Black, White, and in Color

ESSAYS ON
AMERICAN LITERATURE
AND CULTURE

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travel from one generation of kinswomen to another, not unlike love and luck, or money and real estate. Just so, the elders pass on their voice, their tongue, their language, and it might even surprise us that they said the same words, or none at all, in the vaunted coltal embrace, or the celebrated post- orgasmic fall-out. Every child in us dreams, we might suppose, of knowing just what “they” said and did in “there” and do they still?

At any rate, sexuality is the locus of great drama—perhaps the fundamental one—and, as we know, wherever there are actors, there are scripts, scenes, gestures, and reenactments, both enunciated and tacit. Across the terrain of feminist thought, the drama of sexuality is a dialectic with at least one missing configuration of terms. Whatever my mother, niece, and I might say and do about our sexuality (the terms of kinship are also meant collectively) remains an unarticulated nuance in various forms of public discourse as though we were figments of the great invisible empire of womankind. In a very real sense, black American women remain invisible to various public discourse, and the state of invisibility for them has its precedent in an analogy on any patriarchal symbolic mode that we might wish to name. However we try not to call up men in this discussion, we know full well, whether we like it or not, that these “they” do constitute an element of woman-scenery. For instance, in my attempt to lay hold of nonfictional texts—of any discursively rendered experience concerning the sexuality of black women in the United States, authored by themselves, for themselves—I encountered a disturbing silence that acquires, paradoxically, the status of contradiction. With the virtually sole exception of Calvin Horton’s Sex and Racism in America and less than a handful of very recent texts by black feminist and lesbian writers, black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb. Their sexual experiences are depicted, but not often by them, and if and when by the subject herself, often in the guise of vocal music, often in the self-contained accent and sheer romance of the blues.

My survey, however, is mostly limited to some of the nonfictional texts on sexuality because I wish to examine those rhetorical features of an intellectual/symbolic structure of ideas that purport to describe, illuminate, reveal, and valorize the truth about its subject. Fictional texts, which transport us to another world of symbols altogether, are much beyond the scope of this essay and the central tenets of its argument. The nonfictional feminist work along a range of issues is the privileged mode of feminist expression at the moment, and its chief practitioners and revisionists are Anglo-American women/feminists in the academy. The relative absence of African-American women/feminists, in and out of the academic commu-
nity, from this visionary company, is itself an example of the radically divergent historical situations that intersect with feminism. Such absence quite deliberately constitutes the hidden and implicit critique of this essay. The nonfictional feminist text is, to my mind, the empowered text—not fiction—and I would know how power works in the guise of feminist exposition when "sexuality" is its theme. If African-American women's community is relatively "word-poor" in the critical/argumentative displays of symbolic power, then the silence surrounding their sexuality is most evident in the structure of values I am tracing. It is, then, ironical that some of the words that tend to break silence here are, for whatever their purpose, male-authored.

Hernton's Sex and Racism in America proposes to examine the psychological make-up of America's great sexual quartet—the black female, the black male, the white female, the white male—and the historical contexts in which these overlapping complexities work. Each of his chapters provides a study of collective aspects of psyche as Hernton seeks insight into the deep structure of sexual fantasies that operate at the subterranean level of reception. The chapter on the black female interlards anonymous personal witness with the author's historical survey of the black female's social and political situation in the United States. We might call Hernton's text a dialectical/discursive analysis of the question and compare it with words from aspects of oral tradition.

As an example of a spate of discourse that portrays black women as sexual agents, we turn to the world of "toasts," or the extended and elaborate male oratorical display under the ruse of ballad verse. This form of oral narrative projects a female figure most usually poised in an antipathetic, customarily unflattering, sexual relationship to the male. These long oral narratives, which black men often learn in their youth and commit to memory, vary from place to place and time to time, describing contests of male sexual performance. Several versions of "The Titanic," for instance, project a leading character named "Shine" as the great race/sex man, who not only escapes from the ill-fated maiden voyage of the celebrated ship, but also ends up in a Harlem nightclub, after the disaster, drinking Seagram's Seven and boasting his exploits. Within this community of male-authored texts, the female is appropriately grotesque, tendentiously heterosexual, and comparable in verbal prowess to the male, whom she must sexually best in the paradigmatic battle of the ages—that between the sexes. Relevant to the hyperbolic tall tale, comedian Rudy Moore's version of the battle of the sexes depicts evenly matched opponents, with the world "making book" on one side of the contest or the other. The agents literally "screw" for days in language far bolder than mine. But we already know beforehand, according to the wisdom of Chaucer's Wife of Bath, the outcome of the tale that the lion did not write. The woman in the "toasts" is properly subdued, or, more exactly in the latter-day versions of phallic dominance, "tooled" into oblivion.

So, here are two textual instances—Hernton's sympathetic account of the black female and the subject from the point of view of the people's oral poetry. Both instances insinuate quite different, though gratuitously related, versions of female sexuality. The correspondences are crucial. In the world of "toasts," "roasts," and "boasts," in the universe of unreality and exaggeration, the black female is, if anything, a creature of sex, but sexuality touches her nowhere. In the universe of "clean" discourse and muted analysis, to which we relegate Hernton's book, the black woman is reified into a status of non-being. In any comparison with white women in the sexual fantasies of black men, black women funk—in truth, they barely register as fantastic representability—because of the ravages of the "Peculiar Institution." The latter was not the ideal workshop for refining the feminine sensibilities, Hernton argued. We infer from his reading that the black woman disappears as a legitimate subject of female sexuality. In all fairness to Hernton, however, we are obligated to point out his own acknowledgment of the silence that has been imposed on black American women: "Out of the dark annals of man's inhumanity to woman, the epic of the black woman's ordeal in America is yet to be written. . . But the change is just beginning, and the beginning is fraught with hazards."5

My own interpretation of the historical narrative concerning the lives of black American women accords with Hernton's: Their enslavement relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome. Slavery did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality at all, as the myth of the black woman would tend to convince us, nor, alone, the primary receptacle of a highly profitable generative act. She became instead the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and "other." At this level of radical discontinuity in the "great chain of being," black is vestigial to culture. In other words, the black person mirrored for the society around her what a human being was not. Through this stage of the bestial, the act of copulating travels eons before culture incorporates it, before the concept of sexuality can reclaim and "humanize" it. Neither the picture I am draw-
ing here, nor its symbolic interpretation, is unheard of to our understanding of American and New World history. If, however, it is a stunning idea in its ritual repetition, nonetheless, then that is because the black female remains exotic, her history transformed into a pathology turned back on the subject in tenacious blindness.

