him at any time at the hands of cruel slavers such as Edward Covey. Thus, Douglass's narration of his estrangement from maternal love and his necessity to flee upon fighting Covey's sexual brutality, coupled with Equiano's polemical indictment of the violence he sees and the wanderlust it incites as he pursues freedom, set in motion a tradition⁷ of fraught migration narratives this dissertation revisits in Chapter Three. Kristeva, Ruth Salvaggio⁸, and others have theorized that efforts to reconcile within the corporeal self the ache of the loss of a space of maternal safety persist in elegiac texts. This project focalizes black women's mourning in conversations about the presemiotic that consistently have marginalized or excluded them.

The narratives of Equiano and Douglass also expose the scars that miscegenation leaves on the bodies and minds of slave women's orphaned progeny, who grapple with their absence. Although Equiano is born of African parentage, he comes of age under the tutelage of white male sailors, their white and non-white wives and concubines, and their children in the space of simultaneous co-dependency, profitability and the peril that is the sea, the same space into which countless of his forebears and comrades had lost their lives—their blood, bones, and spirits literally paving the way for his self-actualization. Douglass, on the other hand, surmises that his father is, in fact, his first white master, Captain Aaron Anthony, which makes his sense of entitlement to freedom all the more fervent. Both men find in the liberation of their minds through literacy—in the classic texts of the ancients, in the language and cadences of the Bible (which Douglass famously satirizes in his *Narrative*'s poetic closer, "A Parody"), and in those of their white male contemporaries—an enactment of a kind of psychic miscegenation, a transgressive intellectuality that merges the feeling of the pain of their African and African American mothers and their own memories of the lash as slaves with the ideals of freedom that

Greek, Roman, British, French, German, and otherwise Euro-American philosophers impart. In *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, his 1920 followup to *Souls*, Du Bois— orphaned at 16 by the death of his single mother, Mary Sylvina Burghardt—deepens his insights on this complex consciousness in “The Damnation of Black Women,” a moving personal essay about the travails that his mother and other women who reared him endured, and in “Children of the Moon,” the poem succeeding the essay in the text. Both serve as sobering indictments against the ways in which the legacies of slavery weigh on young orphans like himself who are left only to remember mamas taken away by lives cut short by labor, disease, and suffering.

Du Bois, Lorde, Spillers, and the Black Mother Within

Decades before critical race theorists Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, Randall Kennedy, and others coined and defined intersectionality, Du Bois’s *Souls* and *Darkwater* brought the axes of race, gender, and sexuality together as he examined post-Reconstruction and post-Great Migration black life in the urban North and South. While Douglass, Martin Delany, and Alexander Crummell had advocated for women’s rights and addressed the plight of the black Southern woman in particular in essays and speeches, Du Bois makes the faith of black women central to the theoretical frameworks of these books as he had his 1897 essay, “The Conservation of Races.” Thus, these works provide the most salient bridge in this study’s review of criticism on African American elegiac writing at the turn of the previous century to its engagement with criticism of quare elegiac poetics in first quarter of this century. Spillers, Henderson, Hartman, Holloway, and other scholars—invested in the studies of black sexualities, affect, disability, and queer space—also follow in Du Bois’s lineage. Herein, then, lie buried many things that, if read with patience, may complicate the strange meaning of being quare in the twentieth-first century. Expanding a theory of quare poetics—which accounts for the fluidity of gender and sexual

performance, spiritual syncretism, and diasporic Southernness that African American poetics makes possible—is not without interest to contemporary scholars. For the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of moving beyond the color line, of racialization, into the uncharted terrain of the quare.

In “The Conservation of Races,” Du Bois underscores the quixotic paradoxes that construct “race” itself:

What, then, is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life. . . . While race differences have followed mainly physical race lines, yet no mere physical distinctions would really define or explain the deeper differences—the cohesiveness and continuity of the groups. The deeper differences are spiritual, psychical, differences—undoubtedly based on the physical, but indefinitely transcending them. (*W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* 20)

Following his delineation of racial differences, Du Bois begins to attend to the abject relationship of “the Negro” to the American nation-state and to being “hard pressed in the economic world by foreign immigrants and native prejudice, hated here, despised there and pitied everywhere” (25). This liminal state, Du Bois argues, makes imperative an embrace of what I am calling a quare future for African American consciousness (read: an exceptional one that elides the white heterosexist gaze on blackness). In this quare future Du Bois envisions for the twentieth century, upon which *Quare Poetics* will focus much of its attention, black artists and thinkers must accept that “our one haven of refuge is ourselves, and but one means of advance, our belief in our great destiny, our own implicit trust in our ability and worth” (25). A half-century before Black Arts Movement visionaries compelled artists to imbue in their art with an African consciousness, Du Bois saw a No Man’s Land of possibility in the quare space born of the traumatized black maternal, particularly if mined by black writers, whose work “*must* be inspired with the Divine faith of our black mothers, that out of the blood and dust of battle will march a victorious host, a

mighty nation, a peculiar people to speak to the nations of earth a Divine truth that shall make them free” (emphasis in original, 25). In this way, Du Bois cites black maternity as the necessary locus of new ways of theorizing black subjectivity.

Du Bois’s empathy for his own mother’s plight drives his deep, abiding respect for the black maternal’s liberative power throughout his oeuvre. In addition to discourse in *Souls* on black women’s central role in the slave songs, maternity proves a key metaphor for many of Du Bois’s arguments in his commentary in *The Crisis*, the publication engine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People he had helped found in 1909, which he edited. It recurs in *Darkwater*. Thus, Du Bois’s poetics, in lineated poems and in his fiction, awaits closer examination for the ways in which he consistently frames the black female voice and black women personae as fruitful for African American dissent against the racist white gaze. This square space frames his poetic vision for a fully actualized Afro-diasporic consciousness. Rebecka Rutledge Fisher leads contemporary scholars of African American literature revisiting Du Bois’s theorization of the black feminine in *Habitations of the Veil: Metaphor and the Poetics of Black Being in African American Literature* (2014). In an essay that preceded the book’s publication, “The Anatomy of a Symbol: Reading W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Dark Princess: A Romance*,” Fisher identifies a genealogy of Du Bois’s creative deployment of black maternity:

Du Bois’s revolutionary feminine in his creative writings, a counterpart to the revolutionary masculinity of which he speaks in many of his nonfiction texts, is central to his concept of black freedom in a way that might seem contradictory or paradoxical. ... Du Bois’s call to motherhood (what I have come to term his motherhood imperative) reveals to us his political desire for women. In preferring that women mother—and that women in fact *work* to produce other mothers—Du Bois unveils a feminist imperative that may ring flat on the hearing of today’s feminist woman. However, he saw no paradox in calling black feminists to motherhood, and not to motherhood alone. An examination of the genealogy of this ideal shows us that Du Bois sought, through the travail of the black mother, the birth of a symbolic, immortal man-child who would ultimately serve to lead the black Diaspora out of oppression. (96)

While Fisher focuses primarily in *Habitations* on Du Bois's prose, a closer reading of his lineated poems would deepen her analysis of a "motherhood imperative" in Du Bois's poetics.

The black maternal as a powerful site of protest is particularly evident in Du Bois's earliest poems. The poem that would become "The Riddle of the Sphinx" in *Darkwater* began with fragments published in the leftist journal of the Niagara Movement, *The Horizon*, and in *The Crisis* between 1907 and 1910. Du Bois anonymously published other parts of the long poem as "The Burden of Black Women" in 1914 in the NAACP's communication engine nearly a decade before Langston Hughes, the New Negro Renaissance's most acclaimed womanist, published "Mother to Son" and "Christ in Alabama," two of the movement's anthems of black maternity, respectively, in the November 1922 issue of *The Crisis* and the Dec. 1, 1931, issue of *Contempo*, a leftist journal that one-time students at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill ran until 1934, when its main editors Anthony Buttitta and Milton Abernethy had a falling out. ("Mother to Son" remains a mainstay performed in debutante balls, pageants, and Black History Month programs today.) As in Hughes's "Christ in Alabama," Du Bois's "The Burden of Black Women/The Riddle of the Sphinx" situates Christ as a child of a black mammy who has nourished white folks' children at the expense of their own. Du Bois's poem also foreshadows the admonitions in *For My People* that won Margaret Walker Alexander the Yale Younger Prize two decades later. The "motherhood imperative" in Du Bois's poetics also pulses through prose that blurs the line between essay and poem, crafting, as it were, prose poetry. In "The Black Mother," a December 1912 piece in *The Crisis*, Du Bois waxes, with anaphora and alliteration:

Let the present-day mammies suckle their own children. Let them walk in the sunshine with their own toddling boys and girls and put their own sleepy little brothers and sisters to bed. ... In the midst of immense difficulties, surrounded by caste, and hemmed in by restricted economic opportunity, let the colored mother of today build her own statue, and let it be the four walls of her own unsullied home. (294)

By 1920, he would declare in “The Damnation of Women”: “The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause” (309). This linkage of black American progress inextricably to the status of its most prized members, its black mothers, has set into motion another paradigmatic shift toward a quare future freer of chattel shame. Particularly in the aforementioned “Children of the Moon,” a black mother speaks from a metaphysical, metaphorical, and liminal crypt that allows her to see what is possible in the remainder of the twentieth century, should her pain and suffering be acknowledged.

In the succeeding half-century, Lorde’s veneration of black maternity in “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” and Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” would extend Du Bois’s revisionist theorization for quare poetics further, the former adroitly challenging scholars to divorce African diasporic consciousness from pathology. Du Bois’s metaphor of double consciousness and various philosophers’ queer theories have focused on refuting Enlightenment ideas and calling out the fault lines in the theories that Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, and their acolytes and critics have postulated about Greco-Roman and Euro-American men’s psychic fragmentation. Lorde’s construct of the Black mother (her capitalization), on the other hand, offers an alternative episteme of African American womanhood that celebrates uninhibited, clear articulation of feeling over a fraught reason that isn’t reasonable at all, given that it is warped by racism, sexism, homophobia, and gender normativity. Lorde exhorts:

These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep. ... The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary awareness and demand, the implementation of that freedom. (*Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader* 355)

Lorde's notion of a "dark, ancient, deep" source that houses "the woman's place of power" subverts philosophies that privilege intellectual over emotional intelligence. Her "I feel, therefore, I can be free" offers a diasporic point of origin that predates and supersedes chattel slavery, while Spillers's theories complicate the idealization of black maternity as a utopic site.

Spillers challenges scholars to re-examine conceptualizations of race, particularly of mixed-race bodies' relationship to black maternity, even as she curates evidence of black women's survival of the dehumanizing institution's cyclical trauma. Unseating the "tragic mulatta/o" trope, Spillers also underscores, in "Notes on an Alternative Model – Neither/Nor," the necessity of acknowledging the complex positionality from which mixed-race voices such as Trethewey's emerge and how their very existence, particularly in the chattel era, is read as economic misprisions against the nation-state. With the exception of commentary on Gwendolyn Brooks⁹, Spillers's essays dissect prose narratives, often those about mixed-race people, including Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Her insights are particularly useful for this dissertation's theorization of the quare that emerges in black female's voices:

The African-American female, in her historic identity, robbed of the benefits of "the reproduction of mothering," is, consequently, the very negation of femaleness that accrues as the peculiar cultural property of Anglo-American women, in the national instance, and, more generally, of the female of not-color. ... The "mulatta," who has no personhood ... locates in the flesh a site of cultural and political maneuver. Unlike African female personality, implied in her presence, the "mulatta" designates those notions of femaleness that would reinforce the latter as an object of gazing. ... Noted for his/her "beauty," the "mulatto/a" ... bears a secret, the taint of evil in her blood, but paradoxically, the secret is vividly worn, made clear. (304, 308)

Here, Spillers argues that this perception of taint pervades readings of black mothers and the mixed-race bodies they produce in American literature. While these truths are relevant at the cellular and fleshly level that Spillers enters, *Quare Poetics* aims to unpack more truths that

emerge if one probes the sonic, metaphorical, and transgressive beauty that this liminal state of perceived non-personhood brings forth from black females' voices, particularly Trethewey's ironic voice as one marked by the "typology of taint," one who "t'aint one and tain't the other," in "Taxonomy" in her latest collection, *Thrall* (2012). (This dissertation's afterword offers a brief reading of this poem, which indicts the gaze of white male supremacy and thus fashions an ontological future for blackness devoid of this imposition of "taint.") To encode in one's lyrical vocalizations philosophies that make one a participant in defining what it means to be human, American, *and* black is the ultimate dissent against the strictures of the racist, misogynist literary market. This dissertation aims to parse the quareness of black female voices' protest and the reasons they are useful for black writers, regardless of their genders.

Quare Poetics explores, then, what might be gained if scholars push further the study of African American poetics into this liminal space of the quare, a subversive, scholarly middle ground of meaning-making that mines the challenges *and* fortunes that black maternity offers African American elegists. This project aims to walk this tightrope between essentialism and exceptionalism, finding in African American elegiac writing an origin for that Du Boisian Spirit celebrated (or battled with a Marxist vengeance) as "Americanism." While some may call this investment in ontologies of the quare un-American and anti-black, Morrison makes clear in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) that unpacking "the Negro problem" that Du Bois points out in his *Souls* and *Darkwater* demands that scholars stare into mirror at our own obsession, at every turn, with exorcizing an "Africanist presence," called "blackness" throughout this project, to affirm ontologies of "American" (read: white nationalist) exceptionalism. Theories of the quare make room not only to see unapologetic blackness thriving unfettered but also to retrace an African American literary historiography that heralds a linguistic rubric freer of the lies of

“Americanism”/white nationalism. Most acutely in the United States, it is this separatist/white nationalist prism through which blackness as a “race” was birthed—forever and always linguistically and socioculturally framed in opposition to whiteness—forestalling any possibilities of a truly inclusive American literature that doesn’t sublimate or outright erase non-white ontologies. Terry Prince, Wheatley Peters, Equiano, and the nameless, toiling singers of the Negro Spirituals knew they were “writing” against their erasure as they sang and penned their African American humanity into the very fabric of American artistic expression. They masterfully accomplished this feat, even as their black flesh served as the underpainting, the backdrop, the meta-narrative superimposed above—and in existential and phenomenological opposition to—their state of being an enslaved, subhuman, Othered centrifugal force/palindrome used to reify polarized understandings of white, heterosexual male and female identities. Once scholars consider this proposed analysis of African American women’s voices and personae, much of African American writing becomes quite quare, regardless of its authors’ sexual orientations and their personae’s characterizations.

As debate over a positivist, “post-race” American narrative has begun to shape critical conversations in the past decade, Kenneth W. Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) has led scholarship that ironically declares the label “African American” a has-been for contemporary literature by black authors. However, this dissertation resists dismissing “African American” as a twentieth-century trope in pursuit of expanding the ontological vastness of blackness in this new millennium. Instead, the present study calls for a re-examination of the complex subject positions of decidedly black writers of unabashedly black elegies who have de-centered whiteness and criticized whites’ projection of queerness onto blackness without the taint of unanalyzed self-loathing and undeterritorialized shame. This scholarship aims to underscore

the linguistic invention that undergirds the folk ideals of womanism while conversing with poststructuralist ones of “black male feminism” and “black pessimism” that focus on other artifacts of black culture (especially those of popular culture) that have come more centrally into play in mainstream conversations about blackness and the grandchild of the blues: hip-hop.

African American elegists—those who embrace their inner “Black mother”/black female voice at least, Lorde and Spillers argue—have a creative capital that affect and disability scholars have failed to unpack amid the (false) “post-mourning” era that had begun unfold before the election of Donald J. Trump. Why, Butler asks in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), do Americans—from the advent of African American literature to its multi-ethnic, creolized present—want to be post-9/11, post-HIV/AIDS epidemic, and post-race when our grieving is nowhere near complete (as if it ever could be)? This project will extend the conversations this recent work has begun on disembodiment, disidentification, and disavowal of binaries and ableist hegemony, on the spectral and spirit realms at work among Earth’s burden-weary beasts and faithful unbelievers. As *Quare Poetics* will demonstrate, the works of all of these aforementioned “Black mother”-midwives exemplify most intensely something greater than the power of the Kristevan semiotic (central to the effective study of quare poetics), even as they endow syntactic and symbolic power, Sedgwick and Butler have implicitly argued, to the capacity of blackness to de-center and transform the queer.

Chapter Synopses

Chapter One, “Making the Mark of Cain Holy: Motherless Children Preach the Gospel of Mercy—and Protest,” posits the founders of African American literature as orphaned girls who defied Victorian ideals of respectability to fashion the foundations of liberation theology. Two of the slave *kweer*’s most enduring songs, “Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child” and “Hush.

Hush. Somebody's Calling My Name," underscore the centrality of black maternity to the Spirituals and shows that the African American elegiac and protest traditions have always been interconnected and have thrived as aural ones first, whether in choral or oral performance or verbal transcription in written verse. This chapter, then, argues that black elegists create space for motherless children to articulate the pain—and possibility for self-definition—that comes from being orphaned by the chattel system. It argues that Lucy Terry Prince and Phillis Wheatley Peters, two such orphans, are the original African American exegetes of a syncretic faith that melds African spiritual practices with Islam, the chief religion of the Middle East, and Puritanism, the religious sect of Protestantism shaping Americans' nascent values outside Western Europe. In their elegies, these women flout gender and racial binaries; foreground blacks' cosmopolitanism, intellect, and imagination; and expose the hypocrisies of Victorian heteronormativity not afforded black women in the chattel era. At its crux, this chapter asserts that these teens—both of whom survived the circum-Atlantic slave trade's horrific Middle Passage and landed in New England's tempered chattel system—use the murderous "mark of Cain" that white theologians abject onto indigenous, brown, and African Americans as a mirror of the impending doom awaiting those who reject abolition and advance conquest. They animate the rubric of humanity's initial curse post-Fall to imagine a multiracial America in which all are inextricably connected and cursed, with possibilities of redemption outside America's borders in Edenic Canada and the afterlife. This chapter's analysis grounds the project's engagement with the ways that black women's literary protests incite empathy so effectively that African American men (chiefly, Equiano, William Wells Brown, and Douglass) make black female vocalization (shrieks, cries, ballads, etc.), bodily suffering, and sexual traumas formative to their antislavery rhetoric.

This study's two succeeding chapters—"Privileged Children Sing the Afromodern Blues" and "Migrant/Vagrant: The Black Mother's Fugitive Flesh Made Jazz"—interrogate the poetics of lesser-theorized writers of the New Negro Renaissance and subsequent radical literary movements, who grew up in upper-middle-class communities and developed worldviews divergent from those of their contemporaries, making possible visions of nonheteronormative sexualities and malleable racial identities. The most radical of these African American elegists challenge sociosexual binaries and deploy the word "queer" as they invoke the significations of choral mourning, interrogation, fugitivity, and fungibility that have evolved since that word's emergence in the late fourteenth century. Chapter Two, "Privileged Children Sing the Afromodern Blues" attends to the poetics of Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson and Jean Toomer, who write from and about their respective upbringing in New Orleans and Washington, D.C., as they mythologize rural South spaces. Their defiance of genre conventions and framing of blackness as a burdensome object outside themselves reflect the ways that migration from the South during Reconstruction and the early twentieth century creates a generation of African Americans who begin to see themselves as a chosen group set apart from the lot of oppressed blacks, and who, like their white literary benefactors and publishers, observe the juke joints, taverns, and alleys that poor blacks frequent as curiosities to study and capture. In short, these "New Negroes" embraced the quare. Dunbar Nelson's secret bisexual desire, I argue, manifests not only in her private journals, which Gloria T. Hull has unearthed, but also in genre-bending prose poetry and sonnets she published. I analyze two pieces, both titled "Violets," one published early in her career, the other decades later after she settles into her third marriage. The chapter's arguments culminate with a proposition that Toomer's discomfort with black female sexual subjectivity is as important as his passing, which has been the focus of recent scholarship on *Cane*. The chapter

examines his most striking and enigmatic female protagonist, Carma, for insights on his warped womanist lens on black women's survival of and triumph over chattel-era rape.

In Chapter Three, "Migrant/Vagrant: The Black Mother's Fugitive Flesh Made Jazz," discourse on the poetics of Bob Kaufman and Nina Simone brings the dissertation full circle to engage those in the radical elegiac tradition whose work reframes black maternity in ways that expose white supremacy without the homophobia that shaped Amiri Baraka's more heralded, contemporaneous Black Arts Movement poetics. Kaufman and Simone, I contend, take up the enterprise of the New Negro Renaissance and enfold jazz poetics in traditional narratives, meta-narratives, and non-linear narratives that at once scathingly indict American racism and celebrate black innovation through gender- and genre-bending linguistic play. This chapter resituates Kaufman, rather than Baraka and Alan Ginsberg, as the progenitor of the radicalism that shapes the Beat and Black Arts movements and analyzes two of Kaufman's satirical elegies, "Grandfather Was Queer, Too" in detail and, briefly, "Carl Chessman Interviews the P.T.A. in His Swank Gas Chamber Before Leaving on His Annual Inspection of Capital, Tour of Northern California Death Universities, Happy." I argue that in charting "the intellectual's" fraught migration, Kaufman problematizes the myth of his embodiment of two oppositional ancestries—Jewish and black—connected in the diaspora vis-à-vis surreal migration narratives of holocaust, wanderlust, and subversive expressions of racial, gendered, and sexual identities. I also examine this legacy of the black maternal's traumas in Simone's covers of Waring Cuney's poem "No Images" and Janis Ian's "Stars" and her own original standards, "Four Women" and "Mississippi Goddam." I posit that Kaufman and Simone narrate and demonstrate acts of "disremembering"¹⁰ in their performances, transforming historically white spaces into sites of protest. As such, I propose that they stand out as unheralded forebears of the spoken-word/"slam poetry"

movement, which has blurred the lines between the polemic and the poetic, the latter of which has blossomed in the past half-century. In probing intently their legacies of protest, *Quare Poetics* aims to further historicize the work of Holloway¹¹ and Meta DuEwa Jones¹², who have forecast this re-emergence of the historical acts of brush-arbor spiritualism in jazz poetics, the hip-hop “cypher,” and a blend of neo-formalism and “slam” free verse.

“ ‘Nobody Sings Anymore’: The Ghost of LeRoi Jones and The (Re)Birth of a Nation,” this project’s fourth and final chapter, pauses in the interstitial moment that was the writer’s transition from LeRoi Jones—an effete Greenwich Village Beat-adjacent writer of poetry, plays, and jazz criticism navigating a number of racially and sexually ambiguous entanglements—to the “white devil”-hating, anti-Semitic, homophobic firebrand in Uptown proselytizing for a pure art informed solely by a black consciousness (oftentimes with a capital B). This consciousness unfetters from white supremacist ideologies and notions of respectability. This chapter surveys early works in this African American literary titan’s oeuvre to underscore the moment in African American literature when queer intimacies on the page became so linked to authorial identity that it required that Baraka slay Jones, only three decades after Toomer showed the liberative potential of reclaiming the black mother within by freeing speakers and characters of gender binaries. The chapter traces the experiences of Jones’s personae and characters, who are often marked by feminized sexual trauma. In the semiautobiographical *System of Dante’s Hell*, same-sex “trysts” commingle with intimacies among genderqueer men and women, particularly its protagonist Roi, who evolves from a femme, cisgendered teen who witnesses the sexual assault of female peer and does not intervene, to a young twink hooking up with men in Chicago, to a survivor of a military gang rape, to an AWOL who finds temporary solace in short-lived relationship with a mannish woman named Peaches. I also survey his bon voyage to “Negro”

identity in “An Agony. As Now.” and “Ieroy,” poems from *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), his last collection as LeRoi Jones, and 1969’s *Black Magic*, his first collection as Baraka. These close readings chart the vexing, racist, and homophobic historicity that empowers writers marked *black/Negro/queer* and interrogate Baraka’s fraught attempt simultaneously to indict white male perpetrators of supremacist ideologies and terrorism, unburden himself of the the weight of nearly three centuries of racism and heterosexism, and to celebrate what he calls “that strong nigger feeling.” It aims to honor Baraka’s genius while questioning his perceived need to disavow allegiance to his own mixed-race children, one of whom he had posited, as Jones, as a harbinger of a future of syncretic American possibility outside the rubric of Judeo-Christianity.

Finally, *Quare Poetics*’s epilogue meditates briefly on what a generation of these children have made possible in contemporary African American elegiac writing, examining the nuances of the work of Natasha Trethewey, a native Mississippian whose oeuvre examines the illegitimacy of her birth to a black mother and white father in April 1966, a year before the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case codifies their marriage and the nation’s stance on the South’s war against integration. While historicizing the duplicity of America’s abjection of racism as a “Southern problem,” Trethewey’s elegies interrogate the legacies of trauma she has inherited from her mother, whose first marriage succumbs to the persistent pathologizing of interracial intimacies and who loses her life violently at her second husband’s hand. I try to avoid a tenuous teleology between Wheatley Peters and Trethewey, though I do draw out stark parallels across four centuries, bookended these orphaned black women’s triumphs. Rather than examining Trethewey’s tribute in *Domestic Work* (2000) to the working-class women who raised her or to the orphaned women who loved and lost in early-twentieth-century New Orleans’ red light district in *Bellocq’s Ophelia* (2002), her second collection, I focus on “Monument” in her

Pultizer Prize-winning *Native Guard* (2007), a rending elegy for her mother, a domestic violence victim murdered in Decatur, Ga., as a teenage Trethewey began college nearby, and “Enlightenment” from *Thrall* (2012), her protest of her white father’s Lacanian gaze on her biracial flesh. Through these two poems, I point to a more nuanced African American imagination that defies readings of Trethewey as a tragic mulatta and herald how she fashions a poetic future in which a nuanced protest of stereotypical conceptions of blackness in verse and visual art continues to unfold in African American poetics.

Chapter One

MAKING THE MARK OF CAIN HOLY: MOTHERLESS CHILDREN

PREACH THE GOSPEL OF MERCY—AND PROTEST

“Sometimes, I feel like a mother child, a long way from home.”—“Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child,” Negro Spiritual

“I’m so glad trouble don’t last always. Oh, my Lord, oh, my Lord, what shall I do?”—“Hush. Hush, Somebody’s Calling My Name,” Negro Spiritual

“Young Samuel Allen, Oh lack-a-day! / Was taken and carried to Canada.”—Lucy Terry Prince, “Bars Fight”

“Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / ‘Their colour is a diabolic die.’ / Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train”—Phillis Wheatley Peters, “On Being Brought from Africa to America”

“[The] quintessential music is the orphan’s ordeal—an orphan being anyone denied kinship, social sustenance. ... Song is both a complaint and a consolation dialectically tied to that ordeal, where in back of ‘orphan’ one hears echoes of ‘orphy,’ a music that turns on abandonment, absence, loss. ... Music is wounded kinship’s last resort.” — Nathaniel Mackey

In the beginning of African American poetics was a word, and the word was *sable*, and Phillis Wheatley Peters birthed an African American protest tradition in deploying it. *Sable*, as a metonym for *black* and *Negro*, contradicts notions that those words should be synonymous solely with *nigger* (and, today, *Other* and *queer*) so that *white* could be the deified, beatified ideal. For America has had a sable hole in its heart since it outlined its democratic ideals but set in motion systems of chattel slavery that exposed the duplicity of its pontifications about freedom from religious, autocratic tyranny. No other group has had a more consistent, effective means to expose America’s mendacity than black women, themselves often orphaned by the slave trade and mothers both to black children rendered motherless by it and white children who do not act to end their black mothers’ (and siblings’) suffering. While patriarchy relegated their voices to

brush arbor, field, and tavern choruses, these black mothers packed into each of their lyrical adaptations of Christian dogma a message that aimed to liberate their children—those they bore and those who owned them, whom they also reared—from chattel slavery’s physical and psychological chains. So-called “explorer” accounts document these earliest encounters with black African bards and balladeers, those generations made chattel and those who found an early path to freedom in the nascent nation of British, Dutch, and French colonies. From those whose names gained acclaim such as Massachusetts Colony barmaid Lucy Terry Prince to the thousands of others in the nameless slave *kweer*, their call-and-response exhortations in harmonious, mournful songs denounce these European enslavers, likening them to Thutmose II, the Egyptian pharaoh whose enslavement of “the children of Israel” had led to his demise. Each song serves as cautionary tale for European-American pharaohs claiming to fight for their own freedom from tyranny while exacting unimaginable horrors on their darker brothers and sisters. This “man from Galilee,” Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, had been born, like these members of the slave *kweer*, on the other side of the Mediterranean not far from their homes in Western Africa.

It’s ironic, then, that the foundations of liberation theology have been traced to George Lisle, Richard Allen, John Jamison Moore, and other black men who were empowered to be the faces of early congregations of black Baptists and Methodists. Yet, by the time Lisle and the earliest of these congregations formally began to convene in 1773 in Silver Bluff, S.C., and Savannah, Ga., John Wheatley’s wunderkind slave had been using the pulpit of the page for nearly three years and had triumphed in a October 1772 trial that proved she had authored a poetry collection engaging George Washington, students at the University of Cambridge-New England (later Harvard College), and late abolitionists such as George Whitefield, white men caught in the slave trade’s crosshairs who fashioned what would become the United States of

America. With the publication of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* in September 1773 in London, Wheatley Peters cemented in print the wisdom that the Spirituals had divined since those in bondage learned the language (and Calvinist narratives) of their oppressive pharaohs and turned them into melodic indictments of white supremacist violence. However, the freedom her book afforded her at 19 was short-lived: By age 31, she—like far too many young black mothers, then as now—had no wealth or social status. She had lost her independence, allegedly having returned to domestic work because she was unable to sell her sophomore collection. Each of her three children had succumbed to the smallpox epidemic of the 1780s. She, too, would die penniless and grief-stricken in December 1784 within hours of her only living child, likely alone because her husband of six years, an ambitious freedman named John Peters, was jailed over unpaid debts caused by creditors who defrauded his grocery business. This chapter focuses on the exegetic protest Wheatley Peters's verse birthed that defies readings by Jahan Ramizani, Max Cavitch, Tom O. McCulley, and Vincent Carretta of her subjugated (read: queer) state and tragic end.

Nearly a decade before a tween Wheatley Peters would land in Boston harbor for auction, one among the nameless balladeers calling out the hubristic failings of white nationalist terror, another Massachusetts genius slave from West Africa, had made an indelible mark on New England's consciousness in a folk ballad so vivid, even a child could learn and repeat it. She called herself Lucy Bijah, taking as her surname the first name of the black man who bought her freedom, fathered her six children, and secured an expansive Vermont farm for their family. However, white historians, as white historians are prone to do, enshrined her story and her song with the name her master and her husband's master had given the couple. "Bars Fight"—Lucy Terry Prince's stark, haunting song recounting the August 25, 1746, massacre of British

immigrant settlers by Abenaki Indian soldiers doing the French's dirty work—outlived the King George's War battle it describes by a century before it was published in print, 34 years after its lyricist's 1821 death in her 90s and 54 years after the tragic passing of Mrs. John Peters.

This chapter traces the roots of the four inflections of the quare in the African American elegiac tradition through close readings of early African American women exegetes as they endow Calvinist evangelical conceptions of mercy with African syncretic sensibilities. Using irony, repetition, teleological juxtaposition, and italicization, the quare as subversive protest song unfolds in the slave *kweer*'s Negro Spirituals "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Hush. Hush. Somebody's Calling My Name." Terry Prince's "Bars Fight" documents the quare in her unblinking comparison of indigenous warriors' brutal murder of colonizers with their choice to show mercy to a white male child, defying most readers' dismissal of the folk ballad as a one-note, tone-deaf doggerel. The quare also emboldens Wheatley Peters's braggadocio, ribald humor, and embrace of Horatian and African lineage in "To Mæcenās" and undergirds her proto-feminist exegesis in her sermonette "On Being Brought from Africa to America." This chapter demonstrates that these works, individually and cumulatively, serve as the foundation for an ever-evolving liberation theology that the growing African-American *kweer*, both slave and free, then and now, uses to expose the glaring white lies at the heart of Western religions' dogma as they indoctrinate their perceived masters into African syncretic spiritual practices that fundamentally change those religions.

The Slave *Kweer*: Choral Witnesses Enact Quare Protest in Ironic Refrains

The first fruit of the Spirit of the quare—blackness serving as America's choral witness—reflects how newly converted African believers impacted early Puritan American theologies in New England. This slave *kweer* began moaning its complaints against chattel slavery as it made

its torturous way with other foreign cargo on ships ironically named the Good Ship Jesus, the White Lion, Esperanza, Mercy, and the like. From the beginning, then, this *kweer* served as European colonists' Greek Chorus in the Americas, exposing the "queer institution"¹³ of chattel slavery and the pernicious mendacity of the United States' well-spun origin tales of revolution against an oppressive monarchy. Central to white American Christians' move from silent deference to God to heartfelt, open expression of faith during the Second Awakening were the "ring shouts" and hollers that slaves enjoyed in their private worship services in brush arbors, plantation fields, and their quarters. Excluded from white American churches, they were able to revel in African rituals they enjoyed in their native lands and meld them with their growing faith in a Christian Master, who they believed would one day deliver them from the evil predations they faced in the presence of their earthly masters as He had delivered others oppressed like them. The earliest written record of the slave songs is Isaac Watts's 1842 *Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, now canonized as the Negro Spirituals. These songs went under-theorized as a valence into the shaping of Puritan thought in the Americas and the progenitors of lyric poetry and elegiac protest until the first decade of this century.

