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Melody Y. Andrews

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Incidents in the Life of Slave Girls 2.0:  
Rememory and Patriarchal Bargaining in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Dolen Perkins-Valdez's  
*Wench*

Melody Y. Andrews

North Carolina A&T State University

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English

Major: English & African American Literature

Major Professor: Dr. Faye Spencer-Maor

Greensboro, North Carolina

2014

The Graduate School  
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University  
This is to certify that the Master's Thesis of

Melody Y. Andrews

has met the thesis requirements of  
North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Greensboro, North Carolina  
2014

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### Biographical Sketch

Melody Yasmine Andrews was born December 9, 1988 in Evansville, Indiana. A graduate of Mississippi State University, Melody has her BA in Communications with emphasis on journalism and a minor in African American Studies from Mississippi State University. Melody is currently a candidate for the Masters of Arts in English & African American Literature.

During her tenure at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Melody has been an active member of the Graduate Student Advisory Council, the National Association of Black Journalists and the North Carolina Teacher Corps. While pursuing her degree Melody worked as a graduate assistant for the University Writing Center at NCA&T, as well as the *Register* & the *Ayantee* staffs.

In 2013 Melody had the honor of presenting at the North Carolina College Media Association Conference. In the future Melody hopes to continue her scholarship in African American literature as well as mass media.

## Dedication

I like to think when I was created God poured into me an immense love for two things: music and stories. Throughout my life, He has blessed me to have been shrouded in both. Without that untamable desire to hear an unsung song or tell a new tale, this thesis would not be possible. This thesis is dedicated to those who moved the plot of my story or changed the key of my life. For my mother, JoEtta C. Andrews, the made up bedtime stories about little black princesses you told us and the black history lessons in Michigan influenced my love for reading and learning about my heritage. Your passion for unearthing our family's origins in this country makes me beam with pride. For my father, Gaston J. Andrews, while I dreaded long car rides listening to Gil Scott Heron and Earth, Wind and Fire as a kid, I can honestly say it informed much of my perception of the world. And for the mothers, sisters, aunts, grannies, wives, and girlfriends who endured the bondage of slavery, this song-story is dedicated to you.

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First and foremost, I would like to thank God for allowing me the opportunity to further my education and providing me with such an awesome support system to do so. My sincere gratitude goes to my thesis committee: Dr. Maor, Dr. Uwakweh and Dr. DePolo thanks for reminding me to “dig deeper,” and answer hard questions in my research. Thank each of you for the support and advice. To my classmates and study buddies, Zeba, Kanika and Craig, thank you so much for all the stimulating conversations and helping make Greensboro a home away from home. I would like to extend a special thanks go to each of my “besties” for listening to my ideas. Marcie, Melissa and Michelle thanks for entertaining my random ramblings all this time. Finally, I would like to thank my parents for their support and guidance throughout my academic and personal life, without them none of this would be possible.

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### Abstract

Through examining traditional slave narratives, such as Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, as well as neo-slave narratives with female protagonists, such as *Wench* and *A Mercy*, it becomes evident that participating in patriarchal bargaining in the antebellum South existed as a form of resistance and leverage not in a feminist sense, but one that is inherently womanist. Nearly twenty-five years ago, feminist Deniz Kandiyoti coined the term "patriarchal bargain" to describe the way in which women navigate within patriarchal societies: "Women strategize within a set of concrete constraints, which I identify as patriarchal bargains. Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct 'rules of the game' and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression" (Kandiyoti 274). Since its inception, research efforts on patriarchal bargaining have centered on women in patriarchal societies outside of the Western world. However, at its very core patriarchal bargaining can be seen throughout most of American history, especially the antebellum period.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

“somebody/anybody  
 sing a black girl’s song  
 bring her out to know herself  
 to know you  
 but sing her rhythms  
 carin’/struggle/hard times  
 sing her song of life  
 she’s been dead so long  
 closed in silence so long...”

-Ntosake Shange<sup>1</sup>

Memories of the antebellum South tend to evoke images which sugarcoat the reality of the slave experience. Visions of white-washed fences holding together sprawling green lawns lined with ancient magnolia or willow trees, freckled with azalea or gardenia bushes lead up to a picturesque house guarded by powdered sugar columns. A dark hand lightly waves a fan over a flaxen haired head, while the wind carries a burdened spirit song from a field of prickly cotton. The essence of the Southern slave-holding tradition remains swaddled in pleasantries although contradictory to the frank tragedy of the peculiar institution. With that being said, discourse on the subject in both academic and popular culture remains complex. For many scholars the antebellum south was a system focused on the degradation of black bodies, while for others it

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<sup>1</sup> Shange, Ntosake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. New York: Scribner, 1975. Print.

was purely economic. However, thorough examinations of the slave experience render the entire institution as an extremely convoluted time in American history.

In his 1853 narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northrup includes Patsey, a hard working field hand who Northrup describes in his 1853 narrative, as the “enslaved victim of lust and hate” due to her master’s perverted admiration and her mistress’s bitter jealousy (Northrup 65). The 2013 film interpretation of the classic slave narrative ends with Northrup being rescued and reunited with his family, and one haunting image: Patsey alone. Recently, Lupita Nyong’o was awarded an Oscar for her role as Patsey, in the film *12 Years a Slave*<sup>2</sup>. Nyong’o’s role illustrated the devastating experiences faced by enslaved women in the antebellum South on film. Northrup’s walking away from the nightmarish plantation, and to an extent Patsey, could be interpreted as an allegory: while the African American man rises from persecution, the woman despite her efforts remains oppressed with one, singular option-- survival. In a review of the film titled, “Patsey’s Plea,” Nila Mumin claims “Patsey and other black female characters in *12 Years a Slave* become human because they cannot be saved<sup>3</sup>” (Mumin). Many pity the experience of Patsey and women like her in the same fashion one might pity an extinct species, which further simplifies the complexities of slave culture. However, memories of this same South prove “Patseys” survived.

Approximately, two-hundred fifteen miles from the campus of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, lay the small town of Edenton, North Carolina, home of former slave and author, Harriet Jacobs. For seven years Jacobs cleverly eluded her

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<sup>2</sup> A film based on the narrative of Solomon Northrup, a free black man who was kidnapped and served as a slave for twelve years in Louisiana before regaining his freedom.

<sup>3</sup> After the film’s release, several composed reviews and blogs focusing on the character Patsey, which more than likely stimulated Nyong’o’s Oscar buzz. Although Mumin goes on to state slave women found ways to survive in their situation, she suggests that slave women can only be characterized as eternal damsels in distress which minimizes their humanity and their strength as survivors.

former master and slave catchers, who believed she had fled north, by hiding right under their proverbial noses in the attic of her grandmother's home in Edenton. In her 1861 narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs states "[...] why, thought I, did my relatives ever cherish hopes for me? What was there to save me from the usual fate of slave girls?" (Jacobs 56). Born a slave in 1813, Jacob's "fate" as a slave woman was intended to be one full of the exact cruelties which plagued Patsey. According to Dr. Gail Elizabeth Wyatt, "in order to avoid being severely punished black women had to submit to any white man who made sexual [demands of] them" (Wyatt 11). Though Jacobs's options were limited, modes of resistance remained plausible by working within the system.

As previously mentioned, living within a white male dominated antebellum society often meant submitting to the whims of white males, rather master, neighbor, adult or child. Demeaned, humiliated and objectified slave women often resorted to creative means of resisting the sources of their oppression. Some women resisted through sass and signifyin' and others by tainting food or fixin' roots. While many survived through bargaining. In 1988 Deniz Kandiyoti coined the phrase patriarchal bargain. Although the term was created in correlation to the sphere of post-colonial discourse, patriarchal bargaining can also be seen within the peculiar institution of American slavery. Actions taken by women like Jacobs to alleviate their lived experience as slaves, existed as a bargain within the white patriarchal system in which they were oppressed.

