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(Dis)Possessed Black Youth: How America's Architecture Challenges Coming of Age in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century African American Women's Literature

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(DIS)POSSESSED BLACK YOUTH: HOW AMERICA'S ARCHITECTURE CHALLENGES COMING OF AGE IN TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Margaret Frymire Kelly

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Carol Mason, Professor of English and Gender and Women's Studies

Lexington, Kentucky

2022

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

(DIS)POSSESSED BLACK YOUTH: HOW AMERICA'S ARCHITECTURE CHALLENGES COMING OF AGE IN TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

This dissertation advances studies of Black childhood, particularly Black girlhood, by examining how African American women writers depict the troubled journey to adulthood in stories of segregation, immigration, and incarceration. I argue that authors of four representative literary works emphasize architectural structures as well as ancestral hauntings among which Black children grow up. Without examining the material structures, we cannot understand the strategies these haunted Black youth deploy to reach adulthood. Examining the architectural structures that the protagonists of *Maud Martha* (1953), *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959)*, Zami* (1982)*,* and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) grow up in and around, I demonstrate how each protagonist develops an alternative model of adulthood to challenge whiteness as property and to reckon with haunting. Looking at structures from the kitchenette to the prison in these coming-of-age narratives, I endeavor to show how whiteness as property shifts shape to continue to subject young Black people and keep them from the full rights of adulthood. In each chapter, I expound on the history and development of a different architectural structure. I follow that context with close readings that illuminate how each protagonist experiences haunting in a particular built environment on their journey to adulthood and how that spurs them on to develop alternative maturity markers. In chapter one, I grapple with two narratives of segregation. I argue that Gwendolyn Brooks's Maud Martha, unable to buy a home because of redlining restrictions, builds a rich interiority to combat the haunting she endures in her oppressive kitchenette. Conversely, Paule Marshall's Selina refuses to bow to familial and societal pressure to purchase property. Instead, to dispel the haunting she experiences in her Brooklyn brownstone, she returns to the Caribbean to reclaim her ancestral memory. In chapter two, I examine how Audre Lorde's experience as immigrant and lesbian propels her to embrace rather than reject haunting. I assert that

Lorde queers the diaspora as she draws on the erotic as power to create a “house of difference” and reject the monumental whiteness of the United States. In chapter three, I emphasize how whiteness as property changes shape but not substance throughout U.S. history by examining Parchman Prison. I illustrate how Jesmyn Ward’s protagonist, Jojo, and his younger sister Kayla, practice conjure to cope with the ghosts that appear to them and how these inherited conjure abilities offer protection for their futures threatened by incarceration. While each protagonist draws on a different mechanism to reckon with haunting: building interiority, claiming ancestral memory, using the erotic as power, and practicing conjure, in so doing, they construct homes, create spaces for survival, and develop models for adulthood outside of whiteness as property. Thus, they become self-possessed in a world built to dispossess them.

KEYWORDS: Black girlhood, Black childhood, Black women’s writing, property, haunting, coming-of-age narratives

Margaret Frymire Kelly

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December 5, 2022

Date

(DIS)POSSESSED BLACK YOUTH: HOW AMERICA'S ARCHITECTURE CHALLENGES COMING OF AGE IN TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

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INTRODUCTION

In the last semester of my master's program, I had the opportunity to take Dr. Nazera Wright's African American literature seminar. The class covered the works of Black intellectuals from the late nineteenth century to the present-day spanning Anna Julia Cooper to Ta-Nehisi Coates. It was there that I learned about the work of Gertrude Bustill Mossell, a Black journalist, writer, and advocate for racial equality, who argues in her essay "A Lofty Study" that every person "engaged in literary work…feels greatly the need of a quiet nook to write in" (126).[1] She details how Black women might decorate a small attic space for such a purpose with "creamy paper" bordered in crimson velvet, a desk suitable for one's stature, a movable lamp, and comfortable cushions (127-8). She asserts, "These suggestions can be improved upon, but the one central idea, a place to one's self without disturbing the household economy, would be gained" (128). Mossell continues that while there might be a household library, usually men, who have been "educated to work alone," are "very selfishly" disinclined to women sharing their workspace, which creates "the necessity of a study of one's own" (128). An educated woman and a member of the Black middle class, Mossell and her husband Dr. Nathan Francis Mossell likely owned their own home. Even so, Mossell recognized that to work in support of Black women, she would need to carve out her own space around men. As such Mossell positioned herself thoughtfully, both in her physical workspace in the house and in her public presentation as a writer. Publishing under her husband's initials as Mrs. N.F. Mossell, she identified herself as a wife and signaled an emphasis on family as well

[1] For more on Mossell's life see Nazera Sadiq Wright's "'Teach Your Daughters': Black Girlhood and Mrs. N. F. Mossell's Advice Column in the *New York Freeman*." *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, University of Illinois Press, 2016, pp. 93–117.

as career (Wright 99). In so doing, she upheld "her intention to defend and celebrate black womanhood without disrupting the delicate balance of black male-female relations or challenging masculine authority" (Braxton xxviii). Indeed, Mossell was acutely aware of this "delicate balance" and recognized how to work it to her best advantage. She writes, "Our men are too much hampered by their contentions with their white brothers to afford to stop and fight their black sisters, so we slip in and glide along quietly" (100). In other words, by making use of a quiet out-of-the-way space and framing herself and her work as that of a wife, she was able to write prolifically and purposefully without upsetting household functions and male expectations. Essentially, in her brief four-page essay, Mossell suggests that possession of a physical space is necessary for women writers to achieve their work, and that the attic space, removed from the rest of house, is ideal for this purpose.