Scholars Lauri Ramey, April C.E. Langley, and Lois Brown have made space for deeper inquiry into the slave *kweer*'s African-Puritanist exegesis of Protestant Scripture in song and defiant reclamation of their African worship practices in dance. In *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry* (2008), Ramey offers a keen historiographic intervention, aligning these songs with

primitive poetries, ethnopoeitics, ecopoetics, and performance poetries [that] were both new and a recuperation of something ancient by hearkening back to models spanning from classical Greek tradition to the ballad tradition. (19)

In so doing, she designates this sonic, preternatural outpouring to God as the origin not only of

African American poetics but also the free-verse experimentation of Imagism and “high” modernism and the elements of performance that define postmodern Beat and contemporary slam poetics. She calls these songs as “African survivals” that represent the “African view of oral text,” which she links to the call-and-response tradition that demands

... improvisation, ingenuity, surprise, spontaneity, varied performance, and change with each instantiation, in contrast with Western views of texts that have a “correct,” unitary, and rigidified form on the page (apart from variations in readers’ interpretations) that is meant to be read the same way each time it is encountered. ... This structural dynamic can be readily seen as a manifestation of the intimate connection between individuals in the social group in slave songs. (53)

Ramey also re-historicizes the marriage of secular and sacred imagery in African American poetry through her analysis of the slave *kweeer*’s songs and makes space for this project’s focus on resistance and protest in the Spirituals. She characterizes them as “an extraordinary expansion of mind and an unbounded vision of time, place, and identification brought ‘home’ to the speaker, even if the speaker cannot travel ‘home’ ” and as “a combined act of refusal and self-constitution, accomplished by creative means and powered by religious belief” (58). While the U.S. South is a natural location for the slave *kweeer* to have galvanized its force, Ramey makes room for global South readings, showing the ways in which these lyrical ballads not only advanced in New England Puritan imaginings of a God who demands obedience but also one who is ever poised to avenge the oppressed. Invoking these divine qualities as allegiance manifests in unabashed cries, songs, and dance, this *kweeer* was able to imbue this Puritanical, hypermasculine, white God’s consciousness with the myths and attributes of African and Afro-diasporic male, female, and transgender gods and goddesses. They also expanded the practice of Puritanism beyond quiet asceticism to impassioned proselytizing, especially against American laws reifying chattel slavery that conflict with freedoms the Christian God should afford all believers.

This syncretism of African and European beliefs and practices pulses through “Hush. Hush, Somebody’s Calling My Name.” The Spiritual brings two points of protest to mind in its title refrain alone. The first exploits the forceful command of silence that Africans no doubt heard not long after their whimpers, screams, and cries began to unsettle those who failed to understand that unlike animals they were not chattel who were without voices to express their pain, anguish, and rage. To silence those who silence slaves in the name of their God with the same command that stifles slaves’ cries to pre-Christian gods and ancestors is the most daring protest. It becomes all the more powerful once one considers the word’s origins. The British inculcated “hush” into the English lexicon as a verb in the decades before Sir John Hawkins, a cousin of Sir Francis Drake, would bring the first Africans to the Caribbean on *Jesus of Lubeck*, now known as the *Good Ship Jesus*, in 1562, and was common speech in the Virginia colony among the British immigrants who traded goods for the 20 African captives on the Dutch ship, the *White Lion*, who would become the first African American slaves. By 1619, however, “hush” had been used in texts these British American Protestants likely would have read in their native land. In the London editions of a religious treatise, *A Supplication of the Poor Commons* (1546), Protestant clergyman Robert Crowley had used the word as he contested the concept of purgatory and challenged common exegeses on the Lord’s Supper that would lay the foundation for some of American Puritanist ideologies about it. Poet-dramatists William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Alexander Pope had deployed it as an interrogative in monologues for characters in duress, who aimed to invoke a higher power than those by whom they felt oppressed. As they do in each Negro Spiritual, then, the African slave *kweer*’s linguistic mirroring enacts a caesura, a pregnant pause, in their poetic effusions to shift focus from human limitations or unwillingness to show mercy to divine intervention. They subvert biblical teachings of obsequience to masters

and appeal directly to the source to whom their Earthly oppressors must answer.

It is no surprise, then, that Du Bois uses Negro Spiritual refrains as epigraphs in *Souls* and *Darkwater* to make his metaphor of double consciousness plain. These earliest African survivals chart an underexplored third source of sight to which Du Bois alludes in his theorization of song, poetic lyricism, and black maternity in his texts. This third sight is the quare: multivalent and measured, capable of modulating from aside to polemic as needed; it speaks when commanded to quiet and quiets when commanded to confess and perform. Its performance captivates as it defies expectations. In the Spirituals, repetition and irony prove potent gifts of the quare that make these motherless children's elegies resonant even today, moving auditors to tears upon one extended plaintive moan or wail. Rather than solely parsing the burdens those marked black carry in these songs because of the systems of racism that continue to oppress them, *Quare Poetics* takes cues from scholars such as Mackey, Moten, Bolden, and Lorenzo Thomas and explores these African American elegies as poetic tools that equipped men and women uprooted by slavery and its aftermath not only to sing of the troubles they have seen and endured but also to encrypt "the strange meaning of being black" into sonic, performative, and literary art that all humanity desires to imitate. Still.

Mackey makes this project's interventions most salient in his 1993 essay, "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," when he illuminates how the metaphysical state of blackness compels African American verse. Taking a closer look at the lyricism in African American poetics—those that follow traditional forms and those, like the Spirituals, that blur generic lines between narrative/prose and high lyric/lineated verse—allows scholars to hear the song to which Mackey turns our attention here. Through this lens, Negro Spirituals such as "Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Hush. Hush. Somebody's Calling My Name," like all African

American elegies, become sonic vestiges of blacks' constant, innate contravention against the mendacity of American racism. They eschew maudlin readings, and their words empower performers to conjure the ghosts of lost mothers' presence for audiences who often only anticipate getting acquainted with the pain their children experience in the wake of these forebears' absence. Furthermore, the anaphora of "Sometimes" in "Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child" evinces black performers' awareness of the temporality of this feeling of being bereft of their mothers' love. Those who inhabit such spirituals in performance most affectively know this feeling of loss is not a perpetual emotional and metaphysical state; it does, in fact, pass on, too, maybe even as acutely and quickly as these mothers' last breaths. (Douglass, of course, makes this temporality achingly clear in the opening pages of his 1845 *Narrative*.) However far away that "home" that Morrison speaks of may be or may feel, black artists' poetic protest undergirds a longstanding radicalism that supplants every effort to force them to mourn in a way that reifies black pathologies and white male supremacy. In short, through the lens of the quare on African American poetics, this project takes up what appears an impossible task: affirming the agency of blackness and black mourning outside the framework of response to and reaffirmation of white male hegemony.

What makes it impossible? In the essay "The Case of Blackness," Moten's riff on Franz Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness" from *Black Skin, White Masks*, Moten deconstructs the racist lens on black ontologies, which irrevocably links them to a "kind of failure or inadequacy" that is the "non-attainment of meaning or ontology, of source or origin, [and] is the only way to approach the thing in its informal (enformed/enforming, as opposed to formless), material totality" (181-182). Blacks' embrace of perpetual outsidership, Moten posits, can fashion the kind of protest in art that is not a response to white male racism and hegemony but instead

transforms phenomenologies of the human and non-human, the object and the subject, of (no)thing-ness/(no)where-ness and ubiquity/omnipresence. To this end, this project's genealogy of black poets' innate, self-affirming protest offers an alternative to the influential theories of black pessimism, whose invaluable insights on the pervasiveness of systemic racism Orlando Patterson and others have put forth since the 1980s. Moten continues:

Perhaps this would be cause for black optimism or, at least, some black operations. Perhaps the thing, the black, is tantamount to another, fugitive, sublimity altogether. Some/thing escapes in or through the object's vestibule; the object vibrates against its frame like a resonator, and troubled air gets out. (182)

"The air of the thing that escapes enframing," which Moten sees at the heart of blackness, is what I'm interested in, too, in this project's engagement with texts and poets who have been dismissed as "minor."¹⁴ Black creativity that elides an oppositional response to white hegemony through the prototypical "angry black" voice and instead takes on that of the seemingly innocuous maternal one offers scholars a new lens on blackness, a petrichor in which to bask after two stormy centuries spent legitimizing black art and a half-century railing against "the white Man" as luminaries of the Black Arts Movement ordered. Thus, the very meaning of being black shifts through black maternity and the quare—in spirituals such as "Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Hush. Hush. Somebody's Calling My Name" and in the poetics of various writers, many of whose voices, cultivated on slam poetry stages, are melding performance with written craft to innovate American letters. After years outside or on the periphery of the African American literary canon, these black writers have gathered a community of readers in and outside academe and have redefined the rubric for the elegiac tradition. Their protest of their forebears' misunderstood and misappropriated subjectivities in the modern and postmodern last century has birthed a tradition that is multi- in every way. To be quare, as African American poetics has always been, is to be defiantly multigeneric, multimedia,

multicultural, spiritually syncretic, and harmonious in a host of minor keys. In every written word, mothers' cries come forth to carry us home to ourselves, our bleeding hearts longing to be rocked free of fear of white supremacist aggression, abuse, and theft. *Quare Poetics* aims to shed lights on the roots of this resilience in the African American elegiac tradition in writers not yet celebrated in other scholars' lineage of protest.

I invite you into this meditation on the simultaneity of African American mourning and protest through the lens of these Negro Spirituals for three reasons. First, "Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Hush. Hush. Somebody's Calling My Name" represent how clever the Spirituals were because their lyrics' simplicity belie more complex messages¹⁵. Second, the songs' memorability made them ideal clarion signals, respectively, to expose the cruelty of slavery in destroying familial relationship ("Sometimes") and to mobilize slaves planning to make a run for free states in the North or Canada ("Hush. Hush."). In the case of "Sometimes," its singers' (and auditors') aim to mitigate—if not outright reject—the pain of feeling (or, in fact, being) bereft of a mother, a condition that seems at times permanent and implacable. The rate at which "Hush. Hush." is sung makes clear the imminence of escape.¹⁶ Third, the daring choice to precede despairing lyrics with "Sometimes" continues from the chattel era to present-day R&B and hip-hop. (Bilal's "Sometimes" and Fetty Wap's "I Wonder" feature prominent examples of this refrain at the bookends of this century.) Thus, these Spirituals' cited refrains, anaphoras, and epistrophes convey slaves' and their descendants' revisionist relationship with a Calvinism whose tenets, duplicitously used to justify their enslavement, ironically undergird their subjugation to unimaginable physical suffering *and* their newfound understanding of spiritual liberation. In this way, then, these lyrics' articulation of longing for an elusive black maternal presence galvanizes this project's mission: to retrace the

origins of the African American protest tradition to its earliest poets and chart how the prayers, coos, moans, and wails of black mothers throughout this tradition work to unsettle the ambivalence consumers of African American literature and music too often have with the multivalent consciousness that is blackness.

Thus, *Quare Poetics* begins—and will end—with these famous Spirituals and these invocations of blacks’ awareness of the temporality of their corporeal pain, the affective complexity of their faith amid diasporic mourning, and their uncanny relationship to an elusive black maternal. Too often the black mother becomes a cliché, a treacly source of solace, particularly in literature that attempts at interpolation and interpellation of the black experience to accommodate the fictions of the white American imagination. Because of *Arthur Mervyn*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Gone With the Wind*, *The Member of the Wedding*, *The Help*, and other novels, black mothers are loved, idolized even, for all the wrong reasons. Chiefly, narratives of this ilk posit them as mammies and one-dimensional surrogates of absolution and service for white liberals and the most hardened racists alike. Far too few read into black mothers’ prayers, coos, moans, and wails the sonic codes that have served as the foundation for the protest tradition since the advent of African American literature. *Quare Poetics* charges readers to contemplate African American protest literature through a natal lens that decodes the ways that the elegiac expressions of black mothers and their progeny convey how to thrive, though the constant peril hovering over black life feels at times too much to bear. Whereas Du Bois declared prophetically that the twentieth century would be consumed with “the problem of the color line” in *Souls* (1903), this dissertation reanimates the charge literary titan Toni Morrison gives in her lyric essay “Home,” published in the 1997 anthology *The House That Race Built*, for a shift in focus so that African Americans who make art and who study black poetics create from an intellectual

space that is free as possible of “the potency of racist constructs in language” (4) and “clear of racial detritus; a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent” (9).

This problem of the quare and the color line has haunted the colonies that would comprise the United States since the advent of chattel slavery in 1619 and race-based discrimination in the 1660s, especially in the wake of the 1676 Bacon’s Rebellion¹⁷. Until America clears its racial discourse of this false, hierarchical refuse, it will never be home or free, and certainly not the home *of* the free. In fact, Du Bois’s color line and double consciousness metaphors took the conversation only so far, for the polyvalence of the quare demonstrates that blackness—the most feared and abjected ontological state—is the home America cannot live without and loves to love—and hate. Home, quite simply then, is wherever blackness is free to define itself, sing of itself, love itself, rule itself—rather than simply be commodified and repurposed for consumption and entertainment. The nameless slave *kweer* and the original black mother exegetes of African American poetics, who had firsthand knowledge of home *before* chattel slavery, aimed from the outset to plot a linguistic, literary path back through the quare.

All Is Fair in War: When ‘Awful Creatures’ Show No Mercy—Save One White Boy

In the wake of chattel slavery, the quare begins to unfold in North America as generals of developed Western nations attempt to use those marked with blackness—including non-white actors who are conflated with blackness because of what Morrison calls an “Africanist presence”—as soldiers in their territorial wars. Of course, the quare—preternatural as it is and resident, if faintly, in all flesh marked black—intuits the subjectivities *before* the dominion of whiteness and embraces fugitivity in resistance to its nationalist agenda. This valence of the quare can be discerned in the earliest extant lyrical ballad in the slave *kweer* canon and in African American literature, which offers a stark chronicle of indigenous peoples being fugitive

(read: black; read: quare) and mercilessly murderous. In *The Black Aesthetic Unbound: Theorizing the Dilemma of Eighteenth-Century African American Literature*, Langley charges scholars to re-examine this ballad and its composer, Terry Prince, through this project's prism of protest. Langley underscores that "the Puritan-based ideologies of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century captivity narratives of conversion are conspicuously absent" from Terry Prince's "Bars Fight" (157). However, before I begin a closer study of the poem, I will share its 28 lines in full:

August 'twas the twenty-fifth,
Seventeen hundred forty-six;
The Indians did in ambush lay,
Some very valiant men to slay,
The names of whom I'll not leave out.
Samuel Allen like a hero fout,
And though he was so brave and bold,
His face no more shalt we behold.
Eteazer Hawks was killed outright,
Before he had time to fight,—
Before he did the Indians see,
Was shot and killed immediately.
Oliver Amsden he was slain,
Which caused his friends much grief and pain.
Simeon Amsden they found dead,
Not many rods distant from his head.
Adonijah Gillett we do hear
Did lose his life which was so dear.
John Sadler fled across the water,
And thus escaped the dreadful slaughter.
Eunice Allen see the Indians coming,
And hopes to save herself by running,
And had not her petticoats stopped her,
The awful creatures had not catched her,
Nor tommy hawked her on the head,
And left her on the ground for dead.
Young Samuel Allen, Oh lack-a-day!
Was taken and carried to Canada.

Although Terry Prince's rhyming couplets certainly are devoid of conventional lyricism and narrative piety, the ballad's historical account offers telling insights on the politics of the day,

and its resonance with Terry Prince's audience is evidenced in its critical reception and publication in 1855, nearly a century after she first performed it and nearly 30 years after her death. The ballad documents the vulnerabilities of European Americans' fledgling pseudo-nation-state as she underscores the porosity of the borders of what would become the United States, pointing the African American imagination to Canada, which Toronto-based scholar Rinaldo Walcott calls "the most queer of diaspora spaces" ("Outside in Black Studies" 92).¹⁸

"Bars Fight," ostensibly the first blues ballad, also introduces two aspects of the quare in the African American elegaic tradition at once. The first is the infectious cadence of blacks' lyricism in song, which Houston Baker, in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984), characterizes as the mystery of "black rhythm." Simultaneously, "Bars Fight" captures the power of the black womanist's voice to affirm Puritans' sense of moral superiority in the wake of a white family's massacre *and* show non-white warriors' simultaneous capacity for unflinching brutality and extreme empathy. In *Mr. and Mrs. Prince: How An Extraordinary Eighteenth-Century Family Moved Out of Slavery and Into Legend* (2008), biographer Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina writes that before marrying Abijah Prince and moving to Vermont, Terry Prince was a popular balladeer, poet, and tavern maiden in Deerfield, Massachusetts, where enslaved blacks had greater-than-usual agency others in other Northern and Southern spaces. Terry Prince's account of indigenous Canadian Abenakis' killing of six members of two Deerfield families on Aug. 25, 1746, following the orders of their French commanders, is, of course, secondhand. Her original lyrics cannot be known; what we have in the 1855 publication of "Bars Fight" is that which was remixed in the white imagination for more than a century.

Any critique of the ballad's quality is as much a critique of the appropriation of black performance as it is of the depth or power of the original performance itself. In truth, the "very

valiant men” Terry Prince extols in line 4 had no fighting chance on that Deerfield lea; thus, there lies in the ballad’s title alone an obvious and desperate need for whites to endow themselves with agency over their fate, even when there clearly is none. In addition, what is unmistakable is that Terry Prince’s voice and words were so powerful and indelible that their haunting resonance lived on in cultural memory and were passed down through two generations as a folk standard. However, what has gone too long unnoted about “Bars Fight”—given its prominence in concurrent Negro Spirituals and in succeeding works by black male and female writers—is its counter-gaze on the vulnerability of white flesh as narratives of the trans-Atlantic colonialist project and white supremacy proliferate. Terry Prince’s rare perspective on race and racism as they are being invented, much like the ones Morrison fictionalizes in her 2008 novel, *A Mercy*, makes all the more clear the complex subject positions of all bodies in early America.

Blending the American documentarian-journalist impulse with the African griot storytelling tradition into which she was born in her native Guinea, Terry Prince is, of course, absent from the poem’s narrative itself. Yet, her very absence has a palpable presence. Through the omniscient third person point of view her ballad uses, she is given the freedom to be the primary mythical voice carrying the multicultural, multiracial memory of a major event in the Canadian-French/British-American wars for colonized, not-yet-American soil. She is without question the first superstar soloist in the slave *kweer* tradition. She clearly comforts a community upended by trauma in “Bars Fight,” calling each victim’s name so that his or her suffering is not forgotten. Her insistence upon calling attention to each individual in line 5 implicitly acknowledges their suffering and the pain each of their loved ones will endure. This choice contrasts the ironic ubiquity and impersonality of white male patriarchy and violence that Terry Prince has witnessed on her trans-Atlantic journey from West Africa to the land that will become

the United States of America. She knows the confusion of being forced to answer to a name in this new space that her mother and father did not give her, the pain of that original name being forgotten, the trauma of being forced to sublimate the residue of loss to accommodate others' comfort. Here, in this moment and throughout the remainder of Terry Prince's ballad, the Europeans who she no doubt witnessed abusing people who looked like her. The sole adjectival attributes that will forever be sung about the white men associated with this "tragic" moment in not-yet-American history is that they were "valiant" (line 4); the only indictment of the Natives will be that of calling them "awful creatures" (line 24). On the face, those seem fairly kind to the white men and judgmental of the indigenous ones. However, Terry Prince neither must state the implicit ironies of the Indians being used as stand-ins for French-Canadian whites' violence against British-American whites nor shout about the violent perils of which she cannot speak. Her embodiment in song—lost to history, effigized until now—represents the vulnerabilities her own black female flesh may suffer at any moment at the hands of the surviving "valiant" white men who need bodies to angrily abuse as vengeance for the loss of their slain brethren and sons. Lastly, Terry Prince's is the first black voice that situates Canada as a strange, daresay quare, space, free of colonial violence. It is to Canada that eight-year-old Sam Allen is taken, and it is there that he is reported to have implored to remain once his family's sentries found him living happily among the Abenakis. Terry Prince knows the irony of this account of a white boy of presumed sound mind finding in a matter of months more joy in Canada than he had known in Massachusetts among the family into which he was born. Her poem's final lines, then, tacitly raise the question: Why would little Sam beg to live among such "awful creatures"?

In her journey from Guinea to Barbados to Massachusetts, Terry Prince has learned intimately what trauma does to make one complicit to the will of perpetrators of violence and/or

that one might find among alleged enemies friends who are more like family members than those to whom you are linked by blood. Moreover, in her song, Terry Prince makes sure no one forgets these complex possibilities, that they coexist with an on-the-face simplicity and that they swing in a pendulum on the “black rhythm” of her black female voice and flesh. Here, in the closing couplet, then, Terry Prince gives her audience—one might call them her surrogate children, white and non-white alike, in the moments of her performance of the ballad—much to comfort and discomfort their notions of all subject/non-subject positions in what scholars now call Empire. What/who is white(ness)? she asks. Black(ness)? What of the indigenous/“red” in this menagerie of violence? What of the mixtures in-between in mind and flesh and, most of all, in myth and (re)imagination? Why does God, as Matthew 5:45 says, “rain (violence) on the just and the unjust”? “What if the theater of refusal”—Moten writes in *Black and Blur: consent not to be a single being* (2017), gesturing to Charles Gaines’s 1993 text of the same title—“were ours, for us, whoever and whatever ~~we are~~. [his strikethrough] ... In our inhabitation and recitation of those questions”—mine explicit, Terry Prince’s implicit, if overlooked, misappropriated, and effigized after her performance—“we are constrained to imagine, having already enacted, a theater of refusal [Moten notes in a postscript nod to Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and, I’d argue here, Terry Prince], a theater of refuse [white colonists, for the Abenakis and Prince], a theater of refuse [Abenakis, Prince, et al., for white colonists], a theater of refused [you, ~~white~~ reader], a theater of the refusal of what has been refused [an embrace of ~~blackness~~ the quare], a theater of the left over [272 years of quare song], a theater of the left behind [all they chirren’s chilluns’s children’s children’s kids black&brown&red&yellow&white&atalltimesblue], a theater of the left [all they bones everywhere, under your fingers, under your feet], a theater of the (out and gone” (257).

Deepening this dissertation's interest in the ways Terry Prince's life personifies African American liminality as a square space is scholar Lois Brown's reclamation of the literary forebear's obituary. In "Memorial Narratives of African Women in Antebellum New England," Brown's 2003 essay in *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, she finds an anonymously written poetic elegy embedded in the documentation of Terry Prince's death on July 11, 1821, somewhere between age 91 and 97. Its taut syntactical energy mirrors that which one finds in "Bars Fight," though it gives voice to the triumph over Euro-American patriarchy that Terry Prince's life—from unknown African subjectivity to circum-Atlantic chattel to largest African American landowner in Vermont—such that it makes one wonder if Terry Prince might have written its indictment of slavery herself.

I render it in full here:

And shall proud tyrants boast with brazen face,
 Of birth—of genius, over Afric's race:
 Go to the tomb where lies their matron's dust,
 And read the marble, faithful to its trust.
 Their sable mother took her rapt'rous flight.
 High orb'd amidst the realms of endless light:
 The haughty boaster sinks beneath her feet,
 Where vaunting tyrants & oppressors meet.

Terry Prince's "Bars Fight" had exposed the consequences awaiting "proud ... vaunting tyrants" and "oppressors" (lines 1 and 8) in colonial America in the face of fugitive, renegade blackness. In her song, amid the throes of war, she had shown that no one is exempt from casualties and that indigenous people and Africans alike are no less capable of violence than the colonialists aiming to claim their homeland for themselves. Fear the non-white actors' ability to do harm indeed, she had sung, for they do not honor allegiances beyond those that will sustain their autonomy. They will show no mercy; for all is fair in war. This poem embedded in Terry Prince's obituary reflects, then, that in the 75 years between the Deerfield massacre and her death, such a tectonic

shift had occurred in public discourse that her ironic juxtapositions had paved the way for the more bold, anti-slavery messages embedded in the first poetry collection by an African American. With her posthumous song of herself, she honored the little sister who had done what she could not: published a full-length poetry collection at such a young age. Her posthumous lyrics honored herself, her sister, and all survivors of the chattel system, giving one-time victims the last words of glory: *sable* and *Afric's race*, nods to what this first collection rooted in the square had accomplished. That landmark collection, in turn, would contain honorifics apt for Terry Prince. From the lips of the younger poet who had succeeded her to make history had sprung the phrases *Afric's race* and—of course—*sable*. With her ballad, Terry Prince, who had been orphaned by the chattel system and raised her own six children, had become the “sable mother” of African American literature, a title she would share with another African genius, one who would address boldly Western Christendom and expose the mendacity of its dogma.

From Her Bully Pulpit of the Page, An African Prodigy Redefines Mercy

Despite the evidence to the contrary, little discourse has placed Phillis Wheatley Peters in her rightful place as one of the first African American women exegetes. In fact, for at least the past quarter-century, Jarena Lee and Maria W. Stewart, born free, respectively, in New Jersey and Connecticut, have been regarded as African American women pioneers in the preaching of the Gospel. Religion scholars Chanta Haywood, Marilyn C. Richardson, and Valerie C. Cooper¹⁹ have made compelling cases for the pair as exegetes whose narratives of conversion and inculcation into American Puritanism inspired other African Americans to join them in their faith. After becoming the first woman of color ordained to preach by the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1819, Lee's itinerant life led her in one year alone to travel 2,325 miles to deliver 178 sermons, according to her account in her *Religious Experience and*

Journal, which she began in 1783, published in 1836, and expanded in 1839 and 1849 re-printings. Stewart, orphaned by age 5 and a longtime domestic, began in 1831 delivering sermons before the first “promiscuous” audiences, the day’s term for those mixed with African- and European-American men and women. Her public career ended abruptly in 1833 after she scolded African American men at Boston’s African Masonic Lodge:

It must have been the want of ambition and force that has given the whites occasion to say, that our natural abilities are not as good, and our capacities by nature inferior to theirs. ... Talk, without effort, is nothing. You are abundantly capable, gentlemen, of making yourselves men of distinction; and this gross neglect, on your part, causes my blood to boil within me. Here is the grand cause which hinders the rise of the people of color. It is their want of laudable ambition and requisite courage. (14)

This kind of bold critique cost Stewart her place at the dais and required that Lee, who also was known for passionate, incisive effusions, to rove the country for welcoming pulpits. The fervor that drove these African American women to become witnesses, however, springs from a well that preceded their ancestors’ arrival on American soil. It was palpable in print at least a decade before Lee began keeping her journal in the Senegambia-born slave prodigy’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*.

Before Equiano, Walker, Douglass, Du Bois, and other men, Wheatley Peters set the tone for subversive, woman-centered protest vis-à-vis her foregrounding the haunting pain and transformative power of the black maternal voice as she affirmed her native land’s life-giving soil and reflected on her mother’s devotional time. All the more awe-inspiring is that this orphaned child made known her grievances alongside subtle, exegetical interventions in the Calvinism and Puritanism into which she was indoctrinated *while* simultaneously comforting European-American immigrants mourning their children’s deaths. Coupled with aligning her mother’s Islamic faith praxis with the West’s Christianity, Wheatley Peters’s phenomenological interdictions in *Poems on Various Subjects* underscore the role of the black maternal as a

generative bridge between sociocultural divides created by varied religious ideologies. With a frame that takes into account evidence in “To Mæcenās” that Wheatley Peters traces her artistic kinship to African writers and visual artists, I focus primarily on italicizations in Wheatley Peters’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” that underscore linguistic choices central to her foundational protest against to white supremacist views about blackness/the quare.

This chapter’s close readings—and *Quare Poetics* as a whole—aim to empower scholars to trace subversive dissent in African American literature back to its advent in ways that deepen our understanding of poststructuralist discourse on black consciousness and black performativity. To date, there has not been a full historicization of the African American elegiac tradition from its inception. In *American Elegy* (2007), the definitive essay collection examining the genre through the nineteenth century, Cavitch rightly notes that Wheatley Peters, the first African American to publish a book of poetry, initiates a “countertradition in U.S. literature” with *Poems on Various Subjects* (53). In the sole chapter Cavitch dedicates to African American writers, he theorizes that the poetry of Wheatley Peters, George Moses Horton, and other slaves in the not-yet United States—who are writing into and out of the masculinist conventions of the elegy, one of the oldest literary forms—challenge the ideals of freedom colonialists claimed to espouse. Cavitch continues the conversation begun by Ramizani in his 1994 text, *Poetry of Mourning*, the only other major book-length collection that engages the African American poetic elegy. Ramizani, like Cavitch, devotes only one chapter to a larger study on the modern American elegy, highlighting in later chapters only two black men, Langston Hughes and Michael S. Harper, as innovators of the form. In the earlier chapter on the foundational role of Wheatley Peters in the American and African American elegiac traditions, Ramizani brackets the African American elegy in ironic quotations as “a contradiction in terms or a redundancy” to the

unsophisticated eye (134). Noting the “politically coded” verse of Wheatley Peters, whom he aptly calls “the mother of the African-American elegy,” Ramazani traces a traditional genealogy of black elegists “rema[king] the Eurocentric genre in their own image” (135-36). In addition, Ramazani ascribes African Americans’ reinvention of the elegy to a Freudian melancholia that he argues is transformed in the modern era by Hughes’s blues poems and Harper’s poems of paternal grieving. Both Cavitch and Ramazani have made critical interventions in scholarship on early American and modern American literatures, and they have been astute in acknowledging African Americans’ significant contributions to this ancient literary form.

Here, I aim to challenge significant aspects of the readings of African American elegists that Cavitch and Ramazani propose, which underscore the limitations on black artistic expression in the Americas, particularly in the slave era. From this vantage point, African American writers’ verse reaffirms a scholarly queering/Othering of their minds and bodies without examining the revolutionary protest that becomes apparent when one parses the quare subjectivities their imaginations devise. In fact, Cavitch only mentions evidence of protest in Wheatley Peters’s poetry in passing in his chapter “Mourning of the Disprized.” Wheatley Peters is simply a poet who seizes “a wealth of opportunities of surrogacy for the elegiac expression of the heritage of whites,” Cavitch opines, gesturing to Roach’s scholarship in *Cities of the Dead* (187). This analysis of Wheatley Peters’s poetry minimizes her subversive genius. I aim to recuperate and herald Wheatley Peters’s vision of a futurity in which liminality is not simply a space of interdicted subjectivity, as Cavitch posits it, but of self-ownership and self-actualization of one’s imagination, of the freedom one’s spirit and consciousness can attain through a quickening of a divine presence during an era in which one is aligned with the animal world. In considering how Wheatley Peters and other early African American women writers challenge patriarchal critiques

of their minds and the gaze on their black flesh, this chapter argues that early African American women elegists, in aligning themselves with the divine, defy racial and gender stereotypes. Thus, these readings add an important dimension to the conversation about the African American elegiac tradition that Ramazani and Cavitch have begun, dating to the haunting ballads of Terry Prince and the Negro Spirituals' harbingers to the present, tracing an uncharted link between studies of the quare and the "countertradition" that Cavitch names but does not fully probe.

In the past decade, McCulley and Carretta have brought Wheatley Peters's work into queer discourse more directly. In "Queering Phillis Wheatley," McCulley aptly rejects reading her poems as subservient odes to benevolent enslavers, their friends and loved ones but reifies her accepting a position as an "othered other" (*New Essays* 201). He acknowledges the performativity at work in the voice she presents in her book; yet, he reads her elegiac laments as earnest expressions of her limitations as a slave, missing their implicit ironies and satirical potential for her assumed role as an evangelical exegete. "To Mæcenæ," for example, introduces the ironic juxtapositions that satirize white evangelicals' sense of racial superiority. In this poem, Wheatley Peters not only posits herself as an intellectual, artistic peer (honoring patrons from the present day and distant past alongside Greco-Roman Muses, showing her agility with the rhyming couplet) but also flaunts her lineage as unapologetically African and equal under the auspices of the Christian God and the *accepted* pagan ones. With this poem and others in her only extant publication, Wheatley Peters also forces the non-black world to face its foundational lie: Black voices, minds and flesh, all marked by the aggrieved maternal, are more, not less, capable of making impactful art of language. Racist phenomenologies that assert the supremacy of white heterosexual male desire indict themselves with their myriad pocks. That often blackness is presented as an isolated monolith, an Other, a magical/exceptional Negro

“problem”—even by admirers like McCulley and Carretta, author of the definitive *Biography of a Genius in Bondage*—is a troubling notion that Wheatley Peters’s poetics flouts time and again.

Wheatley Peters single-handedly nullifies the now-infamous notions of blackness purported by Kant and others of the Enlightenment, situating people as a “sable race,” a point of pride rather than shame and akin to the most prized fur being traded at the time. In the fifth stanza of “To Maecenas,” Wheatley Peters invokes the venerable Carthaginian-Roman playwright Publius Terentius Afer, known in the canon as Terence, and aligns herself with a fellow African credited with writing the definitive early Latin translations of classic Greek plays. Their collective literary acumen, she implicitly states, calls into question the U.S. chattel slave system that attempts to reduce African American ontology to illiterate animality. In defining an Afro-diasporic imaginary that rejects subjugation to any other forces than those of the divine, Wheatley Peters points readers’ attention to the philosophies of African-Greco-Roman slavery that her and Terence’s respective masters seemingly to espouse. Like Terence, Wheatley Peters is afforded an education. She is not unlike Terry Prince; all of the slaves and ex-slaves in Terence’s plays, particularly Syrus in *Heauton Timorumenos* (*The Self-Tormentor*) and Parmeno in *Eunuchus* (*The Eunuch*); and all African diasporic writers who have succeeded them. Through the quare, they recur as literary tricksters challenging the absurdity and intractability of European American control in the face of prerequisite and precusory African subjectivity.

As African American writers have often done before white witnesses, Wheatley Peters frames herself not only as an interlocutor for black slaves in America but also for white Americans fashioning a national identity separate from their British (and otherwise European) ones, the latter of which she bears out more fully in an elegy for a family friend, George Whitefield. In the process of identity translation and transformation, her use of heroic couplets

signals that she, in fact, has studied Dryden and Pope. However, she does as Lorde would instruct all writers invested in the quare; she circumvents the white patriarchal gaze on her verse by going metaphorically above these and other white men's heads in her collection's opening poem, "To Maecenas," seeking the blessing of African-Greco-Roman patrons of the arts as she challenges the Muses (and her critics) to reconsider the measure of "partial grace" (line 39) endowed to Terence's mind and flesh. Has not this grace been endowed to her as well? she asks the divine forces (along with, tacitly, her white readers and any black and otherwise Othered ones who, as Scripture says, "hath ears to hear"). Terence was first, she says in the sixth stanza, but she will prove herself worthy of their "paternal rays" and "propitious" favor.

