Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia

Master's Degree Program

in European, American and Postcolonial Languages and Literatures

American Studies

Academic years 2022–2023

Final Thesis

The Black Female Body in Bondage

When Undecipherable Pain Becomes a Healing Voice

Supervisor: Professor Elisa Bordin

Assistant Supervisor: Professor Filomena Mitrano

Graduand: Laura Arman, 760505

Academic Year: 2022/2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is conceived as a journey of exploration of the black female body under slavery and its aftermath, in 19th and 20th-century America. At the center is the black enslaved woman; she was transformed into bare flesh, divested of any human trait, used as labor force, exploited for her sexual attributes and breeding function. Excluded by the canons of white womanhood, she was stereotyped into different mythical figures according to her master's whims and the southern discriminating culture. The black female slave's body was the recipient of patriarchal domination, which rendered it the ideal site for medical experimentation and scientific achievements, principally for the benefit of white people. Against this background, the black woman's body was primarily a body in pain; tortures, abuses, sexual violence were designed to desubjectify an individual whose original world had already been dismantled. With physical pain, language withdraws into inaudible spaces leaving sufferings inexpressible and unexpressed. Bodily trauma gradually morphed into psychological suffering, affecting not just the individual but falling upon an entire community and the following generations. Enshrouded in a veil of silence, as a reaction to the traumatic events experienced, the black woman needs to find the instruments which can help her to voice those emotional wounds. One of those tools is poetry. Through verse, the 20th-century African American woman learned to flow with her feelings, joining language and its transformative power. Silence gives place to words to explore past and present: the past of the foremothers, whose living experience shaped the contemporary black woman, the present which enhances the black female body, honoring its blackness. It will be the voices of Audre Lorde,

Lucille Clifton and Maya Angelou that will accompany the reader through the final stage of this journey.

Keywords: slavery, the black female body in bondage, medical experimentation, convict leasing camps, black physical pain, rape, trauma, African American poetry.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* was the novel which sparked my interest in exploring the enslaved women's condition under bondage in the Deep South. While I was reading it, two passages in particular impressed me; I remembered feeling disturbed by the description of the tortured back of the protagonist, Sethe. Countless floggings mauled her skin, leaving bulging scars which took the peculiar shape of a chokeberry tree entirely covering her back. However, the scene which most disconcerted me was the one depicting Sethe when she was being held down by the Schoolteacher's boys and robbed of her milk, which was meant for her children. They later learned that she had reported the incident to her mistress, and, as a result, she was then brutally whipped.

It should be said that, at the time, I had just attended a captivating academic course on blackness and its implications within the North American social and economic context, in the period ranging from 18th and 19th-century slavery to the civil rights movements. Against this background, the image of Sethe's tortured back, and the trauma of her damaged body and motherhood, became more and more realistic in my mind, leading me to explore the issues relating to the sufferings and misery that southern white supremacy inflicted on black slave women.

What is known about the slavery system has become general knowledge through the accounts of former slave men who wrote about their experiences in bondage and their perilous escapes toward freedom. Mainstream cinema has further contributed to present this period of American history from the perspective of male slave protagonists, while slave women's ordeals have never had equal attention from the media, except for a few works. It was not until the 1980s that manuscripts and records by black women historians were redeemed and considered to be an additional

important testimony of the history of slavery. Suffice to say that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* published in 1861, began to circulate only in the mid-1980s.

In the preface to her second edition *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985), in fact, historian Deborah Grey White points out that scholars like her "were put in the ironic and untenable position of having to be especially careful to corroborate black women's sources with those of whites and black men—the very source material that made black women invisible in the first place" (7). It is precisely White's work, recognized as one of the most distinguished on this topic, which forms the subject matter for the drafting of the first part of my dissertation. Concurrently, other scholars' texts contribute to complete my research with additional historical details, such as, for instance, historian Eugene D. Genovese's. His *Roll, Jordan, Roll*: *The World the Slaves Made* (1974) offers an invaluable insight into the mechanism of slavery and the debatable concept of paternalism within the plantation milieu. By the same token, cultural critic bell hooks, through her *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), gives a thought-provoking analysis of the effects of sex and racial discrimination on black slave women and their devaluation as human beings.

The focal point upon which I construct my thesis is the black female body and the brutality that slavery brought with it. The body under scrutiny is, therefore, a battered, suffering, traumatized body inhabited by what academic Bibi Bakare-Yusuf defines "a desubjectified subject" (in Price 319). In Chapter One of this dissertation, a historical overview provides the framework for a proper knowledge of enslaved women's life conditions within the plantation. Black women were thought of as just bodies to be exploited for the backbreaking labor in cotton or tobacco fields, performing the same demanding tasks as their male counterparts; in addition, slave women had often to bear

the weight of being the sexual target of their slaveowners. Since the southern plantation economy was fueled by human capital, one of the bondwomen's duties imposed on them was breeding at an unnatural rate, thereby becoming reproductive machines in the eyes of white supremacy. For this purpose, when not coerced into sexual intercourse with male slaves, often chosen by the master, they were victims of sexual violence at the hands of their owners and overseers.

Despite being an object of abuse, the black woman was deemed to be solely responsible for white men's depraved behavior, as she was cunningly positioned into stereotyped categories; one of these categories labeled her as a Jezebel, whose purported lasciviousness justified her sexual exploitation. The figure of Mammy was another mythologized presence within the master's house; her plump body kept her away from her master's carnal appetites, but it did not exempt her from passive submission to the white family's demands. Both for Mammy and the other female slaves, motherhood often represented a critical moment in their lives; the sacredness and joy, typical of this moment in a woman's experience, were denied to black slave mothers. One of Mammy's duties was breastfeeding her master's children, often to the detriment of her own, while the other slaves working in the field could expect to have their offspring sold to other slaveholders.

The black female body was also a resource to use for medical research. In order to find a treatment for vesico-vaginal fistula, a serious condition which afflicted numerous female slaves, but also white women, medical experimentation was carried out at the expense of black women whose consent was not asked for. In such a context, the figure of Dr. Marion J. Sims has been called into question by medical ethicists and historians of late 20th century, who saw in his practice a further action of racial oppression and abuse against black people. The controversy arises from the fact that,

according to records, he operated on nine enslaved women without anesthetizing them and exposing their naked bodies to his medical apprentices, who held the suffering patients down during the surgeries. Following these experiments, the gynecologist gained such fame and wealth at the time, that he was widely acknowledged as the "father of modern gynecology".

For the purpose of giving an accurate analysis of this slice of the history of slavery, written once again on black women's bodies, I drew on medical ethicist Harriet A. Washington's study on the medical abuse of African Americans, occurring throughout the 18th and 19th century. Historian Deirdre Cooper Owens's *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (2017) represents a further contribution to my enquiry on this topic.

The first chapter closes with the examination of the less explored territory of the convict leasing system, operational from the end of the Civil War until the second decade of the 1900s. Black women, who were caught in the act of vagrancy or found guilty of any allegedly reprehensible behavior, were sentenced to jail or to work in the convict leasing camps which were spreading all over the post-emancipation South. The system partly replicated the slave model of the Old South, as female bodies were subjected to the same exploitative measures adopted by slaveowners; grueling work in iron or coal mines were frequently complemented by sexual violence and whippings. To navigate this understudied part of black women's history in the New South, Talitha L. LeFlouria's *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* (2015) is a key text for the detailed accounts and its richness in primary sources.

Chapter Two discusses the meaning of pain applied to the black woman's body. In this regard, the thorough research carried out by academic Elaine Scarry, collected in her work *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), is

instrumental in exploring the effects of physical agony caused by repeated torture. Although her study focuses chiefly on situations of war, the model she theorizes is also applicable to the context of slavery, where the interrelation between master and slave can be equaled to the relationship between torturer and victim. She maintains that, by continually experiencing corporeal pain, the victim's inner world, their self and consciousness, disintegrates up to the destruction of subjectivity; conversely, the torturer's position is strengthened in its oppressive function. In particular, Scarry illustrates the disruptive effects that bodily pain causes on language, which regresses to a prenatal stage in the sufferer, as she argues in the following passage: "Eventually the pain so deepens that the coherence of complain is displaced by the sounds anterior to learned language. The tendency of pain not simply to resist expression but to destroy the capacity for speech is in torture reenacted in overt, exaggerated form" (54).

The beaten, whipped, and tormented black woman, whose ability to express her pain is undermined, gradually loses her sense of self and identity. On such an issue Hortense Spillers offers a stimulating perspective in her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987): according to the literary critic, the black woman's original identity had already been erased when she was captured and brought to the new land. In that precise moment she became objectified flesh, and projected into what philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995) describes as life stripped of its own essence, unrestrictedly exposed to unpunished violence, life as a transitional "zone of indistinction between the animal and the human" exactly as the life in bondage was: bare life (108).

However, the female slave had also to deal with another kind of pain, in a sense more subtle and intrusive. Bodily torture left its visible signs, but emotional trauma, resulting from the numerous cruelties of slavery, burrows deep down into the psyche,

enclosing the suffering black woman in a cage of silence. Among those barbarities, constant sexual violence perpetrated by the master and his entourage, and sometimes even by black slaves, represented the most brutalizing aspect for female slaves. Rape, which the southern law failed to recognize as a crime if committed against a black woman, generated profound injuries within the victim's mind and soul, which language often struggled to express. Cathy Caruth's exploration of the meaning of trauma is of assistance in illuminating the consequences of the emotional wounds which affected not just the individual who experienced it, but were also passed on to the generations to come.

In outlining the content of these first two chapters, the memoir written by former slave Harriet Jacobs serves as an underlying theme; the vivid testimony of her first-hand experience of abuse and mental subjugation at the hands of her master corroborates the fundamental themes of this dissertation. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (1861) is a historical document, essential for a full understanding of women's sufferings brought about by slavery, those damaging the body and those haunting the mind; simultaneously, it stands as an example of firm and desperate resistance of a woman against the overwhelming burden of slavery.

Chapter Three, which closes this work, is envisaged as a recuperative process, through which silence becomes voice, fear becomes hope, and repression becomes freedom. For a significant number of black women, intellectual and not**,** poetry became the source from which to draw those words that a repressive and exclusionary order stifled. Audre Lorde stated that poetry is a vital commodity and not a luxury, since it allows women access to their most hidden emotions, to that inner place of power which is "dark", "ancient" and "deep" (*Compendium* 95). It is by descending into those silent depths that feelings are addressed, it is by transforming silence into

language that healing occurs, and, as Lorde claims, “where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it” (*Compendium* 96). Lorde’ life and art were partially influenced by the experience of an incurable disease, a condition that led her to talk about her most intimate feelings, and to urge other women to express their inner world. The following passage from her 1997 speech “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” is significant: “I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you” (Lorde, *Compendium* 13).

Although Lorde’s words had been articulated in a specific context, I immediately felt the resonance with the black women in bondage who could not speak or did not dare to do so. Lorde’s call to voice the unexpressed enables me to introduce Lucille Clifton and her poetry of black liberation, not just from inner chains, but also from the chains of a past of subjugation. In this perspective, Clifton distinguishes herself precisely for paying homage to the foremothers and forefathers who spent their lives in enslavement; being herself a descendant of captives from Dahomey, Clifton feels a strong connection with her African roots and, consequently, a number of her poems must be read as a commemoration of her ancestors.

The poems I selected portray black women surrounded by misery, entrapped in a past of repression, like the “aunt nanny” of “slave cabin, sotterly plantation, maryland, 1989”, or the old wretched “miss rosie”, of whose youth nothing remains but a symbolic name. As regards names, Clifton pays considerable attention to them; they are part of personal identity, they tell of one’s origin, they often reveal the individual’s traits, but slavery obliterated black people’s subjectivity by, first of all, erasing their names. This aspect is emphasized by Clifton in the poems “at the cemetery, walnut

grove plantation, south carolina, 1989" and "atlantic is a sea of bones", which will be analyzed in detail.

Clifton, however, does not just represent the voice of black people who could not express themselves, she is also the poet who positively exalts the black female body. Works such as "homage to my hair" and "homage to my hips" give prominence, even by exaggerating their features, to those parts of black women's bodies which have always been related to a stereotyped idea of blackness. Through verse, Clifton wishes to redeem the black female body, depicting it in all its beauty and almost bestowing on it her restorative voice. In Clifton's sensibility, poetry becomes both a eulogy and a way of healing the wounds left by centuries of physical enslavement, followed by the racial and sexual discrimination of contemporary American society.

I envision this dissertation as a journey; first of all, of a personal nature, because it symbolically represents my academic adventure of these years, to which I have brought my history and my emotional world, while approaching new literary and cultural territories. Secondly, it is structured as a journey which develops through three stages: the historical, the emotional, and the literary stage, corresponding to the three chapters. They are intertwined with each other, although linear in their sequence, as the emotional and psychological analysis of the suffering body would not make sense without the historical background; similarly, the part devoted to poetry becomes meaningful only if the ground for full comprehension is prepared. As Clifton herself points out, "the more one knows about who is using the word, the more the reader brings to a fuller understanding of what is meant. Communication involves not only definition but also nuance, sound, history, baggage, culture, even generation and gender and race" (Rowell 58).

BLACK WOMEN

America made us heroines
not wives,
we learned the tricks
to keep the race together
but had to leave our men
to find themselves
and now they damn
what they cannot forgive.

Even ol massas son
lives in a dream
remembering the lie
we made him love.

America made us heroines
not wives.
We hid our ladyness
to save our lives

by *Lucille Clifton*

1. THE BLACK FEMALE BODY: A HISTORY OF EXPLOITATION

1.1THE BLACK WOMAN'S CONDITION IN ANTEBELLUM SLAVERY PLANTATIONS

"When he [the master] told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong". (Jacobs 20, italics in the text). These few lines from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (2000) encapsulate the essence of the slaveholding system ruling plantations life in the Deep South. The protagonist Harriet Jacobs, who wrote under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, a former slave in a plantation in North Carolina, portrays the psychological pressure and physical abuse bondwomen had to endure under southern slavocracy. The work was initially dismissed as a non-authentic account of slave conditions since it was characterized by melodramatic tones and because it primarily focused on domestic dynamics. For this reason, it was considered to be far from slave narrative parameters. Only in 1987 was it recognized as a reliable firsthand testimony, gaining prominence in academic circles and finally entering the national canon of literature, thanks to the meticulous research carried out by historian Jean Fagan Yellin. Jacobs takes into account that she may not be trusted precisely because of the barbarity she reports; however, she tries to reassure her readership on the genuineness of the facts:

> READER, BE ASSURED THIS narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the

> contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts. (Jacobs 3, capitalized in the text)

Behind the veil of a romanticized style and the use of fictitious names, Jacobs gives evidence of the monstrosity of slavery from her perspective as a slave woman, revealing a world where "the degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than [she] can describe. They are greater than [one] would willingly believe" (Jacobs 30-31).

Enslaved women were first of all arms destined to fuel the economic machine of the slaveowner's estate, and to a larger extent, to increase the revenue of the southern colonies in their intensive production of cotton, tobacco, rice, and sugar. They started to work at an early age, at first involved in the chores within the Big House,[1] while later as young adults they were mostly assigned to field duties and tasks. However, as historian Jacqueline Jones in her *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* (1985) points out:

> The lines between domestic service and fieldwork blurred during the day and during the lives of enslaved women. Many continued to live in the quarters but rose early in the morning to perform various chores for the mistress […] before heading for the field. (21)

Bondwomen were daily consumed by the draining rhythm of housework combined with the tasks essential for agriculture, such as hoeing, plowing, or cotton picking. All these tasks, along with the demanding duties of their own families' needs, required

[1] The Big House refers to the main building within the plantation complex, where the master and his family reside.

finding additional time in their days. Jones also reports an interview conducted by the Federal Writers Project of a former slave woman who states, “Work, work, work, […] I been so exhausted working, I was like an inchworm crawling along a roof. I worked till I thought another lick would kill me” (13). Since slaveholders realized that female hands could carry out as strenuous tasks as men did, and often even more skillfully, the division of labor was not practiced, burdening women thus with work as heavy as their male counterparts. Not even pregnancy represented a condition for gender distinction in labor: the mothers-to-be were given just a few weeks break from work before delivery, and then compelled to resume their daily activities in the field as soon as the baby was born. To animal-like beings, as black women were considered, the privileges and rights of motherhood were inaccessible; they had to split themselves between the routine activities and nursing their babies. If they happened to exceed the time allowed them for breastfeeding, they might be whipped. In such circumstances, “child care was an additional burden” that altered the sacredness unique to motherhood, denying female slaves the status of real mothers and subsequently women (White 98).

For the few who remained engaged full time at the service of the master and his family, especially in larger properties, the situation did not fare much better. If, on the one hand, they could have decent clothes and a little more to eat, on the other, they had to be constantly on guard for the many requests of the whites, while trying not to seemingly annoy them somehow. On this theme, historian Eugene D. Genovese, in his analysis of slave society in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*: *The World the Slaves Made* (1974), writes as follow: “The Big House itself often resembled a battlefield. If closeness bred affection and warmth, it also bred hatred and violence; often it bred all at once, according to circumstances, moods, and momentary passions” (378-79). Indeed, even small incidents could have consequences, resulting sometimes in brutal punishments.

One of the countless testimonies, collected by historian John Blassingame, effectively depicts the outcome of an alleged infraction: a ten-year-old little girl who served in the Big House, suspected of having broken a comb, was taken to a room, made to undress, while, with her hands tied, her mistress "commenced beating her naked body with bunches of willow twigs. She would beat her until her arm was tired, and then thrash her on the floor, and stamp on her with her foot, and kick her, and choke her to stop her screams" (Blassingame 131). After a few years, the child died of an infection caused by the bruises following the whippings. Home servants could be severely punished for minimum carelessness, as witnessed by a former slave who recalls in the following interview:

> I saw a woman stretched out, face downwards, on the ground her hands and feet being fastened to stakes. Mr. Farrarby was standing over her and striking her with a leather trace belonging to his carriage harness. As he struck her the flesh of her back and legs were raised in welts and ridges by the force of blows. Sometimes when the poor thing cried too loud from the pain Farrarby would kick her in the mouth. After he exhausted himself whipping her he sent to his house for sealing wax and a lighted candle and, melting the wax, dropped it upon the woman's lacerated back. He then got a riding whip and, standing over the woman, picked off the hardened wax by switching at it. […] This punishment was so terrible that I was induced to ask what offence the woman had committed and was told by her fellow servants that her only crime was in burning the edges of the waffles that she had cooked for breakfast. (hooks 45)

Serving in the master's house, thus, did not guarantee preferential treatment. On the contrary, living under the same roof led almost certainly to enduring both psychological and physical exploitation, as Jacobs herself experienced. This aspect is particularly emphasized by historian Deborah Grey White:

> Obsequious behavior was, therefore, more of a must for them, and the pretty, even the comely, could never rest easy once the master's sons reached puberty, or the master himself developed a roving eye. That roving eye, of course, presented a problem that is ignored in romantic views of female house service. (45)

Once the "roving eye" became fixed on his prey, the servant's life would take a turn for the worse: she would become the target of her white owner's sexual desires, unintentionally igniting feelings of revenge in the betrayed mistress. Jacobs well describes in her memoir this sort of feeling, "I was an object of her jealousy, and, consequently, of her hatred; and I knew I could not expect kindness or confidence from her under the circumstances in which I was placed" (37). It was unlikely for mistresses to turn against their unfaithful husbands; instead, they poured their anger for the wounded pride upon the slave women who were seen as the only culprits. They were so imbued with "the myth of black female immorality" and powerless against their husbands' sexual whims, that "southern white women viewed slave women with jealousy and contempt" (Painter qtd. in Feimster 40).