That this unthinkably vast and criminal fraud created its own contradictions and evasions within the creting brain ultimately does not concern us. The point is that neither we, nor Herston, can easily approach the subtleties of a descriptive apparatus that would adequately account for the nexus dis-effect in this case between female gender and color. The rift translates into unthinkable acts, unspeakable practices. I am not identifying here the black female as the focal point of cultural and political inferiority. I do not mean to pose the black female as an object of the primitive, uxoricidal nightmares, or interrupted nocturnal emissions (elevated to the status of form) as in a Henry Miller or Norman Mailer. The structure of unreality that the black woman must confront originates in the historical moment when language ceases to speak, the historical moment at which hierarchies of power (even the ones to which some women belong) simply run out of terms because the empowered meets in the black female the veritable nemesis of degree and difference. Having encountered what they understand as chaos, the empowered need not name further, since chaos is sufficient naming within itself. I am not addressing the black female in her historical apprenticeship as an inferior social subject, but, rather, the paradox of non-being. Under the sign of this particular historical order, black female and black male are absolutely equal. We note with quiet dismay, for instance, the descriptive language of affirmative-action advertisements, or even certain feminist analyses, and sense once again the historical evocation of chaos: The collective and individual “I” lapses into a cul-de-sac, falls into the great black hole of meaning, wherein there are only “women,” and “minorities,” “blacks” and “other.”

I wish to suggest that the lexical gaps I am describing here are manifest along a range of symbolic behavior in reference to black women and that the absence of sexuality as a structure of distinguishing terms is solidly grounded in the negative aspects of symbol-making. The latter, in turn, are wed to the abuses and uses of history, and how it is perceived. The missing word—the interstice—both as that which allows us to speak about and that which enables us to speak at all—shakes, in this case, a common border with another country of symbols—the iconographic. Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party, for example, in the artist’s tribute to women, had a place set at table for the black female. Sojourner Truth is their representative symbol, and as the female figures around Truth are imagined through ingenious variations on the vagina, Truth’s representation is inscribed by three faces. As Alice Walker comments: “There is of course a case to be made for being ‘personified’ by a face rather than by a vagina, but that is not what this show [was] about.”

The point of the example is self-evident. The excision of the female genitalia here is a symbolic castration. By effacing the genitals, Chicago not only abrogates the disturbing sexuality of her subject, but might well suggest that her sexual being did not exist to be denied in the first place. Truth’s “femaleness,” then, sustains an element of drag. In fact, she is merged here with a notion of sexual neutrality whose features, because they have not been defined, yet could assume any form, or none at all—in either case, the absence of articulation. Ironically, Sojourner Truth’s piercing, rhetorical, now-reputed question on the floor of the second annual Convention of Women’s Rights in Akron, 1852—“Ain’t I a woman?”—anticipates the “atmosphere” of the artist’s deepest assumptions. The displacement of a vagina by a face invites protracted psychological inquiry; but it is enough to guess, almost too much to bear guessing, that if Sojourner, in the female artist’s mind, does not have the necessary female equipment, then its absence might be expressed in a face whose orifices are still searching for a proper role in relationship to the female body.

While there are numerous references to the black woman in the universe of signs, many of them perverted, the prerogatives of sexuality are refused her because the concept of sexuality originates in, stays with, the dominant mode of culture and its elaborate strategies of thought and expression. As a substitute term for “race” and “racism,” I would borrow Edward Said’s “dominative mode” because the latter, not unlike “patriarchy,” moves us closer to the heart of the matter. We would discover the ways and means of power in its intellectual and contemplative fulfillment—those places where most of us do not think to look because the intellectual enterprise, the lie goes, is so “objective” and so “disinterested” that it has little to do with what impresses the brain and the heart, to say nothing of what the legs straddle. If we are “intellectualizing” the issue away, which feminists used to say we ought not do, yet, interestingly enough, have done most of the time, then we mean to “intellectualize” exactly, since questions about woman-sex and the practices of exclusion that demarcate it are among the more impressive intellectual stunts of our time.

We would argue that sexuality as a term of power belongs to the empowered. Feminist thinking often appropriates the term in its own will to discursive power in a sweeping, patriarchist, symbolic gesture that reduces
the human universe of women to its own image. The process might be understood as a kind of deadly metonymic playfulness—a part of the universe of women speaks for the whole of it. The structure of values, the spectacle of symbols under which we presently live and have our being—in short, the theme of domination and subordination—is practiced, even pursued, in many of the leading feminist documents of scholarship this past decade or so. We may affiliate sexuality, then—that term that flirts with the concealment of the activity of sex by way of an exquisite dance of textual priorities and successions, revisions and corrections—with the very project and destiny of power.

Through the institutionalization of sexual reference in the academy, in certain public forums; in the extensive responses to Freud and Lacan; in the eloquent textual discontinuities with the Marquis de Sade and D. H. Lawrence, sexual meaning in the feminist universe of academic discourse threatens to lose its living and palpable connection to training in the feelings and to become, rather, a mode of heater for the dominating mythologies. The discourse of sexuality seems another way, in its present practices, that the world divides decisively between the haves/have-nots, those who may speak and those who may not, those who, by choice or the accident of birth, benefit from the dommative mode, and those who do not. Sexuality describes another type of discourse that splits the world between the “West and the Rest of Us.”

Black American women in the public/critical discourse of feminist thought have no acknowledged sexuality because they enter the historical stage from quite another angle of entrance from that of Anglo-American women. Even though my remarks are addressed specifically to feminists, I do not doubt that the different historical occasions implicated here have dictated sharp patterns of divergence not only in living styles but also in ways of speaking between black and white American women, without modification. We must have refinement in the picture at the same time that we recognize that history has divided the empire of women against itself. As a result, black American women project in their thinking about the female circumstance and their own discourse concerning it an apparently divergent view from feminist thinking on the issues. I am not comfortable with the “black-woman/feminist” opposition that this argument apparently cannot avoid. I am also not cheered by what seems a little noticed elision of meaning—when we say “feminist” without an adjective in front of it, we mean, of course, white women, who, as a category of social and cultural agents, fully occupy the territory of feminism. Other communities of women, overlapping feminist aims, are noted, therefore, by some qualify-

ing term. Alice Walker’s “Coming Apart” addresses this linguistic and cultural issue forthrightly and proposes the term “womanist” for black women and as a way to dissolve these apparently unavoidable locutions. The disparities that we observe in this case are symptomatic of the problem and are a part of the problem. Because black American women do not participate, as a category of social and cultural agents, in the legacies of symbolic power, they maintain no allegiances to a strategic formation of texts, or ways of talking about sexual experience, that even remotely resemble the paradigm of symbolic domination, except that such paradigm has been their concrete disaster.