Throughout *Poems on Various Subjects*, Wheatley Peters's elegies—for Whitefield, for an anonymous "young lady of five years of age," a "young gentleman," and others—position her as both comforter of those in mourning and prophet revising traditional Judeo-Christian rhetoric of heaven and the here-after. As with her use of "sable race" (line 5) in her most anthologized poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," and other phrases (such as "black as *Cain*," line 7, her italics), Wheatley Peters's linguistic play is often underscored by direct quotation and/or italicization. In "On the Death of Rev. Mr. George Whitefield," she inculcates "ye Africans" (line 35) like herself in that holy throng to whom an "Impartial Saviour's" (line 36) redemptive blood is available, thus deconstructing centuries-old notions of blackness as a "diabolic die" (line 6 of "On Being Brought"), a scourge, a curse. The irony of her concurrent state of material bondage and creative freedom in the generative moments that produce these poems is particularly compelling in "To S.M., a Young Painter, on Seeing His Works," her lyrical exhortation to black painter Scipio Moorhead, who gave us our only portrait of the poet. Her focus—to follow exhortations in Romans 12:15 "to mourn with those who mourn"—is a

“noble path” (line 7b), centered “on deathless glories” (line 8a). It is with this “ardent view” (line 8b) that they as black artists, she writes, can “conspire” (line 10b) a different vision of blackness and that she specifically can craft a “purer language” (line 32a) for African American ontology. Like Terry Prince—so eloquent that fictionalized speeches before the Supreme Court and Williams College admission board were mythologized until Gerzina’s biography disproved them despite no self-written account of travails her husband and children suffered in racist Massachusetts and Vermont—Wheatley Peters presents us with an irony we have yet to fully parse in African American literary criticism: her own tragic, untimely fate, a death at 31, a widowed and impoverished mother of three, unable to publish her second book, one that possibly explored the emotional terrain of her and her families’ post-emancipation suffering.

As had happened to less literate African-born slaves Mary Black and Candy during the 1692 Salem Witch scandal and so many others accused of crimes against white supremacy, Wheatley Peters was forced to defend her gifts in front of a room of eighteen elite white male citizens precisely because of the strange relationship between her race and literary production. Her poetics embodies a kind of protest birthed from her quare experience, and it is because of her formal education, ensuring that she is seen at least as equal to a white female subject of a new republic, that she prevails. In “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” her italicizations and capitalizations underscore the satire readers easily endow the minds of white men (Dryden, Pope, Milton, Shakespeare, etc.) who have used the rhyming couplet before her and since. Her satire’s evangelical ingenuity is no less obvious in the poem’s opening line, as Wheatley Peters lowercases *mercy* and capitalizes *Pagan*, reversing readers’ expectation that she give deference to that which is holy and denigrate that which is degenerate. Wheatley Peters knows that ships with such ironic names as Mercy, Esperanza, and the Good Ship Jesus dispersed Africans

throughout the Western diaspora and knows the ironic source of her own name. At the same time, she understands that the Christian God she has come to embrace in America is as integral to her literary success as the pagan gods who will be useful for her poem's arguments. (For example, Aurora recurs as a stand-in metaphor for both the mythological Greek goddess and symbolic reclamation of the Islamic practice she likely knew in her native Senegambia of praying at dusk and dawn in the direction of the sun. She references Aurora in many poems, often linking her to the mother she cannot name in the patriarchal society that governs her verse.) She is playing to her white audience of benefactors and fans, who are overwhelmingly Christian, and offering winks to those in her audience, then and now, who know the pagan pantheons she cannot openly name. In the closing lines of her most canonized poem, Wheatley Peters protests the degradation to which African Americans have been subjected by those whites professing faith-based values and, like Terry Prince, frames a reviled (black) person's violence under the auspices of the divine. "Some view our sable race with scornful eye, / 'Their colour is a diabolic die.' / Remember, *Christians, Negros*, black as *Cain*, / May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train" (lines 6-8). If Africans in the Americas must bear the phenotypic mark and curse of the Bible's first murderer, they must also carry his legacy. In God's punishment of Cain, he was forced to toil the earth where he had killed his brother, Abel; however, anyone who harmed Cain would be punished seven times more than he. Wheatley's invocation of Cain's legacy in the closing couplet not only states what is obvious—that all can be saved through Jesus Christ and have access to heaven—but also warns racist, abusive slaveholders that their mistreatment of other humans will escape God's retribution. Using capitalizations and italicizations exemplifying the quare, "On Being Brought from Africa to America" and other elegies in *Poems on Various Subjects* shape the protest tradition in African American literature.

The African American elegiac tradition's arc of protest began in a strange place, one ideal for the poetics of the quare to manifest. Terry Prince's ballad about a 1746 massacre in the rural Massachusetts meadow haunted white citizens for more than a century and finally was published in 1855, 34 years after she died. This arc evolved over the next half-century to include subtle, exegetical and sociopolitical critiques in the late eighteenth century through Negro Spirituals such as "Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child" and "Hush. Somebody's Calling My Name," which shifted the focus from African slaves as bystanders to victims whose families are irreparably damaged by chattel slavery and who have the Almighty God of the Jews on their side, too. The opaque arc came into fuller focus at its quarter mark as Wheatley Peters's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* expanded the exegetical interventions of the black female voice to challenge Calvinist Puritanism amid its Great Awakening into which they are inculcated, highlighting the divine's care for those the Christian Bible seems to mark as queer. In this way, this chapter has decoded the power that the black female voice has to preach a gospel of protest and liberation amid mourning all that chattel slavery and colonialism leave in their wake and to attenuate the virulence of the white supremacist gaze such that the sheer self-affirming power of an African diasporic consciousness can be mined.

While literary convention and societal constraints inspired in the slave *kweer* (including Terry Prince, Wheatley Peters, Horton, Equiano, and so many nameless Negro Spiritual balladeers) more subversive textual protest during their lives, the elegiac strains that shape the nineteenth-century black woman's voice defined a slave narrative tradition rooted in much more explicit protest, particularly as the arc inculcated the poetics of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who captures most palpably and memorably the intense interplay of feelings of loss and hope that black slave women knew intimately. Harper encodes protest in revisions of Bible stories

(“Ethiopia” and “Vashti”) and racist fictional ones (including “Eliza Harris,” a heartbreaking revision of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 account in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; “The Slave Mother, in which her mastery of iambic tetrameter renders the speaker’s pain inescapable; “Bury Me in a Free Land” and, most especially her “Aunt Chloe” poems). Because of what her foremothers Terry Prince and Wheatley Peters had done, Harper has the agency to move beyond the rhetoric undergirding the Back-to-Africa discourse of Martin Delany, President Abraham Lincoln, and others to imagine for African Americans and understanding of the complex global relations among people of color in nations in the Middle East and West Africa, their native lands. Throughout her oeuvre, Harper’s black women serve as poetic subjects, speakers, and fictional characters who exhibit an uncompromising sense of moral righteousness (particularly Iola Leroy, the titular protagonist of her 1892 novel, who refuses to pass as white and betray her black loved ones who cannot pass). With her “Aunt Chloe” series, emerging at the pinnacle of her decades-long career, Harper envisions equal rights for all American women in the not-too-distant future, a manifestation of the quare that is all the more powerful when one considers that it is portended through the mouth of one of its least regarded *kweer* members, the once-illiterate Chloe Fleet.

Aunt Chloe is, like Harper’s Eliza Harris, a revision of Stowe’s sentimental stereotype, a former slave who lives in the postbellum South with the complex choices that the chattel system has forced upon her life and body, which compromise her access to Victorian purity but not to American and Judeo-Christian citizenship and African American humanity, liminality and self-determination. Aunt Chloe is as much an embodiment of unabashed hope as she is what critic Rebecka Rutledge Fisher astutely frames as “a proxy of the absent slave” (60) and “an ontological operator whose poetic force comes via her verisimilitude, as a poetic instrument in the struggle for being on the biopolitical plane of slavery’s aftermath” (61).²⁰ Much like Terry

Prince and Wheatley Peters, Harper's poetics, particularly through the narratives of Eliza Harris, Vashti, and Chloe Fleet, deploys subversive protest that lies not only in the explicit critiques of white and black patriarchy they announce and enact, but also in the ways they exercise their right to remain silent about traumatic aspects of their lives that shape many black women's narratives, most famously Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and the fictional ones Stowe immortalizes.

As the nineteenth century comes to an end, African American writers, particularly women of the upper classes such as Harper, begin to question the strictures of what Deborah McDowell calls the "cult of true womanhood" and the heteronormative respectability that had been imposed upon them in the years of Reconstruction. In the social clubs of high society in New Orleans and Washington, D.C., some of these young artists began to explore their vast range of sexual desires without reservation, if discreetly. One such writer was Alice Ruth Moore, born to New Orleans mulattos and among a generation of children of the first post-slavery African American middle class who were able to find in the music of the alleyways, brothels, and juke joints a reprieve and a source of literary inspiration.

Chapter Two

PRIVILEGED CHILDREN SING THE AFROMODERN BLUES

“If one should be like me—absolutely devoid of the ability to manage dialect—I don’t see the necessity of cramming and forcing oneself into that plane because one is a Negro or a Southerner.”—Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar-Nelson, letter to Paul Laurence Dunbar

“The heavy fragrance of their crushed loveliness has always lived in my memory.”— Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar-Nelson, “Violets”

“I’ve got to get Cane planted, and sink deep into you before it can come off.”—Jean Toomer, letter to Waldo Frank

“Hi! Yip! God has left the Moses-people for the nigger.”—Jean Toomer, “Carma,” *Cane*

“The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.”—Ralph Ellison, “Richard Wright’s Blues,” *The Antioch Review*

From the nation’s inception but to a greater extent in the wake of emancipation, a free black middle and upper class emerged that would distance itself from poor, uneducated blacks, who often were forced to live as low-wage, indentured servants in the South’s sharecropper system and the North’s burgeoning factory-based, assembly-line industries. They were educated, much like Wheatley Peters and Douglass, by liberal-minded whites outside traditional classrooms and then integrated the handful of forward-thinking universities that would admit them. Long before Alain LeRoy Locke would give himself and his peers the name that defined a generation’s literature in *The New Negro* (1925), a generation of writers emerged who found themselves capable of choosing *how* or *if* they would interrogate black identity and perform blackness on the page. Those who could benefit additionally from their lighter complexions would pass as white on the page and in their everyday lives. They dallied outside and around blackness and black life as a matter of occupational duty quite like the white man’s gaze did,

observing its follies, admiring its cultural wonder, riffing as they wished on its plaintive songs. In the Southern juke joints and Northern taverns and saloons alike, music steeped in the rhythms of the Spiritual began to give voice to the seamier side of life. No one had to be respectable anymore, folk on the streets knew; it certainly did not elide discrimination as Reconstruction gave sway to Jim Crow legislation that made America a neo-slave state. Two such writers, Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson and Jean Toomer, found in these poor blacks' music, the blues, a metaphorical language that expressed a complex blend of elegy and ribald humor, they could translate into a modernistic free verse that birthed a renaissance of African American literature around the United States.

Literary historians James Smethurst, Darlene Clark Hine, and John McCluskey Jr., have urged scholars to explore the urban spaces of New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and Chicago as ones that are as central to this renaissance of New Negro voices as Harlem, where the movement has long been situated beginning in the third decade of the last century. To this end, I examine how the children of the Reconstruction who are born into privilege and African American high society at once draw from—and distance themselves from—lower-class black life and how this “queer” gaze creates what would become the Afro-modern free verse aesthetic. My study begins in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first and second decades of the last century and the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar's widow, who had risen to high society but who harbored a deep-seated secret of domestic abuse and same-sex desire that manifests in multigeneric blues poems. The blues, a new phenomenon borne of the slave songs and ragtime that emerge from the Creole Dunbar Nelson's hometown, transplants to the Windy City as well.

The chapter ends by moving beyond the ongoing claims to and debate about Jean Toomer's identification with blackness and, taking him on his own terms as an “American,”

explores how the quare complicates the heterosexuality he affords his nameless speaker and the Southern black women who drive each of *Cane*'s three sections. As it examines the ways the complex subjectivities of Carma from the first section, characterized as so impenetrable and "mannish" by Toomer's omniscient narrator-speaker that she must die, this chapter also challenges Karen Jackson Ford's thesis in *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity* (2000) that *Cane* (its prose poetry and its lineated poems that carry the narrative forward from South to North and back again) is a *kweer* failure, a death of modern African American song. In *Queering the Color Line*, also published in 2000, Siobhan B. Somerville stands out among a select few who have challenged literary scholars and cultural theorists to examine *Cane* "through an expanded lens that allows us to see race, gender, and sexuality as mutually embedded categories" and to explore Toomer's "disidentification" with "Negro" identity and representation of black male and female sexuality and gender expression as an "articulation of resistance partly but not only [due] to a discourse of naturalized racial identity" (136). With intention, this study bridges the palpable divide in black studies between scholarship about writers whose works reify accepted signifiers of heteronormativity and those whose private sexual lives marks them and their works as "LGBTQIA." No longer should scholars play into the tradition of sexual identity politics in deciding whose work is queer. As the gaze of white male heteronormativity queers African Americans, all African American writing is quare in its declaration of independence from stereotype and illumination of blackness' multivalent ontologies and phenomenologies. This study is of particular importance in the underexplored field of African American poetics, where the reinvention of the elegy remains ripe for discoveries about the impact of blacks' experimentation on the American literary canon, and its genres and movements, writ large. As African American elegists shine concave and convex

mirrors on the white supremacist gaze that marks black flesh queer, they expose its assumptions of blacks' stasis and emotional legibility, its impositions of subhumanity and sexual, economic, and social disenfranchisement, and the resultant traumas. This chapter extends the conversation Somerville initiates, along with José Esteban Muñoz's readings of contemporary deployments of gender transgression in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). However, whereas Somerville and others analyze Toomer's masterwork for the ways it challenges representations of racial, ethnic, and national identities, this project focuses on the queer female sexuality *Cane* dramatizes and the ways Toomer's meta-narrative portends a gender-ambiguous futurity in postmodern African American poetics.

In the years following emancipation, some African Americans—particularly those afforded advanced education in preparatory secondary schools and the nascent “normal,” land-grant and agricultural colleges for the newly free as well as progressive predominantly white liberal arts institutions—began to have the leisure to not only document their survival of slavery and post-emancipation hardship in narratives but also to speak more freely about their lives of privilege, indulgence, and romance. In the first wave of migration from the Deep South to the North during Reconstruction, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and New York City became spaces where African American high societies could thrive within close proximity of areas of extreme poverty and squalor. Likewise, Boston and New Orleans had remained urban centers where longtime communities of free blacks had groomed a generation of cultured, well-to-do teachers and artists who deemed racial uplift as much a part of their livelihood and duty as cultivating aristocratic aspirations akin to those enjoyed by whites. Such middle- and upper-class circumstances produced the first African American celebrity poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, who pioneered blending traditional European poetic forms with a nascent art form of the fallen, the

poor, and the put-upon: the blues. Akin to more traditional forms such as the sonnet, this lyrical genre—rooted in the complex blend of the mournful pleas of Negro Spirituals and field hollers and the irreverent sensuality and lyricism of Romantic poetics—often conflates the sacred and the profane, humanizing an intangible, distant God and making a beloved larger-than-life-on-Earth. Oftentimes, the blues exploits the queer gaze by making blackness quare through satirical, over-the-top performances of stereotypes to expose their limitations. However, whites’ racism often causes them to miss the satire and engage only the humor that undergirds their false assumptions of blacks as “coons,” “Bucks,” “mammies,” “Jezebels,” “pickininnies,” and “Sambos,” leading to problematic attempts to imitate blackness. Minstrel shows in which whites cover their faces in burnt cork, greasepaint, or shoe polish and act out the stereotypes they hold dear—or reward and patronize black artists who do the same—became all the more ubiquitous throughout the nineteenth century, particularly as it gave way to the twentieth. Most critics have lauded Dunbar for crafting verse whose speakers “wear the mask” of dialect well to toe the line between stereotype and satire, between rendering authentic black experience and entertaining white folk with their beloved, if problematic, blackface effigies.

The most egregious of these blackface performance examples in American literature manifest in the works of the white stalwarts of modernism and impressionism. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Joseph Conrad’s 1914 novella that was first serialized in 1897 editions of *New Review*, grounds its ethos in the narrator’s envy and disdain for the humanitarian altruism that undergirds shipmates’ efforts to save a West Indian comrade dying of tuberculosis. When James Wait’s black flesh is discarded overboard like spoiled cargo, it is clear that he is an inanimate effigy for Conrad in service of his racist narrative. Similarly, in “The Man Who Became a Woman,” a short story from the collection *Horses and Men* (1923) full of heterosexism and

zoomorphic schizophrenia, Sherwood Anderson bandies about some of the most racist inanimate effigies of the black male phallus and coitus in print, which Anderson and his narrator can only experience through fashioning a rape fantasy. Even efforts to appropriate and fuse the gifts of the black *kweer* into modern art—as Carl Sandburg does with his mammy poems in the Pulitzer-winning *Cornhuskers* (1918) and as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot do with ragtime and blues lyrics in *The Waste Land* (1922)—result in bastardization of these musical art forms that evolved from the Negro Spiritual and that foreground the black maternal voice. For most racist literature, however, blackness is a backdrop of antithesis. For example, Marianne Moore’s oft-lauded meditation on the humanity of the animal world, “Black Earth,” also published in 1918, ultimately unfolds as an assemblage of white American fantasies about an African safari-like experience. Its hippopotamus, alligator, and elephant become human-like (“Black / but beautiful,” in fact, Moore writes in lines 25 and 26, invoking the biblical Solomon’s vision of himself through King James’s scribes’ revisionary eyes). In the same way, the African animals she subtly attempts to honor in the poem are fashioned with strong backs “full of the history of power” (line 27). Moore confers this power without critiquing her own privilege to try on black/animal skin for art’s sake. Similarly, Wallace Stevens’s “Like Decorations of a Nigger Cemetery,”²¹ the 50-part centerpiece poem in his *Ideas of Order* (1935), reflects his and contemporaneous poets’ racist gaze and resentment, equivocating his distrust for industrial progress with the suffering of poor African Americans in South Florida. Stevens’s poem takes what he might consider inspiration from the piecemeal gravesite tributes that he encounters while on vacation in order to satirize the ways industrialization offends the wealthy executive’s New England, naturalist sensibilities. In the poem, Stevens neither acknowledges the enviable pride and dignity of poor blacks’ piecemeal mourning rites nor the ways their expressions of their own

agency move him to rail against the powerlessness he feels as the world he knows changes before his eyes. His sole acknowledgement is his use of the titular phrase (“nigger cemetery”) that he attributes to his friend, Judge Arthur Powell, in dedicating the poem to him. Besides “Like Decorations,” first published in February 1935 in *Poetry* magazine, many poems in *Ideas*, especially “Nudity in the Colonies” and “Nudity in the Capital,” similarly lack the interrogation of the racist gaze, though some scholars²² have generously cited evidence of Stevens’s self-reflection. What remains clear is that Stevens’s poems—and the ironic, racist imagery in the works of other literary icons—remain requisite inanimate effigies of blackness/the quare.

A Down-Low Lowdown Blues: A Rape and Domestic Abuse Survivor Sings of Same-Sex Desire, Uproots Gender Twice with ‘Violets’

In 1895, the poet, journalist, fiction writer, educator, activist, diarist, and bisexual society woman who would become Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson was still 20-year-old Alice Ruth Moore of New Orleans, not yet Mrs. Paul Laurence Dunbar or Mrs. Henry Arthur Callis, MD, not Mrs. Robert Nelson, the wife of another poet and fellow activist. The fair-skinned, illegitimate child of former slaves had risen to middle class and was a public school teacher living on her own means and terms in her hometown, sharing her first book, dedicated mysteriously to a gender-ambiguous “friend of November 5, 1892.” Was this book a protracted love letter to a one-night stand for a woman barely out of her teens? Readers would have to parse carefully inside the pages of the multigeneric *Violets and Other Tales* to come to their own conclusions, and even then they may wonder. It is certain that young Alice Ruth Moore knew her beauty extended beyond her striking, almost-white mien to what she could put onto paper and share with anyone who would read and see. She also knew intimately the choices that women like her had to make to survive and have some “status” and made art of them in the title piece from her 1895 debut

collection and an early modernist sonnet, a meta-poem of the same title. These pieces, first published in 1895 and 1917, bookend what I see as a longer arc for the New Negro Renaissance era than anthologists acknowledge. Moore Dunbar-Nelson revisits and deepens her meditations on loving in the world in-between before there was a palpable language for it. Flora at their perennial peak—specifically violets, these ironic symbols of chastity and marriage—ground her poetics. “Richard Wright’s Blues,” Ralph Ellison’s appraisal of *Black Boy* in the Summer 1945 edition of *The Antioch Review*, could easily be used to assess Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s work.

Ellison writes:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. (*The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* 129)

Thus, I read these poems as blues poetry, as what scholar Houston Baker calls, in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, “a code radically conditioning Afro-America’s cultural signifying,” a “synthesis” of “work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor, elegiac lament, and much more” (5). I’m interested in the “much more” that has not yet been inculcated into our understanding of the blues, which Baker and I agree have “always ... been in motion in America—always becoming, shaping, transforming, displacing the peculiar experiences of Africans in the New World” (5). In Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s 1895 prose poem, the “much more” consists of her choice to sublimate maternity and challenge what it means to be “wife,” expanding what we know of as the blues.

Moore Dunbar-Nelson did not see the need to perform her blues as her first husband, the first black male celebrity poet, did, writing to him in a May 1895 letter early in their friendship:

You ask my opinion about the Negro dialect in literature? Well, frankly, I believe in everyone following his own bent. If it be so that one has a special aptitude for dialect work why it is only right that dialect work should be a specialty. But if one should be like me—absolutely devoid of the ability to manage dialect—I don't see the necessity of cramming and forcing oneself into that plane because one is a Negro or a Southerner. (*Scribbling Women and the Short Story Form* 88).

But the blues drives her “Violets” from its haunting opening incantation to its tragic ending line. The poetics in Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s 1895 titular imagined narrative, now canonized as flash fiction, explores in three parts the interactions of three characters: one known simply as “She,” who is rapt in the memory of intimacies with a lover, detailed in a letter resting near her on a table; a dead woman in a casket a year later in the second section, likely the “She” of the first section; and the dialogue between a man and a “regal-looking” woman, also simply “She,” whom he claims as “Wife” in the final section and who, I argue, is the mourning lover and recipient of the dead woman’s epistle and a bouquet of flowers. Within the music of the repetition and overlay of images, symbols, and metaphors in “Violets,” the first piece in Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s multigeneric collection, is the pulse of the blues, a force rooted *not* in stereotypical vernacular speech and cadence but in Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s own torquing of classical forms of storytelling. This blues energy emerges from what Ellison calls, in *Shadow and Act*, an “authority out of obscurity” (26), the liminal space of the bisexual black woman born out of wedlock, whose family rose to the upper crust of black America, with all of the blessings and burdens of such an elevated station. “And she tied a bunch of violets with a tress of her pretty brown hair,” “Violets” begins, immediately dislocating the reader. Who is speaking? we wonder. And to whom? To us? Instead of a direct answer, the third-person narrator plays the dual role of poetic speaker. We learn that She, haloed as it were on a hallowed day, Easter, hums these words to herself. We are given access, then, to a private moment of introspection. She is not singing of the risen Savior, however, as She has done throughout that day. Rather, much like

the “newly risen” season bursting into being outside her room, She is “slowly sinking to a gentle, rosy, opalescent slumber,” and she, too, is “sweetly tired of the joy” imposed upon it on this resurrection Sunday (920). The performance of joy here sets in motion Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s engagement with the blues. Joy, for black folk, is always fraught, interdicted, temporal, and for this She—who is never explicitly called a black woman, whose hair color might even have some argue she is “raceless” at best—has finally come to her own sacred space of self-defined domesticity, where she can be done with the airs of “glorious happiness to greet the Savior ... hallelujahs, merrily trilling out carols of bird, and organ and flower-song” (920). Here, she can rest and effuse of her love in a letter.

Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s choice of an epistle in her debut collection puts her in conversation with the birth of the American novel itself. In Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela; Or Virtue Revisited*, the first canonized American novel, a survivor of attempted rape marries her almost-rapist and somehow strangely lives happily ever, deciding to help him raise an illegitimate child born to another girl he successfully “seduced” who ironically is enjoying wedded bliss in Jamaica. In harking back to that form of fiction birthed in 1740, Moore Dunbar-Nelson stakes claim on the tradition and tacitly makes clear how she is going to disrupt the way that marriage has been romanticized—to women’s detriment—in American tales. As Eleanor Alexander’s *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship and Marriage of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore: A History of Love and Violence Among the African American Elite* (2002) makes clear, she, too, is a true blues woman and survivor of rape and severe beatings by Dunbar, an alcoholic and possibly what we would now call bipolar. The sexual assault, so brutal it took Alice months to heal and may be implicated in her never carrying a child to term, sullied her by the day’s standards, which blamed victims for their assaults. Thus,

she became the prize of the dark-skinned, insecure poet's effort to fashion a Victorian marriage. When they wed in 1898, Dunbar aimed to make the fair Moore Dunbar-Nelson legitimize him in a loosely integrated society where colorism reigned supreme. Domestic violence continued for the next four years until she had the courage to leave him. In her *New York Times* review of Alexander's book, historian Paula Giddings sums up the end of Dunbar and Moore Dunbar-Nelson's marriage succinctly: "In January 1902, four years before his death at the age of 34, he beat Alice within an inch of her life. She left him and, ignoring his ardent entreaties for reconciliation, never saw him again." It is no wonder, then, that as Mrs. Dunbar, Alice would seek the Victorian love and confidence she did not find in her husband in middle- and upper-class women like herself who, no doubt, understood the scars of abuse she had to keep secret and that such forbidden love would serve as the overarching theme of her quare poetics.

Moore Dunbar-Nelson's transformation of her suffering into blues is most affecting in her two "Violets." In the 1895 prose poem-as-letter, central subject/protagonist She, addresses a Dear to whom she is sending "my Easter token," a bouquet of violets, orange blossoms, a pink flower, and tuberose (921). As she continues her tale, Moore Dunbar-Nelson lets her character She explain the symbolism of each flower: that violets are "human-faced things" and thus her "favorite flowers" because they "whisper a love-word" and "signify that thought which passes between you and me"; that "pink flowers," which could be anything from roses to peonies to hyacinths, also symbols of love and passion, are included because they are Dear's favorites; that "orange blossoms," which are the symbols for some of chastity and marriage but also are no doubt included because their perfume is a known aphrodisiac; and that tube-roses have a special meaning for She and this Dear lover (921). Not only is their perfume also a known aphrodisiac but also they are linked to intimate kisses and intense embraces shared between them in moments

of erotic pleasure. She recalls having them in her bosom and that “the heavy fragrance of their crushed loveliness has always lived in my memory” (921). Moore Dunbar Nelson’s choice of tuberose is significant, too, because they were at this time common symbols in stories for the funereal. In this way, the poet’s elegy foreshadows through She’s narration that mourning is soon to come with dawn of a new day without the lover. She, then, next reveals wearing the bouquet’s violets and pink flowers to church that day as She kneeled at the altar during holy communion, thinking of Dear. “Did I sin, dear?” She asks in the letter, confessing that the orange blossoms and tuberoses were from a recent Friday night rendezvous, that She is including a lock of hair and the “pale blue” ribbon from the dress of the same hue with “soft ruffles away from the throat and bosom” (921).

She reminds Dear that she had worn in the dress the winter preceding this spring at a dance where the lovers stole away for “long, sweet talk,” and in this moment, Moore Dunbar-Nelson begins to give readers clues that this may be a same-sex relationship between women who are already spoken for by men and who cannot be together (922). That likelihood becomes more a certainty, for me as a reader at least, when She next reveals that the lovers’ favorite book is that of Lord Byron, whose poems of adventure and wanderlust in *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and storied womanizing belie his alleged affair with a 14-year-old boy Nicolò Giraud, who would teach him Italian and inspire later installments of those long narratives. Byron was known for unapologetic passion in his love affairs; now, She and Dear can enjoy their own. She ends her letter with a charge to Dear to hold these symbols close to her lips so that “I will be with you in spirit, permeating your heart with unutterable love and happiness” (922). In writing this letter, as in any blues song, Moore Dunbar-Nelson lets She say what she cannot in her own life about desires beyond the bounds of marriage.

In the second section, Moore Dunbar-Nelson's omniscient narrator-speaker reveals that it is a year since the letter was dispatched, and Section 1's She is dead. Yet, Easter bells "clang out the glad news of the resurrection," while "sunbeams laugh riotously in field and street; birds carol their sweet twitterings everywhere, and the heavy perfume of flowers scents the golden atmosphere" (920). All of the flora of the first section recur here as this blues song, where the same She would wrote so intensely lies "cold, pale, still," her "fair young face pressed against the satin-lined casket," haloed again by sunlight her body "banked" in violets, tuberose, orange blossoms. The cause of death: "a broken heart had ceased to flutter in [her] still, young form" (921). Moore Dunbar-Nelson asks readers to imagine as She "kneels at the throne of heaven" (921). The final section cements that this narrative is a tragic blues song of forbidden love. The aforementioned "regal woman" sits away from her husband "in a distant city." She looks at him askance as he "carelessly" sorts through "some papers" and happens upon "a faded bunch of flowers tied with a blue ribbon and lock of hair." Stunned by the unfamiliar objects, he turns to an object he thinks he knows and can quickly claim. "Wife," he says. At this moment in her story, Moore Dunbar-Nelson shows that the word has no resonance as affectionate and, in fact, sounds like a curse at best. "Did you ever send me these?" (921). Barely able to speak through her grief, she "raise[s] her great, black eyes to his" and mutters, "You know very well I can't bear flowers. How could I ever send such sentimental trash to any one? Throw them into the fire" (921). This queen-like lady is so wracked with grief that she cannot bear the memory of the fragrance that these symbols of lost love emanate. The last sentence complicates my reading, for it implies that it is the husband who is performing ignorance of flowers that *he* was sent by a lover. "Was it mere fancy on the wife's part, or did the husband really sigh, [sic]—a long, quivering breath of remembrance?" Moore Dunbar-Nelson writes. However, I read coda as the

mourning woman's momentary contemplation of her husband possibly being able to understand what *she* has lost, that he, too, may have lovers of his own in their marriage of convenience. Either reading doesn't take away from the hum of the quare, of forbidden love that drives the narrative to its tragic end. Moore Dunbar-Nelson dares in "Violets" to write through the sundry complexities of blacks' declaration of agency in the Reconstruction era. She was speaking for those willing to enjoy transgressive intimacies and love wherever they fell on the spectrum of sexual desire, with whomever they chose in defiance of the norms of heterosexual marriage. Linking the holiest of holy days, Easter, is the most deliciously quare choice of all. Ultimately, "Violets," a 1895 blues ballad in prose, haunts us with its gender-blending mysteries.

By 1922, when a sonnet with the same title was anthologized in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Dunbar-Nelson's verse remained haunted by the abuse of her youth. In the wake of Dunbar's death in 1906, she had married Callis, a man twelve years her junior, in 1910 in secret, only to divorce him shortly thereafter for reasons lost to history. Some have speculated, however, that their issues may have been akin to those linked to Dunbar's abuse: Her Howard University physician-husband did not approve of her unapologetic affairs with other society women. In 1917, five years before it was anthologized, this sonnet "Violets" had been published in *The Crisis*. It was the same year she became Mrs. Robert Nelson, the wife of a fellow poet and activist, to whom she remained married until her death in 1935 at age 60. Well into her 40s, her beauty had begun to fade, and the lies of upper-middle class privilege were weighing on her. Thus, this Shakespearean sonnet's blues feels almost like a dirge, its tragedy muted, made tragicomic by the ironies of its imagery. Throughout the poem, Moore Dunbar-Nelson's 14 end rhymes are pretty standard fare on the surface: "late / feet / mate / sweet / shops / fine / fops / wine / strayed / streams / made / dreams / dream / gleam." But a closer look at what lies between

reveals her self-deprecating humor as she reflects on her life. The access we now have to her diaries because of the work of Gloria T. Hull makes our capacity for inference possible. In the first three lines, Moore Dunbar-Nelson's speaker, so close to her own voice that heretofore I will not make a distinction between them, confesses that she has forgotten about her one-time obsession with violets. Just as Moore Dunbar-Nelson is said to have given violets to her first husband during their courtship, one of her female characters in her 1895 fictional sketch gives a bouquet of violets to her lover a year before her own death.

Moore Dunbar-Nelson likely surmises that her readers know that these symbols of mourning were at the center of the title piece from her literary debut. Having spent much of the past two decades as a anti-lynching journalist and educator, she is keen to turn our attention to the "wild, shy" days of April in which the flowers "spring beneath your feet" and in which "lovers mate" (lines 2, 3b). As she jogs her own memory of her youthful creativity and the sexuality she enjoyed in it, she invites readers to do the same kind of reflection to recall, she writes in line 4, when they could "wander through the fields in raptures sweet." In lines 5-6, Moore Dunbar-Nelson indulges in recalling trips to "florist shops" to buy "bows and pins and perfumed paper fine," but in the succeeding two lines, she makes her signature shift to challenge ideas about gender performance. Rather than describing herself basking in her own feminine wiles, she invokes "garish lights" and "mincing little fops" as they frolic in cabarets and get drunk on "deadening wine" (lines 7, 8b). Here, Moore Dunbar-Nelson lets readers into the sexual counterculture that she likely experienced in the New York and D.C. of her youth, which would soon begin to flourish all the more as brazenly bisexual blues women (most famously, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters) hung out with dandies, queer men who obsess over their appearance, clothing, and carriage as much as or more than their cisgender kin. These are

the “sweet real things” from which Moore Dunbar-Nelson reveals in line 9 “my thought had strayed.” She has accepted her station as the wife of a respectable civil rights activist in Wilmington, Delaware, and thus given up “wild fields” and “clear brown streams” (line 10). In the final four lines, Moore Dunbar-Nelson calls for a religious intervention in her poetics, much like many blues songs do, offering this vision of black love and expression outside norms as, in line 11, “the perfect loveliness that God has made.” There is no shame here, only the regret of what has been given up: “wild violets shy and heaven-mounting dreams” (line 12). In line 13, a mysterious “you” is addressed, no doubt a lover of her youth, possibly one of the many women with whom she has shared forbidden intimacies or a past self. But indulging herself, and we, her readers, in this quare blues dirge, it quickens—and makes all the more palpable—the loss for Moore Dunbar-Nelson of “my soul’s forgotten gleam” (line 14). Sadly, the despair Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s speaker conveys here speaks to the private pain she would document only in her diary. This “Violets” is among a host of unpublished works collated in the posthumous *Give Us This Day* (1985), all of which pulse with the quare and Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s blues.