I would invite the reader to dwell on the term "immorality" used by historian Nell Irvin Painter, and associated with black women: it is the key word to understanding the mythological aura with which Americans always clothed them. When Jefferson

wrote about slavery in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1853), the belief that blacks were prone to raw sexuality is clearly expressed in the following two excerpts: "They [blacks] are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation"; "Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination" (150-152). Therefore, an uncontrolled lasciviousness stigmatized enslaved people, and in particular black females, to the point of their being labeled Jezebels. This association was a result of the interpretation that the first slave traders gave of African customs once they arrived in the continent, where semi-nudity and polygamy were mistaken for depravity. In addition, the environment in which bonded women were forced to work fueled prejudices in southern society: in rice plantations, for instance, they had to roll their clothes up to not get wet, showing their legs in so doing (White 31). Frederick Law Olmsted, correspondent for *The New York Daily Times* from the American South during the 1850s, reported that "the women had their coarse gray skirts 'reefed up' around their waist and did no more than complete their assigned tasks" (qtd. in White 31). The impression he had was aligned with the dominant bias; Olmsted in fact observed that they were "'clumsy', 'gross', and 'elephantine', yet added that in their demeanor the women were 'sly', 'sensual', and 'shameless'" (qtd. in White 31).

This is the ground on which the myth of Jezebel fell. The character was molded upon the biblical Phoenician princess who had become "an icon of cultural disloyalty, excess, sex, beauty, and deviance" (Lomax 38). Following that analogy, "if Jezebel is the evilest immoral seductress in the Bible, then the black/African enslaved wench, the most villainous and wanton on the plantation, must be jezebel" (Lomax 48). Embodying temptation and lust, the voluptuous black woman did not meet the ideals of Victorian womanhood, in which "the four cardinal virtues of piety, purity,

submissiveness, and domesticity" ruled the nineteenth century white woman's behavior (Patton xvi). Accordingly, the bondwoman could not be but a lewd creature who, like a prostitute, as Southerners often referred to her, offered her body for the sexual pleasure of white men. But behind the myth of the Jezebel-like woman, the patriarchal mark is discernible. The image of the seducer woman served as a protective mantle under which masters and overseers could wield their power and legitimize what in reality was rape. Exploring the mythological figure, White argues: "the image of Jezebel excused miscegenation, the sexual exploitation of black women, and the mulatto population" (55).

In contrast with the sinful seducer, the Mammy figure stood out for being asexual in her physical appearance. Commonly depicted as plump and middle aged, clad in apron and headscarf, the black Mammy was a reassuring presence in the plantation houses, capable of meeting the needs of the whole white family. Over the 20th century, cinema and media have contributed to popularize this portrait of a reliable and devoted servant; memorable indeed is the Mammy character played in Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939) with her compassionate and firm attitude, who remains faithful to her mistress even after the Civil War, or the strong and loyal old servant in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Another iconic image of the dependable housekeeper is Aunt Jemima, "introduced to the world at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair as a Reconstructionist alter ego to the mammy" (Sanders 4); her dark and smiling face framed by a colorful bandana, appeared on food product packages, becoming a popular brand throughout the United States. The successful marketing "image of a heavyset black woman serving food to white families became an updated symbol of racial harmony" (Sanders 10); she evoked a feeling of nostalgia and longing for a

romanticized, idyllic antebellum South, where Mammies were portrayed as the undisputed queens of the kitchen, as well as babies' nurses and family counselors.

However, black woman's caricatures were the product of an antebellum society that needed to assert "the institution of bondage as a positive good, a way to care for 'childlike' black people and incorporate them into white 'households'" (Jones 13). Deborah White corroborates Jones's words, claiming that "Southerners had created this icon as proof to themselves and the world that slavery was benign, that its regenerative powers could domesticate Jezebel" (144). Similarly, Genovese expresses this concept in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Citing a scene in which a zealous Mammy restores order in the house, pushing black children out while they are dancing and singing before an amused white audience, he argues: "This picture did not stem simply from postwar nostalgia; it had already appeared in antebellum days in the expressions of those who sought to paint slavery in the brightest possible colors" (Genovese 373). In his portrayal of Mammy, Genovese also points out that "she remains the most elusive and important black presence in the Big House. To understand her is to move toward understanding the tragedy of plantation paternalism" (372).

The ideology of paternalism, according to Genovese, was at the base of the relationship between master and slaves; if masters used this concept to preserve slavery as a benign institution, justifying their power on slaves' labor, enslaved people saw in it an opportunity for demanding better work conditions. His reflection continues:

> Their [Mammies'] position in the Big House, including their close attention to the white children sometimes at the expense of their own, constituted the firmest protection they could have acquired for themselves and their

> immediate families. Mammies did not often have to worry about being sold or about having their husbands or children sold. (Genovese 374)

However, in his attempt to demonstrate the Mammy's "prestigious" role along with the supposed privileges she acquired, Genovese omits to take into account the inner sacrifice she experienced, since she was forced to be a mother to others' children while disregarding her own. This give-and-take balance may not last forever, and certainly came at a high price, as W.E.B. Du Bois observes in *The Gift of Black Folk & The Souls of Black Folk* (1924): "She [the figure of the Black Mammy] was an embodied sorrow, an anomaly crucified on the cross of her own neglected children for the sake of the children of masters who bought and sold her as they bought and sold cattle" (170). In this respect, Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass offer two emblematic memories: Jacobs's grandmother, at her mistress's death, witnessed all her children being sold despite the "long and faithful service to her owners" (10); Douglass's grandmother, in addition to having her descendants "divided, like so many sheep", was sent to live in the woods in a hut, and "made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness" (146). Hence, the danger of being put up for sale or got rid of by precisely those who had been kindly nursed by her, was just around the corner. Even violence, and in some extreme cases killing, was not an uncommon fate for Mammies.

Continuing with the analysis of this figure, the aspect on which scholars of African American studies focused is the Mammy's motherly role, and the enslaved woman's in general. In her research work, scholar Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, for instance, describes Mammy as "a surrogate mother celebrated for emotionally displacing a biological mother and a caricature of ideal motherhood, as her own children are

inconsequential" (19). The quality of surrogacy challenges the very meaning of mother applied to Mammy. The slaveholding family's arrangements implied she renounced her identity as a natural mother in order to become the substitute one, making her move in a liminal space between her artificial role and the biological instinct, suspended between "the ideal mother and the antithesis of motherhood" (Patton 34). Mammy's genuine love for her master's children may not be questioned, what is questioned is "her ability to be a true woman" (Patton 34). Although she possessed, in contrast to the Jezebel, all the characteristics that placed her in the realm of southern womanhood, the ambiguity of her position impeded her from fulfilling the role of natural mother and, consequently, as Patton suggests, from being a real woman.

Moreover, bondwomen could not be true women on the grounds that their categorization into stereotypes made them unreal, for a stereotype corresponds to an idea rather than actuality. The creation of caricatures, illusory by definition, was a tool for whites to justify the enslavement of women who were "something other than ladies" (Patton 27). In white Americans' imagination black women were also painted as Sapphires, when, in contrast with the dominant Christian values, evilness and stubbornness defined their behavior. In other circumstances, they were the embodiment of Amazonic features, in reference to the resistance to hardships they were able to show. Hence, the black woman was "either too masculine, too sexual, or too asexual to be a real woman, let alone a real person" (Patton 27).

The exploration of the emotional and power dynamics that affected the Mammy's nurturer role, sets the stage for investigating the discourse on motherhood as experienced by those black women who were employed mainly in the field labor. In the captivity system of the Deep South, bondwomen were considered a resource to be exploited to the maximum. Their financial relevance also resided in their ability to

give birth to as many children as they could, since those children would soon represent human capital, crucial for the economic growth of the plantation. Consequently, the rhythm of pregnancies for each woman was accelerated, overriding the usual maternity periods of white women; the interval between one childbirth and the next was approximately two years. For this purpose, masters pressured their enslaved women to procreate, resorting to subtle ruses, such as promising a less heavy task or rewarding those who proliferate more with "certain additions of clothing and an additional weekly ration" (hooks 48). The use of violence represented another common method of coercion. Since they were adolescents, slave women were urged to find a husband among black men, even when they had not any feeling of love; otherwise, those who dared to oppose their master by refusing to couple with a man, were the victims of forced sexual intercourse.

In a system in which bearing and raising children equaled the monetary profit of field work, sterile women underwent a worse fate. Regarded as a possession of no worth, barren women were often sold, passing from one slaveholder to another. They were "exposed to every form of privation and affliction. Thus a deficiency, wholly beyond the slave's power [became] the occasion of inconceivable suffering" (hooks 47). Considered as breeding machines, bondwomen were thought to be physically more resistant to frequent pregnancies than white women, as they were used to hard work. This belief led many slaveowners to deny their enslaved women attention and proper care during and after childbearing; instead, they coerced them to work almost until term, especially in the cotton and sugar plantations where the pace of labor was more pressing. If the pregnant woman was unable to achieve the assigned daily quota, she was not spared harsh maltreatment: for instance, the overseer or the master himself made her lay face down naked with her abdomen placed in a hole in the ground, and

then she was whipped (hooks 44). Although the hole should protect the womb, there was a high risk of damage to the fetus, as well as great pain for the mother. The following testimony allows us to understand the danger and cruelty of this practice:

> A woman who gives offense in the field, and is large in a family way, is compelled to lie down over a hole made to receive her corpulency, and is flogged with the whip or beat with a paddle, which has holes in it; at every stroke comes a blister. One of my sisters was so severely punished in this way, that labor was brought on, and the child was born in the field. This very overseer, Mr. Brooks, killed in this manner a girl named Mary. Her father and mother were in the field at that time. (Grandy qtd. in Davis, *Women* 11-12)

Lack of medical care, a low-protein diet, and poor hygienic conditions were the main causes of complications during delivery, in addition to "convulsions, retention of placenta, ectopic pregnancy, breech presentation, premature labor, and uterine rigidity" (White 74). Furthermore, the numerous births in a slave woman's life "meant the risk of inadequate healing time between delivery, plantation labor, post-partum recovery and a new pregnancy" (Bankole 67). In many cases it culminated in prolapses, a serious condition which causes the lowering of the uterus. In such a scenario, the mortality rate during and after pregnancy, due to infections of the reproductive system, was significant among both mothers and infants.

"Self-induced miscarriages" and infanticides occasionally occurred, and the reason behind this extreme gesture is to be found in a desperate refusal of mothers to allow their offspring to endure the brutality of enslavement (White 76). Literature offers a

meaningful case of child-murder at the hands of the enslaved mother: based on the true story of the slave Margaret Garner, the pivotal scene in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that depicts Sethe cutting off her daughter's head is emblematic of how far a mother could go under the slavery regime. The protagonist's words well describe the despair that must have pushed some enslaved mothers to kill their own children: "How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (Morrison 174). Through Sethe, Morrison makes us relive the real tragedy experienced by the fugitive Garner who defended her action by saying: "now she [her daughter] would never know what a woman suffers as a slave […] I will go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to slavery" (Aptheker qtd. in Davis, *Women* 22). The feeling of total hopelessness that pervaded motherhood, and life in general, in the bondage system, is expressed in another poignant passage from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. While a young bondwoman was on her deathbed after having delivered a stillborn baby, her mother, who was attending her, said: "The baby is dead, thank God; and I hope my poor child will soon be in heaven, too" (Jacobs 16). Jacobs herself often wished death for her children as the only escape from the brutality of slavery: "When I lay down beside my child, I felt how much easier it would be to see her die than to see her master beat her about" (96). It may be paradoxical to think of maternity in terms of joy and excitement when applied to black women in the antebellum South, and not because they "were numb to any maternal feelings", as was a common belief among whites, but because of the constant dread of seeing their children sold or violated (Patton 37). Sethe, the mother in the aforementioned *Beloved*, describes the love for her daughter as "too thick" (Morrison 177), and it was that thick love that drove her to take the life of her own child. The fact that black mothers tried to escape less than male slaves proved they cared about their offspring. They would have to rely

on somebody to look after them or, as some bold female slaves did, flee along with their families. In certain cases, truancy represented an option with which slave mothers "reconciled their desire to flee and their need to stay", as was the choice made by Harriet Jacobs who remained concealed for almost seven years in a tiny space under the roof of her grandmother's house, finding thus a compromise between freedom and family ties (White 66).

In the masters' eyes, the black female slave was a commodity womb for the production of the labor force, just "moveable property, bought and sold, seen in terms of nature" (Lomax 23). At the auction blocks indeed, bondwomen on sale were advertised through signs saying, "breeding slaves", "child-bearing woman", "breeding period", "too old to breed" (hooks 47). Other slogans were designed to draw the buyers' attention to female private parts, in addition to the available period for which the slave could be exploited as a breeder: "There's a breast for you, good for a round dozen before she's done child-bearing" (Johnson qtd. in Jones 18). Olmsted, at the end of his travels through the South, remarked that "a slave woman [was] commonly esteemed least for her working qualities, most for those qualities which [gave] value to a brood mare" (qtd. in White 176).

The enslaved black woman was not seen in her entirety, but only valued according to her tireless hands, to her genitalia often craved and despoiled, to her always bulging belly and engorged breasts, to her back upon which merciless fatigue and blood were unleashed. Sometimes she was Mammy, at others Jezebel or Sapphire. She mothered many but no one fully belonged to her. She had no right to speak, not even in a language imposed from above. To colonialist America, the bondwoman was no more than a body where "masculine conflicts" ignited (White 13). Female black bodies were

“no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant[ed], or the horses they tend[ed]” (Jacobs 10).

1.2 BLACK FEMALE BODIES ON THE EXAMINATION TABLE

The pressure put on women slaves for reproduction was concurrent with the passage of the 1807 Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, which banned the slave trade from the African continent to the United States. Hence, female slaves were called, or more appropriately, compelled to serve as procreation machines for the maintenance of the slaveholding apparatus through its main resource, and the consequent increase in the economic productivity of the plantation. The birthrate followed an unnatural pace for a woman's endurance, inevitably leading to complications such as the development of diseases related to the reproductive organs, which could compromise the pregnant black women's health. Since masters relied enormously on the slave breeding for their wealth to grow, they gradually began to turn to physicians for the prompt treatment of their pregnant bondwomen, enabling the intrusion of white men into a field which had been almost exclusively restricted to black midwives. The partnership between slaveholders, concerned with the good functioning of their female slaves' reproductive organs, and doctors, willing to be pioneers in this field, gave the latter "even greater access to black women's reproductive bodies", marking in this way the foundation of modern gynecology (Owens 16, 17).

The few southern doctors who first approached female ailments were not yet professionally trained in this specific area of medicine, and they often resorted to empirical treatments that might be fatal for the sick person (Owens 58). Thus it is not surprising that women were reluctant to avail themselves of medical methods. Bondwomen, whose healing techniques were rooted in the natural remedies of African tradition, were terrified by the cold approach of physicians. Although dictated by personal repulsion toward her slaveholder, who was also a doctor, Jacobs's words testify her unwillingness to have him assist her when she was sick just before

childbirth: “ I could not have any doctor but my master, and I would not have him sent for” (67). Deep South gynecologists could build their knowledge on the enforced availability of suffering black female bodies. The relationship between doctor and patient was virtually nonexistent, overshadowed by the “slaveholder-physician dyad, with the slave left outside, unconsulted, uninformed, and with no recourse if she or he was unsatisfied, injured, or killed—a medical nonentity” (Washington 51). Therefore, the master had the complete control of the sick bodies of his slaves, and it was him and not the sufferer who had the last word on giving permission for a medical operation, regardless of the patient’s consent. As far as female slaves were concerned, the planters’ preoccupation with healing specific disorders of the reproductive system was huge, and not so much for the woman’s pain relief but rather to ensure the reproduction chain. Indeed, slaveholders learned the importance of preserving the bondwomen’s health, and specifically of their sex organs.

The master’s focus mostly remained fixed on his future workforce, distinguishing mother and child into two “separate entities”, each of which was attributed its own value. The following case highlights the conflicting dichotomy between mother and child, or more appropriately, between the bondwoman and her fetus: Celia, a nineteen-year-old slave in a Missouri plantation, murdered her master after she could no longer tolerate the prolonged sexual abuse perpetrated by him. The court condemned her to death, but the execution was postponed until the birth of the child she was bearing (Owens 43-44). First and foremost, the incident shows the mercilessness of justice in not considering extenuating circumstances, like the fact that Celia had been repeatedly raped by her owner; secondly, the court’s decision to make the girl deliver her baby regardless, puts the fruit of her procreative function at center stage, diminishing her vital role as a mother. A further proof that the child was the slaveholder’s property

from its fetal stage on, was the way in which pregnant women were whipped, with their bellies accommodated in a hole in the ground in order to protect the child.

It could be argued that the masters' behavior toward their bondwomen was contradictory: on the one hand, they did not spare them the most severe punishment, which at times even endangered female slaves' life; yet, on the other, masters were well aware of the great value of their wombs. Therefore, if with the lash they asserted their colonial and patriarchal power, through the use of physicians they could possibly restore the good health of their female slaves' reproductive system, and consequently guarantee the plantation operability.

It was precisely within plantations that southern doctors were offered the chance to specialize in a medical sector little known to them before. It can be safely asserted that American medical figures gained their prominence at the expense of subjugated black bodies which were completely at their disposal "not solely for healing and research but largely for the benefit of white women's reproductive health" (Owens 7). The following reflection perfectly captures the rhetoric of the racial supremacy that was expressed by white doctors performing as actors within the institution of slavery:

> More than scientific racism, more than heroic purges, bleedings, and cathartics, and more than the punitive use of therapeutics, involuntary medical experimentation was the scientific personification of enslavement. Violence, pain, and shame joined as physicians forced the enslaved body into medical service, not to cure, but for profit. Medical experimentation was profitable in terms of recovered health and life for whites, who benefited once the medical process had been perfected. It was also a

> profitable source of fame, and sometimes fortune, for physicians. (Washington 59)

As a matter of fact, doctors' aims lay in experimenting and acquiring new techniques such as the cesarean section, to subsequently apply to southern white women. Bondwomen were instrumental in the development of this procedure, which had previously been adopted only on women who had died during delivery, in order to save the child.

Black female bodies thus, plagued by the widespread conditions of the time, such as "menstrual problems, prolapses of the uterus, abortions, difficult pregnancies and births, vesico-vaginal fistulas, and uterine diseases" (Bankole 75), soon became "clinical matter" (Owens 71). Blacks were positioned on the lower rung of the evolutionary ladder; they were considered subordinate to the white race just on the grounds of the visible differences. Polygenism theory postulated the physical and intellectual inferiority of black people, who were believed to be "liars, malingerers, hypersexual, and indolent" (Washington 38).[2] This human hierarchy was abundantly discussed in medical and scientific journals of the time, especially when related to diseases, although it was not endorsed by "logical methodologies, experimental data, control groups, and verification by replication" (Washington 36). As regards black women, stereotypes continued to persecute them, even in terms of gynecological issues. Their supposed promiscuous behavior was thought to be the vehicle for the insurgence of certain pathologies, such as in the case of venereal diseases, or the cause behind doctors' inability to cure them. In this respect, it is emblematic how Dr. John

[2] Polygenism is a theory that became popular in the United States in the mid-1800s. According to polygenists human races evolved from two different origins.