Furthermore, writing an account of these "incidents" as Jacobs eloquently refers to them, testifies not only the cruel nature of slavery but the strength in the slave woman's resolve to resist and survive. Over a century later, black women writers continue composing works of re-memory situated in the conditions of slavery, so vividly described in slave narratives like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Juxtaposed to the post-colonial feminist's roots of

Kandiyoti's theory, Jacob's bargain within white male patriarchy was not solely an attempt to gain egalitarianism through her womanhood. Instead, Jacobs, and those black women composing contemporary narratives of slavery illustrate acts of patriarchal bargaining which reflect black womanism. Through Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, as well as the rememories of slavery by African American women writers, such as Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench* it becomes evident that participation in patriarchal bargaining in the antebellum South existed as a form of resistance and leverage not in a feminist sense, but one that is inherently womanist. In writing to remember a past often over-simplified in academia and the media, Perkins-Valdez and Morrison posit the contemporary African American woman within the context of a stifling patriarchal institution whose remnants remain to this day. According to Wyatt,

Slavery ripped into the hearts and souls of African [American] women altering their culture, their families and most intimately, their sexuality. It would be naïve to think that time has healed those wounds or to believe that they are no longer relevant to the [...] experience of African American women today. (Wyatt 4)

Through composing re-memory or re-visions of the history of slavery in the United States, Perkins-Valdez and Morrison provide voices for black girls often left unsung. Rememories of the slave woman's experience give a voice to those individuals often depicted as only victims in history. Ultimately, works by authors such as Morrison and Perkins-Valdez also strive to alter perceptions of not only black women but the patriarchal system in America.

### **Review of Literature**

The traditional slave narrative was written to appeal to the morality of white middle class American women living in states above the Mason Dixon line. Beginning with the *Interesting*

*Narrative of Olaudah Equiano*<sup>4</sup>, these narrations of slavery gave a people stripped of their homelands a voice. The years leading to the Civil War produced the narratives of figures like Venture Smith (1798), Frederick Douglass (1845), and Solomon Northrup (1853). Within this thesis I will utilize the term “traditional slave narrative” to refer to biographical narratives written by former slaves as part of the American abolitionist movement which took place prior to the Civil War. Slave narratives as a literary genre were considered popular as propaganda, just as much as they were considered to be part of a larger political movement. In “Who Read Slave Narratives,” Charles H. Nichols states,

The narratives begin a tradition of protest in Negro writing, and concerned as they were with the realities of Negro life in America, no doubt affected the larger community's attitudes toward the Negro [...] Slave narratives were, to a large extent, propagated by abolitionists who edited, promoted and distributed them after 1836. Antislavery publications were always eager to get accounts of slaves' experiences [...] Yet it is certain that the general public bought slave narratives which commercial publishing houses soon found it profitable to issue. (Nichols 149)

Essentially, traditional slave narratives positioned bondsmen and women in the position of subject rather than object and allowed them to be viewed as intellectual equals to their white counterparts rather than three fifths of a human being. Several traditional slave narratives by women have come into obscurity in comparison to others. According to Marilyn Richardson,

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<sup>4</sup> While *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert "Ukawsaw Gronniosaw", an African Prince*,” was written over a decade prior to *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African*, Equiano’s narrative is noted for the sensory nature in which Equiano composed the details of his journey through the Middle Passage to America, as well as his release from bondage and relocation to England.

[...] Phyllis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, most notably—have long been considered heroines of their race and sex. While it is always good to affirm the influence of such well-known figures, it is equally important to recognize that they were neither isolated nor atypical, but were inheritors of a black female tradition of activism founded on a commitment to religious faith, human rights and women’s struggles. (Richardson viii)

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* stood as a vehicle for the black female tradition mentioned by Richardson and the protest nature mentioned by Nichols. Writing under the pseudonym, Linda Brent, Jacobs follows the structure of traditional narratives<sup>5</sup> while revealing the intricacies of the slave woman’s psyche.

Jacobs was born to slaves Elijah Knox and Delilah Horniblow in 1813. Jacob’s mother’s mistress, Margaret Horniblow taught Jacobs to read and write, albeit probably not under the assumption that this would eventually become Jacob’s means of aiding the anti-slavery cause. When her mistress died in 1825, Jacobs was willed to be the property of the mistress’s niece, who was five. In turn, Harriet’s de facto master became the young girl’s father, a man in her narrative she refers to as Dr. Flint<sup>6</sup>. By the time Jacobs turned fifteen, her master “began to whisper foul words” in her ear. She states,

“He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master.

I was compelled to live under the same roof with him—where I saw a man forty

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<sup>5</sup> The traditional slave narrative structure is comprised of the following conventions: a letter of authenticity, explicit details of the slave experience, pleas to the audience, and the escape to freedom. For more information on the classical conventions of slave narratives read Lynn A. Casmier-Paz’s “Slave Narratives and the Rhetoric of Author Portraiture,” Stephen T. Butterfield’s “The Use of Language in the Slave Narratives,” and Lindon Barrett’s “African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority.”

<sup>6</sup> According to PBS’s *Africans In America*, Jacobs’s “Dr. Flint,” served as an alias for Dr. James Norcum who refused to allow Jacobs’s to marry a free black man or be sold to anyone including her white suitor, lawyer Samuel Sawyer.

years my senior daily violating the most sacred commandments of nature. He told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. 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 was 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.”

(Jacobs 26)

Jacobs implicates both white and black men in oppressing the slave girl which serves as commentary on the American systems of patriarchy during the time period in which Jacobs writes and Morrison and Perkins-Valdez reflect.

This thesis offers discourse on two forms of patriarchy in America: white patriarchy and black patriarchy. While contrasting systems intertwine in that one system dictates the practices of the other. White patriarchy during slavery was a social system in which prosperous white men, usually slaveholders, dictated the laws and codes of the society. The system of white patriarchy that existed in pre-Civil War America shaped and continues to shape the nation's ideas on gender and race. As a result patriarchy in the black community is greatly influenced by the dominant patriarchal system. Due to the hierarchy in the white patriarchal system during slavery being one in which white men are on top followed by white women, then black men followed by black women, black men were emasculated. Hence, black patriarchy exists as a byproduct of the white patriarchal system. As a result, the black man feels compelled to subvert the system of patriarchy which oppresses them. Frederick Douglass demonstrates this struggle for masculine identity in his narrative in his fight with Mr. Covey. He states,



The battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindles the few expiring embers of freedom and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence and inspired me again with a determination to be free. (Douglass 86)

Within black patriarchy, black men equate freedom as the source of manhood and to an extent attempt to emulate white patriarchal norms. In the antebellum period, some free black men even owned their own plantations and black slaves which can be argued to be an attempt to be recognized as a black man in the eyes of whites. Being that black men were not considered men within the institution of slavery, black women were often held responsible for fortify and reinforcing the masculine identity of black men. Slave women learned strategies of bargaining to navigate both systems of patriarchy.