Midwifing *Cane*: Gender/Genre Border Crossing and Quare Female Sexuality in ‘Carma’

Jean Toomer’s *Cane* remains one of the last century’s most enigmatic masterworks. In the past three decades, critics have probed auto/biography, psychoanalysis, sociopolitical and theological discourse, and Toomer’s own critical essays for answers to questions raised by his exploration of racial and national identity and dislocation and the metaphorical topoi of North and South. Nellie McKay, Robert B. Jones, Rudolph P. Byrd, Farah Jasmine Griffin, John Chandler Griffin, Barbara Foley, Mark Whalan, and Kathleen Pfeiffer in particular have unearthed insightful details about the circumstances surrounding Toomer’s formation of a complex racial identity, his life in the immediate years preceding *Cane*’s creation and

publication, and the text's impact on his subsequent writing and the Afro-modern and postmodern American canon. But Siobhan B. Somerville is among a select few who have challenged literary scholars and cultural theorists to examine *Cane* "through an expanded lens that allows us to see race, gender, and sexuality as mutually embedded categories" and to explore Toomer's "disidentification" with "Negro" identity and representation of black male and female sexuality and gender expression as a queer "articulation of resistance partly but not only to a discourse of naturalized racial identity."²¹ This piece extends the conversation she initiated vis-à-vis a close reading of "Carma," a poetic narrative from *Cane*'s first section. Whereas Somerville and most others have analyzed Toomer's masterwork for the ways it challenges representations of racial, ethnic and national identities in America, the readings that follow focus on how the queer sexuality in "Carma" reflects Toomer's consistent anticipation of a gender-ambiguous futurity in postmodern American poetics.

Before launching into the reading of that narrative, however, I'd like to highlight insights on Toomer's philosophies about poetics and gender that recent collections of his private writing have brought to light. Harkening an epistolary novel, Pfeiffer's 2010 book, *Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank*, is important among recent scholarship as it dramatizes Toomer and Frank, Toomer's closest confidante during the writing of *Cane*, conceptualizing the text in poetic, rather than prosaic, language and metaphors and engaging in gender role play and homosocial, homoerotic fantasy. In fact, in Frank's foreword to the first edition of *Cane*, which Pfeiffer presents as a kind of afterword in *Brother Mine*, he says of Toomer, "a poet has arisen among our youth who writes ... not as a negro, not as an apologist or priest or critic: who writes as a poet" (169). Whalan's 2006 book, *The Letters of Jean Toomer, 1919-1924*, had offered this same exchange in the context of conversations Toomer had with

many of the day's white and non-white literati such as Lola Ridge, Horace Liveright, Sherwood Anderson, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke and Walter White. However, Pfeiffer's lens on the intense homosocial bond that Toomer and Frank expressed in letters between March 1922 and October 1924 deepens our critical understanding of the pair's shared perspective on what American poetics should offer the masses. In extolling an early draft of Toomer's "Kabnis" in an April 1922 letter, Frank defines his pedigree for high modern art: "Color, spiritual penetration, counterpoint of human wills, the intuition that they are harmonics of a Unit, the power to convey the line and volume in words, intellectual cleansing-capacity" (Pfeiffer 35). Later that year, as their correspondence intensifies, Toomer replies on October 4, 1922, to Frank's encouragement to read a review of Frank's work that made a number of philosophical references:

I don't know a damned thing about Mallarme, or about Hegel, but I do know that an artist needs neither the one or the other to find his right to his own universe. Such a thing is not found (though it may be sharpened) in systems of philosophy; it is found within the authentic art consciousness. (66)

Frank, in turn, responds in a metaphor that is full of homoerotic subtext: "Letter's fine, Penetrating, warm. ... We need minds that will apperceive the birth of new spiritual realities, not just carp cleverly and brilliantly over the smells and clumsinesses that such birth brings with it" (Pfeiffer 67). Here, Frank alludes to sex and a resulting insemination but tempers the homoeroticism by invoking the metaphysical and intellectual elements of the Unitism faith of George Gurdjieff that he and Toomer have begun to explore. However, Toomer's denouncement of what we know as the Hegelian power dialectic becomes an ironic lens for his relationship with Frank. For what begins as a series of expressions of homosocial affection—evident in letters dreaming of taking long walks together with signatures such as "ever yours" (Frank, May 2, 1922), "my love to you" (Frank in an undated letter later that summer), and "Faithfully" (Toomer, July 31, 1922)—devolves into violent, homoerotic intimation. As his confidence and

acclaim grows, Toomer becomes the dominant, detached master to Frank's lovesick, dutiful servant, and Frank's desire to offer his help with *Cane*'s publication seems as much about his faith in Toomer's talent as his desperate need to hold onto their disintegrating relationship. One of the most striking of this master-slave moments appears in a late fall 1922 missive Toomer sends that transforms the planting metaphor Frank had used to describe Toomer's poetics: "I've got to get Cane planted, and sink deep into you before it can come off, love ... Jean" (84).²³ The fruit of their homosocial labor, however, only bred greater resentment from Toomer for Frank so that once *Cane* came into fruition and Toomer saw the consequences of his choice to "feature Negro," he detached himself from the homoeroticism that had come to define their relationship and to enter into a heterosexual affair, equally transgressive of racial boundaries, with Frank's wife, art therapist Margaret Naumburg.

Nonetheless, despite Toomer's and Frank's poetic vision for *Cane* in its gestation period, little critical attention has been given, until the past decade, to the lineated poems in *Cane* and the poetics undergirding its prose beyond Bernard Bell's 1971 *CLA Journal* article "A Key to the Poems in *Cane*," most recently republished in the 2011 Norton Critical Edition, edited by Byrd and Henry Louis Gates Jr. Bell's readings underscore the lineated poems' role as connective tissue in *Cane*. "They are all functional," Bell writes, "serving to elucidate or set the stage or to provide a transition between the sketches" (229). Yet Bell resists examining the prose's lyricism as poetry and ultimately rejoins his contemporaries' discourse on Toomer's book as a novel. More recently, in her 1996 essay, "'All the Things You Could Be Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Psychoanalysis and Race," Hortense Spillers acknowledges Toomer as a poet who successfully blurs genre boundaries to explore "'race' as a self-consciously assertive reflexivity" and who offers "a paradigm of the imaginary."²⁴ She charges any psychoanalytic

reading of *Cane* to contend with the fact that “its intelligent ‘muteness’ is already a ‘translation’ that requires a didactic rereading back into its eventuality from concatenations on the real object”: a poetic flouting of the very construct of “race” itself (377).

In 2006, Karen Jackson Ford’s *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity* and Raphael Campone’s essay “Jean Toomer’s *Cane*: Language, Desire, and Feminine Jouissance” answered the call for poetic and psychoanalytic readings. Campone’s contribution to the anthology *Poetry, Desire, and Fantasy in the Harlem Renaissance* locates Toomer’s interest in black male and female sexuality on “his mother’s troubled relationship to men and his father’s disappearance” (55) and explicates the narratives of several of the poetic sketches’ female protagonists and subjects, examining each through a Lacanian lens as “an object of mysterious, non-phallic jouissance that resists being reduced to an object under the gaze of male desire” (62). However, through this lens, he must account for the “splitting of the [female] subject through reference to the Symbolic order (the order of language, institutions, and sociopolitical realities) and the Imaginary order (the register of the senses, of the mirror, and the ego ... [and unearth] repressed material in the unconscious” of Toomer and *Cane*’s female subjects (61). His effort produces readings that are at times alarmingly reductive, redundant pastiches, particularly his commentary on “Carma” and “Kabnis,” the latter of which amounts to narrative summary with some what he calls an “Oedipal complex” between Ralph Kabnis and Father John during Kabnis’s time underground.

Conversely, Ford, having meticulously researched earlier scholarship and finding almost every reference had given the poetry a dismissive or tertiary gloss, notes scholars’ impetus to “invoke the form of the novel to give coherence to *Cane*’s unruly parts” (164). However, she re-envisions “*Cane*’s song of an end [as] the very end of song” (3) and further asserts “the inability

of the modern black poet to transform the echoes of the spirituals into new poetry. The poems in *Cane* dramatize this failure, and it is in the poetry that the elegiac strains of the book are most evident” (3). Unlike Bell, she does not see *Cane*’s lineated poems serving the prose surrounding them; instead, she astutely re-examines the paragraphed sketches as poetic extensions of the poems that bookend them. Ultimately, however, she argues that the absence of lineated poetry in Part 3, “Kabnis,” the declaration of Toomer’s speaker-self as a “bad poet” in that section, and his expression of disappointment in the book in correspondence with its publishers denote that what is accepted as his “swan song” to blackness is also a failed experiment with the genre. Unfortunately, Ford seems to ascribe to a long-held tradition of reading African American texts and the bodies that populate them solely as sociocultural objects that narrativize blacks’ historical experiences of subjugation in the slave, postbellum, Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. Ford did not have at her disposal the chronological dialogue that Pfeiffer’s *Brother Mine* affords us to undertake this philosophical enterprise, nor was her rereading of *Cane* designed to move beyond literary cultural criticism. Her analysis, at its core, takes biographical cues from Toomer’s actual failed transcendence of race rather than his philosophical (re)vision of traditional racial and gender markers vis-à-vis the black women and otherwise raced bodies he creates in *Cane*, who are unlike any who entered the literary imagination before them. All defy binary expectations of their expressions of race and cisgender sexual identity and primitivity, especially three who have not gotten sufficient critical attention: Carma from the opening-section sketch of the same name; Dorris from “Theater,” a pivotal middle passage; and “Kabnis,” which closes the text. This chapter focuses upon the tale of Carma, pointing out alternative epistemologies of African American gender expression and quare female sexuality that Ford, Rampone, Somerville and others have not articulated, given their

respective foci on the presence of a mythical Africa, female jouissance, and male homoeroticism in the text itself and in the authorial subtext.

In “Carma,” Toomer offers readers an African American adulteress who, unlike Hester Prynne, Edna Pontellier, Molly Bloom, and her European and American literary forebears, is far from a tortured lady in heat. In fact, Toomer fashions Carma “in overalls” and “strong as any man”²⁵ (14). It is significant that she is introduced differently than the other women in *Cane*: Toomer describes her industry before her physiognomy and physique. She is driving a mule, the offspring of a female horse and a male donkey known for its stubbornness and impotence. The mule, in fact, is seen and heard before Carma is. While this “old” and “brown” laborer “groans, and shakes as it crosses the railroad track,” she is “riding it easy” (14). Such a depiction is certainly quare. This woman of the post-Reconstruction Jim Crow South is a dramatic departure from the idealistic “cult of true womanhood” that had been characteristic of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century literary depictions of African American female protagonists and subjects and the poetic personae by Georgia Douglas Johnson and her early twentieth-century contemporaries. Not even Aunt Chloe, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s outspoken firebrand, is as steely as Carma. Moreover, whereas Toomer has detailed the seductive wiles of Karintha in his opening sketch, he foregrounds Carma’s masculinity and sheer power over the impotent mule in this prose poem, foregrounding it above her racial identity. Readers can later discern the symbolism of Carma’s relationship to the mule as it foreshadows her dominance in her marriage to Bane and her unapologetic polyamory, a character trait the day’s readers would expect from a man rather than a woman.

Once her race is announced in the prose poem, Toomer replaces the mule with a biblical and mythical symbol of battle: a chariot. While acknowledging that Carma is a “nigger woman,”

Toomer emphasizes that she's no passive mammy, exploited Venus Hottentot, oversexed Jezebel or dawdling pickaninny. She's a warrior, conscious of but unaffected by the speaker-narrator's gaze as she turns and looks back at him and orders her minion, her mule, to hie down Dixie Pike to "some indefinite point down the road" (14). The speaker-narrator, on the other hand, is so moved that within himself he shouts in testimony to the insight that seeing Carma's face illumines about the parallel sojourns of Jews in Egypt and blacks in America as strangers in a strange, new homeland: "Hi! Yip! God has left the Moses-people for the nigger" (14). Ford reads Carma's impact on the speaker-narrator and her queer amalgamation of masculinity and femininity as "a mythical African female power that the male narrator glimpses but cannot possess" (55). What Ford doesn't ask that heightens the excessiveness that is central to the quare: Why does Carma's African American female subjectivity offer her the capacity to act and be "as strong as a man" and yet be a woman who can disturb men's inner peace? Why are men like Toomer rendered impotent in her presence, to be ridden like a mule into the sunset at her whims?

It is in this moment that the prose poem's speaker-narrator focuses readers' attention on Carma's African American face, whose color (that of a "yellow flower") and texture ("mangrove-gloomed") reflect a union of the East and West, of the global U.S. South's notorious past and present miscegenation and the requisite shame. Throughout *Cane*, Toomer evokes an intrinsic sorrow that complicates his female subjects' fortitude, and Carma is not, on these grounds, exceptional. Here, he pulls from the metaphors in "Face" and "Cotton Song," two lineated poems that immediately precede "Carma," and draws upon what his heroine's manly stoicism will not let her show. Readers likely make associative leaps to the subject of "Face," whose timeworn hair, pain-tinged brows and eyes, in line 8, speak what Carma cannot express: a "mist of tears" (12). Even the testament to her physical strength—"channeled muscles" (line

10b)—prove to be “cluster grapes of sorrow / purple in the evening sun / ripe for worms” (12).

What is quare, however, about the female sexuality that Toomer affords Carma and others is that even amid decay, there is defiance, a refusal to surrender their will to an impending doom.

Carma’s “cloudy rumble” down Dixie Pike catapults the speaker-narrator into a panorama survey of the area’s flora and fauna. Here, Ford’s analysis of the Southern landscape’s conflation with a mythical African one is most prescient as is her commentary on the poetic layering of the natural world in “Carma” with symbolic elements from “Karintha” and “Becky” (“pine needles,” the curling smoke, the sawmill, the setting sun, etc.). Yet, a standout moment in this scene involves a potentially homoerotic comment that the speaker-narrator makes to “a black boy”: “You are the most sleepest man I ever seed, Sleeping Beauty” (14). The layers in that declaration could easily be missed, but with Toomer’s poetics, nothing is happenstance. First, there is the boy-man dichotomy: What is this dozing person exactly, a man, a boy, both at once or another woman who, like Carma, harkens a boy or man? Every so subtly, too, the alleged Oedipal complex that Rampone’s work alludes to seems at play here, though Rampone ironically does not expound on this instance among his many psychoanalytic inferences. To complicate the reading further, one might also probe Toomer’s invocation of the infamous fairy-tale damsel in distress, which raises yet another question: Is the male speaker, seemingly the same one who had watched Carma drive her mule down Dixie Pike, imagining himself as the dashing prince who must rush in and rouse Sleeping Beauty’s perpetual slumber with a kiss? Is he projecting himself as fair maiden waiting to be ravished and rescued? Here, too, Somerville might have found fruitful inquiry about homoeroticism and fantasy, but in focusing the bulk of her chapter in her commentary on “Kabnis,” she misses (or ignores) such moments.

Ultimately, an Italian quatrain—with its loose iambic pentameter and A-B-B-A rhyme scheme—brings the reader out of the speaker-narrator’s dreamscape into the present moment, which is, of course, full of metaphorical alluvia and innuendo. In the lineated poem, a field of corn becomes a space that serves as the cane field does in several other prose poems in *Cane*. It foreshadows Carma’s fate—as her name alone signals that she is headed for some unavoidable destiny—and makes myth of the corrosive gossip that drowns out the “guinea’s squawk,” the latter indicative of a plea for help, likely for satiation of hunger (15). That quatrain brings a formal element into the preceding moment’s blur of activity and grounds readers in the straightforward details of Carma’s life that follow them:

Carma’s tale is the crudest melodrama. Her husband’s in the gang. And its [sic] her fault he got there. Working with a contractor, he was away most of the time. She had others. No one blames her for that. He returned one day and hung around town where he picked up week-old boasts and rumors ... Bane accused her. She denied. (15, Toomer’s ellipsis)

Once again, the heterosexual relationship Carma has with her husband is clearly quare. Although there’s no apparent judgment of Carma for attending to her sexual needs at will while her husband is away, she is the talk of the town because she is taking and handling it like a man. Moreover, Toomer’s use of “others,” contrary to what Rampone argues, leaves open the possibility that her lovers identify as male, female or, like herself, somewhere in between. Curiously, however, Carma is not deemed culpable for her affairs, justified by her intrinsic masculinity, but she is blamed for Bane’s fate: hard prison labor. Toomer again imposes his own philosophical leanings on readers: For him, and his Unitism-inspired spiritual understanding, profligate sexuality is expected of a woman with a man’s disposition and strength; however, at the same time, the impenetrability of quare female sexuality unsettles the nature-world order as he understands it. Like Bane, “he would have liked to take his fists and beat her,” but he realizes she is “strong as a man. Stronger” (15). Not even Toomer’s “crudest” narrative, which exposes

the extramarital details that are to sully her reputation, can overpower Carma and put this mannish woman in her place. This unwieldy story documenting the quare in rural Georgia, like “a corkscrew,” is to bring forth a frothy, intoxicating elixir “fizzle[s] out.” Like a mouth or tongue—if one extends the sexual metaphors hovering in this sketch—its words fail to incite a cathartic, orgasmic experience. Indeed, like Carma herself, we readers won’t get voyeuristic satisfaction from this prose poem’s sexual subtexts. We are only left with a host of questions we must answer on our own.

As he does throughout *Cane*, Toomer mirrors human interiority cross-textually and fashions a cross-sexuality in the book’s girls and women. Shaped by his misogynist gaze, they are hypersexual and exploited or wield their sexual power like men. He embeds emotional truths and buries them, as it were, in the lineated poems around the prose ones. In this case, Toomer illumines the consequences of words that burrow imperceptibly below the surface, seeming to do no harm. Of course, having perused “Face,” readers know that what Toomer shows men seeing in Carma, what her face belies, is that inside, behind the veil of her stoic gaze, lies torment. Or, Toomer says, “[h]e couldnt see that she was becoming hysterical” (15). Carma grabs a gun and rushes into the mysterious, titular cloak of vegetation.

Scholars differ on what happens in the cane field. Campone simply calls it an “incomplete ... punishment for Carma’s transgressions of the conventions that define the black woman as the object of patriarchal desire” (80). He further attempts to resolve the relationship between Bane and Carma with a heteronormative (and highly suggestive) reading of its end:

Bane discovers that all of his labor for himself and Carma has been in vain because she did not recognize the sacrifices he had made in order to make a living. Bane learns that he has been working for an imaginary, idealized wife who never existed at the end of the story. Carma’s downfall lies in the fact that she wanted to maintain the illusion of a happy marriage when she was in reality dissatisfied. ... Carma remains married with

Bane only to deceive him even more. (81)

Nothing in Toomer's lineated or prose poems indicates this line of intent and motivation for either party. Rampone's assessment seems pulled from the story line of any modern-day soap opera, not the tragic, nuanced tale of an obviously open marriage rooted in the square. Ford, on the other hand, focuses not on the end of Toomer's mythic narrative but the formal and informal structure of the lyricism throughout and the futility of the songs within "Carma" to liberate any of the narrative's subjects. She also offers no insights on what Carma's fate means for *Cane* as a whole. Similarly, Somerville has no use for the square in the prose poem in her argument for homosexual desire in *Cane*. What is clear from what could be read as an attempted suicide proves that Carma's willfulness cannot be diminished. Even once her injured body is discovered and she is brought home, she laughs in the face of death and those trying to disrobe her. Not even further exposure of her black body—Toomer's philosophical object for exploring the then-unarticulated complexities of black women's sexualities and subjectivities—breaks her down. Toomer likens Carma to a "dying hornet," an apropos metaphor, since this wasp's more intensely venomous sting causes humans greater pain than other bees and wasps and since it does not die after it attacks because its stinger is not barbed and is not pulled from its body in the stinging process. Carma will not fade easily into a memory, will not be mocked or shamed, and, Toomer discovers, cannot be made penetrable by the patriarchal gaze. As Toomer's "Face" has alluded, her eyes show that although she is "weak and pitiable" in body, she is spiritually stalwart and unapologetic, inciting in Bane the rage that leads him to violent acts that land him on the chain gang. That Toomer assigns the blame for Bane's choice on Carma is consistent with other sketches in *Cane* and with a long Western literary tradition, dating to the biblical tale of Adam, Eve, and original sin. Yet, he is careful to reemphasize Carma's square sexuality with his closing

question, even if he must swaddle her in masculinity to account for his patriarchal gaze: “Should she not take others, this Carma, strong as a man, whose tale as I have told it is the crudest melodrama?” What remains is Carma’s story, recounted again and again by the rustling of cane stalks, by those who live according to this mythical Georgia town’s compromised ethical code amid a contained chaos, and by scholars enamored with her sheer audacity to be herself. Carma is a timeless prototype for the revisionist postmodern epistemologies and ontologies ushered in by Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie, Toni Morrison’s Sula and Eva Peace, Hagar, and Sethe, Alice Walker’s Shug Avery, Sherley Anne Williams’s Dessa Rose, Terry McMillian’s Bernadine Harris, and other brazen black women characters coming to life in contemporary novels.

In addition to offering to American literature a (re)vision of Jim Crow Georgian landscapes and daily life, Toomer’s *Cane* takes readers into the post-Reconstruction-era African American neighborhoods of Washington, D.C., particularly U Street’s theater district, where Toomer lived and occasionally worked. This area was abuzz with those swept away from the South in the turn-of-the-century Great Migration. Opportunities were particularly ripe for those who, like Toomer and Moore Dunbar-Nelson, were fair and clever enough to cross the liminal space along the color line. In *Cane*’s second section of poetic sketches, Toomer plumbs these individuals’ subjectivities and quandaries and further blurs the lines between black and white, male and female, heteronormative and quare in re-contextualizing African American subjectivity in the American literary imagination. In Moore Dunbar-Nelson’s *Violets and Other Stories* and lineated poems, she consistently challenges depictions of idealized marriages with doting, monogamous spouses. Instead, she documents infidelities and same-sex desire in the coded blues metaphors of the day. In addition, both Toomer and Moore Dunbar-Nelson defied expectations in their actual lives. Toomer chose several interracial, erotic relationships and learned communal

esoteric practices, outside the realms of traditional marriage. Moore Dunbar-Nelson married three times and engaged in clandestine courtships with other society women. Their works signaled the dawn of a renaissance of the quare in poetics. Blacks had seen what facing the lie of respectability to enter politics and polite society had earned them: nothing. Free of chattel's shackles, they had chosen to enslave themselves to the mendacious notions that "liberty and justice for all" could include them only if they demonstrate their intellectual equality and make themselves "race men and women" who would uplift the masses of sisters and brothers caught in the web of dissolution that had come with a disenfranchised freedom. Toomer and Moore Dunbar-Nelson, survivors of cycles abuse, neglect, and orphanhood, paved a way for writers of the New Negro Renaissance to reflect the harsh realities of rural and urban African American life. Their lyrics joined the *kweer's* chorus of minor keys rooted in the blues aesthetic; their women defied the oppressive rubric of misogynoir, celebrating—even in times of mourning—the excessiveness of their black flesh, bodies, and spirits. As the hunger for freedom deepened in the first half of the twentieth century, African American poetics—and the gospel and blues it birthed—would morph again into an even more complex, avant-garde, syncretic sound called jazz. Bob Kaufman and Nina Simone, mid-century pioneers of the genre, would lead a bastion of black writers who would call upon the quare to make their performance of blackness even more intractable, impenetrable, and ominous under the white, queer gaze.

Chapter Three

QUARE MIGRANT/VAGRANT:

THE BLACK MOTHER'S FUGITIVE BODY MADE JAZZ

Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson and Jean Toomer blazed a path for reading black female protagonists, subjects, and speakers through more realistic lenses that reflected their actual post-Reconstruction experiences, divorced from the respectability politics that had shaped nineteenth-century African American literature. Among the succeeding generation of artists from the global South, Bob Kaufman and Nina Simone stand out as under-theorized folk poets who blew apart what black poets could create in their elegies, particularly as they commented on State-sanctioned terror that affected white and nonwhite women alike. Dunbar Nelson and Toomer ushered in frank, novel ways to write through the multiracial intimacies the early twentieth century fostered for blacks fleeing Southern brutalities for long-mythologized promised lands in the American Northeast, Midwest, and the barely charted West. The resultant multi-ethnic identities that they gave to these children of the Great Migration made space to assert sex-positive black female subjectivities that advanced the arc of the African American literary protest tradition to the precipice of its zenith.

Kaufman, Simone, and a host of others further broke open language to complicate the elegiac chords of the Spirituals and the blues into a new form, jazz, which blurred the performative lines delineating genres and gender markers even more. Many, who were grandchildren of former slaves and slave owners alike, rendered how the dislocation of the Great

Migration from the Jim Crow South to its unwelcome satellite locales throughout the country during the height of the Great Depression felt. In addition, Kaufman and Simone took on the task of reclaiming black literary expression and music from Jewish artists gaining renown for dabbling in avant-garde jazz poetics and a nascent musical genre known as “exotica.”²⁶ Like their forebears, what distinguishes these poets’ works as quare is not necessarily their own sexual identities. It is noteworthy, though, that Simone was tacitly bisexual and also a survivor of marital torture that included brutal beatings and sexual assault. What’s more, Kaufman was involved in a then-illegal interracial marriage; lived as a proudly homeless street walker in the Bay Area’s polysexual, LGBT-friendly, “hippie” community; and had a onetime, drunken, same-sex experience that was a sexual assault²⁷. What makes the folk poetics of Simone and Kaufman quare is that it expands—even as they navigate differently oppressive spaces in the North and West—a globally Southern consciousness that elevates the black maternal from archetypal service to whiteness to African diasporic liminality and sexual agency. Simone and Kaufman, born respectively an isolated mountain community in North Carolina and a Creole swarm in New Orleans, serve as examples that “migration,” as Thadious M. Davis writes in *Southscapes* (2011), “enables a perspective for redefining of self in the context of new spatial geographies, not merely of built and natural environments but primarily of the institutional and organizational structures” (151). Their participation in the second wave of the Great Migration enabled them to draw discipline from the predominantly white institutions of classical music and the military and to fashion new identities fueled by this new jazz aesthetic that synthesized all of the musical genres the quare birthed in America.

Jazz empowered Kaufman and Simone to craft poetics that affirmed what Gilles DeLeuze and Félix Guattari write of “minor literature” and its “high coefficient of deterritorialization” of

the many languages, both linguistic and musical, they mastered over the course of their lives. As people who embraced a rootedness within centered on a connection to a spiritual Home that defied the limitations put upon their flesh by American racism and its resultant psychic breakdowns and outbursts of madness, Kaufman and Simone also embraced lives of constant migration, of vagrancy, akin to those of the European Gypsies, in which a geographical rootlessness defined them, defied the legalized oppression intended to destroy their sense of human dignity and freedom, and produced that which poet-scholar Evie Shockley calls a “renegade poetics” that urged black, brown, and otherwise oppressed people around the globe to fight to preserve this soul/core sense of a spiritual Home while unmoored. By the mid-twentieth century, then, the elegies of Kaufman and Simone reconfigure and expand this liminal space of the quare while satirizing the migration narrative popularly deployed by more prominent writers from the era, enacting what poet Brenda Marie Osbey would call, in a genre-defying, elegiac ode to Simone, “disremembering.”

Contemporaries who crafted the most prominent migration narratives during this postwar, post-New Negro Renaissance era include Richard Wright, Ann Petry, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, and LeRoi Jones, all of whom, except Brooks and Jones, primarily wrote fiction and creative nonfiction. Yet, of this lot, only the three men grapple with Jim Crow’s dominion in the South. Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945) and Jones’s *The System of Dante’s Hell* (1965) take readers through semiautobiographical journeys in Mississippi and Louisiana with protagonists not unlike themselves. Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) reimagines his parents’ sojourn from the perilous South through brief flashbacks. While Petry and Brooks, born in urban centers in the Northeast and Midwest, spent their careers documenting the hope and interdicted humanity of black migrants, they do not return to those Southern refugees’ native

terrains in their works, and in *Black Boy*, Wright rejects Toomer's charge that one must return South to face its suffering and shame, opting instead, ultimately, for a life in Europe. For Baldwin and Jones, transgressive, quare sexualities manifest in Southern spaces where teens revel in premarital sex and bisexual experimentation. (Ironically, Jones's sexual discoveries unfold in a neighborhood so quare that it is known as "the Bottom.") As Farah Jasmine Griffin notes in her "Final Vision of the Migration Narrative" in *Who Set You Flowin'?* (1995), these mid-twentieth century works paved the way for the hip-hop era's fusion of pain and excess into a surreal futurity, where "the black body [as] an indelible part of the Southern landscape [becomes less] the site of terror [than] a source of wisdom, spirituality, and redemption" (179).

However, the ways in which Baldwin and Simone infused the quare in their migration narratives, their "disremembering" of white supremacy for moments of self-indulgence in ecstatic blackness, remains largely undocumented. Instead, scholars²⁸ have begun to explore the ways that postmodern literary and musical artists use madness to make palpable black rage and anguish by turning white supremacist, phallogocentric language on its ear. These readings aim to extend the discourse on the importance of their performance of anger and celebration of excessive blackness to the advancement of the African American literary protest tradition. In addition, I theorize the usefulness of the metaphor of vagrancy in unseating the white-washing of folk and jazz poetics by Jewish Americans and ponder why New York, New Orleans, and the San Francisco Bay area prove ideal spaces for writers battling mental illness, particularly those who have survived unspeakable abuse and have lived or traveled extensively abroad, to imagine subversive narratives that push the bounds of white-black binaries and serve as warnings to America's impending racial implosion.

‘She Is Twenty-Three Months Pregnant’: Black Maternity and the Quare in Bob Kaufman’s Surreal (Re)vision of the African American Migration Narrative

The surrealist migration narrative “Grandfather Was Queer, Too” is an important transitional, mid-twentieth century elegy in a tradition that consistently posits a self-affirming future for blackness through the exhortations and complaints of black mothers, whose expressions of joy and suffering haunt their black and white progeny alike. Exposing the hypocrisies of government-sanctioned violence in the postcolonial United States in the poem, Kaufman champions the ways that embracing vagrancy, fugitivity, and kinship with the non-human can further liberate the children of the Great Migration—and blackness itself—from the chains of respectability that had been black writers’ primary means of flouting these fictions. Even as they have had to contend with the politics of purity, as Chapters One and Two detail, black poets always have done this subversive, subtextual work in their literary art. We see it when Terence of Carthage centers sex workers and liberated slaves like himself as cyphers and tricksters in the Roman comedies of antiquity. It advances further when Phillis Wheatley Peters of Senegambia reaches back to claim Terence as an ancestor in the opening pages of *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* and points out time after time the falsehoods about Africa as a space of pagan profligacy of the worse kind in Enlightenment and colonial American zealots’ theories. She achieves this feat through meditations on the post-coital bliss and maternal suffering of Aurora, one of their revered symbols of Greco-Roman paganism, whose son Agamemnon dies in battle, and in doing so Wheatley Peters humanizes her own mother’s grieving and her forestalled sexuality. Kaufman’s surreal poem, then, continues a long tradition of enacting what I call a quare futurity for blackness, birthing through the maternal a new vision of the black body, realizing Mills’s philosophical objectives for alternative epistemologies about blackness.

This reading of “Grandfather Was Queer, Too” challenges scholars to reimagine the African American elegiac tradition as one not of mere mourning and passive engagement with the form’s investment in pastoral and maritime scenes but as intentional alignment of the suffering of non-human subjects with black mothers and their children in order to redefine blackness outside the bounds of the white gaze *while* critiquing the State-sanctioned violence that gaze fosters. I argue that Kaufman, our “Black Rimbaud,” and other African American poets often foreground the precarious states of black women’s flesh and black maternity to fashion this nuanced consciousness for black life, even in death. Alongside Mills, then, my reading here aims to find a language for limning the aesthetics of the sounds that battered and embittered black female bodies make holy and for dancing on and around black particularity and pathology. It is in this quare space that that which Moten calls “black mo’nin’ ” and Kaufman names “queer meters” unfolds.

Here, quare, this nominalism rooted in self-definition, allows black scholars to stop playing sexual identity politics with writers in our discussion of the complex sexualities they represent in their work, and it sustains an African diasporic consciousness not inherent in queer, its elder allomorph, which has been deployed primarily by scholars affirming white male anal-centric and phallocentric discourse. Instead, quare lays claim upon a global citizenship to the spaces that blacks’ circum-Atlantic journeys have taken them. I challenge scholars to reconsider the ways in which African Americans in the global U.S. South blur the lines delineating genre and gender with the poetic elegy. Through this ancient poetic form and mode, black mothers become philosophers and philosophical objects who presage ways to see blackness anew—in opposition to the white supremacist gaze that marks all black flesh base not subhuman, animal not animus, inferior not mirror, queer not quare.

In analyzing the quare in the African American poetic elegy and its migration narratives, specifically through this reading of a wandering migrant's journey from Creole Louisiana to the San Francisco Bay in "Grandfather Was Queer, Too," I aim to challenge scholars to consider black sexualities' contravening power, taking into consideration the complexities of blackness that marked all black bodies quare, regardless of their experiences on the sexual spectrum, from the advent of African American poetics to the present day. In Kaufman's poem, he intentionally names ancestors' heterosexual relationship as "queer," challenging readers nearly four decades before theorists do to consider the ways that the trauma of slavery and the gifts of Africanist, woman-centered consciousness mark *all* black sexualities as non-heteronormative *and* transformative. When scholars view blackness through the lens of the quare that Kaufman's migration narrative invites us to explore, African American poetic elegies like "Grandfather Was Queer, Too" manifest not as neutral, sentimental, imitative wordplay, now subsumed under the rubric of "jazz poetics," but reveal themselves to be sociopolitical tools through which their harbingers' grapple with being black and thus with being marked as *kweer* (choral witness), *queer* (strange, Other to the white supremacist gaze), and *quare* (self-affirming, self-defining, liminal). Fully aware that they bear the archetypal markers in the white imagination of foreignness, omen, and hypersexual deviance, Kaufman leads a generation of elegists who simultaneously use humor, irony, satire, and horror to unsettle audiences in verse and song by refracting the symbols that seem to reify racist notions of blackness.