Peter Mettauer, forerunning gynecologist in vesico-vaginal fistula surgery, justified his failure to heal an enslaved female patient: he ascribed the persistence of the obstetrical condition to the black woman's sexual activity. Moreover, the double stigma of being black and woman fueled further prejudices among doctors who "considered natural biological conditions such as menstruation pathological", or "asserted that the clitorises of little black girls were larger than those of their white peers because they accompanied their enslaved mothers to the fields while they worked" (Owens 46).

Although blackness was regarded as a genetic illness, color was no longer seen as a hindrance when personal achievement and medical findings were at stake. The alleged biological differences that placed bondwomen on an inferior level did not impede physicians from using their bodies to enhance the progress in gynecology, whose primary beneficiaries would be white American women. After all, as medical historian John Duffy wrote in his *The Healers: A History of American Medicine* (1979), doctors "were far more willing to try new procedures upon slaves than upon other women" (qtd. in Breslaw 132). The black body, as pure object for medical research, elicited repulsion and attraction at the same time, becoming the site of ambiguous qualities: immune to pain but vulnerable to maladies, equipped with inexhaustible force but debilitated by the surgical knife, invisible for the colonial supremacy yet protagonist in medical breakthrough.

This ever-present duality in African American female slaves is at the heart of one of the most discussed experiments in the history of American medicine which questions the boundary between ethic and advancement in therapeutic techniques. The case concerns a serious complication that affected numerous women in 19th-century America, the abovementioned vesico-vaginal fistula, which manifests itself as "an opening between bladder and vagina due to loss of tissue from sloughs or ulceration"

(Vance 2). The injured tissue within the vagina is infected "by the decomposing urine that pours through it" (Vance 4). Those who suffered from this severe condition, usually after having experienced a traumatic childbirth, lamented "recurring pelvic and urinary tract infections" (Wall 347). Moreover, incontinence and fetid smell, due to "the constant stream of urine and sometimes feces that trickled from the fistula", worsen the situation (Owens 26).

One of the most renowned, yet controversial names linked to this debilitating condition is Dr. J. Marion Sims.[3] The South Carolinian physician went down in history as the founder of modern gynecology, thanks to the trailblazing surgeries he developed during his career. After multiple experimental operations he succeeded in finding a cure for the vesico-vaginal fistula, offering women the chance to recover their usual activities. One of his major achievements is the technique he discovered while performing an obstetrical surgery: he realized that positioning the patient on her knees and elbows, he could have better access to the female parts to be treated. In line with the fervent atmosphere of the mid-19th century, Sims proved an excellent entrepreneur of himself by naming the innovative position the "'Sims position', and renam[ing] the duckbilled speculum used to examine women's cervixes the "'Sims speculum'" (Owens 39). What made Sims a disputed figure throughout history is the method he used, judged unethical by many critics and contemporaries, like Dr. Daniel Hale Williams who criticized Sims for constantly practicing on black female slaves without

[3] American physician and writer Abraham Verghese mentions Dr. J. Marion Sims in his novel *Cutting for Stone* (2009), set in Addis Abeba. The protagonist, at his birth, is named after the American gynecologist: "Marion Sims, she [his mother] would tell me later, was a simple practitioner in Alabama, USA, who had revolutionized women's surgery. He was considered the father of obstetrics and gynecology, the patron saint; in naming me for him, she was both honoring him and giving thanks" (Verghese 124). Besides, Marion's twin, Shiva, specializes in the repair of vesico and recto-vaginal fistulae. In the novel, in fact, there is a detailed passage describing the effects of this medical condition, as well as the method used by Dr. Sims to operate on his patients (see page 382).

their consent. Even his former medical assistant Nathan Bozeman questioned Sims's behavior, claiming that "a case of vesicovaginal fistula [was] *created* by Sims when he removed the bladder stones of a nine-year-old slave girl" (Louisville Register qtd. in Washington 73, italics in the text). Dr. Sims, before emerging as a pioneering surgeon and moving to New York, where in 1855 he opened his first women's hospital, could perfect his technique on the bodies of enslaved young women he leased from their owners for the purpose. Between 1844 and 1849, Lucy, Anarcha, Betsy, and other unknown bondwomen suffering from vesico-vaginal fistulae, underwent a series of surgical interventions without the help of any anesthetic substance. Lucy, an eighteen-year-old new mother, was the first to be operated; kneeling with her elbows on a table, completely unclothed and surrounded by white medical apprentices, the young female slave endured a painful surgery. Such was Lucy's physical tribulation that Sims would write later in an article: "Lucy's agony was extreme…she was much prostrated and I thought she was going to die" (Sims qtd. in Washington 70). During the five years at the "sick house", a sort of modest and empiric hospital usually within the plantation, the black slaves went through multifarious surgeries before Sims could refine his technique. For instance, Anarcha, whose condition was aggravated by both vesico and recto-vaginal fistulae, could be considered fully recovered only after the thirtieth operation.

Sims's detractors object that he performed his experimentation on female slaves without their own consent, instead solely in agreement with their slaveholders. Moreover, Sims's decision not to administer anesthesia to his black patients is considered a racist act. Gynecologist L.L. Wall tries to dismantle the accusations made to Sims's practice, by pointing out that the ailment in question, in addition to being incurable, had a serious impact on the quality of women's lives: it caused infertility,

loss of vaginal functions, inflammations, and not last, psychological distress. Hence, adds Wall, "they [Sims's patients] could continue as they were, with whatever palliative treatment might be provided, or they could agree to undergo experimental surgical operations that might offer them some relief, perhaps even a total cure, for their condition" (347). As regards the enslaved women's consent, the gynecologist remarks that Sims himself, in an article published for the *New York Medical Gazette and Journal of Health* in 1855, attested that he could "perform no operation without the full consent of the patients, and never to perform any that would, in [his] judgment, jeopard life, or produce greater mischief on the injured organs" (qtd. in Wall 348). Lastly, Wall demolishes the assertion that Sims failed to use any anesthetic during surgery, by observing that ether anesthesia was discovered only one year after the first surgical intervention on the black slaves. Even though it spread quite rapidly among physicians, Wall says, it was used cautiously because of its unknown side effects; additionally, if Sims had used ether on his enslaved patients before its approved safety, it would have been perceived as a further experiment on black bodies. Concluding his article, Wall argues that Sims was born and raised in a slavery society, and therefore it would not be objective to evaluate the case with the ethical standards of contemporary society.

Undoubtedly, Dr. Sims brought great relief to a large number of women thanks to his medical breakthrough, allowing them to resume a normal life and giving them the opportunity to have other pregnancies. Nevertheless, the bondwomen who contributed with their bodies to Sims's reputation could not be heard. Not a single voice was listened to or recorded. There is just one side to the story, and it belongs to masters and physicians, the white side of the slaveholding system and of medicine. Masters only had interest in having "sound" female slaves, capable of keeping the pace as

reproductive entities, while physicians took advantage of repairing broken bodies for their career advancement and prestige. This need for human beings to be tested even emerges from the advertisements in the medical newspapers which "encouraged owners to send their sick and injured slaves to the infirmary for treatment" (Savitt, "The Use of Blacks" 334). Sims himself wrote in his autobiography that he scoured the country in order to find cases for his research. It is worth taking into account that in whatever field, progress can only be made through experimentation and trials, and for a medical technique to be refined or a remedy to be effective, the so-called guinea pigs become an essential part to the process. For this purpose, the southern bondage system represented the ideal environment that offered easily available and accessible clinical tools, "given their positions as voiceless slaves […] in a society sensitive to and separated by race" (Savitt, "The Use of Blacks" 332). Moreover, black bodies were supposed to be more tolerant to pain, as their resistance to the fatigue of field labor and ruthless floggings gave evidence. In this respect, going back to Sims's case, it is interesting to note how much the doctor was worried about Lucy's excruciating agony for an inflammation that arose after the obstetrical intervention. In fact, in a speech he delivered years later, he had words of praise for the group of enslaved young women who contributed to his success:

> To the indomitable courage of these long-suffering women, more than to any one other single circumstance is the world indebted for the results of these persevering efforts. Had they faltered, then would woman have continued to suffer from the dreadful injuries produced by protracted parturition, and then should the broad domain of surgery not have known

> one of the most useful improvements that shall forever hereafter grace its annals. (Sims qtd. in Savitt, *Race and Medicine* 107)

The different attitude of physicians to treating female slaves was detectable in the examination method as well, as they felt "free to perform procedures on black women that would have been socially unacceptable to white women, at the minimum violating the standard of modesty and at the worst performing highly experimental and painful surgery without anesthesia" (Breslaw 131). Black patients were indeed required to undress for the medical visit, while it was rare for white women to be examined naked or even looked at directly by the doctor, except for emergencies. Given the assumption that black women were sexually immoral and inhibited, doctors had no hesitation in examining their female parts. This practice, which was already common in the auction block among slaveowners who wanted to ensure themselves a good purchase, became part of the medical profession in evaluating the black women's bodies in the slave markets (Owens 79). The habit of testing the female slaves in all their parts was comparable to the usual procedure on livestock during trade. Equated to animals, black women were treated accordingly by white doctors even in delicate circumstances, as occurred to a pregnant slave who was risking a miscarriage following a fall. Historian Deirdre Owens reports the event described by the physician who was present at the moment and rescued the woman: once she was carried into the Big House by other slaves and laid on the floor, the doctor did not think twice and cut off her clothes while applying water and vinegar to her genitalia in order to stop the hemorrhage. Owens sheds light on how the physician handled the case, intervening on a still body "dragged, dumped on the floor, disrobed, and laid out for observation by a mixed slave community as a point of knowledge production" (27). The historian compares then the

case to another one experienced by a white woman treated by the same doctor, similar with regard to the medical condition but different in the way it was managed. Since the patient was defined as a lady of fragile physical structure, the physician preferred to give her just an effective remedy to drink, instead of unclothing her and dabbing her private parts with wet cloths.

Not only were enslaved black women living commodities to be mended for the sake of the plantation economy, or for white medical men's interest in building and broadening their knowledge, but they also became specimens to be examined after death. While human autopsy was illegal in many states during 19th-century America, it was much easier for physicians and students to obtain black corpses to dissect "because of their helpless legal and inconsequential social positions" (Savitt, "The Use of Blacks" 337). Anatomical examinations carried out on dead black slaves revealed the constant concern for bondwomen's primary function; medical periodicals indeed, often reported detailed articles on the dissection of female reproductive organs. Emblematic is the case of an enslaved woman with an ovarian pregnancy and problems related to it. The doctor who had previously examined her, prescribed a high dose of medicine, but unfortunately the woman died shortly after. The physician's main concern was that he could not save "the enslaved woman's reproductive parts for preservation and study", as other doctors did with the tumoral uterus removed from a black woman, and later exposed at a medical museum for educational purposes (Owens 47).

The ambiguous relationship between black women and white doctors would again characterize the history of American medicine. Not so long after abolitionism, African American female descendants experienced another abusive practice, but this time their reproductive ability, so much praised during slavocracy, became ironically a problem

for white America to solve. Black women were denied once more the control over their motherhood, as they "fell victim to widespread sterilization abuse at the hands of government-paid doctors" (Roberts 100). Through deception and lies, a large number of African American women, between the 1920s and 1980s, underwent unneeded and involuntary postpartum hysterectomies. The medical procedure went down in history as the "Mississippi Appendectomy".[4] Returning again to White's words, the African American body continued to be the locus of "masculine conflict" (White 13).

[4] In 1927, the notorious Buck v. Bell decision set in motion coerced sterilization of African American women. In the mentioned case, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes ruled that Carrie Buck, an "allegedly imbecilic poor white girl", would be sterilized. The Justice spoke these words: "Three generations of imbeciles are enough". By the 1930s, sterilization had become mandatory all over The United States (Washington 203-05).

1.3 THE CRIMINALIZED FEMALE BLACK BODY IN POSTEMANCIPATION SOUTH

> And when they whip poor women they tie [their] clothes up over their heads and expose their [nakedness] to all the guards and in some cases I have seen some of the women during their monthly period have been whipped so bad until they have had to [scrub] the floor after them. . . . Women have gotten on the[ir] [knees] and begged me to make this appeal to you for [their] sake. Oh Govoner, you shure ought to go down there and see the condition of those poor women. (Sanders qtd. in "Under the Sting" 366)

Lula Sanders's words in the letter she sent in 1904 to the then Texas Governor, bluntly depict the bodily brutalization that convicted black women had to endure. Sanders was charged for attempted murder and condemned to three years in jail. After she served her sentence, she decided to call to the attention of the authorities the physical and psychological punishments inflicted by guards on the inmates. The condition of women in the convict camps in the New South deserves to be explored, since it was a disguised continuation of the tyrannical methods implemented in the slaveholding apparatus, where whippings and rape mirrored the tortures experienced within the plantation environment. The end of the Civil War and the consequent liberation from bondage did not correspond to freedom from the exploitative mechanism that had subjugated black bodies for over two centuries. On the contrary, emancipation brought along in its wake violence toward former slaves, which often escalated into lynchings, hangings, and in newly freed men and women being burned at the stake, among other forms of brutalization perpetrated to the black body. The incorporation of emancipated black slaves into white society, and the expected recognition of their rights as humans

and citizens, was seen by Southerners as an assault to their own freedom, “and as a challenge to the legitimacy of their definition of what it was to be white” (Blackmon 51). The new status came at a high price for black people, whose lives were not just menaced by marginalization and poverty; they also had to bear the weight of a resentful white community, economically worn out and socio-politically compromised in the aftermath of the war. Hence, the only means in the hands of Southerners were “terror and violence to reinforce black inferiority and to reverse the course of Reconstruction” (LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence* 27). White supremacy could only be restored by resuming the previous racial order, where “all whites belonged to the master class and all blacks were slaves” to be subjugated (Adamson 557). In such a scenario, with a massive population of ex-slaves abandoning the fields and pouring into the countryside and cities searching for paid employment, control over the black race became intertwined with crime control. With the purpose of obstructing the newly acquired mobility of freed slaves, and obliging them to work for low pay, or even without it, a set of laws was codified in the southern states under the name of Black Codes. Unemployed, poor, homeless former bondmen and bondwomen caught in the act of vagrancy were arrested and confined to jail or to convict leasing camps. Black women in particular were in the crosshairs of public officers for their presumed inborn licentiousness and misconduct; drunkenness, prostitution, fighting or raising their voices in public, were considered to be sufficient criminal behaviors to warrant a fine or to be taken to court. The black race was to be criminalized, subjugated, and made productive again.

The notion of “Negro Crime”, which postulates the innate inclination of black people to criminality, ferociously condemned African American women. Criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso contributed to canonizing the image of the black

female felon, whose “racial, biological, physiological, and behavioral” traits determined her inferiority, and consequently her inherent disposition to “commit barbaric acts of cruelty” (Lombroso qtd. in *Chained in Silence* 45). Even further, the “Negro Venus”, as Lombroso dubbed her, was “the most ‘inferior’ female of all races” (Lombroso qtd. in *Chained in Silence* 46). Her much-discussed anatomical peculiarities, supposedly consisting of abnormal genitalia large in size and shape, and hanging breasts, stigmatized the black woman as a carnal, and thus depraved, criminal symbol. Because of her alleged unruly sexual activity, she was perceived as a dangerous threat, deemed responsible for the spreading of syphilis, thereby a criminal for the southerner law, and unqualified for freedom. The charge of fornication and transmission of venereal diseases was one of the reasons that led penal authorities to detain female ex-slaves, broadly branded as prostitutes, while “no white prostitutes were ever sentenced to county work camps or the penitentiary” (Curtin 115). Further offences, such as larceny, poisoning, arson, murder, assault to murder, infanticide, were among the crimes committed by African American women, although “the majority of culpable (and guiltless) offenders were first-time felons with no traceable record of illegal activity” (LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence* 37). If, under the slavery system, a mother might decide to kill her child as an extreme act in order to prevent them from suffering the inhumanity of bondage, as Sethe instinctively did with her little Beloved, economic hardship also impelled freed black women to perpetrate infanticide. In her historical research, scholar Talitha LeFlouria relates a few cases linked to this type of crime, each one motivated by untenable socio-economic pressures. Lena Fry, for instance, a poor and illiterate black woman who left her family and farm work to be employed as a cook in the city of Macon, served a life sentence for slaughtering her newborn baby. Taking care of the child by herself would impede

her from having access to the only source of income available at that time (LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence* 41). Infanticide, as well as other acts of violence, are seen by historians as a form of defense against abuse, and also as an act of rebellion against a judicial system that deliberately and consistently failed to protect black women.

In their newly acquired status of emancipated men and women, African Americans became the target of a southern community obsessed with a potential reversal of the socio-racial order. Subordination remained the only instrument in the hands of whites "to keep the Negro exactly what he was: a propertyless rural laborer without political rights, and with inferior legal rights" (Stampp qtd. in Adamson 559). Therefore, the postbellum southern states presented a shattered social fabric to be redesigned: on the one side, there were newly freed people attempting to rebuild their lives from scratch, on the other, the white oligarchy determined to intensify the hunt for criminals. As previously discussed, numerous were the contributing factors that led to the spread of criminality among blacks at the time. The lack of a basic means of support, the consequent state of extreme poverty that suddenly affected former slaves, along with an increasing racism, cast former bondmen into a harsh environment where tensions and exasperation inevitably fostered illegal acts and violence. In addition, as Du Bois points out, partisan criteria of judgment enforced severe sentences during trials, as "the testimony of a Negro counted for little or nothing in court, while the accusation of white witnesses was usually decisive" (*Some Notes* 4). As a result, an enlarged criminal black population soon became the prey of a corrupt system in which politics, industry and justice were the agents of the rise in convict leasing. It was nothing more than a new form of slavery called by another name, where "thousands of freedpeople and their progeny were forcibly contracted to private parties who established the terms of their labor, living conditions, diet, and medical care and assumed total control over

their bodies" (LeFlouria, "Under the Sting" 369). The lessee, who was in charge of the convicts, resembled the figure of the overseer within the plantation; he typically belonged to the lowest class of white society and had no qualms about pouring out his aggression onto prisoners. To some extent, detention conditions were even worse than those in the antebellum plantations, especially for women who were engaged in the same exploitative labor as their male counterparts, while forced to share the same sleeping place or wear men's garments. Like ex-bondwomen, female convicts had the further burden of domestic chores, they "cooked, cleaned, and sewed for male prisoners at mining camps and farms; they also worked as personal servants to male wardens" (Curtin 120). Exhausted by farm labor, or by the backbreaking work that the flourishing coil, iron or rail industries demanded, such as "grading surfaces for railroads, laying tracks, mining clay, firing bricks, building roads, digging ditches, smelting iron, chopping down trees, harvesting turpentine", women had to submit to the same punishments as male prisoners (LeFlouria, "Under the Sting" 369). Physical torture was the weapon used by bosses to best exploit convict women in their daily tasks, and, all the while, to making use of the authority, granted them by government, on undisciplined black bodies. Whippings, rape, public shame scourged female inmates; they suffered the humiliation of being tortured "with their bosoms, buttocks, and vaginas exposed" in front of other detainees, men and women (LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence* 71). Punishments had to be exemplary, thereby sowing terror and discouraging any forms of rebellion among convicts. The repressive discipline in convict leasing camps perpetuated the practices employed during the slavery period; it was not rare indeed to witness the "bucking" of jailed women, naked or half-naked, "forced to lay bound across a log upon which a whipping would be carried out" (Cardyn qtd. in "Under the Sting" 370).