Despite her rebuttals, Dr. Flint remained relentless in his pursuit of Jacobs. His sexual harassment ranged from verbal taunts and threats to hand written-notes he employed Jacob's younger (and unaware) brother to deliver (Jacobs 30). Though reluctant, Jacobs turns to one of the "fiends" she mentioned previously as a source of relief from her master's ill intended interest. By aligning herself in a relationship with another white man in the Edenton community, Jacobs avoids what was believed to be the inevitable "fate" of slave girls. While Jacobs was still subject to verbal mistreatment from her master and mistress<sup>7</sup>, she was granted security under the guise of romance. While some refer to Jacobs directly aligning with that of the trickster archetype<sup>8</sup>,

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<sup>7</sup> According to Jacobs, Mistress Flint's behavior was nearly as vile as that of Dr. Flint. She states, "I had entered my sixteenth year, and every day it became more apparent that my presence was intolerable to Mrs. Flint[...] she was never satisfied; but in her angry moods, no terms were too vile for her to bestow upon me [...] Sometimes I woke up, and found her bending over me. At other times she whispered in my ear, as though it was her husband who was speaking to me, and listened to hear what I would answer" (Jacobs 30-1).

<sup>8</sup> In the essay "Santa Claus Ain't a Real Man: *Incidents* and Gender," Anne Bradford Warner describes Jacobs as "strangely empowered and doubled" as she discusses the ways in which Jacobs embodies a female trickster (Warner 185). According to the African American folk tradition a trickster is a character who manages to defeat and opponent who is considered more powerful (Harris 1).

Jacobs's decision to take ownership of her own body despite her condition as property illustrates Kandiyoti's theory of patriarchal bargaining.

As aforementioned, the theory of patriarchal bargaining since its inception in 1988 has remained mostly exclusive to the field of post-colonial women's studies. Coined by Deniz Kandiyoti twenty-five years ago, the theory was conceived in reference to women living in male-dominated post-colonial societies in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. According to Kandiyoti,

Women strategize within a set of concrete constraints, which I identify as patriarchal bargains. Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct 'rules of the game' and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression. (Kandiyoti 275)

In other words, women submit to certain circumstances in order to survive in the face of oppression. She goes on to state, "Women's strategies are always played out in the context of identifiable patriarchal bargains that act as implicit scripts that define, limit, and inflect their market and domestic options" (Kandiyoti 285). Although writing in a totally different era and experience than that of antebellum slavery, Kandiyoti's ideology on the strategic undertakings of women evokes Jacobs's own tactics.

While Kandiyoti's theoretical outlook on the survival of women within patriarchy applies outside of the post-colonial realm<sup>9</sup>, little academic discourse which situates the concept of patriarchal bargaining in America, let alone the antebellum slave experience has occurred. Much

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<sup>9</sup> As mentioned throughout this work, Kandiyoti's theory is solely viewed as a reflection of the conditions which women in post-colonial societies live in. However, considering the general social ideas about the position of women during the antebellum period and the colonization of African slaves bought to America, patriarchal bargaining without a doubt has a place within the conversation.

of the academic conversations involving patriarchal bargaining involve the lives of women in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and even parts of South America. More recently, articles in publications like the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *American Ethnologist* and *Gender and Society* have published research based on patriarchal bargaining within the context of current events<sup>10</sup>. Whereas little research has been conducted involving bargains with patriarchy in the system of American slavery or literature of the era, this study aims to juxtapose the concept of patriarchal bargaining keeping with Kandiyoti's 1988 essay with acts of womanism as situated in American slavery.

Often credited as the primary work of womanist theory, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* examines the position of black women within historical, social and theoretical contexts. Within the work of prose, Walker defines a womanist as

A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior [...] Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes love individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist [...] Traditionally universalist [...]

(Walker xi)

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Sherine Harfez's "No Longer a Bargain: Women, Masculinity and the Egyptian Uprising" situates Kandiyoti's patriarchal bargain within the context of the Lotus Revolution or the 2011 Egyptian Uprising which resulted in the end of then president, Hosni Mubarak's regime and gave way to uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, including Tunisia, Libya and Syria.

Since its origin, womanism has taken various forms within social and spiritual studies. Within her narrative Jacobs intentions to protect and provide for her family not only embody a patriarchal bargain, but also the spirit of womanism previously defined by Walker. Early in her narrative, Jacobs recounts her decision to permit a romantic relationship with a young single lawyer, Mr. Sands<sup>11</sup>. This critical decision comes after, being denied the opportunity to marry a free black man<sup>12</sup> with whom Jacobs was genuinely in love. Stripped of the ability to fulfill her relationship with her free lover Jacobs decided to work within the construct of what she calls the “fate of slave girls.” The “fate” of slave girls often resulted in being coerced or forced into a sexual relationship by a white man. More often than not this coupling resulted in biracial children, which further populated the plantations and pockets of slave owners. In her book *Stolen Women: Reclaiming Our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives* Wyatt states, “[...] White Southerners often bragged about their “breeding wenches” the way they bragged about their horses, cows and mules [...] If you did not resist sex became a means to an end” (Wyatt 12). While interracial sex between slaves and masters was common, it was considered by many the “[...] matters of forced sex between the powerful and the powerless” (Yarbrough 560). Jacobs entered the relationship with Mr. Sands as a means of avoiding a non-consensual relationship with her master, Dr. Flint. Furthermore, in this action Jacobs takes ownership of her body and governs her intimate relationships, unlike most slave women who according to Wyatt were expected to always be sexually available for white men, or breeding with fellow slaves.

Jacobs chooses the father of her children, not only to avoid giving birth to Dr. Flint’s children, but as an attempt to assure security and education for her children. In reality, Jacobs’s consensual relationship with Mr. Sands produced two children who she hoped would be freed by

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel Sawyer represented the state of North Carolina in Congress and later served as a major for the Confederacy during the Civil War.

<sup>12</sup> It is particularly interesting to note that Jacobs does not mention said lover by name.

their father. To Jacob's chagrin, Sands promises to free his son, Benny and daughter, Ellen never truly come to fruition<sup>13</sup>. Although Sands purchases his children from Dr. Flint and removes them from their lives as chattel in the South, initially he does not set them free and the latter portion of Jacobs's narrative details her seven year stint in her grandmother's attic avoiding capture, as well as her attempts to ensure her children's freedom. Although Jacobs's bargains with patriarchy do not grant her a perfect happy ending, her gains due to her relationship with Mr. Sands dramatically altered the lives of herself and her children. All of Jacobs's devices to bargain within patriarchy consider those around her, her free grandmother, her older brother, Benjamin and her children. Whether through passive or active means, Jacobs's womanist position within her bargain continues to be reflected in neo-slave narratives<sup>14</sup>.

The chosen neo-narratives discussed within the next chapters were both composed in the last decade by African American women writers. Morrison's *A Mercy*, reconstructs the ideas of the early Republic prior to the construction of institutionalized racism, while Perkins Valdez's *Wench* recounts the story of Tawawa House, an Ohio resort where plantation owners often vacationed with their slave mistresses. Referring to slave women who were involved in relationships with their masters as "mistresses" is an oxymoron in that the wife of a slave master was referred to as the plantation mistress. This oxymoronic titling of women in relationships with slave masters as "mistresses" further indicates the ways in which authors composing rememories of slavery utilize such titles rhetorically to depict the idiosyncrasies of slave life. Both narratives add depth to the histories of slave women through serving as what Morrison

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<sup>13</sup> Given the political climate of the time and Mr. Sands identity as a North Carolina politician, I would like to think that his actions of not officially freeing his children was a means of protecting them from being captured, sold or traded which could of occurred if they were simply set free.