We hope to show in time how African-American women’s peculiar American encounter, in the specific symbolic formation we mean, differs in both degree and kind from Anglo-American women’s. We should not be at all surprised that difference among women is the case, but I am suggesting that in order to anticipate a more definitive social criticism, feminist thinkers, whom African-American women must confront in greater number on the issues, must begin to take on the dialectical challenge of determining in the discourse the actual realities of American women in their pluralistic ways of being. By “actual,” I do not intend to mean, or even deny, some superior truth about life outside books, but, rather, to say that feminist discourse can risk greater truth by examining its profoundest symbolic assumptions, by inquiring into the herstory of American women with a sharpened integrity of thought and feeling. We are, after all, talking about words, as we realize that by their efficacy we are damned or saved. Furthermore, by talking about words as we have seen them marshaled in the discussion, we hope to provide more clues to the duplicitous involvement of much of feminist thinking in the mythological fortunes (words and images) of patriarchal power. By doing so, I believe that we understand more completely the seductive means of power at whatever point it involves women.

While my analysis here is focused primarily on Shulamith Firestone’s *Dialectic of Sex*, one of the earlier documents of the contemporary women’s movement, I should point out that the kind of silence and exclusion I am describing is by no means limited to any one particular text. Firestone’s work serves a vivid analytical purpose because its “narrative voice,” to my mind, replicates the basic flaws of the patriarchal word-game in its unrelenting “objectification” of women and men of color. Firestone addresses black women’s issues in a single chapter, and everywhere else in the book, “woman”—a universal and unmodified noun—does not mean them. “Woman/women” belong to that cluster of nominatives that includes
"feminist," "lesbian," even "man," that purport to define the essence of what they name, and such essence is inherently paradigmatic, or the standard from which deviation and variation are measured. As simple and familiar as the point is, the symbolic behavior is not often checked in our various discourses. An anthropology of women's language would perhaps reveal the conditions in time and space that generate the colonization of words. I do not think that I exaggerate when claiming that there are few exceptions to this general linguistic rule. The exceptions are, of course, dramatic in their isolation: two examples—Adrienne Rich's "Disloyal to Civilization," with its solid reliance on an enlightened feminist critique, and Catharine A. MacKinnon's "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State." MacKinnon's attempt to understand her own appropriation of "woman" in her essay invites pause:

Throughout this essay, I have tried to see if women's condition is shared, even when contexts and magnitudes differ... I aspire to include all women in the term "women" in some way, without violating the particularity of any woman's experience. Whenever this fails, the statement is simply wrong and will have to be qualified or the aspiration (or the theory) abandoned. (6, n. 7)

Neither of these essays focuses on the theme of sexuality, but I make use of them in order to point, by inference, to a particular terministic program whose doggedness is symptomatic of the very problems of power and its arrangements that feminists of all descriptions say they would correct.

Besides Firestone's, many of the other premier texts on the entangling issues of female sexuality argue the black woman's case by negation; looking at some examples, we see the following: Kate Millett's early classic, Sexual Politics, conflates the black woman under the heading of "blacks," and Susan Brownmiller's Against Our Will is so intent on pursuing the black-man-as-rapist theme that her notes on black women's sexual experience, static and reified in "Two Studies in American History: Slavery," strike the reader as rather perverse and exotic exercise. Stimpson and Person's Women: Sex and Sexuality is an elegant metonymic elaboration in its range of inquiry that converges on the theme of sexuality and without any particular nuance or articulation that sounds black female sexual experience.

The works of Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, and Mary Daly overlap questions of sexuality in drawing out other feminist interrogation, but that we read these texts—and might include along with them an impressive number of gynocritical works in women's literature—as though their emblems, their figures of thought, the purposes and motivations that precede and accompany their execution, the living conditions out of which their search comes and the shape it takes all speak monolithically of women—reminds me of the period of symbolic oppression we believe we're leaving. The assumptions of existent power (or gestures toward it) and the ways in which we are governed by them occur in such rapid sequence that we observe no apparent break or discontinuity in the patterns of succession; in short, this undifferentiated spatial progression of texts is experienced as an "environment" whose air we quit "naturally" breathe. I make no attempt here to be definitive in these bibliographical notes and queries, since the library of books on women concerning various aspects of experience profligates with nearly incalculable rapidity, it seems. But the texts I have read point to a center of gravity, a tendency of the field toward a certain word-behavior. It is that apparent centrality that I address here.

A Dialectic of Sex has a noble purpose—to propose a program for the liberation of women from the tyranny of reproductive biology. The "master" and precursor texts to which Firestone directly speaks include Marx's. In fact, we could say that A Dialectic is a postmodernist and feminist invocation to the Marxist canon in its pursuit of a solidly materialist theme—the site of the child and who will tend it: and what caretaking might mean to woman-freedom. To my mind, however, Firestone's chapter on the black female in this projected configuration of social change is not only stridently critical of the Black Nationalist Movement (the only place the book situates black women), but also incredibly ominous in its pronouncements on black women's past and future. A patriarch is not speaking, we have every reason to suppose, but there it is, hushed in under the skirts of Mama in the chapter, "Racism: The Sexism of the Family of Man." In this account, black and white American women are locked in a deadly familial struggle in the House of the White Father. With fathers and sons, they engage in a ferocious Oedipal/Electra contest to the death. Is this writer doing comedy here, or have we misread her text? The object of All-love is, of course the white mom-dad duo, and the children—black female and black male—share their first "sympathetic identification" with the white mother.

This titillating riff on Freud calibrates through more thematic layers of American myth-making sleight-of-hand than one has the goodwill to endure, but what strikes this reader most forcefully about Firestone's overlapping typologies is the narcissistic arrogance of the creating feminist narrator so persistently and ingenuously deployed that the parental possibility does not even exist for her black characters, is not even imaginable. These children—black female and male—spring into being, into time, the spontaneous gagline of an obscene national joke, at best its ambiguous by-
blow, spawned in some Harlem estaminet. 19 Since the line of legitimate descent that Firestone is sketching here can be generated only by virtue of a real domestic pair (which black mothers and fathers most certainly are not), then these children are dirty little bastards, who manage, somehow, to grow up. When we finally discover a black female character on the ruins of this cultural debris, she is nothing other than bastard daughter, turned "whore," who belongs to a "pimp," the black bastard's only possible legacy. By 1970, however, Firestone's black whore is on her way to another and more creditable transformation—"Reverend-Black-Queen-Mother-of-my-Children"—in one of the most disdainfully sustained readings of the U.S. Black Nationalist Movement that I've seen.