However, rape remained the most powerful instrument of both corporal and psychological punishment used by bosses, like overseers or masters had done before to claim their right of ownership over the black body. In the footsteps of their predecessors, bosses, lessees, and guards resorted to sexual violence not solely with a punitive purpose, but to reinforce their authoritative masculinity as white men on black female bodies; bodies over which they could no longer legally assert their property. Once again, rape expressed the perennial "white (sexual) anxiety on the black body" (White 13).

Historical records give blunt accounts of the female detainees' martyrdom, be it within the penitentiary walls or in convict leasing camps. Sometimes inmates have names, sometimes they remain unidentified, like in the case, occurred in Georgia Heardmont camp in 1895, of a young woman who "was repeatedly outraged by several of her guards, and finally died in childbirth while in camp" (Du Bois, *Some Notes* 4-5). Other cases tell of girls, whose ages only are known, who were whipped until they died or became hysterical. The story of Ella Gamble, sentenced to life imprisonment for poisoning, in 1884, emphasizes the lethal effects of "merciless floggings, sexual abuse, injurious childbirth, and medical neglect" on a captive body, already worn out by disease and twenty years of heavy work (LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence* 61). An agonizing death was also Sarah Nealy's fate. The black girl was arrested in 1903 for "some trumped up charge" and sentenced to serve in a prison camp in Alabama (Keeler qtd. in "Under the Sting, 371"). Shortly after her arrival, some inmates were ordered to hold her by hands and feet, while her naked body was stretched on a log. She was flogged a hundred times before being almost completely suspended from the ground by a rope, with her hands and feet bound. Left for two hours in such a position, she was commanded to go to work, but since she was unable,

one of the guards hit her in the head and stepped on her belly. Sarah could not conceivably survive this torture (LeFlouria, “Under the Sting” 371).

Unlike the plantation setting, the penitentiary system, of which the convict leasing and the chain gang later were part, did not need to depend on convicted women’s reproductive ability for its functioning. They had lost their value as generative beings and, by extension, they were not worthy of medical attention when their bodies were ailing and wrecked from excessive work. Hence, “sickly, unproductive, and unprofitable female workers ultimately benefited from being expelled from county convicts camps”, not certainly by an act of clemency, but rather for their inability to contribute to southern industrial progress, while being a burden for government finance (LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence* 184). Nevertheless, being released was of little benefit to female prisoners since they generally bore serious physical, mental, and emotional mutilations for the rest of their lives, if they were not already close to death.

Du Bois exhaustively illustrates in a few lines the reality of the convict leasing system, where the correctional purpose of blacks’ innate deviancy was a pretense to reestablish the political and economic interests of the South:

> The abuses of this system have often been dwelt upon. It had the worst aspects of slavery without any of its redeeming features. The innocent, the guilty, and the depraved were herded together, children and adults, men and women, given into complete control of practically irresponsible men, whose sole object was to make the most money possible. The innocent were made bad, the bad worse; women were outraged and children tainted; whipping and torture were in vogue, and the death-rate from cruelty, exposure, and overwork rose to large percentages. (*Some Notes* 4)

The “outraged” convicted woman was a violated woman, desecrated in her womanhood, whose eyes were constantly quivering with terror. The pieces of her soul had been scattered, her psyche devastated by ferocity and duress. As LeFlouria perfectly outlines, “the imprisoned black female body was a tableau of violence, accentuated with cuts, scrapes, scratches, broken bones, black eyes, bruises, and scabs left by the whip” (LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence* 78). Physical assaults gradually gave way to emotional abuses, dismembering body and mind, leaving a trail of disorders with which the African American woman had to deal. The criminalized body morphed into the traumatized body, serving again as a “corporal site”, echoing White’s words, upon which white supremacy was “exercised, reformulated, and redeemed’” (LeFlouria, “Under the Sting” 367). Many were the shreds of skin and flesh torn apart by the strokes of the lash. Black women had to find the strength to patiently collect those shreds, mend their bones, and voice the heavy burden of the trauma caused by both the former and the new slavery.

2.THE "CRUSHING WEIGHT" OF SLAVERY ON THE BLACK WOMAN'S BODY

2.1 DESUBJECTIFYING THE CAPTIVE FEMALE BODY

> And when the top of her [Sethe's] dress was around her hips and he [Paul D] saw the sculpture her back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display, he could think but not say, 'Aw, Lord, girl'. And he would tolerate no peace until he had touched every ridge and leaf of it with his mouth, none of which Sethe could feel because her back skin had been dead for years. (Morrison 16-17)

Dead skin was what remained to cover the female black body who endured the devastating impact of the slavery machine. A skin made thick and insensitive on a wrecked body, disfigured, permanently carved by the most unequivocal symbols of white patriarchal supremacy, the lash. Sometimes those marks took on strange shapes, like the tree which branched on Sethe's back, emblem of the incidents of this sort which occurred in the real life of plantations.[5] Floggings, blows, and other forms of violence remained utterly visible and tangible, often causing disfigurement and paralysis. From a medical perspective, the tortures perpetrated by the leading figures operating in the slaveholding context, irretrievably damaged the black body, already weakened by extenuating labor hours and workload. Historian of medicine Todd L.

[5] One of the most emblematic photographs that reproduce slavery's atrocities is known as "Gordon" or "Whipped Peter". Shot in 1863, the picture shows the back of a former slave, called Gordon or Peter, brutally scarred by whippings. The circulation of this shocking image caused a great stir in public opinion, strengthening the anti-slavery movement ("The Shocking Photo of 'Whipped Peter' That Made Slavery's Brutality Impossible to Deny." *History.Com*, A&E Television Networks, www.history.com/news/whipped-peter-slavery-photo-scourged-back-real-story-civil-war. Accessed 16 Dec. 2023).

Savitt provides a thorough description of the impact of punishments on a physical and physiological level:

> Laying stripes across the bare back or buttocks caused indescribable pain, especially when each stroke dug deeper into previously opened wounds. During the interval between lashes, victims anticipated the next in anguish, wishing for postponement or for all due speed, though neither alternative brought relief. In addition to multiple lacerations of the skin, whipping caused loss of blood, injury to muscles (and internal organs, if the lash reached that deep), and shock. (Rubbing salt into these wounds, often complained of as a further mode of torture, actually cleansed the injured, exposed tissues and helped ward off infection.) Paddling, another form of whipping, jarred every part of the body by the violence of the blow and raised blisters from repeated strokes. In addition to the possibility of death (uncommon), there was the danger that muscle damage inflicted by these instruments might permanently incapacitate or deform a person for life. (*Race and Medicine* 81)

The anatomical details of the effects of inhumane physical violence brings the focus onto its recipient. The enslaved woman was reduced to a "dominated thing, an animated instrument, a body with natural movements, but without its own reason, an existence entirely absorbed in another", that of the master's (Wallon qtd. in Patterson 4). In this perspective, the black body corresponds exclusively to the concept of *Körper*, namely the body as flesh, as an object with just physical attributes. This connotation is opposed to that of *Leib* which is "the lived, feeling body or the body as

intentionality or subject" (Shusterman 207).[6] The black female slave was treated as a passive entity deprived of her emotional counterpart where feelings and sensations can be found. Her usefulness was confined to laboring, sexual, and reproductive functions, thereby the appeal to punitive measures was necessary to transform her into the "docile body". The notion of a tamed, obedient body was defined by Michel Foucault, who investigated the role of discipline in producing "subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies" (*Discipline and Punish* 129). The philosophe, pinpoints a kind of 'discipline' as a self-imposed control of the body's forces, and another type consisting of practices of external domination on the body. In this respect, he offers a lucid analysis of the dynamics engendered by disciplinary methods:

> What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A 'political anatomy', which was also a 'mechanics of power', was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, […] so that they may do what one wishes. (*Discipline and Punish* 129)

Foucault's reflection lends itself perfectly to the slaveholding system, where torture was designed to imbue the enslaved with dread in order to get an ever-greater labor

[6] In phenomenology, Edmund Husserl was the first philosopher to develop a distinction between *Körper* and *Leib*, in his *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (1913) and in *Cartesianische Meditationen* (1931). Husserl argues that, nevertheless, "both are aspects of the same living human body, and he therefore sometimes spoke of that body as the Leibkörper, both to highlight the underlying union of the two terms and to give phenomenological primacy to the Leib as that with which one starts in one's experience of the world" (Shusterman 208).

yield and a methodical slave breeding. The abiding presence of a state of terror and the infliction of violence reinforced the master's authority. The additional element peculiar to slavery, says Foucault, was the "relation of appropriation of bodies" that made planters possessors and slaves their property (*Discipline and Punish* 128). The slaves' impossibility of claiming their own bodies led to a total negation of their selfhood, as they were "the ultimate human tool, as imprintable and as disposable as the master wished" (Patterson 7). Thrown into a foreign land as strangers, the enslaved could not find comfort in blood ties or ethnic group relations, they had no native homes to go back to, and no political status to protect them. The action of excision and the consequent feeling of estrangement experienced by first-generation enslaved Africans in an unknown territory, are best explained by the term "natal alienation", coined by historian Orlando Patterson (7). Moreover, the removal of the slave's original name was a further act of the disidentification process as his "former name died with his former self" (Patterson 55).

Patterson contends that the condition of not belonging to a community other than that chosen for the slaves by their master, the total loss of power over their own lives, and the desocialization-depersonalization process were the cause of the slaves' social death (38).[7] Biologically alive but socially dead, the bondman/woman suffered the "expulsion from humanity altogether" (Mbembe 75). This strong and effective image reinforces another statement by the philosopher Achille Mbembe: "Because the slave's life is like a 'thing', possessed by another person, slave existence appears as the

[7] It is worth pointing out that Patterson's concept of "social death" have been refuted by other scholars of slavery. More recent historical studies, in fact, assert that "social death does not sufficiently account for the rich and willful lives that enslaved women, men, and children were able to imagine and make possible, amidst the most dire and unthinkable circumstances" (Wilderson III qtd. in Mawani 837). Moreover, as historian Vincent Brown argues, "social death offers a convenient shorthand that glosses the myriad, layered, and nuanced power relations through which slavery was established and maintained as a durable racial, legal, and institutional form" (Mawani 837).

perfect figure of a shadow", a peripheral yet essential presence and, all the while, a non-presence (75). In the plantation milieu, the slave-shadow was forced into a life which was perennially challenged by death which, when not due to illnesses or natural causes, was decided by others. In this "phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity", both biopolitics and the state of exception converge (Mbembe 76). Mbembe draws on Foucault's thesis according to which governments rule the population through the application of biopower, which is, in sum, "that domain of life over which power has asserted its control" (Foucault qtd. in Mbembe 66). Foucault's reflection perceives in the development of capitalism the rise of biopower as a means for "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life"; through different techniques, modern states aim at subjugating bodies and exercising power over populations, leading to "segregation and social hierarchization" (*The History of Sexuality* 140, 141). The microcosm of southern plantations built on an authoritarian and racist system, designed for the exploitation of productive bodies, mirrors the controlling mechanism adopted by the "*institutions* of power", as Foucault defined the government's techniques (*The History of Sexuality* 141, italics in the text).

The colonial world, continues Mbembe, came to represent the border place where law could be suspended in order to defeat the savage by means of violence in the name of civilization. In the so called "state of exception", as philosopher Giorgio Agamben theorized in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), "it is impossible to distinguish transgression of the law from execution of the law, such that what violates a rule and what conforms to it coincide without any remainder" (59). Since the sovereign power within the state of exception is exempted from any judicial rule, the sovereign right to kill prevails (Mbembe 71). In light of this analysis, the plantation system was none other than a liminal, indistinct zone where biopower

replaced the mentioned sovereign control over life and death without restriction. The slave embodied the savage to tame and dominate, "the permanent enemy on the inside […] [who] did not and could not belong because he was the product of a hostile, alien culture" (Patterson 39). This reflection engages with Agamben's concept of bare life which translates into its "inclu[sion] in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion" (20). As a matter of fact, the slave was forcefully inserted into the southern *polis,* but simultaneously banned from it, becoming the target of sovereign tyranny. Scholar Ewa Ziarek, in her essay "Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender", skillfully adds to Agamben's notion of bare life the slave's social death postulated by Patterson:

> Because the expropriation of a slave's life constitutes him or her as a nonperson or a socially dead person, it produces another instance of bare life, violently stripped of genealogy, cultural memory, social distinction, name, and native language, that is, of all the elements of Aristotle's *bios*.[8] […] slavery in all its different historical formations was institutionalized as the extreme destruction of the sociosymbolic formation of subjectivity. This extreme mode of deracination and exclusion from symbolization, the *polis*, and kinship reconstituted enslaved life as a nameless, invisible nonbeing. (95-96, italics in the text)

[8] The term *bíos* was used by ancient Greeks to express the meaning of the word "life" as "the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group". It is opposed to the term *zoé* which translates into the same word, but it indicates "the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)" (Agamben 11).

Expanding the scope of the discussion about the slave as a dead-living presence, academic Elaine Scarry, in her comprehensive exploration of physical suffering in *The Body in Pain* (1985), offers a further key to understanding the phenomenon through the concept of physical agony. She claims that the extreme pain inflicted upon the victim is responsible for the disintegration of their self and their world, up to the destruction of subjectivity. By relating the two figures under study, the torturer and the war prisoner, Scarry traces an equation in terms of pain and personal world, intended as the set of actions, language, and consciousness, in a word the self: "the absence of pain is a presence of world" and, conversely, "the presence of pain is the absence of world" (37). Put differently, bodily pain tips the scale becoming the element that defines power: the more the prisoner suffers, the more their world is bound for dissolution with the consequent "obliteration of consciousness", and, by extension, the more the torturer's world expands (Scarry 37, 38). In what appears as a counterweight game, the prisoner is the one who is overwhelmed by physical suffering, while the tormentor, Scarry observes, "is free of any pain originating in his own body; he is also free of the pain originating in the agonized body so near him" (36). Thus, the absence of pain and the torturer's alienness to it does nothing but reinforce his tyrannical position. Scarry continues her discourse sustaining that the torturer "is so without any human recognition of or identification with the pain that he is not only able to bear its presence but able to bring it continually into the present, inflict it, sustain it, minute after minute, hour after hour" (36).

Once Scarry's model is transferred to the context of slavery, and specifically to the focus area of this study, the interrelation between master and bondwoman could be understood as an intentional process of desubjectification through a continuous, ruthless use of violence, often displayed in front of other slaves. Within the plantation

it was common practice, indeed, to whip women publicly, even before their children's eyes. In her study, Deborah Grey White reports cases of "'naked quivering flesh' […] 'tied up and exposed to the public gaze of all" (Bibb qtd. in White 32). This spectacle of violence, which sometimes had a sexual and sadistic tinge, were, quoting Scarry, "a grotesque piece of compensatory drama" (28). The pain was thereby objectified on stage and made visible to an audience; through its objectification, it was recognized not as pain but as power. The torturer/slaveowner's aim was to make the reality of pain "incontestable to the sufferer […] [and] equally incontestable to those outside the sufferer" (Scarry 52).[9]

At the mercy of her master's power, the enslaved woman in pain experiences the loss of her world and her identity to such a degree that she perceives herself as

[9] The theme concerning the effects of violent scenes displayed in front of an audience leads me to mention Susan Sontag's work *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). The critic carries out an analysis of the function of images, especially in relation to war, and their impact upon the spectator. Sontag contends that photographs depicting atrocities elicit a voyeuristic gaze from viewers who passively stand by and watch. In the context of the enslaved whippings, it is not a photograph which arouses a consumerist attitude, but live scenes of brutalization iterated over time. For the slaves constrained to witness their peers' suffering, the exposure to violence caused revulsion and horror, as they were aware they could be the next, while the master and his entourage projected a perverted pleasure onto the slave's pain which "bordered on the scopophilic" (Scacchi 14); their gazes were lit by a sadistic desire to punish and watch the painful body. However, Sontag's theory invites me to open another window on the relationship between the violence immortalized by the camera and the voyeurism induced in those who watch those pictures of terror. In the South of the post-Reconstruction era, the emancipated slave was an easy target for lynching, whose spectacle was often photographed and then made circulated in the form of a postcard. In this case, white spectators, who were portrayed around the victim with a complicit gaze, become the voyeuristic consumers of such images, even though as willing and active attendees. By the same token, also for the contemporary viewer the act of "looking at images of atrocities committed in the distant past, which of course are irredeemable, cannot be anything but a pornographic act", as academic Anna Scacchi remarks in her "Black Bodies in Pain", echoing Sontag's thinking (9). Nonetheless, those images convey a precise message to those who look from afar: "This is what human beings are capable of doing—may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget" (*Regarding the Pain of Others*, 100).
For a deeper knowledge of Susan Sontag's work, see also academic Filomena Mitrano's *In the Archive of Longing: Susan Sontag's Critical Modernism* (2016) and *La critica sconfinata: Introduzione al pensiero di Susan Sontag* (2023).

responsible for her own annihilation, and "[her] own body as the agent of [her] agony. The ceaseless, self-announcing signal of the body in pain […] contains not only the feeling 'my body hurts' but the feeling 'my body hurts me'", as if the sensory, corporeal shell overwhelms even the last spark of self-awareness (Scarry 47). The excruciating physical pain, of which Savitt gives a detailed account, leads to a disintegration of selfhood, an inner split "akin to the process of dying. […] All trace of humanity, civilization is deconstructed" (Bakare-Yusuf in Price 317-18). The experience of almost death that the black woman had every time she was beaten, whipped, and broken, erased her consciousness, situating her "in an indefinite and paradoxical relation to the normative category 'person'" (Hartman 56). This attribute had already been removed when the slave deportation through the Atlantic route began; women ceased by then to be humans and they became "a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific" (Spillers 67). The displacement, the dismemberment of ethnic groups, the loss of names along with native language, and any other heritage link with the African continent, "marked a theft of the body – a willful and violent […] severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire" (Spillers 67). Once the ties of any blood relationship were cut and the female slave reduced to a commodity, what remained was the captive body, the Körper, quoting Husserl, disjointed from the consciousness residing in the Leib. Suspended on anonymous seas, not belonging to her motherland anymore, no longer called by her native name, the slave woman utterly lost her gender identity, since, as Spillers contends, "'gendering' takes place within the confines of the domestic" (72).

To some extent, the issue of "degendering" had already been brought up by bell hooks in her work *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), where the

author explores the process of defeminization within the plantation context. hooks's analysis has its focus on the black woman's position with respect to her male counterpart. The desexualizing process with the loss of womanly qualities, represented just a liminal stage before the female slave, compelled by the system, underwent the reverse process of masculinization. In other words, hooks considers the removal of gender as a transitory state before "black women were forced to assume a 'masculine' role" (32). Both men and women, in fact, worked side by side with no distinction in labor tasks; moreover, female slaves received the same disciplinary measures as their male counterparts without any restraint, regardless of the slenderer female bodily structure, be they pregnant or during their menses.

Spillers's discussion presents a more radical and complex stance. She considers degendering an irreversible operation with no intermediate phases to project the black woman into a different status. The phenomenon is traced back to the early days of slavery, when African captive women began their unwitting, written-in-blood journey from West Africa as bodies to be tamed. The black female who was flung down and sold in the New World territory had already been denied her subjecthood on board the slave vessels, since the African captive "[was] neither female, nor male, as both subjects [were] taken into 'account' as quantities" (Spillers 72). The Middle Passage thus, by converting humans into objects on which the crew systematically and indistinctively discharged sadistic cruelty, served as a preview of the fate awaiting the captives in the colonies. Besides, the ocean, being an indefinite space of transit, became a metaphor for the "desubjectification of a desubjectified subject" which unequivocally entails "a deconstruction of gendered categories" (Bakare-Yusuf in Price 319, 320).