This investigation of "Grandfather Was Queer, Too" takes up Lorde's and Spillers's charge, outlined in this dissertation's introduction. I explore here how Kaufman honors the black mother in his surreal migration narrative while haunted by the peril and possibility her quare generativity births. This haunting has its traces in the eighteenth- and nineteenth century-African

American migration narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, as explored in Chapter One. Douglass's narration of his mother's estrangement and his own escape upon fighting Edward Covey, coupled with Equiano's polemical indictment of the violence he sees and the wanderlust it incites as he pursues freedom, set in motion a tradition of fraught migration narratives that get more complicated in the fictional ones that emerge from the children of the Great Migration, most famously Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Wright and Ellison further indict the queer lens on black sexuality in their narratives about monstrous, sexual deviants Bigger Thomas and Jim Trueblood, whose acts of rape and incest do as much to censure the titillation the retelling gives white listeners (and readers) as they do to complicate stereotypes about black masculinity in the white American imagination. Often overlooked in discourse on these narratives, however, are the black mothers, who are relegated to silent complicity in seemingly never-ending cycles of victimhood. Kaufman's "Grandfather Was Queer, Too," however, leaves readers to ponder a quare futurity awaiting in the womb of a "twenty-three-months-pregnant" mother in its final stanza's last lines, her child(ren) conceived as a result of loving intimacies. With his poem's stark yet hopeful last image, Kaufman offers a metaphorical breaking of the waters, then, to rethink the possibilities of the quare, thus reframing black maternity's central role in African American migration narratives, which he situates as forestalled and long-overdue.

Kaufman's avant-garde poetics as a whole, and "Grandfather Was Queer, Too" in particular, pushes forward the African American elegaic tradition of migration narratives with black maternity as both the symbol of deep-rooted historicity in chattel and post-emancipation trauma throughout the global South *and* hope a quare future in places most open to such generativity. By the mid-twentieth century, the New Negro and Négritude movements that

birthed Wright, Brooks, Margaret Walker Alexander, Aimé Césaire, Suzanne Lacascade, Ellison, and others had begun to foster in black art an investment in the colloquial and the surreal, which freed Kaufman and others of the Beat and Black Arts movements up to offer sonic (re)visions of readers' internalized narratives about this gendered space of generativity. Kaufman's poems, many of which are elegies, present narratives that posit the black maternal as a liminal site that nurtures within its generations an African diasporic consciousness *and* an American one primed to expose the truths that the former knows about the latter's mendacity. In *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2000), Thomas demarcates an underexplored "direct line" between the Beat and Black Arts movements with which Allen Ginsburg and Jones (aka Amiri Baraka)²⁹ are respectively synonymous (200). The term, *beatnik*, was coined, after all, by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen in April 1958 upon seeing Kaufman perform. The shortened word that evolved from it, *beat*³⁰, became synonymous with the literary movement of largely white gay men, whose demigod, Ginsberg, has inspired subsequent generations of white gay men. Ironically, though, in our moment, *beat* is largely used in transgender communities of color—and those white men like Caen who wish to appropriate black cultural production by way of defining it—to describe those who are too busy being fierce and fabulous to be bothered with worrying about poverty, homelessness, and other oppressive systems. Moreover, Thomas's observation compels scholars to explore Kaufman's central role in defining what it is Beat and his speakers' embodiment of a civil rights ethos. Kaufman and his poetics await as a kind of palimpsest whose surreal vision of black maternity predicts a quare futurity that has manifested since "Grandfather Was Queer, Too" was published in his 1959 full-length debut, *Solititudes Crowded with Loneliness*³¹.

The quare proves fertile ground on which Kaufman builds his re-envisioned African American migration narrative in “Grandfather Was Queer, Too.” Before we reach the travails of the black mother and her unborn child(ren), however, Kaufman takes readers on a journey with a subject much like Kaufman himself from the Louisiana bayou to the San Francisco Bay’s Beat scene. Along the way, Kaufman’s speaker narrates a migrant’s consciousness deepening and evolving again and again, through extended metaphors and symbolic anthropomorphic experiences with flora and fauna over four stanzas. Through this migrant’s simultaneous encounters with State surveillance and violence that attempt to mark him a vagrant, victimized criminal, Kaufman animates moments of resistance, perseverance, and unapologetically transgressive intimacies that serve as a primer for his contemporaries who take pride in an aloof relationship to the rules and torture of the State. Rather than responding in acquiescence, shame, and deference to the State as a result of the trauma it inflicts, Kaufman urges Beats like himself, his poet-speaker (called “he” throughout), his migrant (“the intellectual”), and titular Grandfather to take pride in vagrant acts that challenge the State’s inhumanity, disenfranchisement, and racism. From the outset, the challenge of interpretation begins with the title. Who is the speaker, who is his paternal ancestor, and what makes both of them queer? If we read this poem through the lens that many Kaufman scholars use, we can deduce that the ostensibly heterosexual Grandfather’s queerness is very much akin to our theorization of the quare, one characterized by his tendency to be Beat, to exhaust and buck the rules of decorum sonically and sexually. This inclination may have roots, it appears, in the speaker’s (and Kaufman’s) purported mixed-race heritage³² and artistic filiality with the French surrealists and Romantics.

In the first stanza, readers find Kaufman's subject, simply identified throughout the most of the poem by the nondescript pronoun *he*, steeped in the Louisiana swamp terrain Kaufman knew well. The stanza unfolds as follows:

He was first seen in the Louisiana bayou,
Playing chess with an intellectual lobster.
They burned his linoleum house alive
And sent that intellectual off to jail.
He wrote home everyday, to no avail.
Grandfather had cut out, he couldn't raise the bail. (lines 1-6)

As Kaufman often does in his poetics, readers are invited to observe a speaker's (and his subject's) awareness of surveillance. In this aquatic space storied for its mystery and mysticism, the speaker and the intellectual/he know that governmental surveillance is an implicit, matter-of-fact praxis, and thus he discomfits we, his voyeuristic readers, in the stanza's third line, implicating us in the all-encompassing "they" who "burned his linoleum house alive" (line 3). Here, even the subject's home is animate, a breathing, thinking organism, and we, Kaufman's readers, are indicted in its brutal murder as the poem's purveyors of State violence. Before more acts of State violence unfold in "Grandfather Was Queer, Too," Kaufman makes implicit the extent of his migrant-subject's already-always vulnerability because of the haunting absence of a female human ancestry outside the incinerated space of domesticity often aligned with the maternal: the home. Readers are left to wonder what happened to the black mother figure, possibly even assume that she is a victim of this State-sanctioned fire. Kaufman, a descendant of multiple actual and fictional matrilineages, opens his poem, then, with what some might perceive as a sublimation of the familiar tropes of the African American migration narrative of maternal orphanage. There is no mention of a mother's death, though she is never seen, and thus we are left to empathize with him all the more: Where is his mother? Who will care for him now?

As the journey from the Louisiana bayou unfolds in the preceding line, the speaker describes the poetic subject engaging in a challenging mind game with an “intellectual lobster,” where this seeming maternal void is filled and the conversation about the fragility and possibilities of maternal generativity implicitly begins. Here, too, Kaufman takes the surreal, daring move to align maternity outside the domain of the human to deepen the empathetic potential for his migration narrative for dehumanized blacks *and* for the flora and fauna with which they have this strange kinship. The game of chess, with its ancient East Indian, polytheistic roots, serves as a fitting metaphor for the geographical and metaphysical cartographies that lie ahead for the poem’s subject as the intellectual/he and Grandfather flee various unwelcoming spaces of on-the-face dislocation governed by the State. After all, the queen—the most potently quare, gender-bending piece on the board game rooted in reimagining and ventriloquizing the tools of the State—has the most mobility, versatility, mutability, agency, and power to help any player win a chess match. In this chess game, then, Kaufman makes the opponent of this he an intellectual lobster³³, an apt aquatic symbol of simultaneous fragility and strength, known for pregnancies that can last, from mating to conception to hatching, about twenty months.

The nature of the female lobster’s mating, gestation, and birthing rituals is instructive for our reading. Lobsters thrive best at the ocean bottom, where they can avoid their many predators. There, to initiate mating, each female lobster hovers outside the den of rocks of the male of her choice, usually the largest she can find, and does a mating-boxing dance with her antennae and swimmerlets, through which she releases pheromonic urine to invite her male suitor. The male responds in kind by using his swimmerlets to waft this intoxicating perfume throughout his den. The female’s ongoing swimmerlet-antennae boxing dance calms the male’s aggressive response

until it is clear it is safe for her to enter his den. Inside, she molts her hardy shell, which the species does nearly twenty-five times before age 5, leaving her utterly vulnerable to harm, and they continue the mating-boxing dance for hours, sometimes days, before sexual touch ensues. However, once sex begins it is so intensely tender some marine biologists describe it in terms akin to those used to characterize the gentlest of human lovemaking. The female remains in the den for at least a week until she develops another shell hardy enough to protect the sperm she has gathered in sex, from which 10,000 to 20,000 eggs will be fertilized. Then, she leaves without even a hint of the affection and seductive scent she has used to draw her mate. She uses her swimmerlets to fan as much oxygen as she can to her fertilized eggs to keep as many alive as possible, although only 1 percent live once they are released from her after nine to eleven months of gestation. They are pushed out of her and set adrift in the sea, away from their mother, to start the process of fending for themselves on their own. Thus, outside of this bottom environment of temporal mutuality and tender sex, lobsters, males and females alike, learn quickly to be stealthy omnivores and combative territorial creatures, hunted as they are by fellow sea creatures and humans as soon as they are of any significant size. Invoking the total essence of what is little more than a prized source of meat for sea fauna and the wealthy human defenders of the State, Kaufman endows his migrant-speaker and his Grandfather with an aquatic mirror of generativity and resistant, elusive reconnaissance in the lobster, whose final hardy shell is as hard to crack as are the secrets of the queen piece in the human game deemed one of the hardest to master. In the first two lines of his poem alone, Kaufman charges his migrant-subject and readers to imagine themselves as indefatigable as the State by way of the lessons of environmental adaptation and subversive play in the games of life and death that the maternal and its queens have to teach.

Kaufman's surrealist (re)vision of the African American migration narrative through maternity works not only at the level of metaphorical symbolism, but it also manifests sonically as well in the jazz lyricism of each syllable. That familiar marker of his poetics becomes apparent quickly in the consonance, assonance, and anaphora of lines 3-6 ("They burned his linoleum house alive / And sent that intellectual off to jail. / He wrote home every day, to no avail. / Grandfather had cut out, he couldn't raise the bail."). Once he/the intellectual migrant is rendered homeless by a fire—even his house, outfitted in the midcentury floor material of choice, linoleum, is animate and personified, the crackling sound of which invokes its own ominous yet pleasing music—he ends up in jail (line 4), a fate Kaufman endured so regularly that his arrests, often as a result of his public poetic outbursts, became Beat legends. What sounds like lines from a blues song lolls quickly off the readers' tongue into slant rhyme in line 5 as efforts to reach loved ones via letters dispatched "every day, to no avail" leave the subjectivity of the intellectual migrant/he forestalled, locked up and away, cut off. In this way, Kaufman's tone emphasizes the high-energy, hyper-alert play that his chess game has initiated rather than the maudlin, dirge-like minor chords of the blues. Finally, he closes the opening stanza by goading readers and his surreal (re)vision of the African American migration narrative forward with a line of anaphora, an ultimate fusion of blues and ragtime to make jazz of it in a refrain that closes each of the first four stanzas in the five-stanza poem—"Grandfather cut out, he couldn't make the bail" (line 6). This refrain, on the one hand, seems to disrupt the speaker's kinship to his ancestor, who may know the path his (great-)grandson has chosen but opts instead to distance himself and allow the younger intellectual/migrant to chart his own path. On the other, this refrain enacts the symbolic transmutation and metaphorical disambiguation that sonically moves Kaufman's African American migration narrative from its ties to black art rooted primarily in

Judeo-Christian and Catholic metaphors to its role as a beacon for contemporaneous black American art that foregrounds African diasporic kinship and global citizenship. Kaufman's vision of spirituality also honors polytheism and poly-sexualities, evidenced in his subjects' philoxenist relationship to other humans, fauna, flora, and sundry objects.

A closer examination of this refrain illuminates how Kaufman uses it to reimagine black sexuality as quare, always outside the normative bounds but not pathological. This refrain in "Grandfather Was Queer, Too" makes all the more clear Kaufman's affinity for the linguistic and lyrical frivolity of the African American music and literature of the first half of the twentieth century, rooted in blues moods and wordplay implicit in jazz poetics. As James A. Snead explains in the 1984 essay "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," the jazz "cut" is a sudden shifting back to a sound heard before that sets in motion a new beginning within a song in medias res. In this poem, the refrain—which (re)asserts Grandfather's decision to "cut out," to excise himself from the burden of an impossible task, "pay[ing] the bail"—refracts the multigenerational migration narrative by offering readers a glimpse of a family seemingly fractured by the State. Present here, of course, is the real despair for the migrant and Grandfather, their intangibility for each other, their never being able, it appears, to have enough resources to outpace and/or destroy the systems oppressing and abusing them and those they love. However, Kaufman doesn't leave readers mired in dystopia. When readers are given the cut of Grandfather managing to "cut out" in the poem, to elude oversight long enough to move forward on his journey, he provides his grandson a geographical road map to (and readers a metaphorical one for African Americans' quest for) freedom in the West, one African American readers, too, can draw upon in their quest.

The vulnerability of once-enslaved black flesh to exploitation and abuse at the hands of the State also becomes increasingly apparent in this refrain, even before Grandfather meets and impregnates his mate. In the second stanza, Kaufman enacts scenes of anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, and synesthesia that intensify Kaufman's elegiac critique of white supremacist violence on quare black flesh. In many ways, "Grandfather Was Queer, Too," animates what Moten theorizes as "the sexual cut," riffing on Mackey's exploration of the "echoic spectre of a sexual cut" in his 1986 epistolary jazz novel, *Bedouin Hornbook*. While Moten's text focuses primarily on the subversive vocalizations and phrasing of a famous survivor of sexual trauma, Billie Holiday, Kaufman's (re)vision of the African American migration manifests as he ushers in the liminal possibilities resident in the black maternal, which Spillers, Mackey, Moten, Hartman, and others remind us is the originary site of the traumatized sounds that haunt in the wake of chattel slavery. As Kaufman meditates on and mediates his relationship to the black maternal and the quare, Mackey's insights on what modulates his elegiac chords compel readers to reconsider that music's "wounded kinship" to African American literature's mothers (Terry Prince, Wheatley Peters, the slave *kweer's* nameless harbingers, so many named earlier and not yet discovered). Kaufman's speaker, intellectual/migrant, and Grandfather are among many examples of Mackey's orphans in African American literature, and through our subject's girlfriend—whose racial identity is not made explicit when she emerges in the fifth and final stanza but whose intimacies with black men implicate her as a harbinger of black maternity—Kaufman describes generativity thriving outside the bounds of State-ordained marriage to reconcile his "wounded kinship" to the origins of the quare: the black mother's womb.

The quare maternity that Kaufman attenuates in the environmental and sociopolitical resistance to State violence in the first stanza becomes all the more apparent and powerful in the

second stanza when the lobster metamorphoses into a butterfly. Like the migrant-speaker, it demonstrates no investment in feeding the capitalist State with its intellectual work and is punished in the most horrific, racially charged way. In this stanza, Kaufman enacts scenes of anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, and synesthesia that intensify his elegiac critique of white supremacist violence on quare black flesh. The second stanza reads:

Next seen, skiing on some dusty Texas road,
An intellectual's soul hung from his ears,
Discussing politics with an unemployed butterfly.
They hung that poor butterfly, poor butterfly.
Grandfather had cut out, he couldn't raise the bail. (lines 7-11)

In line 7, readers find the somehow liberated migrant—now conflated with that lobster (or, in the least, a kindred, “intellectual” spirit)—“skiing” in Texas, one of the American landscapes least fathomed as hospitable to such (re)creation and re-envisioning and one whose relationship to migration has been fraught since Alonso Álvarez de Pineda, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, and Francisco Vázquez de Coronado, René-Robert Cavelier de la Salle “discovered” the landscape in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and, after a century of wars, the United States “annexed” it in 1845. Rather than the metaphor of heart-on-sleeve, Kaufman leads readers to take note as, in lines 8-9, “an intellectual’s soul hangs from his ears / Discussing politics with an unemployed butterfly.” What if the human soul is as accessible, Kaufman tactitly asks, as one’s ability to listen to others, and what is the job of the butterfly but to roam free? What, then, does it mean to be metamorphose from unattractive, voracious caterpillar into a literary symbol of change and be beautiful but “unemployed”? How does it feel to be without work, without those with souls to hear to one’s political statement about freedom? Kaufman’s speaker is empathetic to this butterfly’s lessons on liberty, even as it is brutally punished—lynched as it were, by the nondescript, totalizing “they” that implicates readers—for its political act. Situating the poem’s

most extreme act of violence in this way, exacted on something as fragile and innocent as a butterfly, underscores the depths of Kaufman's myriad subtleties in this poem. Knowing that some readers have become so callous that they do not see blacks' deaths as reasons to mourn, he cleverly makes use of a symbol that *does* invoke empathy in his elegy, offering a stark mirror about the poison of racism. If it weren't intuited in the first stanza, Kaufman makes it plain in the second: Bystanders, whose silence make us accomplices to State violence, maintain stasis when we take for granted the butterfly as a political citizen in our global community, as more than a universal metaphor or symbol to deploy as cliché in literature. Again, with his stanza-closing anaphora, Kaufman builds a multigenerational migration narrative, of the escape artist, Grandfather, who opts, like this intellectual/migrant, to "cut out," to keep pressing on, rather than participate in the corrupt capitalist and legal systems that punish these symbolic agents of change. Here, too, the refrain of the first stanza, inspired as one recalls by the quare chess lessons learned and a likely maternal lobster, undercuts and drowns out the synesthetic imagery that the most disturbing sexual elements of lynching conjures.

Kaufman's elegiac critique in his (re)vision of the African American migration narrative quickly shifts next to focus on exploring what the quare make possibles for blacks and other victims of State violence despite its cruelties. The third stanza reads:

Next seen on the Arizona desert, walking,
Applying soothing poultices to the teeth
Of an aching mountain.
Dentists all over the state brought gauze balls,
Bandaged the mountain, buried it at sea.
Grandfather had cut out, he couldn't raise the bail. (lines 12-17)

In line 12, readers find the migrant "next seen on the Arizona desert." At this point in his elegy, Kaufman has established his subjects' humanity such that they no longer necessitate the identity-grounding markers of the poem's intellectual as they blur into Kaufman's surrealist coats of

existential colors on the lyrical canvas that is this migration narrative. Here, the migrant does not have to flee, as he did in Texas. No, here, he can walk. Although the butterfly's body has been slain, its spiritual wisdom has not died; in fact, it has set the migrant free to rove onward and venture into a desert, a space often storied as barren and populated with treachery, deprivation, thirst, temporal extremes, and death to the underprepared human. Kaufman invokes none of these tropes in his surrealist masterpiece. Instead, he deepens his animation of the typically inanimate by humanizing one of the desert's most striking symbols: the mountain. He turns readers' objectification of this symbol onto our intellectual souls' eyes and ears. Here, the migrant assumes the role of quare maternal healer for this mountain in jeopardy. It is ill; it is, Kaufman writes, "aching" (line 14). Yet, like the migrant's house, where the maternal seemed initially absent, the mountain is not some vacuous, static object of victimhood and exploration. Instead, the mountain, like the butterfly, holds sage, steely consciousness of the maternal lobster. It is not simply an imposing, illusory symbol to boost the egos of humans primed to *conquer* it by climbing it. Adding to the edginess of Kaufman's surrealist imagery, this mountain has teeth, letting readers know its peaks once had the capacity to snipe, to snare, to swallow its climbers whole. Now, though, it is dying. Kaufman leaves readers to deduce that its teeth have been infected by those who have traversed the mountain's terrain for centuries and left behind an excess of refuse that has festered and done irrevocable damage.

In this way, Kaufman makes a subtle environmental statement and offers critique of the dangers of humans' abuse of other metaphysical community members in the natural world, even seemingly inanimate ones, long before other writers of color. The empathetic intellectual/migrant tries to ease the mountain's suffering with poultices, intuiting that the calcification and tooth decay have advanced beyond a point of restoration. In addition, in one of the poem's most

enigmatic moments, Kaufman crafts those conceivably most equipped to offer aid, “dentists all over the state” (line 15a), as inept. They simply fill the mountain with aimless gauze and cover it in bandages that do not heal. After it succumbs, they give it a sea burial. In the hands of these ineffectual dentists, this act of mercy seems an almost criminal one, an afterthought by those with no depth of knowledge of what has been lost. What would otherwise be a lovely, tender image of a mountain receiving its last rites—of an enchanting, bittersweet tale of how grief berthed a gigantic grotto in an ancient Greco-Roman myth—reads as a casting off, a discarding of one of the gods’ creations, even though its surreal, implausible internment has poetic resonance for readers. Lest we forget how far the intellectual/migrant has traveled from that Louisiana bayou, Kaufman’s stanza-closing anaphora reminds us that his quest for freedom is not devoid of multigenerational irony.

Here, Grandfather’s escapist act begins to portend something unexpected down the road for his progeny, and Kaufman fashions a metaphysical “cut” that undercuts any sentimentality that the Tale of the Arizona Mountain might incite. Instead, Kaufman piques readers to ask: What lies ahead for the intellectual/migrant, and where is Grandfather now anyway? Again, the refrain of the first stanza wrests readers from the sadness of the mountain’s death as blues and jazz blur again, metaphor and subtext merge, omen borders on curse. The maternal ancestor of the lobster remains present for the orphaned migrant’s surreal journey, even in Grandfather’s absence, making possible his own quare generativity that Kaufman foregrounds in the fourth and penultimate stanza.

At this pivotal turning point in Kaufman’s surreal journey, the intellectual/migrant’s lobster-butterfly spirit, empowering him to embrace the mother within himself and begin to move beyond contemplation to co-creation in the northern Bay area. The fourth stanza reads:

Next seen in California, the top part,
Arranging a marriage, mating trees,
Crossing a rich redwood and a black pine.
He was exposed by the Boy Scouts of America.
The trees were arrested on a vag charge.
Grandfather had cut out, he couldn't raise the bail. (lines 18-23)

Kaufman offers a prophetic vision in 1959 that challenges contemporaneous political discourse on interracial love and marriage and finally introduces a human maternal body, complicating further the manifestations of the quare. The State sees its fugitive potential and thus polices it. In “the top part” of California, where he is “[n]ext seen” (line 18), Kaufman’s migrant no longer reacts to the events around him or responds solely to the life forces he happens upon. Here, he is “[a]rranging a marriage, mating trees” (line 19), creating the surreality he now knows can be tangible. It is in this space so far from his original trauma that he transforms the death and loss that he has endured and witnessed, cross-breeding an ancient tree of knowledge, “the rich redwood,” with a peer known for its versatility and resilience, “the black pine” (line 20). Both species are known for longevity, each living more than 500 years. In this way, Kaufman demonstrates to the excessiveness of the quare, generativity fueled by State violence, which the migrant discovers through cross-special experimentation. With symbolism, Kaufman highlights the interracial intimacies he finds possible in San Francisco’s art scene. Yet, even in this final destination in this revisionist migration narrative, State-sanctioned surveillance threatens creativity and love. Who, ironically, but the Boy Scouts of America—an organization with a storied, problematic hierarchy and fraught homosociality—would “expose” (line 21) the scandal of such an affair as that which the migrant has fostered? The trees, having committed acts deemed unnatural that the State must punish, get “arrested on a vag charge” (line 22). With this jazz cut, Kaufman sonically invokes, for the first time, black women’s sexuality with a slur used to describe the birth canal and womb. Kaufman cleverly aligns heterosexual procreation outside

the bounds of traditional marriage—unions here that are self-defined, ceremoniously un-Christian, and thus criminally quare—with State-sanctioned spaces of homosociality, where homosexual acts could occur unmitigated, underwritten even, by the State. Thus, the slur “fag” echoes in “vag” in this jazz cut. Kaufman divines his readers will infer from the accusations of vagrancy the implications of same-sex desire, conflating them with those of interracial intimacies. In this stanza, then, he lampoons the absurdity of laws that demonize those who love outside the hegemony of white male heteronormativity.

With this confluence of ironies, Kaufman’s genius conceit coalesces, for what could have been interpreted as a poem in which race has no bearing becomes at this moment a surreal metanarrative on the dangers of racism. What could have been solely a racial satire on the African American quest for freedom manifests as a simultaneous one about the plight of those marked LGBTQ. Long before Kristeva, Crenshaw, and others theorize intertextuality and intersectionality, Kaufman *shows* readers how one feels when one’s racial and sexual identities imbricate one as a criminal many times over. In so doing, he again eschews a sentimental scene for one that grounds his surreal portrait in a tangible, timely dilemma and unmask the true cancers—racism and sexual intolerance—destroying America. As one born in New Orleans—a city where multiraciality is not only a given but a badge of beauty for both its citizens and its international renown and as one whose own mien marks him a member of any number of cultural communities that his imagination can devise—Kaufman offers readers a new political vision for the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond.

Kaufman’s lyrical and musical genius reaches its pinnacle in the closing stanza as his speaker, one so close to the poet that it becomes hard to separate the two, announces his presence in a first-person reference. Kaufman and his speaker introduce an unexpected jazz cut that calls

into question the subject positions of all parties (poet, speaker, intellectual/migrant, Grandfather) and blurs the lines of temporality, materiality, narrative interpellation, and gender and sexual normativity. When the poet-speaker declares “Now I have seen him here” in line 24a, readers are left to wonder: Is the speaker-poet himself the intellectual/migrant reflecting on his own journey or that of an ancestor? Or both? Is Kaufman further mythologizing his alleged Jewish great-grandfather’s assimilation experience? The poet has no desire, it seems, to answer these and other questions; on the contrary, “Grandfather Was Queer, Too” seems most invested in showing how State-sanctioned oppression cyclically affects generations in a family and how innately human it is—particularly for people of African descent, whose subhumanity consistently has been asserted in literary and theoretical texts—to resist physical and metaphysical hegemony, to be Beat, as it were, which, Kaufman philosophizes, is a “queer” act. “He is beat,” Kaufman writes, at the end of line 24, and with that single word, multiple narrative interpretations become apparent to readers who connect the connotations implicit in Beatness and the quare. Fittingly, this partner of the forebear of a quare future has “green ears” (line 25b), alluding to and transforming the lynching trauma described in Stanza 2. This woman, who “is twenty-three months pregnant” (line 26), is particularly empowered and poised to birth to new possibilities, given her green (fertile and unsullied) consciousness/soul. That her gestation is nearly three times as long as is humanly possible under normative circumstances underscores all the more the multigenerational impact of trauma on the black maternal and her progeny, the extremity of the suffering and peril that such an extended labor without release and relief must involve. In this way, the threat of death and stillbirth for mother and her child(ren) looms in the elegy, undermining any notions that the quare future Kaufman portends is not without its dangers. Moreover, in this way, Kaufman—as all African-American elegists do—positions the maternal

body as the prototypical philosophical object to challenge and transform false ontologies of blackness that undergird racist State practices.

Rather than responding in acquiescence and with deference, Beats like the poet-speaker, the intellectual/migrant, and their grandfather(s) before them take pride in vagrant acts that challenge State disenfranchisement and racism. In this final stanza, Kaufman, the quintessential Beat has endowed his speaker and Grandfather with his own anarchist spirit. They are part of a movement that is all but synonymous with championing nonheteronormativity. Kaufman takes his surrealist (re)vision of the African American migration narrative beyond the symbolism of flora and fauna into the bold territory of same-sex human desire, even making room for polyamorous and incestuous interpretations, though my reading interprets the kisses that end the poem far differently. In the poem's last three lines, the speaker and intellectual/migrant, who are at once singular and collective selves and possible doppelgängers for each other and their grandfather(s), are tired of being on the lam and hip to the futurity of corporeal and metaphysical freedom awaiting those who embrace the life of the Beat, of being queer, or, for black bodies, of being quare.

Kaufman seals his surreal (re)vision of the African American migration narrative, which reads much like a dark fable-cum-queer fairy tale, in the penultimate line with kisses to punctuate the simultaneous innocence and irreverence of this relationship between the speaker-intellectual/migrant, his Grandfather and his Grandfather's his girlfriend and to champion the hope of beating the State through what liminal, if endangered, black maternal bodies can birth. One recipient is the poem's male subject, possibly in celebration of how this quare future will unburden him of the strictures and fictions of black hypermasculinity, and possibly as an ominous comfort for the new vulnerabilities they must unpack. The other kiss blesses (and

curses) this woman who bears the scars and carries the weight of these fourteen-months-overdue generations of progeny borne with the legacies (and powerful potential) of the quare. “Live happily ever after,” Kaufman says to and of those in his metanarrative on migration. Yet, his direct address also reaches out to contemporaneous, present-day, and future readers. Throughout “Grandfather Was Queer, Too,” Kaufman uses his own refrain to process this “wounded kinship” of his orphaned state, so far removed from Great-Grandfather Abraham and others. In his elegy, the unnamed girlfriend does not speak or sing. Her objectification proves a compelling quandary, one worthy of greater inquiry. One might read her silence as Kaufman’s own indoctrination into the practice of putting the black maternal in service to black masculinity, except that the entire elegy emerges from what she may birth. Kaufman’s refrain, then, *is* as much her song as Grandfather’s, for it is being passed down throughout generations of gestation, to his speaker to tell us what she and others recall.

Conversely, in “Carl Chessman Interviews the P.T.A.,” another poem from this midcareer season, “Kaufman offers a contrasting view of wealthy white maternity, which is the antithesis of the traumatized black maternal. In this 1967 poem, the poet posits these “gold star mothers” (line 11) as safely aligned with white privilege and State oppression. These women, also grieving the losses of sons to the ongoing Vietnam War, decide to go beyond their traditional grief-stricken roles and install the “cut gas stove” (line 10) that may ultimately kill Chessman, whom Kaufman deems a victim of State oppression. Readers are left to wonder what Chessman hears them singing as this divisive war rages on abroad and civil rights tensions at home escalate to a feverish pitch. (Of course, William Lewis Moore, Medgar Evers, President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Viola Luizza, the Rev. James Reeb, Jimmie Lee Jackson, James Chaney, Andrew Schwerner, the Rev. Jonathan Daniels, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and the Rev. Dr.

Martin Luther King Jr. are among its many casualties.) All that is known is that Chessman “feels their meters” and translates them as “queer” (lines 11-12). This grieving cloud of witnesses against Chessman is not concomitant with the quare that is inherent in blackness and the affirming subjectivities black maternity births. They have indicted Chessman, whose execution Kaufman conflates throughout his elegy with Native American genocide and the ecocide of many hapless flora and fauna, including the buffalo. Thus, Kaufman aligns these “gold star mothers” with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Marie St. Clare and other white women whose cloak of virtue is actually one that hides mendacious, racist worldviews. Thus, the “queer” in “Grandfather Was Queer, Too” is far removed from the “queer” of “Carl Chessman Interviews the P.T.A.,” and it is against the backdrop of these contrasting visions of maternity that Kaufman’s quare futurity in “Grandfather Was Queer, Too” becomes clearer.

In essence, Kaufman posits a kind of utopia that scholar José Esteban Muñoz argues still eludes people of color, particularly blacks, to some degree because of the “queer” meters of the “gold star mothers” of America’s P.T.A.s, which have long solely gotten readers’ attention. Opening *Cruising Utopia* (2004), Muñoz muses, “Queerness is not here yet. ... The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*” (1, his emphasis). Like Muñoz, Kaufman’s re-envisioning of the African American migration narrative challenges readers to reach for that which remains on the cusp, waiting for birth: a nation in which multiracial and sexual intimacies of all kinds thrive free from the State surveillance and oppression. What a quare—if elusive—happily-ever-after that will be when the songs that which black mothers’ voices birth are fully heard, celebrated, and become anthems for twenty-first century subjectivities not interdicted by the strictures of gender binaries.

The Heart of a Southern Womanist: Nina Simone's Resurrection of the African American 'Spell on You,' America

Since her death in 2003, Nina Simone has become a cliché touchstone for musicians who want to tinge their pop music with an activist edge. Lauryn Hill, Mary J. Blige, Kanye West, Jay-Z, Lil Wayne, Common, 50 Cent, and Beyoncé regularly sample her biggest hits and reference her outspokenness as a badge of pride. For reclusive artists like Hill, she is a model of resistance to the industry's rules; for the rest, she tempers their lyrics, which largely reify capitalism and other tools of the State, and gives credibility to them and their fans, who want wealth and cultural capital but also want the social cache that comes with being what is now known as “woke”: hip to the State's ploys to keep those who are beat and quare oppressed, slaves to its dehumanizing systems. Thus, Simone's 1965 cover of Screamin' Jay Hawkin's “I Put a Spell on You” was, in fact, prophetic. She has Americans spellbound a half-century after her music's politics and her intractable personality forced her to leave her native land. From her singular alto's tremulous vibrato and haunting melisma to her penchant for deploying the power of both a wail and several bars of silence in a single line, Simone's mark in the African American elegiac tradition is not only indelible, it is vital. Nonetheless, possibly because of the complexities of the pain that shaped her art, biographies on Simone abound, but Daphne A. Brooks and Aldon L. Nielson are among the few scholars who have examined the poetics in her musicianship and performance, exploring how she melds the diasporic Englishes and songs of black folk of the Deep South with the “high” lyricism and musicianship of the Euro-modern literati.

Poets, however, always have heralded Simone as a peer. Tributes from Lance Jeffers and sister-friend Nikki Giovanni are noteworthy, but Brenda Marie Osbey's “The Evening News: A Letter to Nina Simone” stands out as one of the potent odes. The poem continues the dialogic

tradition that African-American writers have employed—women in particular—since Phillis Wheatley Peters forced colonists in the not-yet United States of America to consider the curious intelligence of one of its least regarded denizens. While narrating her own maturation from a “so grown” girl in New Orleans to Louisiana’s poet laureate, Osbey bears witness to the isolation to which whites and blacks alike subjected Simone and celebrates how the maligned chanteuse tapped into a matrilineal well of shaman-like power to transform any stage into a space where black women’s rage and pain became inexorably palpable. Most important, however, Osbey contemporizes the elegy that Lucy Terry Prince and Wheatley Peters pioneered. With her adept hands and otherworldly voice in a career that spanned five decades, Simone’s jazz poetics made civil rights screeds danceable tunes. Each time you listen, her lyrics contemporize the slave *kweer*’s complaints; transmute the sexual swagger, ribald humor, and pathos of the blues; and reappropriate work songs that well-meaning white folk musicians such as Bob Dylan and Woody Guthrie had used to ascend to pop stardom. She uproots any lingering obeisance and minstrelsy in the gospel, blues, and ragtime tunes her generation inherited. Whereas Terry Prince and Wheatley Peters strictly followed form in order that their elegies could be heard—their critiques of racism and patriarchy more subtle and embedded in lines and, thus, debatable among scholars—Simone inscribed explicit indictments in her elegiac tributes such as “Four Women,” “Mississippi Goddam,” “Pirate Jenny,” “Little Girl Blue,” and “Go Limp,” made even richer by formal choices that blurred genre lines.