<sup>14</sup> Within the context of this work, the term neo-slave narrative refers to those slave narratives written by contemporary authors situated within the antebellum or Reconstruction period. Popular examples of such works include Maragaret Walker's *Jubilee*, Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

refers to as rememory. The concept of rememory is explained by Morrison's Sethe in the novel, *Beloved*:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (Morrison 65)

Essentially, rememory in the Morrisonian sense serves as a means of not only individual retention and reflection, but an experience which is communal. "The term "rememory," signifying a magical anamnesis available to one not involved in the originary act[...] the idea of rememory, the concept of mental recollection, both anamnesis and construction,[...] is never only personal but always interpersonal" (Rushdy 304). With that being said, rememory as utilized in this work of research serves to describe a shared revisit to a particular memory or moment in history. More specifically, I utilize rememory in reference to the retelling or the recollection of the slave experience by contemporary African American women writers.

Through rememory of the slave woman's experience and patriarch bargains, Perkins-Valdez and Morrison aim to complicate common perceptions of slave relationships. Furthermore, both authors make their rememories a form of active reading in which the reader is immersed into the memory of a particular moment in a shared history. *A Mercy* suggests the need for order in an evolving nation, and the position a black woman must bargain for to further reflect the current bargains made within society by African American women. Where some would simply describe

the nature of slave-master relationships as rape, *Wench* inverts this idea through the bargains made by the novel's slave women. Within both forms of rememory reside Kandiyoti's patriarchal bargain and Walker's womanist philosophies.

## CHAPTER 2

### **A Walk to Remember: Patriarchy and Position Toni Morrison's *A Mercy***

Harriet Jacobs was a teenage girl when she made the decision to bargain with patriarchy. Her decision to bargain was not based solely on her own personal interests, but her love and concern for her family. Through bargaining Jacobs was able to negotiate the terms of her survival in the system of slavery. Jacobs chose to engage in a relationship with Mr. Sands in hopes of her children being freed shortly after her own planned escape from North Carolina. Sixteen-year-old Florens, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* attempts to participate in the bargain with patriarchy under extremely different circumstances than that of Jacobs. Through memory embedded within Florens's fractured narrative in *A Mercy*, Morrison illustrates the character's attempt to dictate her fate by voluntarily and eagerly attempting to bargain with patriarchy in order to survive in America's infancy.

Compared to other Western nations, the United States of America remains relatively young in terms of nationhood. While nation building exists as an ongoing process or cycle for most countries, nation building within the United States has drastically evolved since the drafting of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The imagined community that developed into the United States of America began as soon as the first European settlers arrived. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson states:

[...] I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the images of their communion. (Anderson 124)



Essentially, America's early settlers—who ranged from religious radicals to convicted felons—learned to navigate their new “home” by forming an imagined community to shape the foundation of their nation. Currently, America's salient social and political paradigm remains rooted in the original ideologies of the settlers in the New World.

The 2008 presidential race between Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama was expected to alter the course of American nation building due to the fact that one of nominees was African American. When President Barack Obama took the oath of office in 2009 change was indeed on the horizon. For one, President Obama literally changed the face of American politics. Gone were the days when the title “Head of State” was only exclusive to White men. As an African American man, Barack Obama's role as president had a variety of meanings to the American public. For some it meant that they had finally overcome and seen the mountaintop spoken of by the late Dr. Martin Luther King. For others the emergence of an African American president potentially meant the end of what they recognized as American civilization. To say the least, President Obama's election did not change America's complicated relationship with race. If anything, Mr. Obama's presidency further complicated the way in which Americans perceived and navigated the country's racial climate. Consequently, electing an African American president did not erase the centuries of racial oppression, discrimination and tension which much of the framework America's founding fathers built the nation's foundation upon.

Released one week after Barack Obama's election, *A Mercy* challenges the mainstream American creation myth (Cantiello 165). Morrison weaves together the stories of several characters, who through their unique racial and cultural experiences participate in the construction of themselves and the new nation they are now a part of. In doing this, Morrison

explores the nation building of America circa 1690 through the eyes of its various inhabitants: Jacob Vaark, a Dutch-born, British raised capitalist and landowner; Rebekka Vaark, Jacob's mail-order bride; Scully and Williard, homosexual indentured servants on Vaark's farm; Lina, the lone survivor of her Native American tribe; Sorrow, a racially ambiguous and sexually exploited orphan; a nameless free black blacksmith; and Florens, a black slave girl.

Within Morrison's novel each character attempts to negotiate their position and identity in the framework of early American society. Morrison also explores the construction of race and gender roles within the early republic. Often in the American creation myth "the subjective stories of Africans, Native Americans, white European indentured servants, and women of all races and ethnicities who had little economic means or domestic security" are lost (Babb 148). Morrison attempts to pinpoint exactly when the founding fathers' construction of the American nation took a turn for the worst in her rememory of America prior to slavery becoming a status exclusive to individuals of African descent. However, Morrison's ninth novel does not occur in a race-less Utopia and instead revolves around American notions of race before institutionalized slavery and as they exist for her present day audience. Morrison utilizes the often silent voices of Africans, Native Americans, women and biracial characters to amend the early American narrative as "a cautionary tale warning of the dangers of selfish individualism to any form of community" (Babb 148). Like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Wench*, Morrison endorses womanist ideals in that the novel's women rely on one another to survive after "patriarch" Jacob Vaark dies of smallpox. However, once his widow, Rebekka falls ill the seemingly secure lives of slaves Florens, Lina and Sorrow are in jeopardy.

[Lina], Sorrow, a newborn and maybe Florens---three unmastered women out here alone, belonging to no one , became wild game for anyone. None of them

could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile. (Morrison 68)

Simply put, being a free, unmarried woman of color in the early American landscape was not an option. In order to have a place as a woman, one must be owned; for Florens this equates re-identifying a system of patriarchy to bargain within.

Early on, Lina reveals the following to young Florens: “We never shape the world [...] The world shapes us” (Morrison 83). The lives of slave girls like Florens were typically shaped by the white men who owned them. However, Morrison problematizes this notion through Florens not being the object of a white man’s affection like Jacobs; instead Florens seeks the affection of a free black man. While contradictory to the patriarchal bargains seen in both *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Wench*, Florens understanding of the world is one in which free men (regardless of race) determine the fate of all Others. With that being said, the novel further complicates the patriarchal bargain in the context of the origins of the American institution of slavery. While both Jacobs bargains reluctantly, Florens desires to be owned in any sense in order to gain agency within early American society. In her quest for agency, Florens is confronted by her past feelings of rejection and inadequacy, hence her attraction to the free and independent blacksmith.

Morrison’s nameless free blacksmith literally exists as his title: he is a shaper of the world. The blacksmith’s most impressive task in the novel is the creation of a decorative gate for the Vaark home. According to the novel, “

Not only was the house grand and its enclosure impressive, its gate was spectacular. Sir wanted fancy work on both panels, but the smithy persuaded him

no. The result was three foot high lines of vertical bars capped with a simple pyramid shape. Neatly these iron bars led to the gate each side of which was crowned by a flourish of thick vines [...] Looking more closely he saw the gilded vines were actually serpents, scale and all, but ending not in fangs but flowers.

(Morrison 175-6)

Morrison's imagery of the gate guarding Vaark's grand home evokes the Biblical image of Eden. The gate's imagery further represents the original sin shaping racism in America. Through forming metal to create the great gate which guards the Vaark home, the blacksmith tools a masculine identity for himself in the seventeenth century New World. While asserting his masculine identity as a free man of color during a time when ownership was reserved for privileged white men, the blacksmith mirrors concepts discussed in Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in that he literally and figuratively builds the house of white patriarchy. According to Lorde,

[...] those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference [...] know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. (Lorde 2)

While Lorde was writing in response to feminist discourse, the same concept may be applied to the blacksmith and patriarchy. As a result, the novel's characters with the exception of the blacksmith operate within this newly constructed white American patriarchal system even after Jacob Vaark's death. In his ability to transcend the system, the blacksmith rises above racial constructs and becomes a proverbial "founding father." Morrison's blacksmith mirrors the rise

of the first black president who also transcended racial boundaries. Though both figures, the blacksmith and the president, are able to rise above racial oppression, they perpetuate the white patriarchal system rather than change it. However, after the death of the Vaark farm's patriarch, Florens identifies the blacksmith as a source of change for her life and resolves that if she is going to be owned it should be by him.