With incisive words, Spillers defines "this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding" (67). In her discourse, the degendered "flesh", distinguished from the body, comes to represent "ethnicity", blackness, the exposed layer of the bodily "vestibule"; it is the "primary narrative" where "lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures" are engraved like undecipherable hieroglyphics (Spillers 67). The dismemberment of the flesh equaled the dissolution of the slave's human nature of which remained just a fragmented, desexualized body, as condensed by Spillers in the excerpt below: [10]

> This profitable "atomizing" of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions. To that extent, the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory. (68)

Once any trace of humanity was eradicated from the slave, and the objectification of the same was accomplished, the use of language inescapably disappeared, as language is naturally intertwined with human subjectivity. Referring to Lacanian thought in fact, "the one who speaks is designated […] as the 'subject'. […] the 'subject' is the one that

[10] In his article "Pornotropes", scholar Alexander G. Weheliye perfectly combines Spillers's concept of flesh with Agamben's bare life: "The creation of the tortured as in/human might also be described as the production of both flesh (Spillers) and bare life (Agamben), since the physicality of torture and other manifestations of politicized brutality depends on the conscription of the victim as lacking both body and full human existence" (71).

speaks to the other. More than that: the *only* subject is a speaking one, and, inversely, all speech *supposes* a subject" (Borch and Brick 89, italics in the text). The result of this process could be illustrated through the following syllogism: the slave was desubjectified; only the subject is capable of language; therefore, the slave had no longer access to language. Since the desubjectification of the enslaved occurred by way of inflicted sufferings, Elaine Scarry's study is once more instrumental in apprehending how pain has an impact on the ability to communicate their feelings with others. The author explains the phenomenon in a chain of factors: "as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject" (Scarry 35). The syllogism above fully reflects Scarry's reasoning which charges physical pain for "bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). The cries that the victim emits resemble children's first attempts to communicate before they can articulate full words. Scarry parallels the babbled sounds and the facial movements that a child produces during language development to the regression experienced by the sufferer under torture. The return to a pre-language stage is tantamount to "witness[ing] the destruction of language" (Scarry 6), and what language comprises such as "subjectivity, civilization, culture, meaning and understanding" (Sa'ez qtd. in Bakare-Yusuf, Price 314).

The tortured body, remnant of the desubjectified enslaved individual, is thus unable to verbally express its own agony; the reason lies in the "objectlessness" of pain, that is to say its lack of referentiality. Although experiencing physical pain is as relevant to physiological functionality as other human senses and emotions, "it differs from these events, and from every other bodily and psychic event, by not having an object in the

external world" (Scarry 161). Put differently, while taste, hearing, sight, feeling hungry "for" or scared "of" always refer to objects external to the body, pain is restricted exclusively to within the realm of corporeality; it "is not 'of' or 'for' anything—it is itself alone" (Scarry 161, 162). Hence, pain being "objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal" (Scarry 162). The victim's impossibility of voicing their physical suffering increases the distance between the speaking torturer and the languageless tortured, exacerbating the imbalance in their relationship. Similarly, as the master also uses words to manifest their power, the slave's words can only come out as a desperate, harrowing cry of pain. Again, where there is the overwhelming presence of a world, that of the torturer/master, there is the absence of the slave's world, self and voice (Scarry 46).

In blacks' life of captivity, the impairment of the power of speech did not just remain confined to corporeality; it transcended the torment endured by the flesh to the degree that it existed as a permanent condition. In other words, the pain caused by physical violence and its being unspeakable contaminated every situation or event faced by black subjects. They were thereby projected into a "silencing process [that] constitute[d] a desperate response to unbearable pain and isolation" (West 66). Harriet Jacobs herself remarks in her autobiography the slaves' impotence in articulating any words in their self-defense before the slaveowner. She witnesses: "A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not speak" (Jacobs 61).

At some point, the agony of the body fused with the anguish and terror that the entire slave system was bearer of, transforming injuries and swollen limbs into more profound wounds, likewise unspeakable. Jacobs, in fact, confesses to being at a loss for words in the effort to reveal her whole experience under bondage: "The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. They are

greater than you would willingly believe"; "I cannot tell how much I suffered in the presence of these wrongs, nor how I am still pained by the retrospect" (30-31). Although she eventually overcame the barriers of silence and fear, the emotional impediment and the struggle to voice the barbarities executed under bondage are hidden right behind the crucial expression "I cannot tell". Jacobs's self-confinement in the cramped garret at her grandmother's house may metaphorically be read as the suppression of language and self. In the true sense of the word, she underwent a social death. The choice she made in order to escape the unbearableness of her master's menaces, paradoxically led her to experience imprisonment, with the partial damage of her sensorial system during her long concealment without any kind of contact. From a medical point of view, living isolated in a tiny space even just for a short period, "with[out] normal stimulation to the senses", is very likely to cause "'massive free-floating anxiety … perceptual distortions and hallucinations, illusions in multiple spheres (auditory, visual, olfactory)'. These are accompanied by acute confusion, sometimes by 'mutism, and subsequent partial amnesia'" (Yellin 50).

Jacobs did not endure the torture of the flesh specifically, yet in the long run the unnatural crawling position strained her body, so much that she was "fearful that she would lose the use of her legs" (Yellin 51). Moreover, there was just a little light that entered from a small window, the winter cold caused frostbite to her feet and shoulders and stiffened her tongue and face, insects molested her skin. All these torments, extended over time, almost annihilated her body, her voice, her world, as likewise intense pain deconstructs the victim's self. These conditions proved challenging for her physical health, yet devastating for her state of mind, as Jacobs scholar Jean Yellin reports: "Jacobs's psychological wounds were not so easily treated. Although finally in the North, she was unable to find peace of mind" (71).

Many years after her escape, Jacobs wrote in a letter to the New England Freedmen's Aid Society how affected she was by being in the vicinity of the place "where [she] suffered all the crushing weight of slavery" (Yellin 210). In *Incidents* too, Jacobs remembers her days in hiding as "long, gloomy days, with no object for [her] eye to rest upon, and no thoughts to occupy [her] mind, except the dreary past and the uncertain future" (131). The garret represented, both literally and symbolically, the "crushing weight of slavery": it embodied the torturer which forced her body to take uncomfortable positions, living most of the time lying on the floor in dim light, prey to the heat and the cold. Like the victim figure examined in *The Body in Pain*, Jacobs progressively perceived her body as the perpetrator of her own distress until she lost the sense of reality, until her seclusion became "a blur" (Yellin 50). In such a scenario, Scarry's words partly explain the ordeal lived by Jacobs and all those black women and men who bore the devastating weight of a life in enslavement:

> Physical pain is able to obliterate psychological pain because it obliterates all psychological content, painful, pleasurable, and neutral. Our recognition of its power to end madness is one of the ways in which, knowingly or unknowingly, we acknowledge its power to end all aspects of self and world. (34)

Even though physical pain is so overwhelming that it can destroy the sufferer's psyche, erasing any sort of emotions, thoughts, perceptions, and hence nullifying their own inner existence, it has to be pointed out that it is a temporary obliteration. Slaves' testimonies, and Jacobs's is one of the most vivid in this regard, are proof that prolonged corporal mortifications gradually morph into psychological trauma. As soon

as the torture perpetration ceases and “the traumatized mind holds on to that moment, preventing it from slipping back into its proper chronological place in the past, and relives it over and over again in the compulsive musings of the day and the seething dreams of night”, what may be called a resurrection from psychological death takes place (Caruth, *Trauma* 185). The awakening of previous awful events gives rise to “the notion of trauma as that which most clearly marks the past, and its structural description as a delayed experience” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 144).

Jacobs’s life story, particularly and pointedly, sheds light on the mental distress experienced by black female slaves: “Superadded to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (Jacobs 86, italics in the text). Not only was the black woman deracinated, dispossessed, and desubjectified, but she was also turned into the object of raw, ferocious sexuality; she was the “unprotected female flesh […] ‘ungendered’” (Spillers 68). The adjective “ungendered” may be questioned at this stage, for the body had a precise sexual connotation in the eyes of masters or overseers’ aggressive masculinity. However, Spillers contends that the naked, defenseless flesh represents the “zero degree of social conceptualization”, emphasizing its belonging to an unidentified, unnamed, depersonalized body (67). It was the black, vulnerable, sheer flesh that white men recognized as the target of their reproductive obsession, and made of it a “site of ejaculatory orgasms” (Bakare-Yusuf in Price 317).

2.2 THE TRAUMA OF RAPE: THE HARROWING CRYING PASSED THROUGH GENERATIONS

Among all the forms of violence against the black female body, sexual exploitation was the most threatening one, with the effect of further debasing and humiliating the victim. Through forced sex, white Southerners could wield their patriarchal power to tame and subjugate the female "other". Being "other" in the eyes of those who hold the dominant position entailed impotence and subordination; being "other" than male brutality meant to fall prey to carnal objectification. By belonging to the "otherness" category, Spillers argues, "the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general 'powerlessness'" (67).

On the term coined by Spillers, historian Hayden White makes an etymological analysis according to which pornotroping "names the becoming-flesh of the (black) body and forms a primary component in the processes by which human beings are converted into bare life" (qtd. in Weheliye 72).[11] In other words, it comes to define the process of the black body morphing into the naked, unprotected flesh by means of "an institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women" (hooks 35). The desubjectification of the female slave was definitively accomplished by violating her most intimate part and impeding her from preserving the already compromised black womanhood.

In her *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), academic Saidiya Hartman posits: "sexuality formed the nexus in which black, female, and chattel were inextricably bound and acted to intensify the constraints of slave status" (87). Indeed, slave accounts bear

[11] The first part of the word, "porno", stems from ancient Greek; in that society it "referred to female slaves who were sold expressly for prostitution" (Weheliye 72).

witness of how black women had to constantly face their slaveowners' overtures, more or less explicit, trying as much as they could to escape bribes and manipulations which positioned them on an even more fragile level. Treated on a par with prostitutes, they were asked, if not compelled, to exchange their bodies with more food or clothes, with the offer of a less severe treatment or the promise of their children's protection. At that point, female slaves had no option but to submit to their owners' desires. Eloquent is the following testimony of an enslaved woman telling her experience of abuse: "we do anything to get our poor flesh some rest from the whip; when he [the master] made me follow him into de bush, what use me tell him no? He have strength to make me" (Kemble qtd. in Hartman 87).[12]

Some audacious slaves attempted to resist those sexual overtures, even by reacting vehemently rather than surrendering, but it proved counterproductive since most of them faced brutal punishments for challenging the system. As slaves, they were none other than their masters' possessions, they were bought and sold as if they were livestock, used as bargaining chips. The text of a 1789 legislative enactment in Maryland, in fact, includes "slaves" in a list of items along with "working beasts, animals of any kind, stock, furniture, plates, books, and so forth" (Goodell qtd. in Spillers 79). This confirms that black slaves were regarded as "a *subcategory* of human proprietary objects" (Finley qtd. in Petterson 21; italics in the text). Needless to say, the sexual exploitation of the black female body was considered to be the planter's legitimate use of property (Hartman 80).

[12] This testimony is reported by Fanny Kemble in her account entitled *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation in* 1838-1839 (ed. John A. Scott, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984). Kemble was a British actress married to plantation owner Pierce Mease Butler. During the time spent in her husband's property, she documented the conversations she had with slaves on their daily conditions and she reported them on her *Journal*, which was published for the first time only in 1863.

Referring to Harriet Jacobs's testimony, the author does not fail to reiterate how her master persistently claimed his power over her, as reported for instance in the following passages: "He told me I was his *property*; that I must *be subject* to his will in all things"; "My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I *belonged* to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to *submit* to him" (Jacobs 30, 31; emphasis mine). Through these statements, Dr. Norcom, who appears in the novel as Dr. Flint, conveys all his thirst for physically possessing the young black servant, insisting on the fact that she was totally in his hands and under his power. Jacobs' narrative, to which Spillers aptly attributes the features of a "psychodrama", offers a perfect example of how seduction came into play in the master-bondwoman relationship, presenting its poisonous effects on the victim's psyche. In fact, the author reports how her master polluted her mind with filthy images and obscene words, causing psychological suffering in a fifteen-year-old girl, while "corrupt[ing] the pure principles [her] grandmother had instilled" (Jacobs 30). However, whereas Jacobs managed to find a way out from an ever-impending sexual assault, thereby "inaugurat[ing] the crisis of consent or consensual sexual relations under domination", the majority of slave women in captivity had no other choice than to succumb to their slaveowner's demands (Hartman 102).

By enacting a sexual confrontation in which the black woman played the underdog opponent, "the act of copulation, reduced by the white man to an animal-like act, [was] symbolic of the effort to conquer the resistance the black woman could unloose" (Davis, "Reflections" 96). As far as the issue of seduction is concerned, Hartman provides a thorough insight into the dynamics of consent and coercion that sexuality set in motion within the master-slave context. Partly paraphrasing historian and

philosopher John Forrester from his *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida* (1990), she points out:

> The discourse of seduction obfuscates the primacy and extremity of violence […] seduction is a meditation on liberty and slavery and will and subjection in the arena of sexuality. Seduction makes recourse to the idea of reciprocal and collusive relations and engenders a precipitating construction of black female sexuality in which rape is unimaginable. As the enslaved is legally unable to give consent or offer resistance, she is presumed to be always willing. (81)

What Hartman brings to the fore in her analysis is the use of force disguised as seduction which made the black woman the agent and not the victim of imposed carnal domination. The purportedly lustful black female slave with her debauched behavior was the sole culprit for her sexual exploitation; in this perspective, the desubjectified female captive morphed into the temptress Jezebel elevating herself to a consenting subject. Depending on the master's advantage, the figure of the black woman was, therefore, suspended between being the passive, usable body and the guilty agent, oscillating between "reciprocity and submission, intimacy and domination, and the legitimacy of violence and the necessity of protection" (Hartman 80). Within such an ambiguous framework, the law acted accordingly to the dual nature assigned to the bondwoman: it denied her humanity ignoring even her basic rights, but simultaneously and promptly, identified her as a willing accomplice even when she was the object of abuse. In other words, she was "made responsible for her undoing and the black body [was] made the originary locus of its violation" (Hartman 227).

For most of her life, the enslaved woman was condemned to endure what was rape for all intents and purposes; she was wholly unprotected by the southern common law, which instead recognized sexual violence as a means of maintaining the existence of the slavery system.[13] It became part and parcel of the submission practice since the journey to the American colonies on slave ships, as a naval officer observed during his service: "In those days many a negress was landed upon our shored already impregnated by someone of the demonic crew that brought her over" (Shufeldt qtd. in hooks 27). The sexual violation of black women also continued in the postbellum South when tensions arose in the new socio-political texture, becoming an institutionalized apparatus of oppression and terrorism; not only was it an act of oppression against the single victim, but it was also a means to subjugate the entire black community.[14]

Rape was not uncommon even within the slave quarters, as historian White informs the reader: "While there were slave women raped by black men, this abuse is overshadowed by white male exploitation of black women, and it is overlooked because it hardly ever turned up in court since there was no legal injunction against it" (129). Therefore, the rape of female slaves did not constitute a crime before both slave codes and the southern law; conversely, the same offense against white women at the

[13] On a closer examination, the flogging of black women could be symbolically regarded as a form of rape; the master exercised his own masculine force penetrating with his whip the victim's female flesh. Moreover, during whippings bondwomen's body was naked or half-naked, usually before other slaves' gaze. This conferred an even more sexual tinge to the punishment.

[14] The notorious secret organization known as the Ku Klux Klan spread terror among black people during the post-Civil War period. Through ferocious violence and murders, the KKK aimed at preventing Republicans and black representatives from entering the political arena and seizing power.
The 1866 Memphis Riot was another dark chapter in the history of Reconstruction era: "The violence of the mob murders was brutally complemented by the concerted sexual attacks on Black women. In the riot's aftermath, numerous Black women testified before a Congressional committee about the savage mob rapes they had suffered" (Aptheker qtd. in Davis, *Women, Race & Class* 149).

hands of black men led to a death sentence for the assailant.[15] The Louisiana rape code explicitly did not include black women among the victims; rape was simply not a crime if committed against a black woman.[16] The 1859 George v. State trial was emblematic of the lack of protection for black female slaves, as the Supreme Court of Mississippi considered whether the death sentence for a slave man accused of raping a female slave was legal. The Court declared that the act was only an offence if the victim was a white woman (Pokorak 8).

The disavowal of sexual attack as a felony plunged black women onto an even lower level compared to the rest of southern society, making her both a racial and a sexual target of the colonial power. The violation was accepted as a legitimate use of the female captive body as personal property, and justified by being a consensual, if not desired, carnal encounter. Such a reversed and perverted mechanism ascribed to the female slave the "power both to render the master weak and, implicitly, to be the mistress of her own subjection" (Hartman 87). Besides, it would have been inaccurate to speak of rape since, as bell hooks provocatively points out, "a sexual savage, a non-human, an animal cannot be raped" (Hartman 56).

Against this background, the enslaved female body, the black obsession of white supremacy, became "the locus of both unredressed and negligible injury", not just because intimate violence of black women was nonexistent for the law, which made them sink into an abyss of loneliness and frailty, but because rape did not seemingly

[15] In the postbellum era, the black man was often associated with the figure of the black rapist, reflecting the white Southerners' anxiety about black sexuality. Historians maintain that the myth of the black sexual assailant was born as a strategic way to defend the widespread practice of lynching. In many respects, it was "the twin of the myth of the bad black woman—both designed to apologize for and facilitate the continued exploitation of black men and women" (Lerner 193).

[16] The article which Jeffrey Pokorak, professor of Law at Suffolk University Law School, refers to is "The Long Arm of the Law: Slave Criminals and the Supreme Court in Antebellum Louisiana", written by historian Judith Kelleher Schafer. Schafer's analysis considers slavery laws in Louisiana in the years between 1812 and 1861.

leave tangible injuries (Hartman 80). Although no signs of violence were visible on the victim's body, rape caused far deeper injuries than those apparent on her flesh, leaving indelible imprints on her mind and soul. Fear, vulnerability, impotence, sense of abandonment, disgust, shame; all these emotions insinuated themselves into the depths of her being. If the black woman had been just a body devoid of the self, she would not have borne the "wounds of the spirit", as academic Traci West accurately entitled her study on violence against black women (1999). Although the author carried out her research chiefly focusing on contemporary women victims of sexual violence, she draws on the historical legacy of black women in bondage, reporting some of the testimonies recorded at the time. West singles out four key points in common between today's African-American women and black female slaves when coping with their traumatizing experience of abuses: they were and are "not heard", "not listened to", "not permitted to speak out", and "censored to the point of losing one's sense of self" (11, 12). Since the beginning of slavery, silence has veiled the psychological oppression resulting from systematic rape. Bondwomen could not express all the weight laid by white men who constantly violated their ever-exploited genitalia and their soul. They had to secretly deal with the consequent disorders due to carnal violence, such as anxiety, insomnia, the constant terror of a possible threat, recurring nightmares, and insecurity among others (LeFlouria, "Under the Sting" 377).