In her poem, then, Osbey continues a centuries-long tradition of the Southern African American womanist poet, pushing the limits of the poetic line and acting as a daring witness and prophet in a world that limits her subjectivity and renders her invisible, vacuous or insouciantly (and/or gleefully) complicit in her own subjugation and fetishization in iconography and art. The

Southern African-American womanist can no longer engage in the “self-forgetting” necessary to abet the “delicious misprisions”—borrowing terms that scholar Patricia Yaeger deploys in *The Geography of Identity*—that have shaped the ways in which her disposition, mien and humanity have been diminished in visual art, creative work and popular media since her arrival in America. As Chapter Two underscores, the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other works in its white, liberal lineage instantiated archetypes such as the Mammy and the Jezebel that have fueled the proliferation of stereotypical representations of black women. Instead, then, central to the success of the Southern African-American womanist’s artistic enterprise is the act of “disremembering,” a term Osbey coins in “The Evening News,” which involves using art to unlearn constant messages of her state of non-being. Employing the fruits of the quare—reveling in one’s excessive, fugitive blackness and using one’s sexuality to expose America’s patriarchy and heterosexism—the Southern black womanist resurrects herself from the crypt she finds herself trapped in as an othered Other or non-subject, and to wrest from her creative moments with womanist ancestors a metaphysical and metaphorical transcendence akin to what Toni Morrison’s Sethe calls, in *Beloved*, “re-memory.” In these moments of reverie, of womanist art-making, she is able to cultivate from the stereotypes she has been given a multidimensional subjectivity and liminality that is radically quare and thus alters the space she occupies and the consciousness of her readers/audience.

Simone’s incorporation of classical stylings into her pop music act stand out as a womanist response to being denied admission to Curtis Institute because of her blackness. Scholar Michele Wallace calls for a closer examination of this phenomenon in “Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity,” her contribution to *Reading Black, Reading Feminism*, a 1990 anthology of black women’s voices on their prickly position in the

literary and scholarly canon. In so doing, she problematizes postmodern, hegemonic constructions by Hayden White and Houston Baker that do not account for “the disorderliness of sexuality” and gender that the black feminist’s (or womanist’s, Walker³⁴ would argue) creativity brings to the forefront. Wallace first interrogates Baker’s use of the tropological “black hole” in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*:

[When an] object or energy enters the black hole and is infinitely compressed to zero volume, as Baker reports, ... it passes through to another dimension, whereupon the object and/or energy reassumes volume, mass, form, direction, velocity—all the properties of visibility and concreteness, but in another dimension. The idea of a black hole as a process—as a progression that appears differently, or not at all, from various perspectives—seems a useful way of illustrating ... incommensurability, or variations of negation, as characteristic of black feminist creativity. ... What most people see of the black woman is a void, a black hole that appears empty, not full. (55)

Throughout the rest of the essay, she further questions the ways in which some black feminists, in articulating the hegemony in dominant discourse, reify its negation of the potency of black women’s creative work to disrupt heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality. Wallace’s inquiry allows for a reassessment of this space about which Yaeger speaks to excavate ways in which Southern African-American womanists such as Simone and Osbey emerge from (or even transform) these proverbial black holes into sanctuaries for the quare to which they and their readers/audiences can return for catharsis. Wallace gestures to and identifies Simone as exemplary of this kind of art-making, but in the absence of closer examination of her work as a womanist poet, and Osbey offers scholars a way into that rich terrain. First, though, I offer an explication of Simone’s performance poetry to contextualize the reading of Osbey’s “Evening News” and this (re)birth of a womanist acts of “disremembering” that portends a burgeoning spirit of a new black nationalism that extended beyond the dandyism and pseudo-militarism that Marcus Garvey’s movement for “nationhood” had reduced to spectacle during the Depression to

an activism poised to meet white-supremacist violence with violence as the civil rights and Black Power movements unfolded.

“The Evening News,” published in *The American Voice* in 1988 and collected a decade later in the American Book Award-winning *All Saints*, celebrates Simone’s womanism against all odds while implicating blacks’ abandonment of her amid her descent into depression, addiction and acts of defiance that some might call endemic of madness. Osbey’s poem is a testament to the matrilineal cloud of witnesses that empowered Simone to confidently command a stage when ostensibly there alone. In Osbey’s poem and in Simone’s lyrics and performance, the Southern womanist’s act of “disremembering” exalts her from her subaltern Mammy/Jezebel status to that of a human capable of subjectivity and the freedom to express or blur the lines of genre and gender long enough to make her audiences witnesses to her complex genius and beauty. In doing so, the Southern womanist also honors the matrilineage of witnessing and witness-making that dates to the earliest blacks’ arrival on U.S. shores.

Simone’s most defiant poems of witnessing are her self-proclaimed “show tunes” “Pirate Jenny” and “Mississippi Goddam,” and her performance of them for predominantly white Carnegie Hall audiences in 1964 at the height of ultraviolent responses to the nonviolent fight for civil rights are among her most powerful invocations of her womanist agency. In the former song, she resituates Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill’s *Threepenny Opera* from Victorian London to the ongoing movement shaking the foundation of racists’ terrorism in the heart of the U.S. South, taking on the persona of a seething ship maid in a dramatic monologue that details a murderous plot of revolt and revenge. In the latter, she jokes that “the show hasn’t been written ... yet,” inciting uproarious laughter as the song begins, but warns, by its end, that “this whole country is full of lies / You’re all going to die and die like flies” to stunned silence. How long

would blacks take billy-club attacks and bombings without recompense? Not much longer, she opined, subtly critiquing the false sense of nationalism and pluralism that followed World War II and alluding to the emerging discourse of Nation of Islam, Black Power, Black Panther, and Black Arts movements. Thus, the African-American womanist artist's resilience and audacity endure, and almost every African-American woman artist (and those men who allow their work to interrogate patriarchy and embrace this timeless well of matrilineal witnesses) celebrates a subjectivity that transgresses against the limits of genre and gender. Literal and metaphorical slaps in the face with patriarchy's open hand at every turn do not deter her. Continuing this lineage, then, much of Osbey's oeuvre—and "The Evening News" in particular—sprawls, weaving long, prose-like lines with short lyrical ones in an intricate tapestry of nonlinear narratives that go on for several pages. This style of circuitous storytelling is decidedly African, unequivocally Southern and unapologetically womanist. None of these elements are exclusive of the other, and, like her the womanists before and since her, Osbey is far from an island unto herself in her art-making.

Civil rights-era Simone's elevation to pop icon status as "the High Priestess of Soul" exemplified this phenomenon in a more public way than any other womanist before her in the twentieth century. Whereas Bessie Smith's and Billie Holiday's public narratives were riddled with tales of alcoholism, drug addiction, and bawdy living from the outset, Simone came to prominence as one with classical music training, a staunch, religious upbringing, and social graces and refinement. Behind the curtain, of course, she was no different from these women, trapped for years in an abusive marriage, struggling with addictions to various prescribed and illicit substance, contending with severe depression and other mental health challenges, and wrestling in a private with bisexual urges. Her public performances, then, functioned as lyric

poems, transforming slave and work songs into ritualistic chants that allowed this blues of “disremembering,” the bitterness of objectification/abjection and of agent-subject witness-making, to be heard in the United States and abroad, to become jazz and early rhythm-and-blues. She donned African-Far-East-inspired garb to fit the High Priestess of Soul mold across the globe. At home, however, the truth would become more apparent by the 1970s as Simone’s erratic behavior in performances increasingly resulted in her dismissal as a crazy, drugged-out troublemaker who verbally assaulted audiences and refused to pay U.S. taxes. Osbey noted in a 1992 interview with John Lowe that in the South, especially in New Orleans—the primary setting of “The Evening News”—there are consequences for “the tendency we have to deify—musicians become gods” (*The Future of Southern Letters* 109). Further, she added, that once our gods rebuke us, as Simone did the Jim Crow South that birthed her, “we’re very good at masking ... very good at presenting one face to outsiders and another face within. ... I’m trying to get beyond the surface of things” (111, 112). In “The Evening News,” Osbey serves as a womanist witness and unmaskers Southern blacks’ abjection of their own mother-sister, restoring Simone to a space of liminal power and subjectivity. In the Southern womanist’s art, the abjected black female body and voice are not only honored but exalted to redemptive status, for the womanist as well as the oppressors who have exploited their power.

In her concerts at the Montreux Jazz Festival and Ronnie Scott’s night in London in 1976 and 1983, one sees Simone grappling with her outcast status most evocatively, demonstrating what Osbey describes witnessing in a contemporaneous New Orleans set in “The Evening News.” One sees her beleaguered and yet still indomitable and railing against her subjugation in her music. Following a powerful performance of “Backlash Blues,” a tribute to Langston Hughes, she launches into a coy, upbeat version of “Be My Husband,” the hit song from her

1965 *Pastel Blues* that her ex-husband Andy Shroud had composed at the height of her fame. Herein lies the ironic dilemma of the womanist who comes of age in the U.S. South: The song for which Shroud got writing credit and royalties is a blues standard, “Rosie,” that folklorist and ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax had recorded in the 1940s at Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana, which housed poor blacks sent to prison at the height of Jim Crow, often for minor offenses and their inability to pay bail. How like Kaufman’s Grandfather, how quare. In this way, Shroud’s only alterations of the lyrics were designed to make it heteronormative for a female singer. Like all blues tunes, “Rosie’s” call-and-response refrain harkens spirituals that slaves birthed while enduring dehumanizing labor, not unlike that which slaves experienced on Southern plantations. Despite Lomax’s well-intentioned efforts to heighten multicultural awareness, his recordings empowered Shroud, a former police officer, to profit from the despair of African-American men in prison and the pain of Simone, then his wife, who he literally beat into submission after she had been denied access to classical piano training at Curtis, the premier American institute, because of her race and had taken up a lounge act to make ends meet.

Performing at Montreux in Switzerland, whose political neutrality makes it a haven for African-American artists on the periphery of the American music industry even today, Simone feels free to admit in the moment that she had never wanted to be a singer. Transforming the words her ex-husband had appropriated, she channels the improvisational talk-sing-moan-style of African-American ministers like her mother through lyrics she makes up as she recounts her struggles. In Simone’s remix of “Be My Husband,” a tale of a woman yearning for a lover to stop cheating becomes a tale of an African-American woman’s quest for America to do right by her, to take her artistic expression and social struggle seriously. Simone reclaims in her performance the agency and spiritual dividends her ex-husband’s physical abuse had denied her

and makes her audience at once witnesses to and participants in her protest against the financial exploitation that she and other African Americans have endured in the American music industry, which cost her millions in royalties. She further invokes the struggles of womanist ancestors who have been abused in an oppressive system designed to keep their bodies alive for service while destroying their spiritual and mental fortitude. She recalls a conversation a giant of the New Negro Renaissance:

The media, you see, is real. It lives. ... Langston Hughes died. He told me many months before. He said, 'Nina, I know it's been hard for you, baby. ... They never wanted to accept ya: black[s]—you see that brother down there, looking up at the ceiling?—'and whites.' They're easier. The blacks never, ever. ... So I'm gonna leave ya with the blues. ... You know, I made 35 albums. They bootlegged 70. Oh, everybody took a chunk of me!

She explains that Hughes's encouraged her even as he empathized with the difficulties she faced. As a Southern womanist creating in a U.S. culture driven by colorism, racism and sexism, Simone's darker skin and self-pride, linked to African sensibilities of royalty and divinity more than American slavery and shame, had made her art unpalatable to whites and blacks alike and, thus, difficult to market on U.S. shores.

By the time of this performance, Simone, born Eunice Waymon and raised in a small North Carolina community, had emigrated from New York to Bermuda and Liberia because of tax evasion charges. In this performance (as in her autobiography, *I Put a Spell on You*), she links her exile to a media campaign against her because of her transformation from rural-South child prodigy to jazz chanteuse of hits such as "My Baby Just Cares for Me" to outspoken civil rights activist belting "Mississippi Goddam." Only her initial and final transformations had been her own; discrimination and an abusive husband had forced her to surrender to the one that had brought her global acclaim. The remainder of Simone's performance at Montreux is filled with ethereal moments in which she blends the classical piano skills she had mastered outside Curtis

Institute with blues, jazz, gospel and folk music traditions in transcendent, spellbinding ways. She often expresses her adulation for the audience of primarily white Swiss and French people. However, those moments often are undercut—insightfully and intentionally—as she declares, “I am a queen.” She stops her performance to tell individuals to sit down and give her their undivided attention as she denounces humans’ general inhumanity to one another.

The most poignant moment occurs when, in trying “to tell my story,” she improvises again while singing Janis Ian’s “Stars” and Morris Albert’s “Feelings,” linking herself to the tragic lives of Janis Joplin and Billie Holiday, who, she says, “told [this story] even better.” “People lust for fame. ... They live their lives in sad cafes and music halls, and they always have a story,” she begins. “But you never know the pain of using a name you never owned, and the years of forgetting what you know too well.” Then, she momentarily succumbs to the emotion the lyrics have aroused, the rest of the words of Ian’s song failing her. “Feelings? Nothing more than feelings, feelings of love?” she repeats several times, staring into a space in the amphitheater above the crowd—ironically this liminal space with an invisible but palpable matrilineal cloud of witnesses that no doubt include Dunbar-Nelson, Smith, Holiday, and others—and then scanning audience members’ faces as she transitions to the second part of “my story ... while a robot gets herself together.” “I wish I *never lived* this long!” she moans, her eyes welling with tears as she intermittently wails, coos, moans, and sighs the lyrics. “I hope this feeling *never comes again!*” (her emphasis) Amid the emotional outpouring, she forgets the words to that classic song as well. “Feelings, oh who, whoa, whoa, feelings ...” she repeats, then moans, “Feed me! Feed me!” while the transfixed audience, in obedience, sings along, the refrain almost inaudible.

Bewildered by her own planned performance gone awry, Simone had been jolted from what Yaeger's performative "space of self-forgetting" into a moment of stillness, of silence, of accountability (*The Geography of Identity* 2). Early in the set, she had been able to wall herself, as it were, into an exalted space in her narrative of sovereign victimhood—where she was at once queen of the stage and wronged black woman in an industry where "delicious misprisions about boundaries, origins, solidarity, and the politics of community" of black art are de rigueur. Something about the silence forced her out of, Yaeger notes, the "phantasmatic space that [made] use of its hollowness to create a dream of closeness or proximity" to her audience (21). She becomes witness to the complex reality of her own complicity and implication in her alcohol, prescription and recreational drug abuse, forcing her audience to witness its own complicity and implication in the abjection that contributed to her descent into addiction. Simone quickly returns to her first love, the piano, to fill these silences, her flourishes ranging from pianissimo to fortissimo, with sforzando and glissandos in between. Then, she is able to face her truths: "No matter ... what the drugs may do, what songs may do, what people may do or machines will do to you. I will always have my feelings. Nothing can destroy that 'cause that is all that there is—the base," she confesses. These confessions make the lyrics of those two powerful songs about the plight of the lovelorn womanist—not the least of which Simone herself was—even more complex and powerful. Ultimately, Simone expresses her love of the "terrible, wonderful peacefulness" of the Swiss people and their "very lyrical" French language and her desire "to stay amongst you for a little while," and she would, in fact, settle eventually into a home in the neighboring South of France. She lived there until her death in 2003.

Through Yaeger and Laub's lens, one can begin to understand Simone's meltdown and inability to articulate her painful story at Montreux and, as "The Evening News" demonstrates, in

New Orleans—another coastal hotbed across the Atlantic where numbness or feigned ambivalence to issues of colorism, racism and sexism has become an ontological necessity to survive French, Spanish and U.S. colonialism. These trauma scholars make clearer these moments of “self-forgetting,” where Simone’s sense of self amid this cloud of witnesses elude her and where she is forced to face the decades she has been psychologically and physically assailed with her ex-husband’s beatings and various U.S. institutions’ punishment for her very existence and evolution as a Southern womanist—and, even more unsettling, her own complicit perpetuation of abuse against herself with drugs. As Osbey painfully depicts in “The Evening News,” which pays witness to another breakdown at a concert a decade after Montreux, Simone’s experience in New Orleans does not end so peacefully.

In the 270-line, twenty-four-stanza “Evening News,” Osbey charts her journey from girlhood in New Orleans to womanhood in England, the South of France and elsewhere while unpacking Simone’s descent from jazz-pop god(dess) to embittered expatriate. In the poem, Osbey shows this Louisiana port city’s simultaneous globality and undeniable U.S. Southernness. The opening stanza of her epistolary poem harkens Simone’s signature mournful voice subtly but palpably—“a wail / a whoop” (*All Saints* 54)—then quickly ushers readers into the realm of metaphor, one that he leaves open to contemplation and one that is a more straightforward refrain throughout the letter to Simone around which her genre- and gender-blending womanist endeavor pivots. The first—“a line brought back from nowhere”—speaks to the matrilineal cloud that hovers, always accessible, for the Southern womanist in her art-making. Osbey alludes here that the energy that pulses through Simone in performance reflects her awareness that she has at her fingertips preternatural forces that have transcended the limits of what scholar Hortense Spillers calls, in her watershed essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” “undecipherable markings

on the captive body [that] render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing of skin color” (67). She continues to prove that “this marking and branding actually ‘transfers’ from one generation to another” (67) in performances such as Simone’s. Whether a packed theater or an intimate jazz pub, Simone, the High Priestess of Soul, lays bare the historical lacerations encoded in her dark brown flesh with mournful moaning and guttural wails that at once honor the masculine and feminine energies she embodies and conjures. She further allows her physicality, musical mastery across traditions and vocal acrobatics to show deep-seated human frailty, anguish and rage. In the succeeding line, then, Osbey quickly links this truth about the Southern womanist and her cloud of ancestral witnesses to the second metaphor: “deep violet of memory.” This color, a common symbol in literature to mark those with spiritual insight, mirrors Simone’s gift as shaman, conveying that it is so embedded in her (and other womanists) that not even her decline into what some might call madness can wrest it away. In line five, Osbey also makes note of the fact that the Southern womanist knows that s/he must keep an artistic resolve “stored up against hard times’ coming,” because s/he faces an inescapable precarity in the Deep South and could be tortured at any moment, possibly without consequence for the perpetrator of violence. Spillers makes this clear in her essay when she says, “This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside” (67). With the word “deep,” Osbey subtly yet effectively alludes to the diasporic religions Simone’s performances harken. In the last four lines of the opening stanza, Osbey articulates Southern blacks’ awareness of their state, not as abjected Other or subaltern, but “righteous” and “experienced in things we had not seen / but always knew / would pass this way” (54). In this way, Osbey shows that the sentience of black flesh (and womanists’ art)

supersedes any perceived naiveté or performed obeisance because, as the one-line second stanza proclaims, “we had righteousness on our side” (line 10).

In the third stanza, Osbey empathizes with Simone’s indictment of her New Orleans audience “for their smallness. / not just their numbers / but their looks. / their soulless way of sitting / and waiting to be entertained” (lines 11-16). Here, Osbey addresses Simone’s exalted, even deified, womanist posture, one she identifies as that of “the old folk, when cornered perhaps” (line 21). It is from this perspective that the god(ess) Simone, an embodiment of this matrilineal cloud, “abused” (line 12) and “cursed them good” (line 17), initiating the “disremember[ing]” (line 22) that the Southern womanist inspires. Osbey continues, in line 18, that “they took it,” reckoning with “all they used to be so long ago they never could forget” (line 20). Further noteworthy, here, is that Simone’s audience—gathered in a city in which the remnants of nearly 300 years of miscegenation make racial distinctions irreducible to simply “black” and “white”—is not racialized explicitly in Osbey’s poem. Rather, her “we” and “they” harken avowed non-black allies as well as blacks who know they cannot forget the lash that some of their ancestors felt, the backlash of racism they currently endure and the even greater scrutiny their beloved Nina has suffered across racial lines alike. Simone gives the blacks the lashing that they have come to expect and the non-blacks the verbal beating that at once punishes them for their ancestors’ oppressive acts and absolves them, in that moment of release, what Kristeva and Freud theorize, divergently, as *jouissance*. From this point, Osbey situates her own maturation from adolescent to young woman in the fifth through tenth stanzas, marked by her growing awareness of some sense of authenticity and daring truth about the anti-civil rights violence that Simone castigated: “even i had sense enough to see you and not weep. / even a child then understood ... anyone could see we were all the evening news” (lines 29-30a, 35)

Osbey recalls she and her friend being admonished to “quit all that giggling / and learn to listen to nina” (lines 45-46) and, as they do, their becoming witness, via Simone’s music and the images on television that they invoke, to the sense of unity their college-age siblings showed with their expressions of black identity and they, too, begin to realize they have within them. They “learned when and when not to apologize” for their expressions of femininity (line 62) and cultural identity (72-82). After stanza 10, however, Osbey charts Simone’s decline—even as her faithful followers as far away as the France that would become her final home “sat in the silence in the dark ... / listening and did not touch . / ... we did not touch / or bow down our heads” (lines 129, 145-146). By stanza sixteen, Osbey’s “i” conflates with Simone’s voice to articulate her despair, culminating in an incantation and litany that deepen the understanding of the lyrics of “Be My Husband,” situating the singer in the position of the dually gendered and wholly worshipped titular lover. She apologizes to Simone that the South that raised her “did not mean to give you up / to let you go off alone that way” (lines 233-234), realizing “how cursed, / how sorry a mess of people we can be, nina / when outside-a you / there is no place to go?” (267-270)

In this way, the elegies of Kaufman and Simone, the latter read through Osbey’s affectionate lens, empower readers to “disremember” Southern womanists—and black flesh in all of its iterations along the gender spectrum— as least empowered in the diaspora and to reaffirm her own subjectivity among a cloud of matrilineal witnesses, without whom any cosmopolitan notions of community are unfathomable. By the mid-twentieth century, this pair had blazed a path for a future of excessive, self-reflexive blackness that celebrated sexual fluidity and an embrace of the black maternal. However, contemporaneous movements soon would invest in hypermasculine and bigoted discourse as tools to fight white supremacist violence, and one of its leaders, LeRoi Jones, would choose a metaphorical death over the dark, dank truth.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘NOBODY SINGS ANYMORE’: THE GHOST OF LEROI JONES

AND THE (RE)BIRTH OF A QUARE NATION

“I am inside someone / who hates me. I look / out from his eyes. Smell / what fouled tunes come in / to his breath. / Love his / wretched women. / Slits in the metal, for sun. Where / my eyes sit turning, at the cool air / the glance of light, or hard flesh / rubbed against me, a woman, a man, / without shadow, or voice, or meaning.”—LeRoi Jones, “An Agony. As Now.,” *The Dead Lecturer*, October 1964

“In Chicago, I kept making the queer scene. ... On the train, I wrote all this down. A journal now sitting in a tray on top the closet, where I placed it today. The journal says ‘Am I like that?’ ‘Those trysts with R?’ ... Flesh to flesh, the cold halls echo death. And it will not come. I am myself after all. The dead are what move me. The various dead. ... ‘I’m sorry. I’m fucked up. My mind, is screwy, I don’t know why. I can’t think. I’m sick. I’ve been fucked in the ass. I love books and smells and my own voice.’ ”—LeRoi Jones, June 1965, *The System of Dante’s Hell*

“Let the world be a Black Poem / And Let All Black People Speak This Poem / Silently / or LOUD”—Amiri Baraka, “Black Art,” New York *Liberator* magazine, December 1966; *Black Magic*, June 1969

“When I die, the consciousness I carry I will to / black people. May they pick me apart and take the / useful parts, the sweet meat of my feelings. And leave / the bitter bullshit rotten white parts / alone.”—“leroy,” Amiri Baraka, *Black Magic*, June 1969

“In the beginning was not only the word but the contradiction of the word.”—Ralph Ellison, “Society, Morality, and the Novel,” 1957

After enduring the murder of Malcolm X in March 1965, a severe beating by police in his native Newark, New Jersey, in July 1967, and the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968, LeRoi Jones (née Everett Leroy Jones) made a final and dramatic shift in his poetics and life that had been underway at least seven years. He adopted the personae of Imamu Ameer/Ameear Baraka and ultimately Amiri Baraka. These noms de plume were among many he had chosen over the course of the first half of his life, all of which allowed the diminutive Jones to shed—in amorous relations with effete white yuppies and layer by metaphorical, typological layer on the page—the beatnik ideals that had shaped his personal and artistic experimentation, which he had cultivated over a decade in New York’s Greenwich

Village. Free of Leroy, Le Roi, and LeRoi Jones, Amiri Baraka committed fully to the Marxism and radical black nationalism he had begun to proselytize in Harlem and his hometown, which would deepen in the latter half of the 1960s and intensify over the latter half of his life.

There was much for LeRoi Jones to cast off publicly to become Amiri Baraka. He had been in an interracial marriage to the former Hettie Cohen, a Jewish woman, which produced two daughters, and had sired another daughter, born to Italian-American poet Diana di Prima, in 1962, two years before he was formally divorced. He also had documented in several semi-autobiographical works—most notably the play *The Toilet* (1964), *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965), a novella, and *Tales* (1967), his sole short-story collection—the same-sex desire and a host of same-sex dalliances that characters respectively named Foots, Ray, and Roi experience with teen and young adult peers and older men. Since Fred Moten and José Esteban Muñoz have unpacked Jones's plays at length in their respective *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Radical Tradition* (2003) and *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), I focus in the final chapter of *Quare Poetics* on Jones's description of "trysts," with men and women alike, in *System* and his bon voyage to "Negro" identity in poems from, respectively, *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), his last collection as LeRoi Jones, and 1969's *Black Magic*, his first collection as Amiri Baraka. I choose these early works in the poetics of this giant in American letters, possibly African American literature's most generically prolific writer, to underscore the moment in African American literature when queer intimacies on the page became so linked to authorial identity that it required that Amiri Baraka kill LeRoi Jones.

'That Thing Screams': Rejecting 'the Female' Within

"An Agony. As Now." and "leroy," then, emerge from a vexing, racist, and homophobic historicity that empowers writers marked *black/Negro/queer* to use their speakers to indict white

male perpetrators of supremacist ideologies and terrorism at the same time they may appear to unburden themselves of carrying the weight of nearly three centuries of racism and heterosexism. In the former poem, Jones's speaker performs as expected; he is tormented with a self-loathing for which he largely blames himself. As in Jones's debut collection, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), particularly its titular poem, readers find a lover who is exhausted with disease in "An Agony. As Now." Jones's speaker is weary and wary of the troubling simultaneity of having learned to hate himself *and* the white men and women whose ancestors birthed the hate. Caught in the crosshairs of a purported polyamorous, ambisexual revolution, this speaker, like Jones himself, must contend with the coercion his ancestors suffered that continues to haunt his own sexual choices. The first two stanzas, rendered in full in this prologue's first epigraph, lay bare the synesthetic trauma of white supremacy. This speaker's worldview and all of his sensual experiences (be they amorous, olfactory, sonic, or gustatory) are "fouled" by the very racist air he breathes (lines 1-5a). For him, all intercourse is cursed. If one were to take the opening two lines literally, he is making a bold declaration about penetrating a man who is no doubt white. However, even if one focalizes on the metaphysical and presumes that he is being self-reflexive about internalized racism and heterosexism, as the remainder of this reading does, Jones's speaker frames sex with women, particularly white ones who are presumed the most desirable objects for black male revenge against white male domination, as "wretched" (line 6). "Love" with them amounts to little more than sexual anhedonia (line 5b-6). In the succeeding stanza, the speaker analogizes his (and his lovers' collective) body to an armor or prison, and his eyes are but "slits in the metal, for sun" (line 7). However, the light that enters the speaker offers no warmth or greater illumination. Instead, a small opening permits only the discomfiting sensation of "cool air" (line 8b) as the speaker gets a mere "glance" (line 9a) outside this metaphorical cell

or armor as another's "hard flesh [is] rubbed against" him (line 9b-10a). If he feels any arousal from this touch, he chooses not to articulate its source in any discernible way. Frankly, for Jones's speaker, gender doesn't matter because all intimacies come with an endless agony. Thus, he is ambivalent about his inability (or outright refusal) to determine and/or disclose the gender of the person caressing him, and he does not feel beholden to any readers', auditors', or monitors' demand that he identify the source of this touch by "shadow, or voice, or meaning" (lines 10b-11).

What becomes clearer—and most important—for Jones's speaker to communicate in the succeeding four stanzas is that this touch not only incites the guilt he has internalized, but it also affirms the intense spiritual and psychic suffering his Negro flesh endures as a result of living daily in various states of imagined and actual isolation, imprisonment, and surveillance. This speaker senses, then, that he is what white supremacists love most, the ultimate victim of his own self-loathing, and this knowledge fuels the nihilism Jones would eventually cast off to realize what Muñoz theorizes as a post-queer (and problematically homophobic) future. However, encoded in this poem is the hint of protest that would manifest fully once the Jones persona dies and the Black Arts Movement for which Amiri Baraka has become a symbolic leader unleashes its androcentric wrath. This early, more subtle protest of Jones, rooted in Wheatley Peters's *sable* theology, springs from his speaker's self-awareness that this formless, racially and gender-ambiguous touch affirms the presence of a pan-African, preternatural divinity that precedes and precludes Judeo-Christian conceptions of a masculine Trinity. This consciousness begins to manifest in the third stanza, where the speaker avows that his "innocence is a weapon," an originary, if now foreign, space (line 13). This short-lived resistance to guilt allows him to confess that he has "abandoned" his soul (line 16), which has been only "an abstraction" (line

14) at this point. Ultimately, however, this speaker cannot seem to move beyond being a passive victim who knows he is spiritually blind, pitiable, and held aloft in repose at his behest, as though he were a corpse, by those he knows mean him harm (lines 16-18). His suffering is multivalent, multilayered, and deepened by his sense that that which makes him feel beautiful makes a reclamation of an African connection to the divine all the more prescient, if elusive.

This torment stems from an awareness of the speaker's abandoned soul as an extension of the first man in Judeo-Christian mythology, Adam, and Adam's pursuit of Godlike omniscience and omnipotence. The speaker realizes, too, that the pain intensifies as his once-myopic vision senses the memory of the loss of his female selves and the shame that comes with their witnessing his hunger for what he has lost. Jones's speaker intimates that implicit here is the conquering, lording predator Eve/Lilith must have observed in Adam's newly opened eyes for his female selves, the good and the abjected evil that was once within. Literally beside his female selves, he—and they—can sense his flesh hunger for them, which causes them to flee “from me into / that forest” (line 21b-22). That these female agents of divinity hasten here into “that forest” harkens and subverts the narrative of “wilderness” wandering that shapes the spiritual awakenings of many Judeo-Christian heroes (i.e. Joseph, Moses and the children of Israel, Elijah, David, Job, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Saul/Paul). In those narratives, these men act alone and converse with a masculinized God. Here, however, the speaker's short-lived awakening and earlier declaration of innocence become more directly linked to his embrace of what he calls “the *yes*” (Jones's italicization, lines 26-27, 29, 33) of the knowledge that the record of this female beauty will not be found in “his (read: any given white supremacist theologian's) books,” which imagine this masculine God as a vengeful, white master not unlike themselves (line 27). Instead, in this moment, Jones's speaker has a new imaginary vision that transports him “higher than

even old men thought / God would be” (lines 25-26a) so that he can see his metaphysical God selves in syzygy with the most basic symbols of Earth’s natural world (“the tree” and “slow river,” lines 30b-31a) and the center of the celestial universe (“A white sun in its wet sentences,” line 31b). Aligning himself with mysterious, elemental forces in humans’ conceptions of the universe, about whose creation every religion has mythologized, makes all the more compelling this speaker’s denouncement of white supremacists’ documented knowledge in the preceding lines as “withered yellow flowers” that were “never / beautiful” (lines 28b-29a). (Here the blues of Dunbar-Nelson’s violets echoes.)

In this pivotal moment, Jones’s speaker realizes that learning to see this female connection to the divine and to beauty everywhere, on Earth as it is in the heavens, must undergird a new ontology that must be “practiced” (line 30a). He is on the cusp of proselytizing the gospel of “the yes” of these proto-female divine forces within himself, and this declaration of syncretic faith becomes briefly a welcome mantra (“You will, lost soul, say / ‘beauty’,” lines 29b-30a). Readers have glimpsed this kind of recognition and admiration of a faith to which the female has an equally central role before. Jones’s speaker in “An Agony. As Now.” harkens the one who gazes lovingly in “Preface to Twenty Volume Suicide Note” on a child much like Jones’s biracial daughter, Kellie, to whom Jones dedicates the poem. As that speaker looks in on her, the toddler prays to “no one” (line 15). Having been wallowing throughout the poem in his own state of disillusionment and apocalyptic, dystopic vision of the world, where the ground seems poised to swallow him whole and no religion’s God intervenes to rescue him from it, this father rushes to see how his daughter makes sense of what remains senseless to him and what, in fact, makes him contemplate the end of his own Earth-bound life. As he peers into his daughter’s room, he finds “only she on her knees, peeking into / Her own clasped hands” (lines 16-17). In

this syncretic (re)vision that Jones fashions, much like the one to which he returns at this moment in “An Agony. As Now.,” the Islamic and Judeo-Christian prayer postures blend as the speaker’s daughter not only shows deference and reverence to external, all-encompassing divine forces but also makes her pleas with her hands open and palms held upward. Yet, this girl child’s act of “peeking into / Her own clasped hands” shows that she somehow intuits that the desires of her heart, named before God, lie as much in her own hands as they do the divine’s. They are co-creators here, and she has not yet learned that God is a white master to whom she must be an obedient servant, lest she suffer God’s wrath.