Florens's narrative begins with her mother enthusiastically suggesting her daughter is given to Jacob Vaark by plantation owner, Senhor D'Ortega to pay a debt.

Just then the little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes [...] that made him laugh. His laughter had not subsided when the woman cradling the small boy on her hip came forward. Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency.

'Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter.' Jacob looked up at her, away from the child's feet his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. (Morrison 30)

Ironically, Morrison's naming of her central character reflects the traditional commodification of slaves in that Florens's namesake derives from the word "florin" which was a coin used throughout Europe. Similar to the blacksmith, who Morrison crafts as literally existing as his title, Florens is a human coin. What Florens remembers and internalizes as rejection in the moment she is traded, actually demonstrates her mother's womanistic intentions. The novel concludes with Florens's "a minha mãe<sup>15</sup>" narrating the same experience:

Breasts provide the pleasure more than simpler things. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming irritated by the clothe covering your little girl chest. And they see [...] There was no protection. None. Certainly not with your vice for

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<sup>15</sup> Translated as Portugese for "mother."

shoes. (Morrison 190)

Florens's "vice for shoes" exists as a recurring motif in the novel. She states,

The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes[...] As a result, Lina says my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles tougher than leather that life requires. (Morrison 4)

Florens's need to literally walk in the shoes of those individuals in positions of privilege serves as an act of passive resistance to her position as a slave. Furthermore, Vaark's recollection of the image of "little girl" Florens teetering in a wealthy, white woman's high-heeled shoes echoes Walker's root origin of womanism, "womanish." In being womanish at her young age, foreshadows Florens eventual commitment to an existence in which the survival of others lies in her hands.

As a *minha mãe* continues her account of voluntarily giving Florens to Vaark she continues to place emphasis on protection: "There is no protection to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (Morrison 191). A *minha mãe*'s voice in the novel evokes Harriet Jacob's own commentary on the protection of black women. Florens's mother explains that it was not her intention to abandon or reject her daughter, but to give her a better life and protect her from the "fate" of slave girls which she herself endured.

One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference. You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter.

Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not as pieces of eight [...]  
He said yes [...] It was a mercy. (Morrison 195)

While Florens's mother's intentions were a selfless act of protecting her young daughter from sexual abuse at the hands of an indulgent master and mistress, Florens's interprets being given to Vaark as not being worthy of her mother's love. Having no real sense of home, biological family or culture outside of her childhood memories of Maryland plantation life and her experiences on the Vaark farm in New York, Florens attempts to find her "place" in bargaining with patriarchy through pursuing free blacksmith.

Florens's attraction to the blacksmith begins as an intense infatuation. She stares at him with longing:

My eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me. There will never be enough time to look how you move. Your arm goes up to strike iron. You drop to one knee. You bend. You stop to pour water first on the iron then down your throat [...]. And when at last our eyes hit I am not dead. For the first time I am live.  
(Morrison 44)

And fantasizes about being intimate with him:

You probably don't know anything at all about what your back looks like whatever the sky holds: sunlight, moonrise. I rest there. My hand, my eyes, my mouth. The first time I see you are shaping fire with bellows. The shine of water runs down your spine and I have shock at myself for wanting to lick there. I run away into the cowshed to stop this thing from happening inside me. Nothing stops it. There is only you. Nothing outside of you[...] My mouth is open, my legs go softly and the heart is stretching to break. (Morrison 43-4)

Morrison's rememory illustrates a shift in paradigms of patriarchy (from one which is white to one which is black) through Florens pursuing security in the freedman. Florens cannot fathom a life not being owned either as chattel property or the property of a husband. "You are my protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free man from New Amsterdam and always are that. Not like Will or Scully but like Sir. I don't know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free. But I have a memory" (Morrison 81-2). Florens then reminisces on looking for the blacksmith in the woods:

Standing there between the beckoning wall of perfume and the stag I wonder what else the world may show me. It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don't like it. I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you. When I choose and say good morning, the stag bounds away. (Morrison 82)

Freedom for Florens is only frightening in that she has never experienced it. However, Florens knows that to be owned in a sense by the blacksmith is far better than to be traded by white slaveholders. Furthermore, Florens's attempt to negotiate her level of liberation is a fully conscious form of patriarchal bargaining.

Florens, aware that men "shape the world," believes the blacksmith will claim her as his own which will equate security for her. The young slave girl's infatuation with the blacksmith becomes physical on Vaark's farm: "You hold your hand over my mouth so no one can hear my pleasure startling hens from their sleep. Quiet. Quiet. No one must know but Lina does. Beware she tells me [...] I am just come from you aching with sin and looking forward to more (Morrison 123). Sorrow witnesses the two "dancing" (Morrison 151). Lina, a mother figure for Florens warns the relationship will result in Florens rejection, which foreshadows Florens' fate in



the novel. As predicted, intimacy with the freedman does not result in his protection as Florens presumed which results in her violently attacking the blacksmith and young male, child he has taken in. After the attack they have the following exchange:

Why are you killing me I ask you./ I want you to go./ Let me explain/

No. Now. /Why? Why?/ Because you are a slave./ What?/You heard me./

Sir makes me that ./I don't mean him./Then who?/You. /What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me. / No. You have become one. (Morrison 166)

Within Morrison's poetic conversation between a heartbroken Florens and the blacksmith, the blacksmith suggests that Florens's physical enslavement has further enslaved her mentally. However, Florens desire to be owned only stems from her attempting to work within the system of white patriarchy. To be "unmastered" is dangerous for slave girls like Florens. They go on:

Your head is empty and your body is wild./ I am adoring you. / And a slave to that too./ You alone own me. / Own yourself, woman , and let us be[...]/ No.

Wait. You put me in misery./ You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind./ You shout the word—mind, mind, mind--- over and then you laugh, saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice. On my knees I reach for you.

Crawl to you. You step back saying get away from me [...] Are you meaning I am nothing to you? That I have no consequence in your world? (Morrison 167)

The blacksmith chastises Florens for wanting him to own her and finds her wanting to be owned preposterous. However, what the blacksmith fails to realize is the truly limited range of options for slave girls like Florens or women period. His failure to understand Florens hesitation to be free lies in his privilege as a "shaper" rather than one shaped by the world like Florens. She does not know how to exist as a free black woman in a time when free women did not exist regardless

of race. Yet in her attempt to bargain, Florens hopes to ensure a better future for herself by being with the blacksmith rather than being sold to the highest bidder on the auction block.

Furthermore, Florens's final exchange with the blacksmith illustrates the ways in which black women were and still bargain within the system of black patriarchy. As the blacksmith continuously criticize Florens, she only speaks out of her love for him. Currently, black women are berated and degraded by black men today in ways ranging from barbershop commentary to popular culture, black women continue to love and support black men in hopes of acceptance, similar to Florens.