One of the consequences of forced intercourse that measures its impact on a woman's life is what, in current medical language, is known as "hypoactive sexual desire disorder (chronic lack of interest in sexual activity) or sexual aversion disorder (phobic avoidance of sexual contact with an intimate partner)" (Basson et al qtd. in "Under the Sting" 377). Such is the case of sixteen-year-old Rose Williams, a slave sold in 1860 to a Texan planter. The young girl was forced to have sex with a slave

called Rufus; despite her attempts to resist, she had to eventually obey her master's command and mate with the slave, as was the practice for the sake of breeding. Williams remained marked forever by this experience as she recalled in an interview in the 1930s: "I never marries, 'cause one 'sperience am 'nough for this nigger. After what I does for the massa, I's never wants no truck with any man" (White 13; Botkin qtd. in White 89). Testimonies like this one reveal how heavy the burden of intimate violence was to bear. It was a weight made even heavier by the veil of silence that the victims had to pull down on them. Black female slaves were not allowed to speak of the cruelties against them, and even if they dared to do this they would have found a wall of denial and retaliation around them, as Jacobs denounces in this passage:

> But where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. (30)

The unguarded, helpless black female body found itself isolated in facing trauma, which "is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available", as Caruth translates Freud's core concept of trauma (*Unclaimed Experience* 4).

Nevertheless, although that "crying wound" desperately strives to reveal the truth, the traumatic event is hardly expressible. Its repetition over time and the difficulty in articulating it through language constitutes the essence of trauma. As discussed in the

first part of this chapter, psychological trauma, as well as physical pain, leads to the inhibition of language, although to varying degrees. If, on the one hand, black female slaves were forced into silence because not even the law would have listened to them and further punishment would have been the consequence, on the other, in psychoanalytical terms, it was extremely problematic to express all the pain pulsating inside them. Silence was thereby an imposed reaction, but simultaneously, it also became a defense mechanism which enabled the bondwoman to endure her tribulations while suppressing her emotional responses.

Black women continued to remain wrapped in their silence even with the dawn of emancipation, developing what academic Darlene Clark Hine defines a "culture of dissemblance"; with this term, Hine describes a "cult of secrecy" to which black women adhered "to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma" (Hine 915). This double facade allowed the black woman to conceal her emotions, her thoughts and fears, in effect dissimulating her nature in an effort to preserve the remnants of her inner world. Such an attitude, continues Hine, led black women to prefer to leave their personal issues "unknown, unwritten, unspoken except in whispered tones" (916).

***

Locked in this silence, however, trauma failed to be recognized, rationalized, comprehended and processed, at least until black women, once they reached freedom, gradually reacquired the language that physical and emotional pain, each on its own way, had hampered. Their voices would help to give the black female body back its consciousness, reassembling the fragments scattered around by the white male invader; they would "transform the female body from an object that bears the mark of

trauma within cultural narratives to the active creator of her own testimony" (Griffiths 13). In the meanwhile, the annihilation of family ties, "the (dis)possession of the body and its issue", using Hartman's words, the desecration of black motherhood, and the sexual invasion of the black woman's body, had shaped the traumatic experience (103). Such an experience was the result of "a cascade of experiences, eruptions, crevasses, a sliding of tectonic plates that undergird[ed] the self" (Kirmayer qtd. in Griffiths 18), and just as an earthquake travels through the ground, the trauma of slavery was passed from generation to generation long after abolitionism.

Haunted by the legacy of slavery, 20th-century African American women often relived inside domestic walls the wounds that had disfigured their foremothers. Notably in lower layers of black society, the black woman had to deal with the past shadows of oppression and violence; she found herself entrapped again in the patriarchal yoke that her black male counterpart, imitating white dominion, put on her. Slave history delivered the image of black men whose masculinity had been further eroded because of their inability to defend their women from white assault, and once they realized their powerlessness, they were "symbolically castrated and assaulted in their essential dignity" (Lerner 172).[17] In certain social contexts, the African American woman reexperienced the subordination that her ancestors had to suffer; freedom gave her body back but it continued to be the locus of sexual violation.

Nonetheless, the black woman was not denied perseverance, and in the effort to reconstruct her personality and her downtrodden womanhood, despite being shut down in a cage of silence, she attempted to find the lost words, to rebuild the language

[17] bell hooks is of the opinion that the portrait of the black man "as effete, emasculated, crippled", was the product of an excessive emphasis on the effects of racism. Such perception, she continues, became so persistent in the American collective imaginary "that people are absolutely unwilling to admit that the damaging effects of racism on black men neither prevents them from being sexist oppressors nor excuses or justifies their sexist oppression of black women (hooks 85).

dismantled by abuse after abuse. Among the millions of slave women in their daily struggle for physical and mental survival, there were those who tried every possible strategy, and in the most personal way, subtly or overtly, to oppose the system. Others, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Harriet Jacobs, combined action and voice. They tore the shroud of silence in order to allow the history of female slavery to come so far, and possibly relieve the fathomless wounds in the process. Evoking Truth's landmark speech delivered during the Ohio Women's Rights convention in 1851, Deborah Grey White dwells on the thought-provoking question posed by the activist at the time. The resulting reflection is the voice of millions of silenced voices, it is a proud cry for the African American woman who broke the chains of subjugation:

> Thank God black women were never what white people perceived us or wanted us to be. There is no question that we have suffered tremendously from historic racism and sexism. We were never superwomen. Disease, mortality, and depression—the perils of adversity—have taken their toll. But African-American women's lives have been salvaged by sustained psychological and physical resistance to white exploitation and terror. In slavery and in freedom we practiced an alternative style of womanhood. A womanhood that persevered in hardship but revered overt resistance. A womanhood that celebrated heroism but accepted frailty. A womanhood that could answer a confident and assertive "yes" to the persistent question: "Ar'n't I a woman?". (162)

3. POETRY IS NOT A MATTER OF LUXURY

3.1 THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF POETRY

In her 1977 speech “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”, published in *The Cancer Journals* (1980), and later in the collection *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde counterposes the two forces within each individual, silence and language precisely, discussing the implications of remaining silent or speaking. Lorde delivered this speech while going through a critical moment in her own life; she had just been diagnosed with breast cancer and, from such a painful experience, she realized how feelings, thoughts, and distressing incidents need to be voiced and shared. Lorde’s experience of physical disease, and her falling silent as a result of the unexpected event, parallels the body wracked with pain analyzed previously; in this case, Lorde’s merciless cancer mirrors the master who inflicts pain to his slave’s bodies by torturing them. As the victim loses their language faculty because of the extreme physical anguish, similarly, the bodily and emotional pain suffered by Lorde was the source of her sinking into silence. Although the act of not speaking is a protective response to situations which cause threat or shame, Lorde is cognizant that it can have detrimental effects on one’s own self, becoming the enemy within. In light of this, she urges her audience to turn silence into words and deeds so as to prevent it from behaving as a life-threatening cancer.

Lorde’s discussion does not remain confined to her personal fight against cancer or disease in general, but it embraces a wider vision; she also turns her gaze toward society and the role of language, in all its forms, in giving back the right visibility, and not that established by others, to those who have been silenced by the white dominant power:

> Within this country where racial difference creates a constant, if unspoken, distortion of vision, Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism. […] For to survive in the mouth of this dragon we call america, we have had to learn this first and most vital lesson – that we were never meant to survive. Not as human beings. […] And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. (14)

The African American woman has always been marked by the two opposing constants of visibility and invisibility. Her body has been an object under scrutiny since the first auction blocks, dissected into her individual parts by whites' greedy eyes; buttocks, genitalia and breasts determined her value and attractiveness, the color of her skin defined her belonging to an inferior race and thereby deprived her of any right. Black female bodies became a synonym with savage visual exposure, while, simultaneously, they "lay veiled in a shroud of silence, invisible not because they had no face, but rather because they had no voice" (Baker qtd. in Campbell, Kean 77-78); a voice which black women themselves learnt to muffle through a policy of dissemblance and secrecy, a concept suggested by Hine and explored in Chapter Two (see page 74), which became a hallmark attitude in the black woman's life, bequeathed to succeeding female generations.

By calling for a transformation of silence into language and action, Lorde carries on the legacy left by those foremothers who audaciously performed their resistance by denouncing the abominations of slavery through speeches, memoirs and narratives. Echoing Lorde's reflection, bell hooks, in her *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist,*

Thinking Black (1989), remarks that "speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. *Only as subjects can we speak*. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others" (12, emphasis mine). In their challenging journey toward becoming subjects along with the reappropriation of their voices, African American women have given different shapes to language; each one of them has chosen the form which could most effectively place them within the frame of subjectivity and visibility, allowing them to convey their emotions while still portraying the blacks' world. Hence, the act of speaking encouraged by Lorde and hooks takes on a broader meaning, coming to signify not just the verbal communication but also the written word.

With her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury" (1977), Audre Lorde opens the doors to the art of poetry as the means through which numerous female intellectuals and authors have found their expressivity. This literature tool, she writes, "is a vital necessity of our [women's] existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (Lorde, *Compendium* 96). According to Lorde, poetry is an "illumination" enabling self-inquiry, an exploration of those places of the soul which "are dark because they are ancient and hidden" (*Compendium* 95). In this perspective, poetry becomes the key to access the remote corners within each person, where feelings, thoughts and ideas are waiting to be named; the profound transformative power Lorde attributes to verse is in stark contrast to "the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean — in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight" (*Compendium* 96; italics in the text). Through this statement, Lorde positions the European, masculine and rational

attitude toward poetry and life in antithesis to the visceral, instinctive, intimate way of experiencing them. In compliance with the patriarchal view, poetry and theory are incompatible, likewise feeling and reason are two components of human nature to be kept separated. The intended fissure can be explained as nothing but a means of domination, since a fragmented self is more easily controlled (Lorde, *Compendium* 70).

Contextually, Lorde asserts: "The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free" (*Compendium* 97). The assertion is built into the dichotomy between white fathers – Black mother, told – whispers, think – feel. These opposite pairs highlight the dissimilarity between an old and restrained patriarchal vision, which recognizes the human beings' essence exclusively in the act of thinking, and the vision of a dormant poet residing in each individual and identified with the "Black mother", which encourages us to rely on feeling as a way toward freedom.

However, as argued in an interview with poet Adrienne Rich in 1981, it is not Lorde's intention to reproduce the stereotyping of white men as rational and black women as sentimental, as she was accused of; instead, she believes that "patriarchal thinkers" could be either male or female, just like the soul of the Black mother poet belongs to everyone, be they men or women, whites or blacks (Lorde, *Compendium* 149). In other words, she opines that rationality and instinctiveness coexist, but they should operate in harmony. Sometimes, "dreams of new ideas" end up drugging people, and, in such an event, the head alone can counterbalance the heart (Lorde, *Compendium* 97). Rationality, she insists, is necessary as "it serves the chaos of knowledge. It serves feeling. It serves to get from some place to some place. If [one doesn't] honor those places then the road is meaningless" (Lorde, *Compendium* 149).

Through the metaphors employed, Lorde calls for an amalgamation between the two sides of the same coin. She longs for a wholeness which stems from her intimate necessity to piece together the multifarious aspects of her being, as she often remarked in her speeches: “I am a Black Woman Poet Lesbian Mother Lover Teacher Friend Warrior, and I am shy, strong, fat, generous, loyal, and crotchety, among other things” (Lorde, *I Am Your Sister* 184). For Lorde, thus, poetry represents the process of unification of all those parts of her self, yet respecting each one in its diversity.

Poetry is not just about dreaming and having visions, Lorde continues, “it is the skeleton architecture” of life experience, the language which allows to “give name to the nameless so it can be thought”; by so doing, poetry performs a therapeutic action, it is not just a pastime or “a luxury. It is a vital necessity of […] existence” (Lorde, *Compendium* 96). Such a reflection is powerfully expressed in the lyrical verse “A Litany for Survival” collected in *The Black Unicorn* (1978), where , like in a repetitive devotional prayer, lists the numerous fears humans can experience, and speaking is one of those fears. Nonetheless, Lorde exhorts, “it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive” (42-43-44), than remaining silent, because even in silence “we are still afraid” (40). Audre Lorde chose to speak through poetry instead of remaining silent, because, as she maintained, “while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (*The Selected Works* 8).

> And when the sun rises we are afraid
> it might not remain
> when the sun sets we are afraid
> it might not rise in the morning
> when our stomachs are full we are afraid

of indigestion
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid
we may never eat again
when we are loved we are afraid
love will vanish
when we are alone we are afraid
love will never return
and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive. (25-44; Lorde, *The Selected Works* 216-17)

3.2 LUCILLE CLIFTON: POETRY AS A BRIDGE TOWARD THE PAST

Poetry is not a luxury even for Lucille Clifton. For her, it is "the way of walking in the world, a way of seeing the world, a way of understanding the world in one's life" (Rowell 64). From these few words in reply to Charles H. Rowell, in an interview in 1999 for the journal *Callaloo*, it is evident that poetry is to Clifton a way of being and living life, a place where she can express her identities of being female and black. Like Lorde, Clifton believes in the importance of revealing through her writing all those identities which define who she is, as each one of them carries its own history: "I am a woman and I write from that experience. I am a Black woman and I write from that experience" (Clifton in Evans 137). As scholar Hilary Holladay points out, some of Clifton's poems highlight her being a woman, some others focus on her being a black woman, while others explore her self-identity as Lucille Clifton persona; however, all those identities merge in her works making the personal mingle with gender and race issues, while disengaging from a collocation within rigid categories (*Wild Blessing* 64). In this regard, Clifton, like Lorde, tries to give wholeness to the different aspects of her being by overcoming the constraining boundaries defined by society: "To me, that I am what I am is *all* of it; *all* of what I am is relevant". The all-embracing image of herself she conveys is also relevant to the reader to fully experience her poetry (Rowell 58, 59; italics in the text).

The multiple identities which shape Clifton as an individual and a writer are forged by her family's past of resistance within the broader experience of slavery. Although she was born and grew up in the North of the United States, she always claimed back her southern origins, since her parents were native of the Deep South and maintained aspects of southern culture. Such a background had a strong influence on her poetry, leading her to deal with two specific themes: slavery and its aftermath, and the role of

language in establishing people's knowledge of themselves and others, particularly in relation to slaves' identity. In those poems set in the South, writes Holladay, "we don't see much of the region's landscape, but we do see how language, especially the language of names, can either obliterate or validate one's identity" (in Bloom 135, 136).

Under slavery, the removal of captives' native names was the first step toward the desubjectification process. Black slaves' original identity was wiped out and new American names were given to them; their provenance was defined by their owner's surname, which was evidence that they were his sole property. Typically, planters addressed older slaves as "uncle" or "aunt", even "granny" in some cases, giving them an appearance of familial respect; however, this manner of addressing them contributed to creating the stereotypization of black slaves and denying them a genuine form of respect.

The effect of the depersonalization of slaves by substituting their names is well represented in Clifton's "slave cabin, sotterly plantation, maryland, 1989", contained in the 1991 collection entitled *Quilting*. The nicknames "aunt" and "nanny", in reference to the female slave of the poem, do not reveal who she actually is, leaving her in an undefined space. Besides, the combination of aunt and nanny is paradoxical, since the two labels allude to different positions within a family; this word play is employed by Clifton to highlight the use of nicknames during slavery as "a means of co-opting the unidentified woman's identity and subsuming her into the white family that owned her" (Holladay in Bloom 141).

The reader, or the visitor, is guided into the tiny space of the cabin and invited to observe:

in this little room
note carefully

aunt nanny's bench

three words that label
things
aunt
is my parent's sister
nanny
my grandmother
bench
the board at which
i stare
the soft curved polished
wood
that held her bottom
after the long days
without end
without beginning
when she aunt nanny sat
feet dead against the dirty floor
humming for herself humming
her own sweet human name (Clifton, *The Collected Poems* 333)

The line "aunt nanny's bench" (3) is singled out from the rest of the poem, as if to draw the attention specifically to the bench. The speaking I, our guide into the remnants of slave quarters, equates the bondwoman with an object: "three words that label / *things*" (4, emphasis mine). In this way, Clifton emphasizes the dehumanizing action of the slavery system, which put slaves on a par with any other kind of goods or animals, as previously discussed; as such, "aunt" and "nanny" are not just undefining

names, but they even take on a disqualifying meaning. Moreover, by pointing out that "aunt / is *my* parent's sister, nanny / *my* grandmother" (6-7-8-9, emphasis mine), Clifton stresses the fact that this nameless, and presumably no longer young, slave woman could represent someone related to her by blood; by extension, she comes to symbolize African American people's past. In her memoir *Generations* (1976), in fact, Clifton reveals that she descends from African ancestors on the maternal line; her great-great-grandmother was a Dahomey woman, captured and then enslaved in Louisiana. Certainly, her genealogical history tied to slavery made Clifton strongly committed to extensively address this issue in her lyrical verse, in particular the question of identity and names which helps her to enhance her self-awareness and the sense of her past (Holladay in Bloom 145).

The "crushing weight of slavery", an expression mentioned in Chapter Two, seems to flow onto the "soft curved polished / wood" (13-14) where the image of the bondwoman materializes. The reader can visualize her sitting on the bench which bears her and all the fatigue accumulated day after day, in an endless, repetitive cycle. The focus has shifted onto the exhausted woman with her feet consumed by hard labor and abandoned on the "dirty floor" of the room. Despite being worn-out, she still has the strength to hum "for herself", as if, within this private place, she were able to reconnect with her inner world. In the act of "humming / her own sweet human name" (21-22), she asserts her identity which the generical "aunt nanny" obfuscates. In her small personal space, almost limited to the bench, by crooning an imperceptible song, the "essentially wordless entity […] define herself on her own terms" (Holladay in Bloom 141). It is worth noting that the mouth remains closed while humming, and no words come out; this image recalls that of black women enshrouded in silence, and whose voices are audible only to themselves. Nonetheless, Clifton restores dignity to

the woman by depicting her far from the daily routines, in a tender and solitary moment of rest in which she can feel protected, in touch again with her soul, symbolized by her "sweet human name". Through effective imagery, along with simple and concise language the reader is given a glimpse into a slave woman's life, dealing with excruciating physical pain and her reemerging true self;[18] nothing of her is left but a piece of wood, now "polished" and on display for tourists.

Another female figure who brings us back to the tough past in the South is "miss rosie" (*Good Times* 1969):

when i watch you
wrapped up like garbage
sitting, surrounded by the smell
of too old potato peels
or
when i watch you
in your old man's shoes
with the little toe cut out
sitting, waiting for your mind
like next week's grocery
i say
when i watch you
you wet brown bag of a woman
who used to be the best looking gal in georgia
used to be called the Georgia Rose
i stand up
through your destruction

[18] In "A Simple Language", Clifton points out: "I use a simple language. I have never believed that for anything to be valid or true or intellectual or 'deep' it had to first be complex. I deliberately use the language that I use" (in Evans 137). Clifton's statement is supported by the stylistic choice of writing her poems in lower case letters, a distinctive sign which conveys the idea of essentiality and spontaneity in her verse.

i stand up (Clifton, *The Collected Poems* 39)

The protagonist is introduced to the reader with a name in the title, though this is likely to be a nickname she gained in her youth, as it is suggested in the final lines of the poem. Similar to aunt nanny, Miss Rosie lives in harsh conditions as well, although the setting is no longer the plantation, and she is probably experiencing the aftermath of slavery. What we know about this woman is through the narrating I who addresses her directly, or in their internal dialogue, with the refrain "when i watch you", repeated at the beginning of each stanza. In the first one, the I's gaze and sense of smell conveys the portrait of a woman in a situation of extreme misery and isolation. The imagery used is so strong that Miss Rosie no longer resembles a woman, dressed in a way that she seems "a garbage", with the odor of rotting "potato peels" around her.