To Firestone, the Movement was not only the last picture show of phallic domination, but also an ineffective imitation of it. In short, black Americans in this chapter have no human right to aspire to the nuclear family, political and economic freedom, or any of the affective postures since they can only ape WASPs in doing so. Firestone goes on to tell us that the Movement's attempt at revision and correction of the historic identity of the black woman that she is imagining is not really possible since its success is based on fantasy:

For as long as the white man is still in power, he has the privilege to define the black community as he chooses—they are dependent on him for their very survival—and the psychosexual consequences of this inferior definition must continue to operate. Thus the concept of the Dignified Black Family rarely penetrates beyond the circles of the copycat Bourgeoisie or the True Believer Revolutionaries.20

Of course the Black Revolutionary in this book—female and male—is not a serious person, but only a parody.

Backing up a moment, we see that the black family in the United States is a recent invention of the late twentieth century: "Attempts are now being made to institute the family in the black community from Whorehouse for the White Family to Black Family."21 For those of us across the country who grew up in black families, observations like Firestone's are simply astonishing. Some of the readers with whom I have shared this paper have complained that my remarks are based on a book that is by now "old" and that the women's movement has gone well beyond Firestone's opinions. But is that true? The criticism is to say, of course, that there is Progress and that feminists have "gotten their act together" on the question of race, but the complaint about the lament is itself negligible because it would suggest that we are not always properly attuned to the deep chords of deception that

sound through the language and the structures of thought in which it fixes us. The version of anomie that Firestone is fabricating in this chapter stretches back through the last five hundred years of human history, and it is hardly my fault that the jaundice is still with us.

Perhaps the genuine culprit here is the "Family," and Firestone is warning her reader against its entrapments, but it is difficult to tell whether we are in the midst of an ironical display, or being forced to reengage an altogether--familiar configuration of violently imposed meanings. At any rate, Firestone manages, by a complicated series of grammatical maneuvers and with enviable journalistic verve, to convince the whole structure of dominating symbolic moves as it operates against the minority others. The values, the emblems, the modes of perception, their patterns of discourse, and quasi-religious feelings that choreograph male and female, black and white not only into a Manichean frieze, but also, consequently, out of history, are so brazenly deployed in Firestone's drama that with feminist interpretations like this, who in the world needs patriarchs? It is clear: If the Anglo-American father (and by genetic association his woman) is God, then he is also the Devil, which status would assign his household the customary omnipotence that must be a lie. If Firestone is urging us in this discussion to introduce God-terms in their hint of first and last things, of the elected and the damned, then we are no longer in this world. We have slipped and slid, shuffled, bucked and winged into Paradise. I would go so far as to say that Firestone reconstitutes the white female as the "gynelatrous"22 object of desire, who willingly trades her body for a little piece of the patriarchal soul. In short, Firestone's "Family of Man" is a mysterious essence, drooping down from an ahistorical source, and I am not at all so sure that the reading is ambiguously intended.

A displacement of this psychosexual drama into history would attempt, first of all, a dismantling of the God-terms. For example, "as long as the white man [read white person] is still in power, he has the privilege to define the black community as he chooses" proffers a dose of "necessity" that we might as well refuse, since it gives the white male unlimited power. The fact of domination is alterable only to the extent that the dominated subject recognizes the potential power of its own "double-consciousness."23 The subject is certainly seen, but she also sees. It is this return of the gaze that negotiates at every point a space for living, and it is the latter that we must willingly name the counter-power, the counter-mythology.

Firestone, however, is so busy making a case against the patriarchal bogey-man, so passionate in gathering allies against him, and so intent on throwing out the bath water of the nuclear family, babies and all, that she
actually reinforces the very notions of victimization that she claims she would undo, and in overstating, misstating the black female "condition," assumes herself the negating posture that will liberate neither black nor white female into the possibilities of her own history. Once the agents are replaced onto a material/historical scene, wherein they recover their collective and individual and differentiated human status, then we can initiate discourse about power in its human and negotiable limit. We do not recognize human agency in Firestone's face. In fact, one entire group of characters drops out of sight. Dangled by her "pimp," handled by White Daddy, who gets to fondle everybody, held in contempt by White Mother, and uncreated, unimagined, in an existential reality by a biological mother and father, whom she in turn cannot now recreate, Firestone's black woman can only throw the reflections of an imposed pathology.

We know how myths work—through the impoverishment of history—and Firestone's chapter is, for the black woman, an exemplary killing myth. In this account, she is not touched by sexuality either, as we have seen in the toasts, in Calvin Hernton's text, in Judy Chicago's imagistic absences, and in the endless and other-named trances of epistemic violence on which bases Firestone's work is erected.

The black-female-as-whore forms an iconographic equation with black-female-vagina-less, but in different clothes, we might say. From the point of view of the dominant mythology, it seems that sexual experience among black people (or sex between black and any other) is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning and becomes, quite simply, a medium in which the individual is suspended. From this angle, the act of sex has no occasional moments of inauguration, transition, and termination; it does not belong to human and social process, embedded in time, pledged to time and to notions of mortality. It is, on the contrary, a state, of vicious, routinized entanglement, whose passions are pure, direct, and untrammeled by consciousness. Under these conditions of seeing, we lose all nuance, subjects are divested of their names, and, oddly enough, the female has so much sexual potential that she has none at all that anybody is ready and able to recognize at the level of culture. Thus, the unsexed black female and the supersexed black female embody the very same vice, cast the very same shadow, since both are an exaggeration of the uses to which sex might be put.