Whereas Jones’s “Preface to a Twenty-volume Suicide Note” ends in this liminal space of possibility, Jones—and his speaker in “An Agony. As Now.”—makes an important turning point in his poetics in *The Dead Lecturer*. Rather quickly, the speaker returns to his pattern of oscillation between certainty and disavowal, between admiration and abnegation of the beauty of the woman within, and shifts again with an “Or,” in line 32 that undercuts his aforementioned mantra (“You will, lost soul, say / ‘beauty’,” lines 29-30). No longer able to transcend the imprisoned state of his flesh by connecting to the feminized celestial and the natural world (Mother Earth, as it were), he identifies the once-gender-ambiguous, damning touch that opened the poem with “cold men in their gale” (line 32). Although they, too, incite what he names as “Ecstasy” (line 32) and a kind of communion of body and soul, they offer no sustenance (“their bowls / empty,” lines 33b-34a), their spiritual incantations torment (“They chant at my heels, not at yours,” lines 34), and their presence makes the connection of flesh and soul “corrupt” (line 35a). In the presence of these men, he is unable to fully embrace his inherent beauty—his colloquial feminine side of his God selves—and appreciate it as an extension of himself that neither he nor any man needs to pillage, conquer, or reclaim/own. In their presence, “the answer

moves too quickly” (line 35b) and God becomes “a [singular] self” (line 36b). Here, Jones refuses to do that which Spillers illumines in her widely anthologized essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe, ” first published in the Summer 1987 issue of *Diacritics*, as integral to any African American male writer’s liberation from white supremacist hegemony: to embrace “the power of ‘yes’ to the female within” (80). Throughout her landmark essay, Spillers decodes the legacy of slavery in forestalling blacks’ creation of traditional nuclear families—such that children’s “condition” as chattel was determined by their mothers, not their fathers—and demonstrates how the “black American male embodies the *only* American community of males handed the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself” (80, her emphasis). As quickly as Jones is able to revisit the memory of and briefly bask in mirrors of his female selves in the celestial elements and in nature, the prison and armor of his male body reminds him of the pain of their loss as other men breathe cold air on and man-handle his “white hot metal” flesh (lines 36b-37a).

In these final moments in the sixth stanza, Jones’s speaker reminds those observing and listening to his quandary that even as he suffers, he remains circumspect about his objectification under the white supremacist gaze that reduces him to a queer object. Even as he “[g]lows as the day with its sun” (line 37b) and longs to inhabit “a human love” (line 38a), his existence is at best skeletal, not fully animate, and his complex artistic effusions are misinterpreted “as words or simple feeling” (lines 38b-39). In fact, this speaker finds he is not a *he* at all. Disembodied and rendered lifeless amid imprisonment in this armor, the speaker names the skeletal self an “it” in the seventh stanza and chooses the antithesis of the transcendence described only two stanzas before. Jones’s rhetorical shift here underscores his abrupt, 180-degree pivot back to the expected posture of victimhood and powerlessness. He goes so far as to offer a contradiction of

his own words in this penultimate stanza, denouncing his declaration of “human love” in the preceding one with the nihilistic notion that “it [the skeleton of the speaker’s former self] has no feeling” (line 40a). He blames this loss of humanity on an alchemist’s work—and he, of course, is the self-reflexive alchemist: “As the metal, is hot, it is not, / given to love” (lines 40b-41). Here, Jones is testing his predominantly white yuppie readership. He is demonstrating what Henry Louis Gates Jr. spent nearly 300 pages theorizing as the work of the signifyin’ monkey. Although he is being very mannish here, his womanish tendencies are also showing, as Alice Walker and Mae Henderson would surmise, and he is doublespeaking in a number of mother tongues. Like any brother from any corner of America, he knows how to play the dozens, even as he lays bare the ache of being misunderstood, of being forced to play the part of singing Nina Simone’s “disremembering” backlash blues. *Ain’t got no home. Ain’t got no job. Ain’t got no earth. Ain’t got no faith. Ain’t got no love. Ain’t got no god. ...*

Jones lets his speaker pretend to be at ease with what poet-scholar Duriel E. Harris has begun to call “thingification”³⁵ because that is what his predominantly white readers want him to be. In rejecting “the yes to female within,” the master-alchemist Jones applies heat to the overwrought, manmade matter in the eighth and final stanza as the speaker’s skeletal metal self, also an “it” here, “burns the thing / inside it” (lines 42-43a). It is in this cramped, incinerated state that the truth of the Negro body as an queer object of protest emerges, the truth that sound studies theorists such as Moten, Ashon Crawley, and other Moten acolytes (myself included) will no doubt spend the rest of the twenty-first century distilling. Akin to the helplessness Frederick Douglass expresses in his 1855 *Narrative* in witnessing his Aunt Hester’s brutal beating, Jones concretizes the queer object’s pain simply and powerfully in lines 43b and 44, the final two lines of “An Agony. As Now.”: “And that thing / screams.”³⁶

How does one inhabit the sentient flesh of a woefully abused, utterly trapped, dehumanized and emasculated victim who must provide in any given moment evidence of the suffering that comes with oppression—the moan, the make-me-wanna holler and the holler, the scream, the wail—and perform as one whose threshold for pain is so great that one can, on demand, become a stoic object, apparently devoid of feeling? Only as a Negro “thing” can Jones’s speaker survive the soul-tormenting heat of the heterosexist gaze of white male supremacy and reconnect with “the female within.” He cannot name her presence here, as the poem ends; yet, he has learned that as long as white male supremacy pervades, to be a thing is to be Negro and feminized, and only as a Negro “thing” can Jones feign complicity in his oppression *while* articulating protest *against* the very system that creates his speaker’s objectification.

‘I Guess I’ll Get Pregnant’: A Rape Survivor Loses His Religion

Jones’s critique of the Negro as an oppressed queer object intensifies the following year with the publication of *The System of Dante’s Hell*. In this novella, Jones’s protagonist, Roi, more often than not assumes passive roles as he recounts his search for a place to call home in Jones’s native Newark, New Jersey, New York City’s Greenwich Village and Lower East Side, Chicago, and Shreveport, Louisiana. Jones and his Roi hunger for a world devoid of the white supremacy that necessitates a veneer of hypermasculinity, and as Roi realizes no such place exists outside himself, he begins a scatological descent through the levels of torment Dante Alighieri made famous in the fourteenth century. Two passages of his most confessional meditations on same-sex experiences offer occasion to ponder what the writer who would become Amiri Baraka needs to exorcise from himself before giving up the ghost of LeRoi Jones. The first comes in “Circle 8 (Ditch 5) Grafters (Barrators).” Here, he concludes a sweeping,

panoramic view of pubescence in Newark's projects, one that leads him to reflect upon his brief sojourn in the Windy City:

In Chicago, I kept making the queer scene. Under the "El" with a preacher. And later, in the rotogravure, his slick (this other, larger, man, like my father) hair, murrays grease probably. He had a grey suit with gold and blues threads and he held my head under the blanket. The first guy (he spoke to me grinning and I said my name was Stephen Dedalus. ... One more guy and it was over. On the train, I wrote all this down. A journal now sitting in a tray on top the closet, where I placed it today. The journal says 'Am I like that?' 'Those trysts with R?'. ... Space, now those thin jews live there and my brusque cuckold friend. Another bond. You miss everything. Even pain. ... Not what I am, who says that. Not what I am. ... Flesh to flesh, the cold halls echo death. And it will not come. I am myself after all. The dead are what move me. The various dead. (61-63)

Ron Simmons and E. Patrick Johnson, respectively in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (1991) and *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003), have excerpted these passages to invoke "sympathy" for "the pain and the fear" that drive Amiri Baraka's homophobia (218) and to assert that "Baraka's heterosexuality subsists through the continual sustenance that his homosexual disavowal provides" (60). Beyond the shock of reading that Roi has been forced to perform fellatio on an unattractive, older black man and has invited Jewish men into his marriage bed, however, what remains most strikingly unexamined from this passage is Jones's invocation of the torment that drives James Joyce's antihero in several works, most notably *Ulysses*. Stephen Dedalus's mother constantly haunts him because he, an avowed agnostic humanist, refused to honor her deathbed prayer request. What about this Irish literary ancestor and his character's agony resonate with Jones and his Roi? It is arguably Dedalus's disavowal of and disdain for his mother's suffocating Judeo-Christian faith, even in the face of death. Joyce's alter ego no longer accepts what he had been raised to believe as fact. This stance affirms the more brazen critique Amiri Baraka would deploy against the naïvete that undergirds some African American religious practice, particularly in *System's* coda, "Sound and Image," and in his speaker's abjection of maternal piety in "Ieroy," close

readings of which unfold in subsequent pages. Like Dedalus, Jones sees and hears the sounds of mourning everywhere, especially in moments of intimacy and even as his risks bring him in close repose with an elusive dance partner, death. In the end, what seems like acceptance of his hypersexual worldview (“I am myself after all”) actually reflects Roi donning the mask he often wears as he copes with his constant companions and literary inspirations: grief and melancholia (“The dead are what move me. The various dead”).

Roi’s religious ambivalence, sexual risk-taking, and dissociative personality traits (“Not what I am, who says that. Not what I am”) make sense, given forced oral sodomy by one whose job is to spread the Good News. However, three chapters later, in “The Eight Ditch (Is Drama,” readers learn the original source of Roi’s melancholic fugue: He has endured sexual predation and gang rape. Jones recounts the ordeal as a verse play that is set in an apparent camp for members of the military. (Here, Jones positions his bookish protagonist in a space he knows well, having served as an Army librarian in Puerto Rico in the late 1950s.) Some misogynists might argue that Roi is complicit, but it is difficult not to see the sex as rape. Initially, Roi lies in the prone position on his cot, doesn’t resist as Herman Saunders undresses and grinds on top of him, and appears mildly curious about the prospect of being penetrated by his Newark comrade, who avows he is full of a manifold “blues” he longs to convey intimately. However, when Herman tries to pull down Roi’s trousers, Roi cries out, “Oh shudup, shudup, willya, for christ’s sakes keep your fat mouth quiet” and tries to “get up from under” Herman (91). However, at that moment, Herman pens a confused Roi down and commands him to accept the blues he begins to pound into his anus; he ignores Roi’s “short sharp moan” and instead orders him to “wiggle a little” (92-93). Accustomed to doing what he is told, Roi begins “pushing up and down as fast as he can,” and once Herman quickly ejaculates inside him, he immediately dissociates himself

from his violation by imagining himself a newly inseminated black mother-to-be, awkwardly joking that “I guess I’ll get pregnant” (93). Adding insult to injury, another youth, Otis, discovers Herman and Roi in a compromising, post-coital position and crassly announces “I want some” (93), but Herman wrestles him away long enough for Roi to dash out of their tent. However, in the chapter-as-verse-play’s closing scene, which extrapolates its brief opening one, Jones directs readers back to the tent, where the implied gang rape unfolds after Herman mounts Roi, who deems resistance is futile this time (“Because you say it’s all there is ... I guess”), while their comrades sleep. Herman grunts and moans to express his pleasure loudly and intentionally rouses nearby comrades Wattley and Cookie, who mirror Otis’s reaction during the initial rape scene and egg on Herman to hasten so that they can enjoy Roi’s “sweet cakes” (95-96). Roi, assuming Jones’s misogynistic role for feminized objects throughout *System*, has learned to “[t]hrow that ol nasty ass” at the behest of domineering men (96). Jones’s disturbing chapter ends with Otis again walking in on the “melee” and finally getting what he wants (97). Jones leaves readers with an image of Roi helplessly gesticulating his bottom for Herman, and we know what lies ahead for him: rough sex without mercy from any number of men who cannot contain their blues. Sadly, as is sometimes the case with survivors of sexual violation who suppress their trauma, Roi finds himself a perpetrator in the gang rape of a female prostitute in “Circle 9: Bolgia 1—Treachery to Kindred.” Jones no doubt places this moment within pages of Roi’s own violation in order to heighten readers’ empathy for his reprehensible act and to set the stage for the transformative healing that he attempts to narrate in the most anthologized chapter from *System*, “The Heretics.”

As “The Heretics” opens, readers learn that Roi, who wants desperately to distance himself from his violent homosexual past, has left the greater New York City area and the

Midwest for the bayous of Louisiana, specifically a poor Shreveport neighborhood that residents ironically call “the Bottom.” The Bottom’s “softness and ... indirect warmth” (125) remind him of his hometown’s “culture of violence and foodsmells” (128). Here, Roi, who is inebriated, disillusioned, and riven with “agony at how beautiful I was” before this descent into sexual profligacy and madness, continues his quest “to be loved” (128) and chooses to go home with a man he incredulously names Don, who is “the first face I saw” (129). Again, as Jones has envisioned Roi throughout the novella, he assumes the expected, submissive role he has learned to perform with men: “He shoved his old empty sack of self against my frozen skin” (129). He has learned to numb himself in order to survive the pain of being a receptacle for other men’s orgasms, even as he lives with “an actual longing for men ... in each finger of my memory” (130). As he and Don look for a dive in the Bottom, he literally stumbles into the arms of a 17-year-old prostitute named Peaches. Seemingly playing the proverbial dozens with his readers, Jones’s Peaches is far from the nursery rhyme’s sugar-and-spice-and-everything-nice vision of femininity. In fact, as he describes her, she defies gender norms, doesn’t embody any physical attribute of beauty, and subsists in her industry in an aggressive masculine drag:

So Peaches was mine. Fat with short baked hair split at the ends. Pregnant empty stomach. Thin shriek voice like knives against a blackboard. Speeding up records. Big feet in white, shiny polished shoes. Fat tiny hands full of rings. A purple dress with wrinkles across the stomach. And perspiring flesh that made my khakis wet. (132)

Almost immediately, Peaches dominates Roi; his drunken attempt to leave the dive bar proves futile as “[s]he came around and rubbed my tiny pecker with her fingers. ... When I got outside, she moved in front of me” (136). Seeing that another person has taken ownership of his sex organs and that Peaches, like so many of his male lovers, won’t relent in her pursuit of his body, Roi verbalizes his most startling confession: “I’m sorry. I’m fucked up. My mind, is screwy, I

don't know why. I can't think. I'm sick. I've been fucked in the ass. I love books and smells and my own voice. You don't want me. Please, Please, don't want me" (136).

This pitiful plea for rejection has the opposite effect on the foul-mouthed sex worker. It reinvigorates her and her three colleagues, and they taunt Roi by taking his hat and use it to lure him to another Bottom haunt, the Cotton Club, apparently modeled after the interracial Harlem institution that was popular a generation earlier during the Prohibition era. There, Peaches shares her own life's woes—she is separated from her husband, who also is a serviceman—and Roi sees homosocial relations (white and black men “touching each other, and screaming with laughter at what they said”) that make him feel more intensely “[s]ome other soul, than the filth I feel. Have in me. Guilt, like something of God's. Some separate suffering self” (138-139). Even in this drunken state, Roi can discern that the source of his agony lies in his internalization of a false notion that his “wish to be lovely,” his desire to experience reciprocal love with a man, and this intellectual beauty that he links time after time as a manifestation of femininity that he must suppress are sinful. Peaches brings him to this space to experience a kind of freedom from the shame that has become his constant companion and tormentor. Yet, he cannot turn off the voices in his head, what he ultimately names “Hell,” that cajole him; these voices of indictment blur with Peaches's, whose playful banter reflects the simultaneous insult and compliment that African Americans deploy when signifyin' on one another:

Old slack nigger. Drunk punk. Fag. Get up. Where's your home? Your mother. Rich nigger. Porch sitter. It comes down. So cute, huh? Yellow thing. Think you cute. Brown skinned. Stuck in the ass. Suffering from what? Can you read? Who is T.S. Eliot? So what? A cross. *You've got to like girls. Weirdo. Break, Roi, break.* ... Talk to me. Goddammit. Say something. You never talk, just sit there, impossible to love. Alone, there, under those buildings. Your shadows. Your selfish tongue. Move. Frightened bastard. Frightened scared sissy motherfucker. (139, my emphasis)

Peaches takes Roi to her home, where her “broken” English and taunting (“Talk like a white man ... From up north (she made the ‘th’ an ‘f’)”) meld into Roi’s memories of “Willful sin. in [sic] your toilets jerking off” with other men. Her words break him open to heterosexual possibility, if only for one night (139). She echoes his own command to himself “to like girls” and forces him to submit to rape, an act to which he has become accustomed and is too intoxicated to resist. Ultimately, she proves little more than a temporary balm and stand-in for the male enactors of sexual domination to which Roi has been indoctrinated. Although Roi cannot sustain an erection, it doesn’t stop Peaches from mounting him and forcing him inside her. As the sex unfolds, Roi again dissociates and hallucinates that among the witnesses are his mother, who “would grin and tell her friends,” and his father, who “would call me ‘mcgee’ and want me to tell about it” (142). Roi’s initial incontinence with Peaches forces back into his consciousness his “[n]eed to be used, touched, and see for the first time how it moved ... to be pushed under a quilt, and call it love” in Chicago’s “queer scene,” where his spirit begged “Touch me. Please. Please, touch me” (143).

As the rest of this night unfolds with Peaches as the aggressor, Jones narrates further the false sense of salvation from his homosexual past that Roi experiences. Readers can see the truth of the matter in Peaches litany of insults and orders: “No wonder you so pretty ... ol bigeye faggot. ... Goddam punk, you gonna fuck me tonight or I’m gonna pull your fuckin dick aloose” (144). Past and present commingle in Roi’s initiation into heterosexual penetration, which at once feels foreign and painful to him and harkens other moments in Chicago with one of several older men of the cloth with whom Roi feigned himself a “beautiful ... young pharaoh under trees” and a “romantic, liar” whose “soul is white, pure white, and soars” (145). Here, Jones links Roi’s homosexual yearnings to his longtime pursuit of European ideals of agnostic intelligence, which Roi’s idol, Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, embodies. Roi’s bottled-up grief about

the loss of his innocence and his too-long rejection of his “black soul” explodes onto Peaches, who becomes a willing recipient of all of Roi’s liquid excrement—his tears, his saliva, his urine, his sperm—as she shouts more insults, much like Herman Saunders and others had, such as “Fuck me, you lousy fag” (145). Nonetheless, with her, Roi can express his anger, shame, and deep well of sadness in ways he could not with the military captain and earlier sexual partners from whom he has fled. As he draws his revisionist autobiographical novella to a climax vis-à-vis Roi’s orgasm, Jones fashions sex with a black woman who can accept Roi’s same-sex past as the cure to his homosexual encounters and the resultant incontinence. Intimating that Roi’s life as a homosexual victim could end hereafter, Jones sends a post-coital Roi wandering from Peaches’s home into the now-empty wilderness that is streets of the Bottom. There, he encounters a man with “jew hair” and “yellow soggy skin full of red freckles” who begs him to allow him to “suck yo dick, honey” (147). Like other aforementioned Judeo-Christian wanderers, Roi does not yield to temptation with this “[i]rreligious spirit pushing through shadows, frustrating and confusing the flesh,” who mirrors the desperate “hurt ugly thing dying alone” that Roi once was (147). Suddenly, as a new day literally dawns, Roi launches into a victory march that begins awkwardly and ends in a triumphant, syncopated stride to demonstrate his symbolic, momentary transcendence of his horrific past.

System’s denouement appears poised to wrap Jones’s twisted narrative with a tidy bow that includes a common-law marriage and a happily-ever-after. In its closing pages, however, Jones lays the surreal insanity that shapes its final moments at the feet of white supremacy and its Judeo-Christian tales of redemption. Readers quickly see that Roi’s phantasmagoric descent into madness has not ended despite the sexual healing Peaches seemingly has provided. While skipping through the Bottom’s streets and celebrating his new lease on life, Roi runs into a

nightmarish memory from his military past as he happens upon a mortally wounded soldier and then gives chase to police officers, who he presumes blame him for the dying man's murder and who know, too, that he is AWOL. Roi races, of course, back to the safety he has just left in Peaches's ramshackle studio apartment under the Cotton Club, where he makes an impromptu proposal that they live together and the elated sex worker expresses her fondness of him and his lawyerly way with words. As Peaches undresses Roi again, she vows to teach him how to please her and begins to divine that they can enjoy two years of bliss before her husband, Wallace, returns from his military deployment. In this scene's most striking sendup among the panoply of symbols of stereotypical blackness, Peaches offers Roi a watermelon to feast on as a culinary consummation of their union. Sensing that "things had come to an order," Roi drifts into a peaceful slumber before awaking to the aroma of greens, biscuits, and chicken and news that his new "wife" needs him to go to the market to get some tomatoes for their meal (152). However, shortly after buying the fruit and their sweeter cousins, for whom his newly betrothed is named (natch), clouds blanket the sky's blue as an omen of what is to come. This overcast sky reminds Roi instantly of Dante's prophesy in *The Inferno* for those who commit heresy in the way that he feels he has. Roi also aligns this ominous moment with the one in which the biblical Jesus reacts to encountering one woman who had sought healing from him without permission by touching his garment's hems in the days before his crucifixion. "Something touched me," Roi says to himself (154). Here, Roi halts his plan to escape his homosexual past as he realizes he is too far gone and not even Peaches's invitation into her "indroitus" for vaginal baptism has saved him from being "[l]ost to myself ... [t]o that ugliness sat inside me waiting" (154-155). He decides he must return to military duty (and likely ongoing homosexual violation) that he has referred to earlier in *System* as his "cross" to bear. Mirroring Jesus and those other aforementioned Judeo-

Christian wanderers, Roi plods through difficult weather conditions (rain and scorching heat) to get to the bus stop, pondering what his punishment will be for leaving the Army base for two days. In this final scene, Roi again experiences violation at the hands of three men, but this time, he is brutalized with a physical beating, rather than a sexual one, in his very own Golgatha, a Shreveport square. Nonetheless, as he has always done, Roi dissociates from the pain of the brutality of this public assault designed to make him “[c]razy out of my head” and imagines himself swaddled in the music of a kind of Greek Chorus of dancing prostitutes as he reads an unnamed book (157). Jones implies that this act destroys what might have remained of Roi’s spirit as Roi “fell forward weeping on the floor” and the dancing women “spilled whisky on my clothes” (157). The ghost who was once Roi awakens after 48 hours, fully descended into Hell because the internalization of white supremacist violence has led to a cycle of physical and psychosexual predation among black men from which he cannot escape. In fact, in this underworld, “white men”—the very individuals whose ideals and legacy of violence have put him in harm’s way—are “screaming for God to help me” (157).

Not surprisingly, the didactic Jones doesn’t leave readers with this image of defeat, only to ponder what the ordeal they have just read means. Instead, while there remains more questions than answers about Roi’s literal fate in *The System of Dante’s Hell* as the novella ends, Jones clarifies in its epilogue, “Sound and Image,” that the concept of absolute, never-ending torment is one in which “educated” blacks like Roi, like himself, cannot escape Judeo-Christian ideologies and other vestiges of white supremacy:

Hell in the head. *The torture of being the unseen object, and, the constantly observed subject.* The flame of social dichotomy. Split open down the center, which is the early legacy of the black man unfocused on blackness. The dichotomy of what is seen and taught and desired opposed to what is felt. Finally, God, is simply a white man, a white ‘idea,’ in this society, unless we have made some other image which is stronger, and can deliver us from the salvation of our enemies. ... *One thinks of home, or the other ‘homes’*

we have had. And remember w/love those things bathed in soft black light. The struggles away or toward this peace is (sic) Hell's function. (158, my emphasis)

System thus ends with Jones's attempt to name the objectification/thingification that looms as the gaze of queerness (read: white male gaze) on his black flesh and his ambisexual and interracial choices in his amorous life. Jones here exorcises, then, this ghost's American (read: white male) "pursuit of happiness" in a home that is not his home once and for all as he shifts the focus of his intellectual energies. Ultimately, however, inasmuch as Grove Press's publication of *System* reflected Jones's attempt to distance himself from his relationships to mainstream white power structures in American letters—he was, after all, the only poet of color included in the press's influential late modernist anthology, *New American Poetry: 1940-1960*, edited by Donald Allen—its content complicated his desired role as an alpha-male, authoritarian leader of his people to "other homes we have had" in the wake of the murders of their King, their Malcolm, and their other political and spiritual leaders. In short, LeRoi Jones and all that he had created had to die and be sifted in subsequent anthologies in order for the "Black consciousness" Amiri Baraka would spend the rest of his life defending to flourish, but the death was a slow and beautiful, if painful, one. It had been foreshadowed in a white woman's coldblooded, calculated murder of Clay in Jones's theatrical masterpiece *Dutchman* in 1964, documented throughout the ironically titled poetry collection *Dead Lecturer* in 1965, and reiterated again and again in *System* as his protagonist descended deeper and deeper into his own psychic turmoil around a host of complex sexual experiences. Yet, the sifting of *System* and *Tales* in the 1999 definitive *LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* couldn't forever exorcise the complex truths embedded in the effusions that Jones's personae confess. Thus, *Quare Poetics* investigates hereafter the ways the ghosts of LeRoi Jones's Roi and others haunt African American scholarship. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), Avery Gordon reminds scholars that in the

wake of chattel slavery, non-Western writers of color's work continually reanimate "those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive ... a something-to-be-done" (xvi). Among the undone somethings, *Quare Poetics* posits, is the analysis of the galvanizing power of black mothers' rallying cry against predation, objectification, and victimhood.

'Look in your mother's head / if you want to know everything': Becoming 'Black' and Embracing a New Consciousness

Long before Amiri Baraka's actual death in January 2014, Muñoz and a cadre of scholars had begun to do what Moten had charged in his luminary text, *In the Break*, to attenuate the seemingly vast distance between the early words of LeRoi Jones and Amiri Baraka's latter-year Marxist militarism. While Moten most astutely underscores "the anarchic organization of phonic substance" that drives Baraka's syncopated public performance of blackness as linked to "the sexual differentiation of sexual difference" (85), few have plumbed this "sexual differentiation" in Jones's early work, including the transitional moment that *System* represents, beyond the valence of "queerness" that accompanies a fetishistic gaze upon his black flesh as an object of desire for nonheterosexual white men and women. This collection of essays joins the chorus crafting the new American grammar book for intimacies among black men and women outside that white gaze, which Jones's poetics signaled had arrived and which Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" foreshadows as imminent in scholarly discourse. It aims to eschew the discourse of "Other"-ing that has been so central to postcolonial, post-structural, and queer epistemologies. Baraka and many of his scholarly and literary scions have arrived at the same conclusions about writing outside the gaze of white supremacy, but scholars have failed to explore the instances in which they honor the central role of black literary foremothers in making their protest possible,

likely because these writers' relationship to black maternity was fraught with a legacy of what Baraka calls "the strong nigger feeling" in "leroy," a standout poem in "Black Art," the last of three sections in *Black Magic* (1969), his first collection as Baraka, in which his most famous poem of the same title from that era appears. In that collection's introductory "Explanation of the Work," he cites that even in his early work, obsessed with death, this feeling manifests as "a spirituality always trying to get through, to triumph, to walk across these dead bodies like stuntin (sic) for disciples, walking the water of dead bodies europeans (his lowercasing) call their minds" (ix). Thus, throughout *Black Magic*, Baraka frames black mothers as bastions of this feeling and the accompanying ancient information and emotional intelligence, which he calls "knowledge." Time and again after his "Explanation," Baraka intimates the importance of this knowledge, charging young poets Calvin Hernton and Ishmael Reed in "Red Eye," a transitional piece from *Black Magic's* second section, "Target Study," "Look in your mother's head / if you want to know everything" (lines 4b-5a). In "leroy," which appears toward the end of the "Black Art" section, the speaker revisits his mother's immortalized image as a college student³⁷ who "sat / looking sad" (lines 1b-2a) and "getting into / new blues, from the old ones, the trips and passions / showered on her by her own" (lines 6b-8a). Baraka then establishes black mothers as avatars of atavistic transformation with "hypnotizing" power "passed on to her passed on / to me and all other black people of our time" (lines 8b-10). For Baraka, his mother is among a host of matrilineal guardian "angels," harbingers of a spirit called *black-ness* that has enlivened his flesh, formerly *nigger* and *Negro* and soiled with the "bitter bullshit rotten"-ness of white supremacy. This new "consciousness I carry," Baraka writes, is "the sweet meat" he wants others to devour. Again, as if deifying himself and calling thinkers and writers to a Last Supper communion of initiation into a newfound faith in black-ness, Baraka invites us to feast on the

wisdom of his renewed mind. However, as I have attempted to show, all that he divined as LeRoi Jones was not “bitter bullshit rotten” and “white.” There was beauty in LeRoi Jones, and surely the ghost of his Roi—feminized as he was with the funk and “knowledge” of sexual trauma that many of these female ancestors carry—hovers among Baraka’s “angels,” whether or not he wants us to see him. Paradoxically, then, in his most anthologized poem, which opens *Black Magic*’s final section, Baraka decries “girdlemamma mulatto bitches / whose brains are red jelly stuck / between ’lizabeth taylor’s toes. Stinking / Whores!” (lines 16-19a). Baraka’s major shortcomings in his new persona lie in these kinds of moments when he refuses to acknowledge the complex humanity of those like his first-born daughters, who are coming of age in the difficult circumstance of mixed-race identity. He errantly reasons that these women cannot create “poems that kill” and that “black” poems must obliterate their allegedly mindless embodiment of “knockoff” ideals of beauty that are synonymous with European features and “white” identity. As *Quare Poetics* has shown in a number of its subjects and as the epilogue will reassert, mixed-race writers such as Natasha Trethewey draw from a well of grief that comes from one who is marked by the “typology of taint”—caught, that is, between a black and white world as one who “tain’t one and tain’t the other”—and thus who is often orphaned, both emotionally and sometimes literally. These writers’ mother-figures and their progeny have charted a futurity in the twenty-first century that awaits further inquiry.

In the beginning of white supremacist conceptions of a world of language were *African*, *black*, *Colored*, *Negro*, and many other metonyms and synonyms that were necessarily synonymous with *nigger*, *Other*, and *queer* and necessarily hated so that whiteness could be the deified, beatified ideal. Conversely, in the beginning of African American poetics was a word, *sable*, but through deploying it, Phillis Wheatley Peters birthed an African American tradition of

radical protest that contradicts notions that *sable* and its kin exist to reify a beautiful white male Judeo-Christian God, made in the image of the white men who created him. Here, however, one has found neither an in-depth study of male stalwarts of African American letters—Olaudah Equiano, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin—who made it possible for Baraka’s militancy to materialize with such visceral, incisive foment. Instead, one has discovered an analysis of the centrality of black mothers’ haunting (and illuminative) presence in the works of some of these men and in the poetics of those women who have been rendered “minor,” under-theorized, or misread in the African American literary canon. To chart this journey from the advent of African American literature to the dawn of the Black Arts Movement that Baraka would birth, I have deployed a term, *quare*, that allows for simultaneous study of song (the lyricism and music in the African American elegiac tradition as the Greek chorus in American letters); of protest (a new genealogy for this tradition’s already always indictment of improvident white supremacist violence and the hegemony of white supremacist theology from African American literature’s inception); and of the black mother’s pivotal role in shaping this ever-evolving chorus signaling alternate paths to self-made sociocultural, spiritual, and sexual choices devoid of the sexual identity politics that accompany the modification of white supremacist identity markers (*American, queer, feminist, etc.*) with *African* or *black*.

Baraka’s most inspired and hauntingly resonant rallying cry, particularly in the wake of his own transition from elder to angel/ghost, unfolds in “Ka ’Ba,” *Black Magic*’s gesture to the holiest site in Mecca, the heart of a religion that forebears such as Wheatley Peters and other Africans melded with their tribal, syncretic faith practice before being indoctrinated into Puritanism, a religious practice still more caught in a war of words about the source of terroristic

violence in the United States and around the globe than the many manifestations of Judeo-Christianity that have shaped Americans' warped concepts of freedom and equality. After acknowledging in the first three stanzas that white supremacy necessarily arrests African Americans in a state of constant crisis in which "we suffer, and kill each other / and sometimes fail to walk the air" (lines 8-9), he makes a moving reminder in the succeeding line—"We are beautiful people"—and proceeds in the final three stanzas to point, possibly unwittingly, to African American literary foremothers whose names have been too long peripheral bookends who help us as "we *labor* to make our getaway, into / the ancient image into a new / Correspondence with ourselves / and our Black family" (lines 17-20a, my emphasis). Here, we see that the very concept of liberation for African Americans in concert with the very painful process of birth. These African American literary foremothers have always been what Baraka calls here the sources of the "magic / now we need the spells, to raise up / return, destroy, and create" (lines 20b-22).

Quare Poetics has dared to answer the question Baraka poses at the end of "Ka'Ba" ("What will be the sacred word?") with two words—*quare* and *mother*—that return our attention to Lucy Terry Prince, Phillis Wheatley Peters, Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, Jean Toomer, Bob Kaufman, and Nina Simone, whose oeuvres pulse with a litany of other sacred words this dissertation have woven into a path to imagine metaphysical, religious, and corporeal freedom for generations of believers in a democractic American nation that never intended to welcome them or offer them citizenship and equal humanity. Their most impassioned children's children are now marching the streets decrying homegrown police terror and chanting "Black Lives Matter" and singing along to the anthems of their new religion, hip-hop, and its chief theologian, Pulitzer Prize winner Kendrick Lamar, as he declares "I love myself" and "if God's with us, then

we gon' be alright," even though "all my grandmamas is dead / ... ain't nobody prayin' for me."

They are much like the young biracial daughter Jones's speaker spied realizing she held the power in her own hands to birth new ways of seeing herself in concert with any number of divine forces. I invite you now, too, to hold in yours, for as long as you can, this meditation that "the sweet meat"—this metaphorical essence of blackness that Amiri Baraka wanted us to taste and see—is not, in fact, phallic and male, but vulnerable, feminized flesh and much more like the LeRoi Jones he tried so hard to bury, who has been too long forgotten. This flesh has been wrought with the scars—but also bears the resilience and even the glee—of a proud, hope-filled people. It is maternal and wholly holy. Already always quare, not queer.