Miss Rosie is in a sitting position, not specified where, and motionless, as reported in lines 9-10: "waiting for your mind / like next week's grocery". The expression is a clue of a possible mental illness affecting the woman, while the simile refers again to her being destitute, lacking food. The speaking I notices she wears her "old man's shoes / with the little toe cut out" (7-8), highlighting once again Miss Rosie's material deprivation, to the extent that she has no other shoes than those of her husband, a description which reminds us of the masculine nature of women's work under slavery, forced to perform manly tasks. From a rhythmic point of view, the assonance of the vowel sound "o" in the words "your", "old", "shoes", "toe", "grocery", also repeated in lines 4-5 with "surrounded", "old" and "potato", has a slowing effect which reinforces the stillness of the scene. It is worth noting, furthermore, that the adjective "old" recurs in both the first and second stanza, anticipating the information we are given in the last one. In fact, we are told a little more about Miss Rosie and her past,

when she “used to be the best looking gal in georgia” (14), an indication that now she is an old woman.

There is a change of tone and tense in the poem’s final part; a more insistent voice demands Miss Rosie’s complete attention, emphasized by the repetition of “you” and the imperative “i say”, which stands out compared to the conjunction “or” between the first and second stanza. The line “you wet brown bag of a woman” (13) brings to mind the description of the woman as garbage in the second line, making Miss Rosie look even shabbier, while the adjective “brown” suggests her skin color. This portrait is in sharp contrast to the formerly most beautiful girl in Georgia who everybody called “Georgia Rose”. The latter sounds like a nickname, where “Rose”, like the flower, symbolizes the ephemeral nature of youth and beauty. On this basis, “miss rosie” appears to be more a fantasy name linked to the woman’s glorious past, rather than her real identity, and the title “miss” before it has an ironic nuance, exactly as it has for the black slave called “aunt nanny”.

The final lines mark the climax of the poem in which the narrating voice takes a firm resolution not to let the same situation occur to them. The time clause “when i watch you”, suspended for three times at every description of the woman, is completed only at the end of the poem with a firm intention: “i stand up / through your destruction / i stand up” (16-17-18). The whole poem is accompanied by sensory imagery portraying all the troubles of an old black woman. This structural strategy has in fact, prepared the ground for the change in the tone; the speaking I wants to make a decision on their life, choosing to stand up and prevail over destruction, choosing “to fight the forces that caused that human waste and suffering” (Evans 145).

Miss Rosie resembles the sacrificial victim who had to endure the difficulties and discriminations left behind by slavery, while the speaker could be the contemporary

black woman or man who, through their predecessors' destruction, have the chance to give another direction to their lives. As a matter of fact, in the interview between Clifton and Rowell, it is argued that Miss Rosie embodies the ancestors of African Americans and their shared past. Rowell himself observes: "When I think of her, I am given strength to move forward on the shoulders of those who went before us, those who prepared the way for us – the ancestors who struggled, survived, and prevailed (64). Miss Rosie is, hence, the emblem through which Clifton pays tribute to her foremothers and forefathers: "I'm where I am because somebody was before me, and that somebody suffered so that I might get here" (Rowell 65).

Clifton's focus on the denial of slaves' identity, their being nameless and voiceless, emerges distinctly in another poem: "at the cemetery, walnut grove plantation, south carolina, 1989" (*Quilting* 1991). The poet tells about a visit she paid in 1989 to the historic slavery site of Walnut Grove. During the tour, as she reported in an interview with journalist Bill Moyers, the guide did not mention the presence of slaves in the plantation or refer to slavery in any way. At the family cemetery, however, she noticed the unmarked rocks where the enslaved people were buried:

> among the rocks
> at walnut grove
> your silence drumming
> in my bones,
> tell me your names. (1-5)

The silence coming from those anonymous rocks is so penetrating that Clifton perceives it inside her bones like the sound of a drum; the oxymoron emphasizes the power of that silence which pulses to be heard. The effect of drumming recalls the image of aunt nanny who hums in her cabin; both sounds have a pounding quality, as

if the people who produce them try to find a way to express themselves despite the impossibility of talking. In fact, Clifton, feeling “the palpable if invisible presence of the slaves”, calls upon their souls and invites them to tell her their names (Holladay in Bloom 137).

> nobody mentioned slaves
> and yet the curious tools
> shine with your fingerprints.
> nobody mentioned slaves
> but somebody did this work
> who had no guide, no stone,
> who moulders under rock. (6-12)

Despite the fact that, apparently, there are no signs of slaves, the tools for the plantation labor are on display for the sake of tourism. Yet, the fingerprints of those who used them are still visible under the paint; although “nobody mentioned slaves” (6), as Clifton repeats twice, she is well aware that those who worked hard and suffered in Walnut Grove Plantation are the slaves without stones and names at the present time.

> tell me your names,
> tell me your bashful names
> and i will testify. (13-15)

The third stanza is a plea addressed directly to slaves; Clifton longs for them to tell her their names, which she defines as “bashful” (14), as if the buried slaves were reluctant to tell their names. If she knew their names, she could do them justice and consign them to history. Clifton feels the act of testifying the presence of slaves as a mission;

her struggle against ignorance is necessary, as she expressly argues: “All that may be needed is that the injustice in the world be mentioned so that nobody can ever say, ‘Nobody told me’” (Clifton in Moyers).

A pause follows, marking the separation before the last stanza and, as Holladay suggests, “the slaves’ unwillingness or inability to supply the basic information that the poet craves” (in Bloom 138). This suspension also indicates a turning point in Clifton’s visit to the site; she asks, in fact, to look at the inventory of the plantation, where the slaves’ names could be written, among other objects belonging to the slaveowner. Surprisingly, only ten slaves were on the list and all of them were men, as evidence that female slaves were not counted at all. The space between the statement and the final part of the poem invites the reader to reflect on the missing names on the inventory, emblem of the devaluation that black women, in particular, suffered during slavery:

the inventory lists ten slaves
but only men were recognized.

among the rocks
at walnut grove
some of these honored dead
were dark
some of these dark
were slaves
some of these slaves
were women
some of them did this
honored work.
tell me your names

foremothers, brothers,
tell me your dishonored names.
here lies
here lies
here lies
here lies
hear (16-35; Clifton, *The Collected Poems* 331-32)

In the style of a children's tale, Clifton eventually tells the real story of Walnut Grove Plantation. Starting again from the anonymous rocks, she lists, in order, those who are buried there, finally mentioning the women who "did this / honored work" (26-27), to which the tools on display refer. The enjambement in this line creates a suspension which gives emphasis to the kind of work the slave women performed; it was "honored work", like "honored" are the dead slaves, whose names are now "dishonored". The play of opposite adjectives aims to shed light on the omitted truth, while it tries to restore slaves' dignity in history, since, as Clifton points out, "the past isn't back there, the past is here too" (Clifton in Moyers).

The poet's last attempt to get to know those lost names leads to the closing lines, which take the form of gravestone inscriptions. The announcing words "here lies", seeming to wait for the missing information, creates a hiatus which culminates in the final exhortation "hear". Clifton employs a subtle pun between the adverb "here" and the verb "hear", as well as with the double meaning of "lies"; through the repetition of these words, she warns the visitors that they have been lied to, again and again.

Clifton's effort to have Walnut Grove Plantation recognized as a "site of slavery" becomes wider-ranging when her thought turns to the Atlantic Ocean and the countless

unidentified African people who lost their lives during the slave trade.[19] She wrote "atlantic is a sea of bones" (*Next* 1987) as a poem of commemoration of the many unidentified African people who lost their lives during the slave trade. The lyrical verse is preceded by a spiritual song, "them bones", inspired by prophet Ezekiel's vision in which he visits the Valley of Dry Bones, as stated in the Bible, where he heralds the resurrection of the people of Israel, a clear allusion to the black slaves' redemption:[20]

them bones
them bones will
rise again
them bones
them bones will
walk again
them bones
them bones will
talk again
now hear
the word of The Lord
—Traditional

atlantic is a sea of bones,
my bones,
my elegant afrikans

[19] The term "sites of slavery" was employed by scholar Salamishah Tillet in her *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post–Civil Rights Imagination* (2012). With this term, Tillet designates those places, texts, and historical figures connected with slavery era, and which become locus for the commemoration of black enslaved people.

[20] "Then he said to me: Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They have been saying, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off'. Therefore, prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel" ("The New American Bible", Ezek. 37.11-12; capitalized in the text. https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/__PS9.HTM).

connecting whydah and new york,
a bridge of ivory. (1-17)

The Atlantic Ocean is, metaphorically, a "bridge of ivory", made of millions of African bones lying in its seabed; bones which are also Clifton's bones, as she stated in *Generations*: "I look at my husband and our six children and I feel the Dahomey women gathering in *my bones*" (18, emphasis mine). The word "ivory" is a reference to the precious material so abundant in the African continent, much requested abroad, and, for this reason, it becomes a metaphor for the slaves' bodies required in the American plantations. So devastating was the Middle Passage for the captives that a human bridge covers the whole route between the city of Whydah, one of the major slave ports in the Dahomey kingdom in West Africa, and New York, the largest city in eastern United States. Clifton praises her forefathers and foremothers for their elegant posture, while calling them by the name given by ancient Egyptians to their birthplace Afrika: "*my* elegant afrikans" (15, emphasis mine). As a result, all these elements are evidence of the connection Clifton feels with her African roots.

The poet commemorates, in particular, all those mothers who saw in the ocean the only way to salvation for them and their children; hence, the Atlantic, with "its arms", comes to embody the great mother who welcomes the black mothers, "with babies in their arms", into her eternal embrace. Black women were confronted with a dramatic decision which brought nothing but sorrow. The assonance between the verbs "leapt" and "wept" is accurate in depicting the tragic fate, whether the mothers jumped into the ocean with their children, or remained onboard without them:

seabed they call it.
in its arms my early mothers sleep.

some women leapt with babies in their arms.
some women wept and threw the babies in.

maternal armies pace the atlantic floor.
i call my name into the roar of surf
and something awful answers. (18-24; Clifton, *The Collected Poems* 268)

The poem closes with an evocative and powerful image of African mothers who, like soldiers, march on the Atlantic seabed. In this line there is an overt reference to the Dahomey women, to "how they had a whole army of nothing but women back there and how they was the best soldiers in the world", as Clifton's father used to tell her when she was a child (Clifton, *Generations* 22).[21] The two final lines convey another suggestive image: the poet, standing in front of the Atlantic, proudly cries out her name to assert her identity of African descent. The answer arrives, a sign that she is recognized by her people, but it carries with it all the grief and misery enslaved Africans experienced in those long journeys of death.

A combination of emotions strikes the reader while reading Clifton's poems, and the last in particular; the tone is at times melancholic, at others reveals pride and fighting spirit. Clifton is able to express a wide range of feelings despite being "an economist with words" (Madhubuti in Evans 154). Her language, dry and informal, shapes short lyrical creations where intellect coexists with feeling, as it is poetry for Lorde, where values and truth are the common denominator. Poet Haki R. Madhubuti defines Clifton's work as the ground where values are transmitted:

[21] In the poem "amazons", Clifton refers to her ancestors as the Amazons of Dahomey kingdom. Combining Greek mythology and personal genealogical history, she describes them as an army of valiant and intrepid women of the 18th and 19th centuries, who resembled the mythological Greek female warriors. Amazon was also the epithet which, during slavery, was used about black women because of their ability to withstand heavy labor (Lupton 108).

> It is these values that form the base of a developing consciousness of struggle. She [Clifton] realizes that we do have choices that can still be exercised. Hers is most definitely to fight. From page to page, from generation to generation, the poems cry out direction, hope, and future. (in Evans 153)

Fight and hope are precisely the driving force for Clifton to speak about unpleasant and hard-hitting truths, especially those related to history, of which the poem "at the cemetery" is an example. In this context, poetry serves as a bridge toward the past and an essential tool for reexamining memory, for telling the "stories excluded or denigrated or erased from the versions of white history" (Campbell, Kean 79). Significant, in this sense, is the poem that Clifton was asked to write for the 350th anniversary of the State of Maryland, as a memorial to its glorious colonial times. In response, she wrote the poem "why some people be mad at me sometimes" (*Next* 1987), through which she reasserts the importance of dispelling the false myths and conflicting information in the American historical memory, for the sake of justice and for a restored collective identity:

> they ask me to remember
> but they want me to remember
> their memories
> and i keep on remembering
> mine. (Clifton, *The Collected Poems* 262)

3.2 CLIFTON PAYING HOMAGE TO THE BLACK FEMALE BODY

In Clifton, a keen interest in the black female body becomes the theme of a number of her praised works. Through such poems, she glorifies specific parts of the black woman's body by exalting their functions and their beauty; in this way, the poetess gives back to the female body the dignity and sacredness that slavery brutally trampled. More than two centuries of oppression reduced the enslaved woman primarily to being an uninhibited and carnal creature, whose body was overtly violated by whites and their uncontrolled sexual desire. The false myths built around her figure concurred to exclude the black woman from the white womanhood category, enclosing her, instead, within a mistaken view which was defined by sexual and racial prejudices. She was highly visible because of her color and her being the purported agent of white men's debauchery and weakness, while, simultaneously, being rendered invisible and voiceless in the eyes of American society.

Since the period following the Reconstruction era and, later, during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, African American female poets began to write in an effort to challenge such a distorted ideology;[22] through poetry they attempted to "dislodge womanhood from its association with the white middle-class home and then to write into possibility a subject who is woman and not white" (Mance in Bennett, Dickerson 124). Recovering the distorted identity of the black woman was the main focus of 20th-century African American women poets. The black female body

[22] The Black Arts Movement, also known as BAM, was an African American movement which became popular between the 1960s and 1970s throughout the United States, and whose primarily aim was creating art and culture. "Based on the cultural politics of black nationalism, which were developed into a set of theories referred to as the Black Aesthetic, the movement sought to create a populist art form to promote the idea of black separatism" (https://www.britannica.com/event/Black-Arts-movement).

needed to be relocated into a new frame, where blackness and womanhood could fuse and shape a new empowered subject.

For this purpose, poets like Clifton "create portraits of the black corpus that, in resisting the narrow definitions of womanhood that have hidden the African American woman from view, undermine the system of sociopolitical hierarchies that perpetuates her invisibility" (Mance in Bennett, Dickerson 125). In this perspective, the black body is narrated, celebrated in its individual parts, it is claimed and eventually liberated through lyrical verse. Clifton makes the body the protagonist of many of her works, telling of the transformations it undergoes after a disease, a surgery, after abuse, but also depicting a body which morphs with the natural passage of time. Physical descriptions intertwine with emotional aspects, conveying the image of a woman who has gained total possession of her body, proud of being black and female.

To highlight the reconquest of the corporeal, Clifton aptly calls "homage to mine" the first section contained in the volume *two-headed woman* (1980); the possessive "mine" reinforces the reappropriation of her own body and those parts that make it unique, regardless of the cultural and aesthetic boundaries that have narrowed its visibility. Through a series of poems entitled "homage", Clifton creates a space of intimate connection with the physical, where hair and hips, for instance, are acclaimed as representatives of black appearance and ethnic identity, by virtue of their peculiar forms and size. Hence, bodily features become the protagonists of these poems, personified attributes of the often ridiculed and despised black beauty.

In "homage to my hair", the narrating voice addresses her nappy hair as if it were another woman, a sort of ally which amplifies the vibrations of the music through "her" rhythmic coming and going:

when i feel her jump up and dance
i hear the music! my God
i'm talking about my nappy hair!
she is a challenge to your hand
black man,
she is as tasty on your tongue as good greens
black man,
she can touch your mind
with her electric fingers and
the grayer she do get, good God,
the blacker she do be! (Clifton, *The Collected Poems* 197)

The bushy, rebellious hair is proudly displayed in front of the black man, challenging his touch and tickling his taste, while even penetrating his mind with her curls. The richness in sensory imagery contributes to invest the black hair with human traits: it can be touched, it can be kissed, and it can touch in turn, arousing emotions in the other. Naturally, it is not exempt from aging; in fact, as the saying "a person gets better with age", the grayer the hair becomes the more seductive it is.

Other than nappy hair, the poem presents many references to black culture: Clifton playfully compares the taste of her hair to "good greens", which stands for collard greens, a common type of vegetable grown by black slaves for their food; moreover, the two final lines recall a popular vernacular expression used among African American men to admire a woman for her dark complexion, implying that she is more attractive and loving than a woman with a lighter skin color; as "the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice", in a similar fashion, "the grayer she do get, good God, / the blacker she do be!" (10-11). It is worth noting the alliteration of the hard "g" sound in "grayer", "get", "good", "God", which renders the tone vigorous, as it is the approach of the speaking I toward the man; by using this figure of speech, Clifton reasserts the

black woman's power of imposing her visibility. Lastly, the two interjections "my God" and "good God" may be an allusion to the traditional Southern Baptist way of preaching, in which Clifton was raised, and where God is invoked aloud.

At a more attentive reading, a further interpretation may attribute to nappy hair a sexual connotation, reinforced by the use of the feminine pronoun. The scene the poet describes could be the prelude to a sexual encounter between the protagonist and the black man, even though she hastens to specify that it is not what it seems: "my God / i'm talking about my nappy hair!" (2-3). In light of this reading, the poem is not only a tribute to blackness, but also to a liberated black female sexuality in which the black body is the active and joyful protagonist.

This liberating vision of the black woman's body also emerges in "homage to my hips" (*two-headed woman*, 1980); with the same playful and vivacious tone, Clifton personifies this lower part of her body, infusing it with vigor and making it the focus of the poem, as if its functioning were detached from the rest:

> these hips are big hips
> they need space to
> move around in.
> they don't fit into little
> petty places. these hips
> are free hips.
> they don't like to be held back.
> these hips have never been enslaved,
> they go where they want to go
> they do what they want to do. (1-10)

Clifton's I describes "these hips" as impressive hips, proudly highlighting the excessiveness in size and form, not suitable for tiny spaces. A further feature that

renders them special is freedom: “they don’t like to be held back” (7), a statement that emphasizes their rebellious nature, supported by the fact that they “have never been enslaved” (9). The reference to past slavery and the black women’s sexual submission to white slaveowners is evident in this line; now, they can “go” wherever they “want” and they are free to “do” whatever they “want”, since no one can impose anything on them. “These hips”, thus, have acquired freedom of movement and action along with decisional power, a condition totally withheld from black foremothers. Moreover, the verbs “don’t fit”, “don’t like” and “want”, repeated twice, corroborate the image of an independent woman, not at all willing to yield.

> these hips are mighty hips.
> these hips are magic hips.
> i have known them
> to put a spell on a man and
> spin him like a top! (11-15, Clifton, *The Collected Poems* 198)

The narrating voice continues to give homage to her hips, praising, as in a rhythmic song, their magnificence and superpower, to the extent that they are capable of enchanting the man and “spin him like a top!” (15). From a linguistic point of view, the closing line marks the high point of the long list of qualities displayed by the hips; the suspended sound of the last consonants in “spell”, “on”, “man”, “spin”, “him”, prepares in a crescendo movement the final plosive “p” sound in “top”, thereby metaphorically reproducing sexual intercourse (Lupton 87). The subject “hips” appears nine times throughout the single-stanza poem, and seven times substituted by the personal pronoun “they”, a poet’s linguistic strategy that aims to give

hypervisibility to that part of the body which has always been considered by white men, and sometimes even by black males, just an object to be exploited.