Following her rejection and expulsion by the blacksmith Florens begins the journey back to the Vaark farm without her deceased master's boots she had once traveled in. Florens's soles<sup>16</sup> finally grow coarse during her journey, the way her "a minha mãe" and Lina say they should be. Upon her return she is told by Scully and Willard that the mistress, Rebekka, intends to sell her which confirms Florens position as a commodity within early America. Morrison ends the novel with the voice of Florens's often remembered but silent a minha mãe who warns "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing. Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe" (Morrison 196). Essentially, a minha mãe advises Florens to never give freely of herself as she attempted to do with the blacksmith. Ultimately, the poignant warning of Florens's long lost mother is reminiscent in *Wench*'s protagonist, Lizzie's own instructions to her young daughter. Through engaging the reader in the rememory of a critical moment in the American creation myth, Morrison illustrates the role of slave girls in the early republic which directly speaks to the position of African American women in both the past and the present.

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<sup>16</sup> Along with the shoe motif, Morrison mentions soles of feet as a pun in reference to the human soul.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **An Imitation of Life: Rememory & Patriarchal Bargaining in Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench***

Harriet Jacobs composed her personal narrative as a means of writing against the brutal institution of slavery. In 1861 when *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was published the slavery debate came to a volatile head. Nearly a decade prior the Fugitive Slave Act was passed by Congress as a means of compromise between slaveholding and free states. The Fugitive Slave Act permitted slave catchers to track and capture runaway slaves into free territory. In turn, free states were required to cooperate in capturing fugitive slaves. Set shortly after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, Dolen Perkins-Valdez's controversial debut novel, *Wench* offers a rememory of relationships between slave women and their masters. The novel chronicles the experiences of slave mistresses taken on vacation with their masters to Tawawa House Resort in the free state of Ohio.

Most of the guests stayed in the main hotel, but the Southern men preferred to rent the cottages for privacy. The hotel was a lofty white structure, three stories high with twenty-four pane windows. Rocking chairs sat in groups of two on a wide porch verandah that ran across the front of the building. Six columns lined the verandah, forming a colonnade. In the middle of the pond, a wooden water wheel turned slowly, patiently, as if to signal that the days at the resort would turn just as steadily and would be in no hurry to cease. (Perkins-Valdez 12)

According to the author's note at the end of *Wench* Tawawa House resort was an actual vacation destination for slaveholders between 1852 and 1855 (Perkins-Valdez 291). *Wench* weaves together the experiences of four slave women in a rememory of a little known historical fact and explores the relationships between slaves and their masters. While considered a cultural taboo

contradicting the White Southern Christian ideals projected by many slaveholders, sex between slaves and their masters did occur and contrary to popular opinion was not always rape<sup>17</sup>.

“Sexual intercourse between blacks and whites seems to have begun as soon as the former were introduced into America” (Wyatt 11). Generalizing assumptions of all relationships between slaves and masters as acts of rape eliminate the possibility for slaves to have any emotion which deviates from sorrow or loathsome shame.

Thomas Jefferson, founding father, loyal countryman and all-American “good guy” declared in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

They [black men] 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 griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them. Love is the peculiar oestrus of the poet. Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination [...] To our reproach it must be said, that though for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and of red men, they have never yet been viewed by us as subjects of natural history. I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. (Jefferson 265, 270)

Noted as one of the most significant figures in American history, Thomas Jefferson remains remembered for his diplomacy, as well as his hypocrisy. Despite his relationship with Sally

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<sup>17</sup> Within the media and popular culture the construct of American slavery is reduced to simplest terms in black and white with few deviations. Therefore, the idea is if slavery was bad, relationships between slave women and their masters could only be negative.

Hemings<sup>18</sup>, Jefferson believed blackness equated inferiority in most areas of life including matters of the heart. Eliminating the ability for enslaved black women to feel any positive emotions for white men, further strips enslaved women of their humanity. The reductive nature of such assumptions merely perpetuates the racist rationale for legislation which propagated the belief that people of African descent were less than human<sup>19</sup>.

Lizzie, Mawu, Reenie and Sweet all lead lives as slave wenches. In the novel's epigraph, Perkins-Valdez offers definitions of a wench: "(c.1290): A girl, maid, young woman; a female child. (1362): A wanton woman: a mistress. United States: (1812;1832): A black or colored female servant a negress. (1848): A colored woman of any age: a negress or mulatress, especially one in service (Perkins-Valdez). In including the evolving definition of the term, Perkins-Valdez bridges the gap between past in present in providing an explanation as to why the term remains a negative reference specific to women of color today. In their station as "wenches" the women all navigate their circumstances differently. Reenie has herself "fixed" to avoid having children by her master. Sweet commits suicide after the stillbirth of her last child due to being overworked during pregnancy. Mawu actively resists through learning from an "old conjuring man" who help keep her master, Tip at bay. "He taught her to mix her Christian religion with the spells, neither upsetting the other. It turned out that she liked spells better than Jesus" (Perkins-Valdez 41). Mawu further resists Tip's ownership of her body by changing her

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<sup>18</sup> Sally Hemings was the slave mistress of Thomas Jefferson. Despite documented and biological evidence of their relationship (Jefferson fathered at least one of Hemings's children), several Jefferson historians claim Sally was no Jefferson's lover and mistress. Efforts to save Jefferson's image appear to be attempt to enforce his legendary persona as the prime example of saintly whiteness. Gary Wills explore Jefferson's position on slavery in *The Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power*.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, the Three-Fifths Clause. Thomas Jefferson was the first president to win an election with voting districts counting slaves as three-fifths of human beings for representation. Supporters of the three-fifths clause claimed blacks were inferior to whites and therefore were not completely human.

given name, Betsy, to that of an African goddess<sup>20</sup>. In contrast, Lizzie's state of resistance exists in her passive bargaining with patriarchy. Early in the novel, twenty-something year old Lizzie questions, "What is love?" (Perkins-Valdez 16). In illustrating the bargains with patriarchy enacted by Lizzie in *Wench*, Perkins-Valdez evokes Jacobs's own narrative through Lizzie's conflicted relationship with her master, Nathan Drayle. Like Jacobs's decision to partake in a relationship with Mr. Sands, Lizzie consciously chooses to enter a relationship with Drayle.

Lizzie's relationship with Drayle begins when Lizzie is barely a teenager—by sixteen Lizzie bears two children fathered by Drayle (Perkins-Valdez 114). Drayle initiates the relationship by presenting Lizzie with benevolent gifts: a cold glass of water on a hot night in the slave quarters, reading lessons, books and horseback riding. "And with each, visit he moved closer and closer to her on the pallet, until finally he was lying beside her [...] at first he asked to touch her. Later he did not. Each touch was like a payment for his kindnesses" (Perkins-Valdez 91-2). Drayle's pursuit of Lizzie through benevolence culminates in his reuniting Lizzie with her sister:

He asked her if she had a wish and taught her the word genie. She said she'd once heard she had a sister. Somewhere close by. Her only living blood relation that she knew of. Could he find her? He promised with a serious face. She believed him and permitted him an extra touch. (Perkins-Valdez 93)

Separation of slave families was commonplace in the antebellum South. The image of a slave mother's children being torn from her grasp by slave traders often appears in both traditional slave narratives and works of rememory like *Wench*. Through including Lizzie's rememory of

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<sup>20</sup> Mawu and Lizzie's names further illustrate the synthesis of Christianity and African religious tradition. While Mawu's name overtly represents elements of a lost African religious tradition, Lizzie's name represents a duality between the two. Lizzie, short for Elizabeth (which derives from Hebrew) represents elements of Christianity.

the reunion with her sister Polly, Perkins-Valdez aims to reflect upon the impact slavery had on the black family in the past and present.