Michel Foucault argues that the whore in European history was a marker of banishment, that point at which institutional Europe in the eighteenth century fixed its sundry perversions, as the latter will reenter the mainstream culture under the rule of psychiatric medicine. According to him, European bourgeois culture and the career of sexuality are linked by the newly empowered as a way to assure their dominance. Those outside the circle of culture, i.e., the whore, the pimp, were robbed of legitimate sexual being and, to that degree, defined the point of passage between inner and outer; the brothel, for instance, became an "insularized form of reality," a place were sex reigned unimpeached. Consequently, the banished place and the banished person acquire an element of secrecy, and discourse about them is circumscribed and coded. The black African female, whether whore or asexed, serves an analogous function for the symbolically empowered on the American scene in fixing the frontier of "woman" with her own being. If life as the black person—female or male—leads it is the imagined site of an illegitimate sexuality, then it is also, paradoxically enough, the affirmation of asexuality. ("Sidney Poitier," an idea that might be appropriated by female gender in this case, never gets to kiss the bride, we remember, in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?") The fiction of this symbolic act does not impress us with its awful tenacity nearly so much as when we witness its repetitions under feminist auspices.

To find another and truer sexual self-image the black woman must turn to the domain of music and America's black female vocalists, who suggest a composite figure of ironical grace. The singer is likely closer to the poetry of black female sexual experience than we might think, not so much, interestingly enough, in the words of her music, but in the sense of dramatic confrontation between ego and world that the vocalist herself embodies. We must be careful here not to romanticize the singer, with her sometimes unlovely self-destructive life, as a late reading of the content of Sojourner's life turns it into an idea that Truth itself would probably not recognize. I do not intend to take the vocalist out of history, but to try and see her firmly within it.

The Burkean pentad of fiction—agent, agency, act, scene, and purpose as the principal elements involved in the human drama—is compressed in the singer into a living body, insinuating itself through a material scene, and in that dance of motives, in which the motor behavior, the changes of countenance, the vocal dynamics, the calibration of gesture and nuance in relationship to a formal object—the song itself—is a precise demonstration of the subject turning in fully conscious knowledge of her own resources toward her object. In this instance of being-for-self, it does not matter that the vocalist is "entertaining" under American skies because the woman, in her particular and vivid thereness, is an unalterable and discrete moment of self-knowledge. The singer is a good example of "double consciousness" in action. We lay hold of a metaphor of commanding fe-
male sexuality with the singer who celebrates, chides, embraces, inquires into, controls her womanhood through the eloquence of form that she both makes use of and brings into being. Black women have learned as much (probably more) that is positive about their sexuality through the practicing singer as they have from the polemicist; Bessie Smith, for instance,

in a deliberate inversion of the Punitism of the Protestant ethic ... articulated, as clearly as anyone before or since, how fundamental sexuality was to survival. Where work was often death to us, sex brought us back to life. It was better than food, and sometimes a necessary substitute.

With her, Black women in American culture could no longer just be regarded as sexual objects. She made us sexual subjects, the first step in taking control. She transformed our collective shame at being rape victims, treated like dogs, or worse, the meat dogs eat, by emphasizing the value of our allure. In so doing, she humanized sexuality for black women.27

My aim in quoting Michele Russell’s valorization of the singer is to trace her proposal that the dancing voice embodied is the chief teaching model for black women of what their femininity might consist in and to highlight Russell’s discussion of the project implied in some of the Smith discography.

The attention that the vocalist pays to building a relationship of equality in the woman’s own house with her male lovers is quite explicit in “Get It, Bring It, and Put It Right Here”:

He’s got to get it, bring it, and put it right here
Or else he’s gonna keep it out there.
He can steal it, beg it, borrow it somewhere,
Long as he gets it, chile, I don’t care.28

We can perform various exegeses on this text, for example, the modulations through which the singer runs “it” so that the ambiguity of phrasing becomes a point of humor. To that extent, hyperbolic phallic status is restored to quite normal size, and the man himself inverted in the display as the dispenser of gifts. Whatever we might ultimately think of the message of Smith’s inversions and its quite explicit heterosexual leanings, as in most of the discography of black female vocalists, we are interested in the singer’s attitude toward her material, her audience, and, ultimately, her own egostanding in the world as it is interpreted through form. If we can draw out the emphasis on the female vocalist’s art, rather than her biographies, then we gather from the singer that power and control maintain an ontological edge. Whatever luck or misfortune the Player has dealt to her, she is, in the moment of performance, the primary subject of her own invention. Her sexuality is precisely the physical expression of the highest self-regard and, often, the sheer pleasure she takes in her own powers.

The difference and distance between the way black women are seen in their sexual experience and the way that they see themselves are considerable, as Russell’s notes on blues tradition attest. We would argue that the black female’s sexuality in feminist and patriarchist discourse is paradigmatic of her status in the universe of symbol-making so that our grasp of one complements clarity in the other: The words that would make her the subject of sexual inquiry are analogous to the enabling postulates that would give her the right action in history. To state the problem metaphorically, the black woman must translate the female vocalist’s gestures into an opposite structure of terms that will articulate both her kinship to other women and the particular nuances of her own experience.

It is perhaps not useless to repeat an observation that we made earlier in different terms: feminist discourse over the last decade or so has obtained a logological disposition, or words that talk about other words,29 in a response to prior texts—male- and female-authored. A Dialectic of Sex and Dorothy Dinnerstein’s Mermaid and Minotaur, for instance, are as much a reading on Freud and/or Marx as they are an attempt to establish women at the center of the theoretical enterprise. Firestone’s text is in fact enabled by the predecessor texts so that her book and Engels’s Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State, as a specific precedent, share a category of alignment that establishes a perspective between prior statements and counter and successive statements.30 That the feminist writer challenges certain symbolic formations of the past in correcting and revising them does not destroy the previous authority, but extends its possibilities. By reopening the lines of a prior closure, feminist writers at once define a new position of attack and lay claim to a site of ancestral imperative. Do feminist revisionary acts, as a result, become futile? This question that a reader put to me about the last few sentences could not possibly have “yes” for an answer. My point is that the analytical discourse that feminists engage in different ways and for different reasons must not only keep vigil over its procedures, but must also know its hidden and impermissible origins. I am remembering a folk-say from my childhood, and to introduce it seems relevant to what I am driving at: “Mama’s baby, papa’s maybe.” In other words, to know the seductions of the father and who, in fact, the father is might also help the subject to know wherein she occasionally speaks when she is least suspecting.
Whether we are talking about sexuality, or some other theme, we would identify this process of categorical aligning with prior acts of the text as the subtle component of power that bas black women, indeed, women of color, as a proper subject of inquiry from the various topics of contemporary feminist discourse. Such exclusion is neither deliberate, perhaps, nor inevitable, for sure, but moves through phases of symbolic value that conform precisely to equations of political power: the first order of symbolic "business" within a community is the articulation of what we would call a first-order naming, words that express the experience of a community in diachronic time, in daily social relationships, in economic well-being, in subject identity. A second order of naming, or words about the first order, would articulate another level of symbolic responses. I would be careful not to say a "higher," but "another" in order to get at differences of function. The literature (and the range of the arts) of African-Americans and the criticism of it, for example, constitute a second and third order of naming, with the potential power to become a first order, to the extent that the community and the artist sustain a mutual engagement that might lead to seeing anew in both. Since the content concerning the actual life experiences of black women is barely articulated, to say nothing of exhausted, we are in the incredible position of having either to create a first-order discourse on black women's community and/or speak to and from it. The interviews took place during the mid-seventies and in an unidentified urban community of the northeastern United States. Some of the models for the work might have been reminiscence narratives of the people of the formerly enslaved and Studs Terkel's Working. Gwaltney's text, however, is an attempt to represent the coeval patterns of thinking among African-Americans—those without particular intellectual bias, specified allegiance, or academic and institutional connection of any sort. In other words, Gwaltney's interviewees are just "dying and growing," the ordinary people of the family and what they think about money, love, sex, white folk, war, the presidency, pollution, the economy, the future of human society.