AFTERWORD
‘THE TYPOLOGY OF TAINT’ AND THE QUARE FUTURE
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POETICS

I aim in these closing pages to meditate on the quare futurity of Trethewey’s elegies and the African American elegiac tradition for which her work is a beacon. A dialogue between her work and Wheatley Peters’s poems underscores the subversive power Trethewey crafts into a neo-formalism that has begun to unfold since the turn of the twenty-first century. Like Wheatley, Trethewey’s role as mother to a new era came into powerful relief from me when I witnessed her work juxtaposed with Amiri Baraka’s Marxist verse in a joint reading at a popular summer retreat for African American poets sponsored by the influential Cave Canem Foundation in 2010. Whereas Trethewey examined the ways her father’s white gaze prevented him from fully seeing the complexities of her and her mother’s experiences as black women living in loving between two worlds in poems that would become *Thrall*, Baraka’s timeworn abjection of whiteness continued to posit a binary construction of race that undergirded his verse’s wit for nearly fifty years. It made one of the last recorded public readings of the frail and clearly ill poet bittersweet as the baton was literally and metaphorically passed to Trethewey. Her poetry’s interrogation of biracial and multiethnic black identity—and the African American imagination as a whole—demonstrates the ache of the loss of the black maternal particularly in the global South and reflects the pattern of motherless children flouting the white supremacist gaze.

Trethewey’s formal poetry and free verse most palpably actualize Wheatley Peters’s ode to the Muses and her own black mind in “On Imagination,” when she exclaims, at the start of the

poem's second stanza, "Imagination! Who can sing thy force?" Answering across nearly two and a half centuries' time, Trethewey, the first poet laureate of color of this century, has offered four poetry collections—three rooted in biomythography³⁸ that reimagine and resurrect women silenced by history, including her slain mother, all engaged in the kind of historiography that African American writing must do in the face of racism's mendacity. Each also critiques Trethewey's own embodiment of all the gifts and contradictions of American miscegenation, powerfully indicting the white gaze on the bodies and intellectual acumen of those marked black and white and making palpable the painful loss of black maternity. Trethewey—born to a law-breaking white Canadian expatriate-cum-poet, Eric Trethewey, and his black wife, Gwendolyn Ann Turnbough, an African American daughter of the Mississippi Delta—has spent each collection contending with her hematological birthright as a child whose parents had to flee Mississippi for her father's homeland, much like William Wells Brown's heroines and their white lovers do, as well as her literary birthright as a motherless and fatherless black child.

Much like Wheatley Peters, Trethewey is a motherless child, torn from her mother by her stepfather's murderous hands in the city in which she spent her formative years and where she now lives, metro Atlanta, Ga., a global South space divided along racial and socioeconomic lines that wants to eschew its Old South legacies with skyscrapers and other monuments to modernization and postmodern industry. Throughout her oeuvre, Trethewey names what was impossible for Wheatley Peters and other orphans of the global South to name: the righteous rage one feels to be left behind with so much ache and knowledge to share. Wheatley Peters's forestalled subjectivity as a slave in Boston—another city that feigns liberalism, innovation, and post-racality—makes all the more revolutionary her use of subversive word choices to celebrate her own genius and exploit the satire that pulsed through Enlightenment European and European

American thought. Trethewey, too, often uses insightful puns to expose the ironies of her early life in between two worlds, not as a plea to either for acceptance—as Du Bois’s *Souls* did to whites on behalf of blacks—but to indict the gaze that marks her the queerest of the queer: black but not black enough for African Americans, fair in flesh tone but not white like her father. As Wheatley Peters’s *Poems of Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* pioneered the path that African American writers such as Trethewey have followed over the past 245 years, Trethewey’s *Domestic Work* (2000), *Bellocq’s Orphelia* (2002), *Native Guard* (2006), and *Thrall* (2012) have given a generation of African American writers navigating the publishing industry on their own terms a rich tapestry of wisdom.

These two women in literary dialogue and their progeny show time after time how it feels to be left behind with so much ache and knowledge to share. Wheatley Peters serves as a harbinger of spiritual hope for Europeans, Africans, and other non-whites alike trying to start their lives anew among indigenous Americans in the eighteenth century. Similarly, Trethewey’s two terms as America’s poetry ambassador have positioned her to be the voice of all races in this nation that is still avoiding a hard look at the open wounds and festering scars of colonial and institutional racism, nineteenth- and twentieth-century miscegenation and Jim Crow, and ongoing systemic socioeconomic inequity, particularly the gaze on the “mulatta” and the abjection of the possibility of mixed race bodies being able to own their whole selves devoid of the shame of “the taint” of blackness and not-black-enough-ness. In her latest collection, *Thrall*, Trethewey famously satirizes this dilemma in the poem “Taxonomy,” where she writes, “What do you call the space between the dark geographies of sex? Call it the taint, as in t’aint one and t’aint the other” (24-25). Her speaker in this poem, as in “Monument” from her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Native Guard*, uses point of view to put the reader into the seat of abjection she knows

full well. In “Monument,” Trethewey transforms the unkempt gravesite where her mother is interred, the “nigger cemetery” that had inspired Wallace Stevens to rail against modernity, to challenge her readers to choose a different path in this century, a path that Stevens and other celebrants of white supremacy lamented as inevitable. As she describes in six quatrains the anthill obscuring her mother’s “untended plot” (line 13)—reflective of the millions of untold narratives of abuse, neglect, and triumph of our nation’s black mothers sublimated in “a world / made by displacement” (lines 7-8)—it serves as “this reminder of what / [we] haven’t done” (lines 21-22). Trethewey reminds us that America’s allegiance to whiteness isn’t something we can simply “begrudge” (line 20) any longer. Ants doing what ants do with sand to colonize and protect their intricate system in “Monument”—what white supremacy has continually done to narratives of African and American American syncretic survivals to extend its dominion under the guise of republican democracy—will remain a “mound [that] is a blister on [our] hearts / a red and humming swarm” (lines 23-24).

The humming swarm has never drowned out the black mothers’ moans, cries, and wails, which haunt their children’s bleeding American hearts—sinking, as they were, in an abyss of unimaginable grief—and it never will. The only way out of this abyss, as Glissant reminds us, is refusal of a totalizing summation of the African experience in this American experiment that has failed *because* of this attempt at displacement and erasure of its crimes. The quare makes this refusal not only possible, not only fruitful, but incipient and liberating. It is rooted in the songs of our people, which upon utterance become the songs of the nation. Every time. High or low, gutbucket or “classical,” blues, bluegrass, jazz, or hip-hop, African music is the soundtrack of America. It manifests in the fugitive, unapologetic blackness that keeps fomenting when white supremacist violence reaches its zenith as it has in the wake of the election of Barack Obama.

We see the fungibility black mothers' traumas serving as the mirror image America can no longer ignore. We see it in the legacy of womanist testimony that Wheatley Peters, Lucy Terry Prince, the slave *kweer*, Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson, Nina Simone, and made plain enough for activists such as Tarana Burke³⁹ to take up, even as countless men, including Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jean Toomer, Bob Kaufman, and LeRoi Jones struggle to articulate the castration they feel because they cannot atone for their own sins against their mothers and the mothers of their children. I have chosen these oft-misread or under-read voices, but we are legion. The quare awaits on virtually every African American page we turn.

This embrace of the black mother's utterances—the imitation and redeployment of her prayers, coos, moans, and wails—has become paramount at moments in American history of great change and tumult, including the nation's major military conflicts and cultural wars such as the one that has gripped the nation since Donald J. Trump entered the political sphere questioning the American birthright and religious identity of its first president of openly African descent⁴⁰. These events shape every aspect of U.S. history in which Americans celebrate white male terrorists' colonialism, pillory, and dominance, and at every juncture, black and brown elegists call out their violent acts' erosion of the nation's moral fabric. The most popular anti-slavery ballads and narratives use black mothers' suffering to expose the fault lines in the documents of liberty shaping the years between the Revolution and the Civil War; the first and second waves of U.S. Reconstruction and the Central and South American revolutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries birth the African American work song and the blues, the *corridos*, and other renegade tales-in-verse of resistance in chain gangs, juke joints, and nightclubs. Whose voices carry those sad, subversive tunes? Black and Afro-Latinx mothers. Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, as the first and second world wars give way

to the wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East, Negroes leave the U.S. South en masse and declare themselves “New,” and African American mothers—at home and abroad—join the front lines of protest leading freedom songs and literary movements that fuel the fight for equal rights in the military, the industrial complex, the classroom, and other aspects of public life.

Meanwhile, U.S. miscegenation laws begin to come undone so that the interracial intimacies that have always defied them produce writers who deepen the complexities of biracial and multi-ethnic characters, speakers, and subjects and expand their consciousness beyond the tropes of the “tragic mulatt@” that shaped the African American literature of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries. Thus, as the past century comes to the close, the United States’ role as the global police leads to the militarization of its own police forces amid an international, racist “War on Drugs” and the poor, whose central target are single black “welfare” mothers.

Simultaneously, their progeny, particularly those who are biracial and multi-ethnic, have attempted to illuminate the interiority of characters, speakers, and subjects who make room for twenty-first-century theorizations of a futurity that demands black mothers’ longtime wails and cries be examined, not just deployed for audiences’ comfort, for they prove essential to atoning for and making sense of centuries of African American survival, innovation, and agency and the instantiation of ideals and values Americans hold dear.

This study, then, began with an examination of the poetics of an orphaned wunderkind forced to make music of her African consciousness and spirituality in order to posit a way for African American chattel and her adoptive parents and kin, European-American zealots, to free themselves of the psychic trauma of slavery before the United States found its own name. Because her readers did not listen to nuances of her syncretic interventions, *Quare Poetics* has traced the four centuries of protest that ensued, focused on the voices of black mothers reminding

America of its open secret. This project offers, as a prism for inquiry of what lies ahead, the prescient vision of Trethewey, a mixed-race child who has embraced the blackness that is her birthright, nourished by her African American mother, grandmother, aunts, and communities in her native Mississippi Delta. In *Thrall* (2012), Trethewey decodes “the typology of taint” that stems from the mendacious gaze of white men, who, like her beloved father, struggle with the black consciousness they at once love and abject, which fuels the violences that she, her mother, and other bodies marked by it have endured. Trethewey, the first recipient of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize, serves as a beacon of the quare futurity that organization has birthed since its 1997 founding. She and other members of the Boston-born Dark Room Collective (including Sharan Strange, Kevin Young, Tracy K. Smith, and Carl Phillips), its first literary bastions, document how black mothers’ struggles create space for the liberation of their children, marginalized people, and all readers, who choose to parse the nuances complexities in their music

Quare Poetics emerges, then, to challenge scholars to contemplate a return to the music and literature before the early-twentieth-century New Negro Renaissance as a third wave of Reconstruction unfolds in the current Black Lives Matter movements that expose the fault lines of the ascension to the White House of a neo-Nazi and white male terrorism sympathizer and celebrant of sexual assault of women and abuse of the disabled. Thus, these four inflections will commingle as this project traces the ways in which African American writers and performers indict racist, white supremacist fictions of subhumanity, inordinate criminality, and inferior intellect among those marked black throughout the global South and debunk the deceptive notion that American exceptionalism and democratic freedom extends to black flesh today.

Glissant underscores that within this abyss—the mound of Trethewey’s “Monument”—blackness emerges as “an open totality evolving upon itself . . . In Relation, the whole is not the

finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity” (*Poetics of Relation* 218).

Trethewey and others who have emerged from Cave Canem’s community lay bare in their work the gifts *and* burdens of black maternity—and the African diasporic imaginary that black mothering inspires in the generations they birth—while artfully and intensely indicting the gaze of white heterosexism and patriarchy on multiethnic blackness. I submit *Quare Poetics* to you then, kind reader, not only that you may ponder the quare futurity that multiraciality has afforded so many of us as individuals but of what remains uncharted on this nation’s in this path to healing, particularly among people of color at various stations in the African American, Afro-Latinx, and Afro-Caribbean diasporas. African American poets’ elegies have drafted a glorious roadmap, pulsing with tales of righteous rage, heart-opening sorrow, and ultimately unwavering faith and will to thrive.

Hush. Hush. Some bodies—so many motherless children and their children’s children—are calling our names. They await our attentive, thorough ears, hands, and hearts.

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END NOTES

Introduction: Toward a New Theory of Quareness in the African American Elegiac Protest Tradition

¹“To Mæcenās,” Wheatley Peters’s first poem in *Poems on Various Subject, Religious and Moral*, announces that she has this great Augustan poet’s rubric in mind and desires the patronage of Gaius Clinius Mæcenās, the advisor of Octavian, adoptive son of Julius Caesar and Rome’s first emperor. In Horace’s poem of the same title, he thanks Mæcenās for modeling a life of political modesty amid great artistic philanthropy over “glitter[ing] in the proconsulship of fertile Africa.” In contrast, Wheatley Peters brandishes bravura throughout her oeuvre, especially in her “To Mæcenās,” where she declares that she, like Terentius Afer, another African slave who rose to acclaim under that empire, will “snatch a laurel from thine honor’d head / While you indulgent smile upon the deed” (lines 46-47).

²In *Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (1983), Alice Walker’s critique of feminists’ racism and chauvinism, defines a womanist as one who exhibits “outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior,” who articulates “[w]anting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one,” and who “[a]ppreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance to laughter), and women’s strength” (xi, her emphasis). Further, a womanist, Walker declares, is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female,” and she loves music, dance, “the moon ... the Spirit ... love and food and roundness ... struggle ... the Folk ... [and] herself. *Regardless*” (her emphasis, xi, xii). Walker empowers scholars to examine black women’s literature for its self-affirming power and self-reflexive wordplay and to celebrate it as a testament to these women’s awareness that “their experiences as ordinary human beings was valuable, and in danger of being misrepresented, distorted, or lost” (13).

³The whims of the white male phallus and anus remain the centrifugal forces around which queer studies revolve, and abjected black (read: quare) flesh invariably arises as the object of their desires. Quare theory takes black flesh out of service to whiteness, reanimates black folks’ desires without the language of pathology, and “challenges a static reading of identity as only performativity or only performance” (*Black Queer Studies* 142).

⁴One noteworthy instance is Frederick Douglass’s denunciation in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845).

⁵In *Blackness Visible* (1996), Charles W. Mills argues that all African American critical and literary works are political articulations of what he calls “alternative epistemologies” (21), which redefine black American ontology under a hermeneutic of presence and personhood, rather than absence and subhumanity. As he deploys this term, Mills underscores the centrality of acknowledging the black body as a “philosophical object” to any effective critique of Western political philosophy (16). He also notes the challenge black feminists have faced in exposing “the realities of racial subordination without having race loyalty automatically trump gender” (17). He later says “the feminist challenge to mainstream political philosophy may provide a useful model” for twenty-first-century critical race theorists to intervene in discourse on political philosophy (121). Underscoring what feminism accomplished in illuminating the pervasiveness of patriarchy, he points to the importance of that movement’s “excavation and rediscovery of oppositional political texts or fragments by women” and “mapping of the full dimensions of female subordination, what would be required to incorporate women into the body politic on a basis of real moral equality” (121). Black feminist scholars took up this cartography with aplomb in the latter half of the twentieth century.

⁶Rather than see Equiano’s quest for a mother figure, its earliest white readers and many today interrogate *Interesting Narrative* through the lens of surrogation. Equiano’s travels in the Caribbean and Southeastern and Northeastern United States often get framed as his longing for whiteness and its freedoms rather than his longing to reclaim his connection to the joys and freedom he felt in the presence of his African mother. Equiano describes intimacies with white male peers like Richard Baker, a young American boy he calls “Dick” who helps him learn to read, with the same affectionate language he uses to describe his mother. The loss of this relationship incites elegiac—and poetic—effusions that reflect Equiano’s longing for a mother figure.

⁷In *Lose Your Mother* (2007), a chronicle of her failed quest to find ancestral ties to an African home, Hartman distills this experience of exile that she and these literary forebears experience when she writes, “The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger” (5).

⁸See Salvaggio’s *The Sound of Feminist Theory* (State University of New York Press, 1999). She deconstructs the motion of words and of sound, specifically what she calls “hearing the O,” in feminist texts, particularly those of lesbians and others deemed “queer.”

⁹See “Gwendolyn the Terrible: Propositions on Eleven Poems,” *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*.

¹⁰Poet Brenda Marie Osbey deploys this term in, “The Morning News.” It describes black women’s use of art to unlearn constant messages of their state of non-being, to resurrect themselves from the ontological crypt they find themselves born into as othered Others, and to wrest from their creative moments with ancestors a metaphysical and metaphorical transcendence. Toni Morrison also uses this term in her 1987 novel, *Beloved*, along with “re-memory,” as she details the ways in which Sethe processes the traumas of slavery. In Osbey’s poem, Simone’s “disremembering” enacts moments of reverie, of womanist art-making, that eschew stereotypes of black womanhood and fashion a multidimensional subjectivity and liminality that radically alter the space she occupies and the consciousness of her readers/audience.

¹¹See Holloway, “Doing Poetic(s) Justice,” *Codes of Code: Race, Ethics, and the Color of Our Character* (1995). 104-122.

¹²See Jones, *The Muse Is Music: Jazz Poetry from the Harlem Renaissance to Spoken Word* (2013).

Chapter One: Making The Mark Of Cain Holy: Motherless Children Preach The Gospel Of Mercy—And Protest

¹³See Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845).

¹⁴See more on what poet-scholar Duriel E. Harris has begun to call “thingification” in Chapter Four’s discussion of the early poetics of LeRoi Jones. This nominalism has origins in a 1935 edition of the *Columbia Law Review* that has come back into vogue as contemporary African American writers such as the Black Took Collective (Harris, Ronaldo V. Wilson, Dawn Lundy Martin, and others) take queues from ancestors such as Jones/Baraka, Bob Kaufman, Ted Joans, Jayne Cortez, and Ishmael Reed, who saw blackness as a creative, performative space from which to critique the *expected* performance of African American archetypes and tropes. See also more on Harris’s stage production of the same name at her website (<http://www.thingification.org>).

¹⁵Besides the words in the chapter’s first epigraph, the only others in the former song—traditionally intoned at a slow, dirge-like pace that is designed to evoke sympathy for the bereft singer—are “Sometimes I feel like I’m almost gone.” The most noted interpretations of “Sometimes, I Feel Like a Motherless Child” feature the contralto vocalizations of women such as Marian Anderson, Bessie Griffin, and Odetta, who transform the lyrics’ agony into a bold incantation of a centuries-long poetics of protest. “Hush. Hush. Somebody’s Calling My Name,” has an upbeat tone and call-and-response structure that undulates against a backdrop of percussive handclapping and foot stomping. The words that give it its title are sung in three rounds, followed in many versions by the antistrophic rhetorical question “Oh my Lord, oh my Lord, what shall I do?” that one sees in the epigraph. After several refrains of that patterned verse, an alternate antistrophe—“Sounds like Jesus is calling my name”—succeeds the title refrain. Of course, slaves used the antistrophes to alert one another that an Underground Railroad conductor would soon arrive or was among them. Ironically, slaves’ masters often did not discern that the song’s “Jesus” had a human ambassador doing his bidding until it was too late and one or more slaves turned up missing/on the lam.

¹⁶In the moment of performance of “Sometimes,” any singer must make palpable the ache of not having the comfort of the touch of one’s birth mother or sufficient maternal stand-ins; what’s more, the stead that one once knew as home eludes, the distance from it protracted. As written and sung narratives recount, this separation was a reality more likely than not during the chattel slave era, and given that African Americans make up the largest incarcerated population, that likelihood has not improved over the century and a half since federal emancipation. See the May 28, 2014, [Prison Policy Initiative](#) and June 14, 2016, Sentencing Project reports, “Breaking Down Mass Incarceration in the 2010 Census” and “The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in State Prisons,” which note that African Americans comprise 40 percent of the total incarcerated population and 35 percent, 38 percent, and 34 percent, respectively, of the municipal and county jail population, state prisons, and federal prisons. The NAACP has compiled additional statistics on the criminalization of black and brown people. Finally, law professor and civil rights advocate Michelle Alexander notes in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2012) that there are more African Americans under correctional control—in prison or jail, on probation or parole—than were enslaved in 1850, and that, as of 2004, laws disenfranchised more black men with felony convictions disenfranchised than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment prohibited laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race.

¹⁷See Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review* 106. 8 (June 1993): 1717-1725.

¹⁸It is important to underscore that Africans lived among indigenous people in the Americas long before chattel slavery. Accounts of Africans in what is now Alabama date to the 1540 Battle of Mabila, and others are documented in the regions that would become Canada as well. Despite the persistence of small-scale racial slavery in Canada prior to 1833 under both British and French rule, this nation represented a fantasy of freedom, particularly for indigenous peoples who were being displaced by European-American colonialism. While white supremacy persisted there as in the United

States, African- and Caribbean-born people of color in Canada were able to enjoy a modicum of independence and access to capitalism a full generation before their American peers caught in the crosshairs of chattel oppression. Some would found cities rooted in these capitalist ideals, namely Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, the man of mythical Haitian and French-Canadian descent who married a Potawatomi woman and with her “settled” the land that would become Chicago. It is not a stretch to fathom that black Africans were among the Abenakis who led the 1746 Deerfield massacre. See Cassander L. Smith’s *Black Africans and the British Imagination English Narratives of the Early Atlantic World* (2016) for accounts of black Africans in pre-colonial America.

¹⁹See Haywood’s *Prophecy Daughters: Black Women Preachers and the Word, 1823-1913* (2003), Richardson’s *Maria W. Stewart: America’s First Black Woman Political Writer* (1988), and Cooper’s *Word, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans* (2011) for analysis of the Puritan rhetoric these women proselytized.

²⁰For detailed commentary of each of these poems and others, see Fisher’s *Habitations of the Veil: Metaphor and the Poetics of Black Being in African American Literature* (2014).

Chapter Two: Privileged Children Sing the Afromodern Blues

²¹Several contemporary African American poets have penned recent responses to the poem, most notably Terrance Hayes (“Snow for Wallace Stevens,” published in 2010 in his National Book Award-winning *Lighthouse*) and Rickey Laurentiis (in a 2014 *Boston Review* poem, “Of the Leaves That Have Fallen”).

²²See George Lensing’s *Wallace Stevens: A Poet’s Growth* (Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

²³For more on the homosocial, homoerotic relationship between Toomer and Frank, see my book review of Kathleen Pffeifer’s *Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank* in *Callaloo* 37:3 (Summer 2014): 735-739.

²⁴See Hortense Spillers’s “‘All the Things You Could Be Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother’: Psychoanalysis and Race,” in *Black, White, and in Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

²⁵All references and quotations from *Cane* are taken from the 2011 second/paperback edition of the Norton Critical Edition, edited by Rudolph P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co.).

Chapter Three: Migrant/Vagrant: The Black Mother’s Fugitive Flesh Made Jazz

²⁶This genre officially got its name from Martin Denny’s 1957 album title. However, dating to at least singer-songwriters Al Jolson and Raymond Scott, poet Vachel Lindsay, and fiction writer/photographer Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926), white writers had appropriated, imitated, and bastardized African, African American, Caribbean, and East Asian dialect, intonations, and harmonies into this amalgamated sound. Its popularity proved whites’ simultaneous hunger for blackness and black artistry and hatred of their desires.

²⁷According to Maria Damon’s *The Dark End of the Street* and Preston Whaley’s *Blows Like a Horn*, painter Russell Fitzgerald noted in his diary that after expressing an unrequited love for an ever-elusive Kaufman for months, he performed oral sex on a “passed out” Kaufman.

²⁸See La Marr Jurelle Bruce’s Yale University dissertation, “‘The Domain of the Marvelous’: Madness, Blackness, and Radical Creativity” and *How to Go Mad With Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* (Duke University Press, 2019). Both offer a compelling theorization of anger as a fruitful praxis of madness, particularly the ways that Nina Simone’s use of anger served her art.

²⁹Although Ginsburg and Baraka distanced themselves publically from Kaufman toward the end of his life as they gained mainstream acclaim and he became increasingly eccentric, the pair offered posthumous praise for the man whose poetics and performance most encapsulated the essence of the mid-twentieth-century movements for which they are famous. In a 1991 PBS interview with David Henderson, Baraka lauded Kaufman’s anarchist spirit “from the feelings of being opposed to society, and that that whole society had to be overthrown” (*Cranial Guitar* 11-12). In the same film, Ginsburg said of Kaufman: “He wasn’t just political, he was metaphysical, psychological, surrealist, and enlightened in extending his care into the whole society of poetry, seeing that as the revolution. There was a kind of psychological revolution going on along with the liberation of the word” (7). Henderson edited and collected these and other musings in his 1996 introduction for *Cranial Guitar*, a collation of excerpts from Kaufman’s published and then-unpublished works.

³⁰Dating to the mid-nineteenth century, the word *beat* began adjectivally to describe not only those experiencing physical and emotional exhaustion or, conversely, enjoying the success of besting a competitor but also specifically to connote a

general discontent and refusal to cooperate with laws deemed oppressive or with societal rules of decorum. Those who are marked recidivist criminals by acting above the law began to be known as Beats. They publicly protested the State's intrusion into their private, amorous lives with a ferocity and brazenness that inspired a generation of youths, many of whom were LGBT, to join them. Thus, by the mid-twentieth century, LGBT men, particularly those of color, began basking in the fabulousness of their Beat-ness. With snaps to punctuate their indifference and collective "F-you" to oppressive systems, they cloaked themselves in the best attire and makeup, and began competing in "balls" in which judges decided who are the most "beat" sissies on the block. Of course, it would be more than 30 years after *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines documented these gender-transgressive events in Chicago, New York, and elsewhere on their pages before Jennie Livingston would make them legend with her 1990 documentary film, *Paris Is Burning*.

³¹Kaufman again invokes the allomorph *queer* in the even more enigmatic poem-within-a-film-script-within-in-a-poem in his second collection, *Golden Sardine* (1965), titled "Carl Chessman Interviews the P.T.A. in His Swank Gas Chamber Before Leaving on His Annual Inspection of Capital, Tour of Northern California Death Universities, Happy." In the poem, he seems keenly aware of its many fraught connotations for any post-World War II reader. This epic indictment of the media frenzy incited by Caryl Chessman's years on death row was a perennial piece Kaufman extemporized in performances in the late 1950s; yet, it was not published beyond a broadside until five years after Chessman met his fate in a San Quentin gas chamber. In its third prosaic stanza, Kaufman reimagines the convicted serial rapist and robber chatting with the "gold star mothers" of the eponymous P.T.A., whose "meters," Kaufman quips, Chessman "feels ... [and] pronounces them queer." This reading focuses chiefly on his first recorded use of the term in the aforementioned early elegy in *Solitudes* and ends with a brief meditation on that opening framing in the "Chessman" poem. The echoes of black maternity, subtextual but deeply resonant in "Grandfather," attenuate the "queer" sounds of white maternity in "Chessman," which likely have received more attention because of the famous crime case that inspired it.

³²In the 1989 book, *View Askew: Postmodern Investigations*, Steve Abbott recounts one of Kaufman's layered tales of his parentage, citing him as one "born of a German Jewish father and a Native American Martinique Black Roman Catholic mother in New Orleans" who "grew up speaking Cajun as well as English" (130). Abbott says Kaufman's maternal grandmother, an African slave, "used to take him on long morning walks," which imbued him with a sensitivity to the concerns of blacks' U.S. plight (130). In Damon's introduction to the *Callaloo* special issue, however, she describes Kaufman as one son among 13 children of a schoolteacher and a Pullman porter, raised in in a middle-class, Catholic home in Tremé, one of the oldest African American communities in the United States. Kaufman, Damon argues, is one "with a colorful if somewhat fictitious legacy—that of a hybrid Orthodox Jewish and Martiniquan 'voodoo'-inflected Catholic upbringing. (The possibility that his great-grandfather, Abraham Kaufman, was Jewish and Kaufman's own fluency in French Louisiana patois helped to give rise to this legend.)" (106)

³³With this gesture to the crustacean, Kaufman also invokes a metaphor beloved among surrealist and environmentally conscious ancestors, including nineteenth-century French Romantic poet Gérard de Nerval, also known as Gérard Labrunie, who is said to have treated lobsters as pets, allegedly walking a favorite down Parisian streets on a leash.

³⁴In the first essay in her landmark 1983 collection, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Walker underscores the importance of this lineage of models for African-American womanist artist, whose art-making is inherently political. She says, "Black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom" (5). Because of this end goal, "the absence of models" that Walker underscores leaves womanists artist vulnerable to the "curse of ridicule" of her "most original, most strikingly deviant" work by "a fund of ignorance" among critics who presume their "judgment is free of restrictions imposed by prejudice, and is well informed, indeed, about all the art in the world that really matters" (4-5, my emphasis). In this way, womanists artist endures a particularly myopic and scathing critique. Without some validation from another womanist whose art reminds her that her work has merit, Walker notes, she will not survive or will go mad under the pressure. Such was the case for Hurston, who is now hailed as a quintessential Southern womanist but who died in poverty, a maid, forgotten. Through *Gardens*, Walker articulates the motivation for her quest to resurrect Hurston and restore her to prominence in the canon, charging, "We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone" (92, her emphasis).

The historical subjugation of Southern womanists' voices can be linked to Wallace's othered Other or what psychoanalyst philosopher Julia Kristeva calls the marginalization of an abjected Other. The abjection of the Southern womanist has at its roots a desire to expunge the guilt of their longtime rape, dehumanization and terrorization, most often at the hands of white men but also by lovers of color, in antebellum and postbellum times. Put most simply, Kristeva argues in *Powers of Horror* that the ongoing oppressive systems of racism, sexism and heteronormativity would have the Southern womanist view themselves as little more than "a definable *object*" (her emphasis) and one who as

“abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I” (1). This imagined “I,” deployed by liberal white men and women writers and heterosexist black male writers under the guise of giving her a voice, re-inscribes a longtime gaze of fetishization on Southern, black expressions of the feminine in general and the Southern womanist in particular, reducing them to an metaphorical effigy. Southern womanists’ resistance to subordination and social death, codified and reified in art by those who claim to speak on her behalf, then, creates a space in which womanists’ subjectivity can surprisingly thrive. Kristeva notes:

The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. Situationist in a sense, and not without laughter—since laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection. (all her emphasis, 18)

The quare enables Southern womanists to elide patriarchy’s offensive distancing and to empower their womanist self through an unhinged imagination, ingenuity and creativity. In perceived isolation, womanists gather fortitude and invoke this cloud of matrilineal witnesses. Once whites (or Eurocentric imitators) call upon womanists to entertain, as they always do, womanists emerge, wielding art that enraptures, astounds, embarrasses and radically alters those who have abjected them. Through art, womanists may give illusions of the mammy-nurturing that audiences crave but simultaneously present their full, complex selfhoods and subjectivities, which is decidedly not that of mammies but of artists unfettered by gender and genre binaries. Womanists’ art offers audiences a glimpse of their genius and beauty. It also serves as a mirror to grapple with their deceit. In this way, womanists invalidate the perceived superior I and debunk centuries-long attempts to subjugate their artistry. In these performative moments and spaces, audiences are witnesses caught up, as it were, in a liminal moment of redemption beneath an exalted, matrilineal cloud of witnesses whose presence they can feel but not fully understand. Womanists, then, enjoy an identity that is at once foreign and pagan and familiar and set apart and divine.

In conversation with Kristeva’s theories of abjection, Jewish Holocaust survivor Dori Laub’s theory of the true witness, outlined in his essay “Truth and Testimony,” makes even clearer how Southern womanists, whose agency is arguably the most foreclosed among those who identify with the feminine, have the capacity for the quare. Southern womanists bear some of the deepest scars of the African-Caribbean holocaust, resulting from the trans-Atlantic Middle Passage and the U.S. South’s chattel slave system. They have survived the cumulative effect of centuries of repressed trauma, relying upon an ancestral community of witnesses who have transcended the bounds of space, time and human logic. Although Southern womanists often “experience[s] the feeling of belonging to a ‘secret order’ that is sworn to silence,” they use art to bring audiences, who are “outside” witnesses to their own traumatic acts of abjection, “inside the event” of witnessing womanists’ performance, seeing them maybe for the first time, not as objects but as subjective agents of healing (66-67). As a result, Laub notes, “The interviewer-listener/[-observer] takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt [she] bore alone” (69). Defying the notion that Laub presents that “one could not bear witness to oneself” (66) or that “the lost ones are never coming back” (74), Southern womanists rely on an alternate spirituality that transforms the holocaust’s trauma, a faith that is an often unconscious mélange of the Judeo-Christian Trinitarianism and Far Eastern, Middle-Eastern, and African polythesism that womanists access through an embodied historical and cultural “rememory.” This blended faith, central to “disremembering” womanists’ subaltern state in America, empowers her or him to transubstantiate the dead and reanimate their own subjectivities, in moments of art-making and art-witnessing, into living witnesses to and co-transcendents of past trauma.

Chapter Four: Nobody Sings Anymore’: The Ghost of LeRoi Jones and the (Re)birth of a Nation

³⁵This term, which has its origin in a 1935 edition of the *Columbia Law Review*, has come back in vogue as contemporary African American writers such as the Black Took Collective (Harris, Ronaldo V. Wilson, Dawn Lundy Martin, and others) take queues from ancestors such as Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Bob Kaufman, Ted Joans, and Ishmael Reed, who saw blackness as a creative, performative space from which to critique *expected* performances of African American archetypes and tropes. See also more on Harris’s stage production of the same name at her website (<http://www.thingification.org>).

³⁶See Moten’s analysis of this moment in *In the Break*, where he draws a lineage between Abbey Lincoln’s 1960s protest songs, slave-era field hollers, and the haunting screams of literary characters such as Douglass’s Aunt Hester.

³⁷Baraka’s mother, Anna Lois Jones, was born into a family of middle-class privilege in segregated Alabama, courted his father and became pregnant while a student at historically black Fisk University, according to Baraka’s *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (1984). A New York Times obit reports she graduated from Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C.

Afterword: The Typology of 'Taint' and the Quare Future of African American Poetics

³⁸Audre Lorde and her publishers coined this term for her autobiography *Zami*, which combines biography, history and myth much like that which Trethewey (and many late-twentieth- and early twenty-first-century writers of color) do, blurring generic lines in the way that black American artists must. Much like *Zami*—oftentimes elegiac in its longing to bridge the gap between father, mother, and emotionally orphaned child—Trethewey's first and most recent three books blur the lines between genres to articulate its narratives of orphanage.

³⁹Burke founded the Just Be Inc. (and #MeToo Movement) in 2007, a decade after meeting a girl named Heaven in Alabama, who was a survivor of her stepfather's sexual abuse. White women in Hollywood initially co-opted her foundation's mantra as a hashtag for their Times Up efforts before black feminists set the record straight.

⁴⁰Conspiracy theories about the alleged African lineages of Abraham Lincoln, Warren J. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Dwight D. Eisenhower persist, and one of Franklin D. Roosevelt's white ancestors was born in present-day Morocco.