Lizzie recognizes her commodification as a slave woman and ultimately, a sex object in the eyes of Drayle. Through patriarchal bargaining as described by Kandiyoti, Lizzie negotiates her “price” per se. Drayle sets the tone of bargaining with Lizzie from the relationships inception, through his attempts to woo her. What begins as an unconsummated exchange evolves into Lizzie’s intense feelings for Drayle which eventually leads to intimacy. After being moved into the guest bedroom across from Drayle’s own, Lizzie learns the clout of having Drayle as her “man:”

The house slaves had accepted Lizzie as Drayle’s woman, and they now looked to her to convince him of favors. If someone was sick down in the quarters, they asked Lizzie to whisper the news to him so the person would be granted a reprieve. Another time, Lizzie convinced Drayle to let the slaves have extra rations of meat. Each time Lizzie was able to redeem a request, the field slaves accepted her position a bit more. (Perkins-Valdez 105)

According to *Stolen Women* “If you worked in the house, you were more likely to be better clothed and fed, and you could develop special skills. Your children sometimes had opportunities to learn to read and write, and they had less strenuous housework” (Wyatt 16). As Drayle’s mistress, Lizzie enjoys the privileges of being a house slave. In that she is his cook, Lizzie accompanies Drayle on his trips to Tawawa House under the guise of service.

Tawawa House permits Lizzie to feel human and free to express her love for Drayle more openly than on his Tennessee plantation. She also enjoys spending time with the other slave women whose situations are similar to her relationship with Drayle. Unlike Lizzie, the

relationships of the other slave women bargain within are coerced circumstances they learn to survive in. None of the women are courted in the same way as Lizzie. Lizzie along with Mawu, Reenie and Sweet fashion their own temporary community as a means of navigating their time at the resort and rely on one another for support. They share stories of home, family, advice and trauma with one another as a means of catharsis from the brutality several of them face. In *Stolen Women* Wyatt states, “Secrecy was a necessary requirement for survival. Silence about the abuse was a sign of strength” (Wyatt 21). However, Perkins-Valdez writes against the act of silence in that the women share their stories and experiences as a means of writing against the contemporary presence of silence in the African American community in correlation to sexual abuse. For instance, Reenie shares the story of her relationship with her master, Sir:

‘He my brother,’ she said, her voice low and flat. Lizzie almost dropped the bird she was dipping into the tub. ‘Who’s your brother?’ She wiped at her runny eye with the back of her arm. ‘Sir.’ Lizzie tried to digest the news. She had heard about such things. ‘So your daughter, the one that got sold off...’ ‘Sho she my daughter and my neice [...] so I fixed myself so he couldn’t make no more childrens. My family helped me. All the womens and mens gathered round me and prayed over me. All night they went right on praying. Then right before the sun started to gather herself up, us fixed it so it wouldn’t happen no more [...] Sir’s daddy took my own mammy before she got her first blood. She give him three children before he died.’ (Perkins-Valdez 56-7)

The other women shocked by Reenie’s disclosure, vow to help Reenie in any way possible. Similarly, when the strong-willed Mawu decides to utilize her time in Ohio as an opportunity to flee further north she enlists the women’s help.



Being a slave bought to a free state like Ohio was tempting for many slaves who utilized the location as a chance to run away further North. Hence, the Fugitive Slave Act was put into effect. The Fugitive Slave Act ensured slaves travelling North with or without their masters were required to return to their prospective plantations. A turning point in *Wench* occurs when Lizzie's love for Drayle leads her to rationalize that the only way to truly ensure Mawu's safety in light of the Fugitive Slave Act is to tell Drayle. Drayle's reply contradicts his alleged love for Lizzie in that his loyalty is not aligned with Lizzie's womanistic concern for Mawu, but instead his fellow white man. He states, "I've got to tell Tip, Lizzie. I wouldn't be a man if I didn't" (Perkins-Valdez 66). As a member of the dominant group, Drayle seeks to reinforce his position as a white male in the antebellum society through his loyalty to Tip. Rather than pleading with Drayle not to expose Mawu's intentions to run away, Lizzie only asks that he make sure Tip does not "beat her hard" (Perkins-Valdez 66). However, whether or not Drayle suggested such to Tip is debatable:

'Ya'll need to know one thang and one thang only. These here United States will never be free for you. Ya'll are slaves today and you will be slaves tomorrow. Your children will be slaves and your children's children will be slaves.' He wielding the riding crop onto Mawu's back. He was the only white man present. Lizzie stood among the slave men and women. The whip was small[...] But just as Lizzie congratulated herself on Drayle keeping his promise and making sure that the whipping would not be so severe, Tip [...] stripped off Mawu's clothes[...]undid his pants and mounted Mawu from behind[...] Mawu yelled like an animal, a shriek so cold and shrill that Lizzie knew that he had done something unnatural. And he had done it in front of all of them. (Perkins-Valdez 68)

For many, exposing Mawu demonstrates Lizzie's betrayal of her race in exchange for approval in the eyes of a white man. However, Lizzie's actions and intentions reveal a myriad of conflicting emotions and obligations for Lizzie. In keeping with Walker's approach to womanism, Lizzie loves her fellow slave women and acts out of concern for their well-being. Yet, within her position as a slave mistress, Lizzie feels as if her only means of saving Mawu from a fate of being captured, traded or killed by slave catchers is to inform Drayle.

Lizzie was of two minds. She wished she had not told. But if she hadn't, Mawu might be dead. If she had run and been caught, there was no doubt in Lizzie's mind that her friend wouldn't have allowed herself to be taken alive. And what if the others had followed? Drayle had done the right thing. So had she. She wished they could understand why. (Perkins-Valdez 81)

The aforementioned excerpt echoes the DuBoisian notion of double-consciousness in Lizzie's decision making process. After Mawu's public rape, Lizzie's womanistic concern is interpreted by the other slave women, who temporarily banish Lizzie from their makeshift community, as betrayal. Ashamed and rejected, Lizzie begins to question the plausibility of her actions. In telling Drayle, Lizzie bargains her reputation and relationship with the other slave women in exchange for what she views as Mawu's long-term well-being. In taking this responsibility, Lizzie appears to embody the archetypal subservient slave despite her intentions which are rooted in womanism. Conversely, Lizzie did not expect Mawu's punishment to be as harsh and perverse as it was, and at heart her intent was simply to protect a member of her community.

Following Mawu's punishment, and to a further extent Lizzie's punishment for betraying her women, Lizzie begins to examine her relationship with Drayle through a lens similar to Harriet Jacobs's experience. Through the course of the novel, Lizzie's attention shifts from

solely being concerned with Drayle to focusing singularly on her children. Early on in the novel Lizzie nervously prepares to inquire about Drayle's intentions for Nate and Rabbit's futures. As usual she receives no real answer, only sexual advances. Lizzie participates in the bargain with Drayle as a means of advancement and security for herself and her children. However, as the novel's plot progresses, Lizzie's focus shifts from concentrating on her relationship with Drayle to emphasis on her children. Initially, Tawawa House represents a place where Lizzie's relationship with Drayle is allowed to transcend the slave-master binary. However this "sacred" space and Lizzie's identity as Drayle's woman, dissipates as events at the resort serve as constant reminders of her position as property. This revelation allows Lizzie to reevaluate her bargains and like Jacobs she decides rather than place the fate of her children in the hands of their father and master, Drayle, she must take actions to ensure the best for them. "Even though she was going back to Tennessee, she wasn't the same woman. She was something else. All these years, she realized, she had been putting her faith in Drayle to free her children. Now she had to put her faith in herself" (Perkins-Valdez 290).

The novel concludes with Lizzie contemplating whether or not to escape with the resilient Mawu. Lizzie chooses to return to the Shelby County, Tennessee plantation with Drayle and his wife.

He'd had Lizzie tied to the front porch of his cottage all morning long.