The women that Gwaltney interviewed in the "Sex and Work" chapter express what I would call a first-order naming concerning their sexual reality. I would call their words first-order because they speak "naturally," in which case words seem to come off the human tongue and need not be referred back to a dictionary in order to be understood. The impression that Gwaltney manages to convey is that he has entered these lives noiselessly and the lives have gone on, as if he were not there, and with the conversations that the actors were having when he arrived. To say that the book makes us comfortable, gives us feelings of coziness and charm is not to speak pejoratively, but to describe what we mean by first-order naming here; that the speaking is written makes the conversations a naming since we talk all the time, and most of it is not naming, has no significance or record beyond the transitory business of our daily lives. The trick, though, to reading these intriguing witnesses is that, first of all, they are a translation through the medium of a male voice. I personally trust Gwaltney's pro-
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ject and its outcome since I think I know what some black Americans think sometimes about some things. At the same time, I realize that the reader has no way of knowing under what constraints and mandates the women felt compelled to speak, nor whether they reported the truth of their feelings to the interviewer. Second, the women interviewed are not academically affiliated, and while their status does not disqualify them from having an opinion about anything, the cast of their views is not consonant with the arguments I am pursuing here, nor to the discourse of sexuality as we engage it in and out of books; I must observe, then, a disparity of interests which this essay has already anticipated, and I do not quite know where to fit these women's words about their bodies, or the status of their report. We proceed, nevertheless, on a sort of poetic faith that Gwaltney's partially fictionalized women provide clues to the kind of discursive differences that prevail among American women in their sounding the depths of individual and collective sexual differences. Gwaltney's interviewees are also heterosexual women, as far as I can see, and I am not prepared to call them heterosexist or homophobic because of it. The experiences of lesbians of color is as recent a chapter of public discourse (if not the actual experience itself) as are the experiences of lesbians of non-color. At any rate, we believe that the sexual realities of black American women across the spectrum of sexual preference and widened sexual styles tend to be a missing dialectical feature of the entire discussion. In any event, Gwaltney's Interlocutors take us to another universe of symbol-making, intimate different ways of saying sexuality, and express one of the vocabularies of feeling available to black American women on the meeting between sexuality and survival.

For them sexual experience is overwhelmingly related to the thematics of work. Among the older women, the loss of jobs, because the subject often defended herself against the sexual aggressions of another, is a major focus for feminist inquiry: "Sexual harassment of working women has been one of the most pervasive but carefully ignored features of our national life." The kind of sexual harassment that Gwaltney's Interlocutors describe, however, is occasionally lost to feminist discussion because it is often tied up with notions of domestic work and intimacy and, as a result, inhabits a vast domain of silence. That the care of Anglo-American families in certain communities has been entrusted over time to black women remains largely unspoken in feminist discourse. Its articulation would alter considerably feminist thinking about women's social history and the problems evoked by economic and social inequities. But the writing of a new feminist project will require the critic's commitment to a thorough exploration of patterns of domination in its racist, as well as gender and sexual-preferential, manifestations.

Seventy-three years old, Mrs Nancy White, one of the fictitiously named women of Gwaltney's work, talks about her own sexual menace this way:

'I've had to ask some hands off me and I've had to give up some jobs if they got too hot behind me. Now, I have lost some money that way, but that's all right. When you lose control of your body, you have just about lost all you have in this world.'

Nancy White's metaphors of the body are scarcely negotiable through layers of abstraction. In this case, tenor and vehicle are virtually useless distinctions, as in the following point: "My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog" (148). According to her conclusions,

white women are not free either, but most of them think they are and that is because that white man pats them wherever he feels like patting them and throws all that moonlight boogie-joogie on them and they eat it up! It's killing them, but they eat it up and beg the doctor for a prescription so they can get more. (143)

At seventy-three years, which would date her birth near the turn of the country, Mrs White expresses a culture of feeling different from our own, but she touches, nonetheless, the origins of a central vein of disaffection in African-American women not only from the major tenets of the historic feminist movement, but also from the community of Anglo-American women in general. bell hooks's Ain't I A Woman rehearses the corruptive tendencies of racist ideology to filter through the cracks of America's earlier women's movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mrs. White registers an attitude that black women have difficulty overcoming for good reason, and that is their sense of being embattled at once by patriarchal culture and white women complicitous with it. This perceived connection, whether real or imagined, is the "covering cherub" that feminist criticism must reveal.

That no love was lost in Mrs. White's career between herself and white women will not surprise and is complemented by her classic understanding of "male nature." Twice-married, she knows quite well that "boogie-joogie," her play-word that shimmers across the borders of magic, is just so much garbage. Gwaltney's glossary of terms defines the word as "nonsense, trickery." The truth for Mrs. White is that

men don't need women and women don't need men for nothing but getting children. Now, most of these men out here are not on strike. They will be evermore glad to give you just as much nature as you
need. ... I listened to all the moonlight boogie-joogie [from black men] and before a hoe cake could make a crust, there I was with two children. Well, I promised God that if he would help me through that little tight, that I was going to think about what I did a long time before I done it. Now, that's what I did. (49)

Not only does Mrs. White think "a long time" before trusting the premises of romantic love again, but she also achieves a perspective on the matter that does not allow any confusion in her own mind between sexual indulgence and the mandates of survival: "Hard work don't have a thing between its legs. I know there ain't nothing I don't know about real hard work" (150).