Contextually, academic and artist Ajuan Maria Mance interprets Clifton's works on the female body as "deliberate resistance" to the canonical concept of womanhood and femininity through the exaltation of traits and "mythical capabilities" that release the black body from bondage (in Bennett, Dickerson 134-126). With such an image in mind, the poem "if i stand in my window" (*Good Times* 1969) precisely evokes the figure of a self-assertive black woman, finally liberated from the chains of race prejudice:

> if i stand in my window
> naked in my own house
> and press my breasts
> against my windowpane
> like black birds pushing against glass
> because i am somebody
> in a New Thing (1-7)

The hypothetical proposition introducing the first stanza allows to imagine an unclothed woman leaning at the window of her house with her breasts pressed on it, which, through an effective simile, are paralleled to "black birds" pushing their beaks "against the glass". The woman explains the reason why she is in such a position, asserting that she exists, that she is "somebody / in a New Thing" (6-7). These two lines suggest a rebirth of self-awareness in the protagonist, as if she had rediscovered her value as a woman and as black in a new body, to which the term "New Thing", capitalized compared to the rest, refers. The New Thing was also a subgenre of jazz

music known for its subversiveness, a plausible association with the black woman's rebellious temperament.

The massive presence of possessive adjectives underscores the protagonist's claim over her property: the "window", the "house", the "breasts", the "windowpane" are hers and only hers, assertion also reiterated in the second stanza. The impression that the reader may have is that of a woman who has never really owned anything before, and who now shows her pride in possessing material goods. As a matter of fact, it was not until the 1968, with the ban of housing discrimination, that African Americans were allowed to buy property.

The first-person voice continues to envisage a hypothetical scenario in which "the man", resentful of her provoking behavior, goes to her house to stop her, accusing her of having offended him and his Gods:

> and if the man come to stop me
> in my own house
> naked in my own window
> saying i have offended him
> i have offended his
>
> Gods (8-13)

The expression "his Gods" seems to allude to a male individual belonging to another culture and with other values, not necessarily spiritual, who is so susceptible as to be frightened by her outrageous presence. It is very likely that the man in question does not belong to the protagonist's people, but instead represents the American white male who struggles to accept the other, being black and female. However, the black woman

does not let him subjugate her, but instead she maintains her standing position in a challenging attitude:

> let him watch my black body
> push against my own glass
> let him discover self
> let him run naked through the streets
> crying
> praying in tongues (14-19; Clifton, *The Collected Poems 45*)

In her dream-like vision, the woman's total body is now pressed against the window so that the white man can see it in its wholeness; but this body emanates such a mysterious force that has a shocking effect on the man, similar to a spiritual rebirth: "let him run naked through the streets / crying / praying in tongues" (17-18-19). Like in a mystic revelation, he is deeply transformed by the vision of the black female body, whose nudity ironically evokes the stereotyped slave woman as a sexually enchanting savage, object of both attraction and repulsion for the white male. It is interesting to note the repetition of the "ing" nasal sound in the two closing lines, similar to the pronunciation of "tongues", which gives a decisive nuance to the speaker's tone.

The black woman now feels free to show herself naked in the safe space of her own home, without risking being assaulted by the white man, who symbolically represents the master of the nation's slavery past and, more generally, the contemporary discriminative white society. Her nakedness embodies her liberation from the constrictive boundaries dictated by race and sexual prejudices; such an interpretation is strengthened by the presence of the birds, free animals by definition, although,

simultaneously, they could be seen as an "unnerving, racialized image" (Holladay, *Wild Blessing* 69).

Clifton uses her poetic voice to recover the black female body, exposing it in all its beauty, in all its magnificence, in all its blackness; she gives it the just and protected visibility, in contrast to the one which chained it to the hubris of white men. Despite being unmoving at the window, the body is combative: it rebels against oppression, refuses to submit and chooses to stand against white power. To be noted, the word "against" appears, in fact, three times throughout the poem.

The conclusive lines show a reverse situation: it is now the black woman who watches the white man running away, frightened, laid bare by the almost supernatural female black body. The kind of body Clifton presents through her poetry is enfranchised from the pain and sufferings which bondage inflicted on it; it is not afraid to show itself in its integrity because, in the meantime, it has been able to overcome the lacerating effects of enslavement. In this light, Clifton's voice becomes the collective I of all black women entering into full possession of their bodies and their subjectivity: "my 'I' tends to be both me Lucille and the me that stands for people who look like me, and the me that is also human" (Rowell 59).

CONCLUSION

To conclude this journey, I selected a poem from Maya Angelou's volume *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* (1983), "Caged Bird". When I read the poem, it immediately reminded me of Harriet Jacobs and her long period of confinement in the tiny garret. She must have felt like a bird in a cage, exactly like the bird of the poem. Although she chose to hide herself away from the terrible world of enslavement, many emotions filled her heart: powerlessness, frailty, threat, despair, rage. Metaphorically, she had her wings clipped and her feet tied in the narrow hiding place which represented her cage for seven long years. However, as soon as she liberated herself from captivity, she managed to make her voice heard, and that voice reached distant places while traveling through time to the present day, precisely as the voice of the caged bird: "and his tune is heard / on the distant hill / for the caged bird / sings of freedom (19-22).

> A free bird leaps
> on the back of the wind
> and floats downstream
> till the current ends
> and dips his wing
> in the orange sun rays
> and dares to claim the sky. (1-7)

Two different situations are depicted in the poem: a bird which moves freely in nature and a bird which is confined in a cage. The visual imagery Angelou uses allows the reader to mentally see the free bird, which opens the poem, playing with the wind, floating in the stream and swooping. All these movements emphasize the dynamism of the bird and the possibility for him to go from place to place. When the bird "dips his

wings / in the orange sun rays" (5-6), he seems to acquire human traits, similarly to someone who enjoys the warmth of the sun; furthermore, the presence of a masculine possessive adjective proves its personification. The closing line strengthens the idea of a humanized bird who, consumed by pride, feels that the sky belongs to him, and he "dares to claim" it. It is worth noting the recurrence of the conjunction "and" which marks the multiple movements taken by the bird, while giving rhythm to the whole stanza: "and floats", "and dips", "and dares".

Conversely, the other bird is entrapped in a "narrow cage" where his sight is limited by "his bars of rage" (11):

> But a bird that stalks
> down his narrow cage
> can seldom see through
> his bars of rage
> his wings are clipped and
> his feet are tied
> so he opens his throat to sing. (8-14)

His anger prevents him from having a clear vision beyond the cage, which is further reduced by the restricted space at his disposal and by the bird's descending movement. Moreover, we are told that it would be impossible for him to fly anyway, since "his wings are clipped and / his feet are tied" (12-13); the enjambement formed by the final "and" in line 12 is interesting because, as opposed to the conjunctions in the first stanza, it highlights the double impediment experienced by the bird: not only is he unable to fly, but he is also unable to move his feet freely. He has no other choice than to sing.

A number of linguistic elements also reveal the personification of the captive bird, along with the masculine adjectives: the words “feet” and “throat” refer to human characteristics, while “stalks” and “rage” represent emotions, which usually define human moods. Lastly, when the bird “opens his throat to sing” (14), the image of a man giving expression to all his rage through his voice takes shape in the reader’s mind. The feeling of rage is related to his being in a cage.

The contrasting descriptions of the two birds metaphorically recall the distinction of the two poles of society: white American society, on the one hand, and black African American society, on the other. The first is compared to a bird free to move everywhere he wishes, self-confident and even arrogant when he thinks of possessing the sky, which is infinite by definition. Black society is instead represented by the caged bird, which inevitably reminds us of slavery and the oppressive segregation that followed. To African American people, the only liberty allowed to them is to use their voice, although that voice is like “a fearful trill”:

> The caged bird sings
> with a fearful trill
> of things unknown
> but longed for still
> and his tune is heard
> on the distant hill
> for the caged bird
> sings of freedom. (15-22)

The metaphor continues with the caged bird-black man singing “of things unknown / but longed for still” (17-18), a clear reference to the undiscovered territory of freedom, which frightens because it is new for him, but, simultaneously, is forever yearned for.

The bird's trill is, hence, the black man's cry for freedom, so desperate that it is heard even from a long distance. In this regard, the triple rhyme "trill", "still" and "hill" emphasizes the escalation of the tone of this voice, which begins as "a fearful trill" (16), and "still" conveys the idea of something quiet, until it becomes a powerful voice, heard even "on the distant hill" (20).

In the fourth stanza, the focus returns on the free bird-white man, who, enjoying his liberty of movement, "thinks of another breeze" (23):

> The free bird thinks of another breeze
> and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
> and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
> and he names the sky his own. (23-26)

The passage presents an effective symbolization of the oppressive white supremacy, as evidenced by the line 24; the "trade winds", blowing in the direction east to west, are the winds which favored the sea route from Europe to the Americas, allowing first the colonization of new territories, and, later, the importation of slaves from the African continent. However, when the winds calm down, a soft wind takes their place "through the *sighing* trees" (24, emphasis mine), which powerfully recalls the grim image of black bodies hanging from the southern trees.

The closing lines of this stanza comment on the abundance of food available to the free bird, who now is not limited to just "claim the sky", but even to declare it his property: "and he names the sky his own" (26). The reiteration of the conjunction "and" recalls the same effect as in the first stanza, reinforcing the ceaseless possibilities he has due to his freedom.

Following a call-and-response pattern, the fifth stanza has the same function of the second one; both, in fact, begin with the conjunction “but”, which informs the reader of the opposite situation experienced by the bird in a cage:

> But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
> his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
> his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
> so he opens his throat to sing. (27-30)

The figurative imagery immediately evokes a dreadful moment; the caged bird has no longer dreams and, like the black man he embodies, he cannot but stand on their grave. It is worth noting that the tones are more distressing now, the “fearful trill” (16) of the third stanza has become the shout “on a nightmare scream” (28). The use of the word “shadow” reminds us of the concept of visibility and invisibility relating to slaves: a shadow is visible, yet it is not a person. Similarly, slaves were desubjectified, visible as far as their labor and sexual exploitation were concerned, and, at the same time, invisible as human beings.

The last lines, which take up again those of the second stanza, once more underline the restrictive conditions of the caged bird; hindered in his movements, with his wings clipped and his feet tied, the only thing he can do is to resort to the potent instrument he possesses:

> The caged bird sings
> with a fearful trill
> of things unknown
> but longed for still
> and his tune is heard

on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. (31-38; Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems* 194-95)

Angelou once said: “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you” (*Rainbow* 26). Black women had found in their voices that powerful force which allowed them to emerge from the abyss of subjugation and abuse. When their bodies were suffering, exploited or limited in movement, they realized that the only way toward healing was to voice their inner burden. That was the moment in which the unbearable weight transformed into a healing voice. In this respect, I cannot but return to Scarry’s theory about pain and language; although her analysis concerns physical suffering and the disintegration of language it entails, the recuperation of voice and its decisive role in expressing trauma has a similar effect to that which Scarry describes in this passage: “to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself” (11). For many African American women, writing poetry coincided with the rebirth of language.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

SLAVERY SECTION

Adamson, Christopher R. “Punishment after Slavery: Southern State Penal Systems, 1865-1890”. *Social Problems*, vol. 30, no. 5, 1983, pp. 555–569, https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.1983.30.5.03a00070.

Bankole, Katherine Medina. *Slavery and Medicine: Enslavement and Medical Practices in Antebellum Louisiana*. E-book, Routledge, 2017.

Blackmon, Douglas A. *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. E-book, Anchor Books, 2008.

Blassingame, John W. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

Breslaw, Elaine G. *Lotions, Potions, Pills, and Magic Health Care in Early America*. New York University Press, 2012.

Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will*: *Men, Women and Rape*. E-book, New York: Open Road Media, 2013.

Curtin, Mary Ellen. *Black Prisoners and Their World, Alabama, 1865-1900*. The University Press of Virginia, 2000.

Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race & Class*. E-book, Vintage Books, 1981.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *Some Notes on Negro Crime, Particularly in Georgia 1868-1963. Internet Archive*, Atlanta, Ga., Atlanta University Press, 1 Jan. 1970, archive.org/details/somenotesonnegro00dubo.

---. *The Gift of Black Folk & The Souls of Black Folk*. E-book, Wisehouse Classics, 2020.

Feimster, Crystal Nicole. *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

Genovese, Eugene D. *Roll, Jordan, Roll*: *The World the Slaves Made*. E-book, Vintage Books, 1976.

hooks, bell. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. E-book, New York: Routledge, 2015.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*. London: Penguin Books, 2000.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia, by Thomas Jefferson.* Richmond, 1853. https://lccn.loc.gov/01006564. Accessed 1 Oct. 2023.

Jones, Jacqueline. *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family, from Slavery to the Present*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.

LeFlouria, Talitha L. *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*. University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

---. "'Under the Sting of the Lash': Gendered Violence, Terror, and Resistance in the South's Convict Camps". *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 100, no. 3, 2015, pp. 366–384, https://doi.org/10.5323/jafriamerhist.100.3.0366.

Lerner, Gerda. *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*. Vintage Books, 1992.

Lomax, Tamura A. *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. E-book, Vintage Books, 2005.

Owens, Deirdre Cooper. *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*. University of Georgia Press, 2017.

Patton, Venetria K. *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000.

Roberts, Dorothy E. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. E-book, Vintage Books, 1997.

Savitt, Todd L. "The Use of Blacks for Medical Experimentation and Demonstration in the Old South". *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1982, p. 331-348, https://doi.org/10.2307/2207450.

---. *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth-and Early-Twentieth-Century America*. E-book, The Kent State University Press, 2007.

Vance, Reuben A. "Vesico-Vaginal Fistula - Digital Collections - National Library of Medicine". *U.S. National Library of Medicine*, National Institutes of Health, collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101730167-bk. Accessed 22 Oct. 2023.

Verghese, Abraham. *Cutting for Stone*. E-book, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

Wall, LL. "The Medical Ethics of Dr J Marion Sims: A Fresh Look at the Historical Record". *Journal of Medical Ethics*, vol. 32, no. 6, 2006, pp. 346–350, https://doi.org/10.1136/jme.2005.012559.

Wallace-Sanders, Kimberley. *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*. The University of Michigan Press, 2002.

Washington, Harriet A. *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*. E-book, Anchor Books, 2008.

White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. 2nd ed., e-book, W.W. Norton & Co, 1999.

TRAUMA SECTION

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, E-book, Stanford University Press, 1998.

Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkel, and Douglas Brick. "What Is Called Subject? A Note on Lacan's 'Linguistery'". *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1989, pp. 83–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26285926. Accessed 11 Dec. 2023.

Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.

---. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Davis, Angela. “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves”. *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 13, no. 1/2, 1972, pp. 81–100. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25088201. Accessed 20 Nov. 2023.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Volume I, an Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

---. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed., Vintage Books, 1995.

Griffiths, Jennifer L. *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women’s Writing and Performance*. University of Virginia Press, 2009.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Hine, Darlene Clark. “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West”. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1989, pp. 912–920, https://doi.org/10.1086/494552.

Mawani, Renisa. “From Slave Revolts to Social Death”. Theory and Society, vol. 48, no. 6, 2019, pp. 835–49. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/45284476. Accessed 18 Jan. 2024.

Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death*. Harvard University Press, 1982.

Pokorak, Jeffrey J. “Rape as a Badge of Slavery: The Legal History of, and Remedies for, Prosecutorial Race-of-Victim Charging Disparities”. Nevada Law Journal, vol. 7:1, 2006, pp. 1-54, scholars.law.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1418&context=nlj. Accessed 3 Jan. 2024.

Price, Janet and Margrit Shildrick. *Feminist Theory and the Body*. Edinburgh University Press, 1999.

Scacchi, Anna. “Black Bodies in Pain”. *Slavery, Memory and Literature,* vol. 2 of *A Comparative Literary History of Modern Slavery, eds.* Mads Anders Baggesgaard, Madeleine Dobie and Karen-Margrethe Simonsen, John Benjamins (forthcoming).

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

Shusterman, Richard. “Soma and Psyche”. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2010, pp. 205-23, https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.24.3.0205. Accessed 1 Dec. 2023.

Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Penguin Random House, 2019.

Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”. *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 64-81, https://doi.org/10.2307/464747.

Weheliye, A. G. “Pornotropes”. *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2008, pp. 65-81, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412907087202. Accessed 24 Dec. 2023.

West, Traci C. *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*. New York University Press, 1999.

Yellin, Jean Fagan. *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. Basic Civitas Books, 2004.

Ziarek, Ewa Płonowska. "Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender". *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 107, no. 1, 2008, pp. 89-105.

POETRY SECTION

Angelou, Maya. *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*. New York: Random House, 1994.

---. *Rainbow in the Cloud: The Wisdom and Spirit of Maya Angelou*. E-book, New York: Random House, 2014.

Bennett, Michael, and Vanessa D. Dickerson. *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*. Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Bloom, Harold. *American Women Poets*. New Edition, New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2011.

Campbell, Neil, and Alasdair Kean. *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Clifton, Lucille, et al. *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton, 1965-2010*, edited by Kevin Young and Michael S. Glaser, New York: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2012.

---. *Generations*: *A Memoir*. E-book, New York Review Books Classic, 2021.

Evans, Mari. *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): a Critical Evaluation*. New York: Anchor Press, 1984.

Holladay, Hilary. *Wild Blessings: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton*. LSU Press, 2004.

hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Lorde, Audre. *The Audre Lorde Compendium: Essays, Speeches and Journals*. London: HarperCollins, 1996.

---. *I Am Your Sister: Collected and Unpublished Writings of Audre Lorde*, edited by Rudolph P. Byrd et al., Oxford University Press, 2009.

---. *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*, edited by Roxane Gay, e-book, W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.

Lupton, Mary Jane. *Lucille Clifton: Her Life and Letters*. Praeger, 2006.

Moyers, Bill. "Interview on 'at the Cemetery, Walnut Grove Plantation, South Carolina, 1989'". *The Language of Life: A festival of Poets*, edited by James Haba, New York: Doubleday, 1995. *Modern American Poetry*, https://modernamericanpoetry.org/index.php/bill-moyers-interview-cemetery-walnut-grove-plantation-south-carolina-1989. Accessed 25 Jan. 2024.

Rowell, Charles H., and Lucille Clifton. "An Interview with Lucille Clifton." *Callaloo*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1999, pp. 56–72, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299938. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

The Holy See, "The New American Bible", 2002, www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/__PS9.HTM. Accessed 17 Feb. 2024.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Elisa Bordin for being my invaluable mentor in this final step of my academic path. I owe to her the inspiration for the topic of my thesis and the consequent exploration of such a fascinating field. I will always treasure her great kindness and professionality.

I am also extremely grateful to Professor Filomena Mitrano for being my assistant supervisor. Her immense cultural knowledge, her stimulating teaching approach and the dedication she has for her work are a model for me. I would also like to extend my thanks to the whole academic team of American Studies, Professor Dowling, Professor Masiero, and Professor Francescato, for their preparation and for helping me to expand my knowledge.

My special thanks go to Lorna, her support and patience have been priceless. I am deeply grateful to my uncles for the financial support they gave to me, because without it my project would have remained just a dream. This dissertation is dedicated to them. I sincerely thank my mother and father for believing in me and accompanying me on this journey. My deepest thoughts and gratitude go to my brother Giorgio and my sister Lauretta who inspired me. How could I not mention all my friends, old and new, near and far, who have encouraged me during these years of intense study.

Lastly, my heartfelt gratitude turns to my Beloved Amma, without Her grace and blessing, my efforts would be vain.