She'd been sitting there all day, lapping up water out of a bowl like a dog. Did Drayle really think Lizzie would try to escape when her son's future rested on her decision to return south with him? (Perkins-Valdez 286)

Lizzie's literal leashing to the vacation cabin like an animal symbolizes her deteriorating relationship with Drayle and a reminder of her role within his life. However, Lizzie bargains to

remain a slave as a form of patriarchal bargaining for her children's sake. Prior to leaving the resort, Drayle reveals to Lizzie that Tawawa House is being turned into a school:

‘A school for colored.’ He stopped rocking and Lizzie turned to look at him. He nuzzled his nose in her neck, clearly looking for appreciation [...] For Nate. My son. He needs to get his lessons properly. When we return, I’m going to get him a teacher to come to the house and give him his lessons. You’ve taught him just about everything you can. Now he needs a real education. After that, I’m going to...’ The words ran together. (Perkins 283)

Lizzie chose to remain a slave to ensure the fulfillment of Drayle's promises which mirror Jacobs's decision to remain in the attic of her grandmother's home for seven years not only to avoid recapture, but watch over her children.

Drayle states he knows Lizzie is not going anywhere at two points in the novel: upon learning of Mawu's first plan to escape and again after Lizzie has chosen not to run with Mawu and remain his slave at the end of the novel (Perkins-Valdez 67, 288). In both instances when Drayle makes this statement he believes it is due to Lizzie's unflinching loyalty to him as both his mistress and his property. In actuality, Lizzie's remaining a slave has nothing to do with being loyal to or loving Drayle, but rather her love for her children, especially her daughter. In the novel's conclusion, Lizzie reminisces on the advice given to her by the Drayle plantation's slave matriarch, Big Mama and considers what advice to give her own daughter, Rabbit who Drayle has made no plans to educate like his son, Nate.

As she leaned against the porch post she thought of Rabbit and what she would teacher her. This is what she would say: *Don't give in to the white man. And if you have to give in, don't give your soul over to him. Love yourself first. Fix it so*

*you don't give him any children. If you ever make it to freedom, remember your mammy who tried to be good to you. Hold fast to your women friends because they are going to be there when ain't nobody else there. If you don't believe in God, it's all right. God believes in you. Never Forget your name. Keep track of your years and how old you are. Don't be afraid to say how you feel. Learn a craft so you always have something to barter other than your private parts.*

(Perkins-Valdez 287-8)

In utilizing the term “barter” Perkins-Valdez fully demonstrates Kandiyoti’s idea of patriarchal bargaining within the institution of slavery. In bargaining out of love for her children Lizzie reflects, *“My children ain't the only thing I love. If I was allowed, I reckon I'd love myself, too”* (Perkins-Valdez 286). Given the circumstances, love for self remains the one luxury bargaining with patriarchy cannot afford Lizzie. Ultimately, Dolen Perkins-Valdez’s *Wench* offers a rememory of a time when black women were not allowed to love or own their own bodies and a reminder to present African American women never to stop loving themselves.

## CHAPTER 4

### Conclusion

At the conclusion of her narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs states,

It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them if I could. Yet the retrospection is not altogether without solace for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea. (Jacobs 164)

Jacobs's commentary on remembering her tenure as a slave, as well as the bargain with patriarchy she made to escape the condition, tells of the importance of family, more specifically, motherhood in the African American community. The advice given by the matriarchal figures in *Incidents*, *A Mercy* and *Wench* resonates today. In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* Walker reflects on African American mothers. She paraphrases poet, Okot p'Bitak who states, "For our mothers [...] And all the young women/Have perished in the wilderness" (Walker 234).

However, Walker goes on to state,

But this is not the end of the story, for all the young women – our mothers and grandmothers, ourselves—have not perished in the wilderness. And if we ask ourselves why, and search for and find the answer, we will know beyond all efforts to erase it from our minds, just exactly who, and of what, we black American women are. (Walker 235)

Walker was correct. The story of the African American woman does not end with her "perishing

in the wilderness.” Instead, the story of the African American woman persists through hardships and strife. The experiences of women like Florens, Lizzie and Harriet Jacobs surviving daunting circumstances in order to not only secure their own positions, but simultaneously aid others, is a message rarely communicated presently in reference to women of African descent in America.

Many current representations of African American women center on catty drama or loose morality. Most televised representations derive from reality television where the on-screen drama perpetuates negative stereotypes of African American women. According to Wyatt:

No women are more devalued in our society than women of color. It’s been said that every woman bears the burden of sexual stereotyping at some point during her lifetime. That may be true; white women are often depersonalized, labeled as less than intelligent or incompetent. But the depersonalization of black women focuses on our sexuality first. In our homes, in our neighborhoods, and around the world powerful stereotypes rooted in slavery perpetuated myths about who we are. (Wyatt xvii)

Fortunately, the story of the black woman in America does not solely exist in music videos and reality television drama.

Patsey’s portrayal in the film adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave* dominates discussions about the film, despite the range of black women characters included in the film. The brutalized bodies of Patsey and women like her in popular culture appear as the only way in which enslaved women are permitted to be remembered. However, one of the film’s often overlooked characters directly negates this notion of slave women. Mistress Shaw, a former slave who becomes the “wife” of a plantation owner illustrates the way in which slave women subverted the system of slavery which was intended to keep them oppressed. Mistress Shaw subverts the hierarchy of the

white patriarchal system during slavery, in that she rises from the bottom and positions herself as equal to a white woman. She states to Northrup,

Ha! You worry for me? Got no cause to worry for my sensibilities. I ain't felt the end of a lash in 'mo years than I cain recall. Ain't worked a field, neither. Where one time I served, now I got others servin' me. The cost to my current existence be Massa Shaw broadcasting his affections, 'n me enjoyin his pantomime of fidelity. If that what keep me from the cotton pickin' niggers, that what it be. A small and reasonable price to be paid 'fo sure. (McQueen)

The brief scene in which Mistress Shaw explains her bargain to Northrup, offers a wider view of slave women on film that what many expect and consider the norm. Mistress Shaw's bargain with white patriarchy demonstrates Kandiyoti's theory of patriarchal bargaining in a way similar to that of *A Mercy* and *Wench*. In including the scene director, offers a visual rememory of slavery as a means of continuity. In sharing the converging stories of Patsey and Mistress Shaw within Northrup's narrative, progresses the narrative of slave women in America.

Rememories of slavery such as Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench* refute stereotypes of black women and offer an explanation as to how generalizations of African American women emerged. Furthermore, Jacobs's bargain with the white patriarchal system, as well as the systems of patriarchy the fictional Florens and Lizzie bargain within add depth to the way in which slave women are portrayed in history. The "incidents" expressed in these works serve as a means of explaining the current condition of African American women, as well as the role of dual patriarchies in shaping America. Further research on the bargains of women within patriarchal structures should reflect the universality at the heart Kandiyoti's theory of patriarchal bargaining. Research efforts should aim to offer a comparative analysis of



the ways in which patriarchal bargains are illustrated within the literature of various cultures. Additionally, the same approach may be taken in the context of studying the concept rememory as seen outside of the African American literary tradition.

Rememories of the patriarchal bargains slave women enacted, mirror the bargains African American women continue to make today. Through current bargains African American women also subvert the hierarchal social structure in order to improve not only their own lives but those of their children and their futures. Current bargaining tactics for African American women are just as selfless as the womanist actions of Florens, Lizzie and Harriet Jacobs. Ultimately, bargaining within their workplaces, relationships, families and communities not only as a means of survival, but also as a means to dispel rather than succumb to “the fate of slave girls.”

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