The leisure that Mrs. White does not perceive that she has had to contemplate her sexuality as an isolated ontological detail marks a classically schismatic feature between African-American and Anglo-American historical passage. I observe a tendency, if not a law. A mediation in this case between a first-order expression of sexual practice and the discourse of sexuality would try to elicit the hierarchies of value that the respective terms stand for. "Body," for example, is not a polyvalent or ambiguous referent for a Mrs. White. At the level of analysis and experience, we witness no arbitrary bonding between a signifier and a signified so that for Mrs. White the word, the gesture that fulfills it, and the actual consequences of both converge on a literal moment of time. To lose control of the body is to be hostage to insurable circumstances; the lack of control is also in the historical outline of black American women often enough the loss of life. In either case, we are exposed immediately to fatal implications of change in the state of nature. The threatened return of the metaphors of experience to their original ground of tangible and material meaning demonstrates the distance we must travel between the status of the protected and that of the unprotected, or the difference between sex and sexuality.

Gwaltney’s May Anna Madison is nearly a generation younger than Nancy White, but the complicated equation that she draws between her own life in relationship to white women, the tenets of feminist social analysis, and sexual experience is comparable:

The t.v. is full of people talking about women's lib. Well, I can handle black men; what I can't handle is this prejudice. White women have done more bad things to me than black men ever thought of doing. . . . It was a female chauvinist sow that worked me a full day for seventy-five cents. When I was nothing but a child myself, white women looked the other way when their fresh little male chauvinist pigs were trying to make a fool out of me! That's why I don't pay any attention to all that stuff! A black man can't do any more to me than I will let him do because I can and have taken care of myself. But I do have to work to be able to do that and that means that I have to be able to deal with white people. (171)

Madison's solution to inequities is radically democratic:

These white people are not really running things right, and that's the fault of the white men mostly and the white women go along with that. I would get color out of it altogether. I just wouldn't let nobody get but so rich and I wouldn't let nobody get but so poor. (175)

In these instances that the text brings to light, Gwaltney's interlocutors perceive their sexual being in so poignantly a connection with the requirements of survival that we lose the theme of relationship in its isolated emphasis. The fusion, however, might be useful to feminist critics in suggesting that a contrastive historical order engenders a different slope of consciousness and at least one structure of first-order terms to be interpreted. Gwaltney has already provided one interpretive instrument—transcribed interviews edited into a text with the voices speaking to us in an imagined spontaneity of responses. A third order of naming would attempt to discover, layer by layer, the symptoms of culture that engender this order of things. From whatever angle of history and temperament feminists address cultural issues, they ignore historical particularities as symbol-making refracts them at peril to the program of action that would liberate women from the seductions and betrayals of patriarchal dominance.

To return in conclusion to Kenneth Burke's grammar of motives and the pentad of terms on which it is built refocuses quite deliberately the dramatic character of sexuality as human potential and discursive possibility. In order to supply the missing words in the discourse of sexuality, we would try to encounter agent, agency, act, scene, and purpose in ways that the dominative mode certainly forbids. Its division of women's community along various fault lines is the superior talisman that has worked across the centuries. To dissipate its energies requires that the feminist investigator actively imagine women in their living and pluralistic conformation with experience (at least, the way they report it), and perhaps the best guarantee of such a commitment is the investigator's heightened self-consciousness with regard to the operative conceptual tools.

The dominative symbolic mode proceeds through a sequence of violent acts to attenuate historical particularities, whereas the agents in question become items in the store of mythical signifiers. The image of the "whore"
and the "female eunuch," for example, has been invested with semiological and ideological values whose origins are concealed by the image itself. The image/icon acquires mystical attribution doing overtime, divested of specific reference and dispersed over time and space in blind disregard for the particular agents and scenes on which it lands. The refined image can be imposed at any moment on any individual "I." This sort of symbol-making is analogous to an act of mugging that catches the agent not only off guard, but also, most effectively, in the dark. A feminist critique in the specific instance of sexuality would encourage a counter-narrative in pursuit of the provenance and career of word- and image-structures in order that agent, agency, act, scene, and purpose regain their differentiated responsiveness. The aim, though obvious, might be restated: to restore to women's historical movement its complexity of issues and supply the right verb to the subject searching for it, feminists are called upon to initiate a corrected and revised view of women of color on the frontiers of symbolic action.

Because black women have had long experience with the brutalizations of male power, are subject to rape, know their womanhood and being as crucially related and decisively timed moments in the creation and nurture of human life; because they experience their biological and human destiny by way of women and must sooner or later face their mirror and catch their own reflection of imagination in it, they do not live out their destiny on the periphery of American race and gender magic, but in the center of its Manichean darkness. But the forgoing configuration is only part of the picture. There is at least one other. Because they love their fathers, sons, and brothers, yet must be free of them as a willed act of the mind and the heart; because they witness no lapse in this narrative because they have seen their fathers, sons, and brothers cut down in war and even in peace for the very same reasons that they have been, their daughters de-based and humiliated and invisible often enough in the company of other women; because other women have helped to foster the myth of their "superotherness" on either end of the scale of being; and after two closely contiguous women's movements in this country, parallel and related to the historical movements of black people, have yet to come to grips with the irremediable rendezvous of race and gender in the subject, black women do not live out their destiny on the borders of femaleness, but in the heart of it.

We are urged, then, to raise this energetic scheme of conflicting tensions, allegiances, affirmations, and denials to an act of discursive form that confronts the image of the woman of color with other world women, with other dominated communities. We would try to do so in order that this generation of women ("this" as ongoing) may lay hold at last of a compara-

tive human order, whose primary noun Person has been modified to points of a detailed refinement.

In putting afoot a new woman, we delight in remembering that half the world is female. We are challenged, however, when we recall that more than half the globe's female half is yellow, brown, black, and red. I do not mean to suggest that "white" in this ethnic and political calculus is an adendum, but, rather, only an angle on a thematic vision whose agents in gaining authenticity have the radical chance now, which patriarchy passed up, to help orchestrate the dialectics of a global new woman. As I see it, the goal is not an articulating of sexuality so much as it is a global restoration and dispersal of power. In such an act of restoration, sexuality becomes one of several active predicates. So much depends on it.
bridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). From Derrida, Kermode adopts this formulation to explain the hermeneutical relationship between interpreter and work. I borrow it here to argue that Maud Martha punctuated a significant period of work in the poet's career and that after it Brooks seemed to turn increasingly toward the meditative poetry that we associate with In the Mecca and After the Mecca.

18. All references to Maud Martha refer to The World of Gwendolyn Brooks; page numbers noted in the text.


For a complete autobiographical sketch, Brooks's Report from Part One (Detroits: Broadside Press, 1973) and Report from Part Two (Chicago: Third World Press, 1986) are indispensable. The poet explained to Claudia Late in an interview that she was at work on a second volume of autobiography. See Black Women Writers at Work (New York: Continuum, 1983), 39–48.


21. From The Bean Eaters, WGB, 313.

22. A remarkable study of the human and social body as a site of contracted or expanded ground, Elaine Scarry's Body in Pain (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) offers an unusual reading of aspects of Holy Scripture and excerpts from the Marxian canon as speculative inquiry into the principles of "making" and " unmaking."


27. The term is taken from W. J. Cash's classic study of the mythic operations of the "white male mind" of the South: The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941). It is not altogether surprising that "mind" in this case is confined to the male, while the female becomes the object of investigation.

28. I have placed these typically descriptive words for two American races in quotation marks here because the terms are often inadequate for what we actually mean. As we know, "color" in America is "washable" since "black" registers along a range of genetic traits, and so does "white," or the notion of "passing" would have no value whatsoever, either as an actual deed, or trophic possibility. "Race" should be an anachronism, or dead, but it is neither. We await, in the meantime, a vocabulary that gets us through the complexities that we sometimes observe.

29. WGB, 14.


33. In two separate studies, I examine these historical/terministic issues with an eye to locating African-American women's community in relationship to questions of feminist investigation: "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" and "Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Not" (see this volume). These pieces anticipate a longer work that examines the rift between the "body" and "the flesh" as means of social and cultural production.

34. Burke, "Literature and Equipment for Living," in Philosophy of Literary Form, 300.

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4. Ibid., 111–23. Different versions of "The Titanic" are given by Abrahams in demonstration of the "olkotype," the local variations that an oral narrative assumes when it reaches a specific area (10). The expurgated version of the narrative, reprinted in Langton Hughes and Arna Bontemps, eds., The Book of Negro Folklore (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1955), 365–67, might be advantageously compared with Abrahams's.

5. Hernton, Sex and Racism in America, 166.


11. Freud’s notes on the “frequency with which sexual repression makes use of transpositions from a lover to an upper part of the body” were a surprising find in connection with this point. He specifically names the replacement of the genitals by the face as a dynamic “in the symbolism of unconscious thinking” (“The Dream Work,” The Interpretation of Dreams, trans. James Strachey [New York: Avon, 1966], 422). I do not claim to know the artist’s mind and might guess that she was thinking of a Freudian reading of her subject, giving her viewers the benefit of the doubt, or that they knew speaking, was involved in an intricate calculus of sexual repressions that both identifies black personality with “wild” sex and at the same time suppresses the name in reference to her.


19. The various positions within the gendered hierarchy of bodies—women writers and critics at the center of the critical enterprise with women’s culture as their theme—is the subject of a striking essay by Elaine Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” in Writing and Sexual Difference, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 9–37. (See above in this volume, “An Order of Constancy.”) It is noteworthy that this interesting volume of essays on points of intersection between writing culture and female gender does not have a single item in it on black American women’s writings. The absence is stunning to my mind that it demonstrates precisely the sort of symbolic lapse of nerve I am identifying in the associating women of color with the intellectual and artistic project that relates to sexuality.

20. A café (where smoking is permitted), the resonance of the line in the text is borrowed directly from T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion”: “My house is a decayed house, / And the Jew squats on the window sill, the crows, / Spanned in some estaminet of Antwerp” (The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950 [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971], 21). I intrude the image to make plain the bad taste that Firestone’s emblem-making leaves in my mouth as certain aspects of Eliot’s poem might do for certain other American communities; I’d assume quite a lot in thinking so and would ignore, for the sake of the point, the poem’s aesthetic gestures. Doing so wrenches meaning, but the poet occasionally and the scholar more often compel a sort of resistance of reading in this case.

21. Ibid., 118.


25. Ibid., 4–5.


28. Ibid., 133.

29. Kenneth Burke, “On Words and the Word,” The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 14–15. Burke proposes that of the four realms to which words may refer, the third realm—words about words—“is the realm of dictionaries, grammar, etymology, philology, literary criticism, rhetoric, poetics, dialectics.”

30. Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Language, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper Colophon, 1972). Foucault’s discussion of fields of discourse, or the “enunciative field,” is very useful in explaining continuities and discontinuities among concepts that share a common familial identity; concepts within an “enunciative field” may be related in three ways: (1) by way of a “field of presence,” (2) a “field of concomitance,” and (3) a “field of memory” (57–58ff).

31. In an address at Wellesley College a few years ago, Toni Morrison provided a moving testimony to the textual silence concerning black American women. She could find in the library shelves books about virtually every community of women in the world, but precious few about her own. One of Morrison’s ambitions as a writer, she said, is to supply some of the missing narrative.


34. An example of reminiscence narrative is Julius Lester's *To Be A Slave* (New York: Dell, 1968); *Studs Terkel, Working* (New York: Avon, 1972).


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13. Ibid., 81.

14. Stephen Greenblatt's impressive formulation of "improvisational skills" concerning Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* informs my own thinking about intertextual possibilities between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Flight to Canada": "I shall call that mode improvisation by which I mean the ability born to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980], 227).


16. I refer here not very precisely to René Girard's formulation of the triangle of desire in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965). 1–52. There is, of course, no obvious "rivalry" for Eva's affections between Uncle Tom and Augustine St. Clare, but imagining for the moment that these central figures embody wider psychocultural functions, we might say that "Little Eva" is made to represent, indeed, the gynocular object of desire, dangerously poised between the "black" male and his freedom, essentially "held in fey" by the "white" male.


18. Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 124–25. One of the most recent definitive texts on American women writers, Tompkins's work offers a brilliant paradigm of conceptualization on the issues. Although I accept her basic premises, my most significant reservations about this work have to do with the muting of "race" in this cultural analysis.


29. Ibid.


36. The dynamics of the mechanism of violent reprisal are formulated in Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*.

37. This narrative is reported in Albizzi: C. Rugh's *History of the English Language*, 2d ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crafts, 1957), 94.