Mossell's essay was published in 1894, over thirty years before Virginia Woolf delivered a series of lectures at Cambridge which would become what we know as *A Room of One's Own* (1929).[2] In her now iconic essay, Woolf argues that, historically, women have not achieved the fame of literary writers like William Shakespeare, not because they are untalented, but because they lack property (a room they own with lock and key) and income. I first encountered Woolf's ideas in high school and later read her essay in my undergraduate coursework. I knew, of course, that men and white women were taught more widely than Black women. Nonetheless, I was floored that I had neared the end of my master's degree in English unaware of Mossell's work. When Woolf's essay was so renowned as to be embedded in the fabric of Western culture, how had we,

[2] Woolf spoke at Girton and Newnham, two of University of Cambridge's women's colleges, and thus her audience would have primarily comprised affluent educated white women.

as a discipline, not made Mossell, a predecessor to Woolf's ideas, more prominent in literary studies?[3] At that moment, I began to wonder what other literary contributions Black women writers made that we were under-examining. I didn't think we should stop teaching Woolf, whose lengthy essay goes beyond the scope of Mossell's to explore the ramifications of the historical lack of physical space for (white) women at large. But I was captivated by the fact that Mossell's innovative idea–that women needed space dedicated to literary work to succeed as writers–existed more than thirty years before Virginia Woolf delivered her lecture. As scholars, we were failing to give Mossell the recognition she deserved. As such, we were missing an integral piece of literary history, upholding the overwhelming whiteness of canonical Anglophone literature, and contributing to systemic racism within our discipline.[4]

In pursuit of essays predating or relating to Woolf's, I encountered Alice Walker's "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1983). The work of Mossell and Woolf is predicated on having the economic means to own personal space. But Walker demonstrates how creativity manifests differently for Black women who cannot own space. Walker cites enslaved poet Phillis Wheatley as an example. Wheatley neither owned a room nor herself. She produced prolific poetry, yet it was shaped by the oppressor's language and Wheatley's experiences within it. Walker notes that a creative Black woman, "born or made a slave" living in the eighteenth century, would receive

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[3] Woolf's essay, and its title, is ubiquitous. There's a self-proclaimed independent, feminist bookstore established in 1975 in downtown Madison, Wisconsin called A Room of One's Own. Evie Dunmore's popular historical romance which follows a suffragette's love story is titled *A Rogue of One's Own* (2020). An essay by Suhasini Yeeda titled "A Roof of One's Own" appeared in a 2020 issue of *Ms.* magazine. There are song titles, bands, literary magazines, and women's co-working spaces all named after Woolf's essay.

[4] Since that moment, I have always taught the two essays in tandem to my women's literature classes. I ask my students to discuss the differences and similarities and to consider how race, class, time period, and nationality/citizenship affect both the content and the reception of the essays.

similar treatment to what Woolf details a talented white woman born in the sixteenth century would experience. She would have been feared, alone, and perhaps driven to insanity without space and income with which to fuel her art. But Walker notes that Black women would also have had to contend with “chains, guns, the lash, the ownership of one’s body by someone else, submission to an alien religion” (317). In other words, the obstacles to Black women writing were more, in every sense of the word, than those white women faced. Wheatley died of malnutrition and neglect, which aligned with Walker’s assertion that talented Black women not in possession of themselves died or went insane. Nevertheless, Walker admires the resiliency apparent in Wheatley’s endeavor to keep the song of Black women alive by writing even while dispossessed of space and self.

Through Mossell, Woolf, and Walker, I saw that ownership of property and ownership of self were integral to the proliferation of women’s writing, and I observed how challenges to ownership shaped Black women’s writing in particular. For instance, Walker notes that Wheatley personifies Liberty with white-centric language by describing her as golden haired (318). I couldn’t unsee the complexities of property and possession that appeared in Black women’s writing across decades. I began to wonder: How did space mean differently for Black women writers? How did their inability to own themselves or other property shape their work? How did their characters occupy or make use of physical space? How did Black women writers survive and create in a nation whose very foundations were made to exclude them? How did their literary endeavors reflect those experiences?

In my PhD coursework, I saw the beginnings of an answer to those questions when I read Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Linda Brent's garret, her hiding space in her grandmother's house, is cramped and oppressive, but it is also a space in which she is free from and can surveil her enslaver, Dr. Flint (92). In Nazera Wright's *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*, she argues that "African American women writers reconceived rigid spaces by showing their value" and that Linda used her garret as a space of "mental freedom" (15). Wright suggests that "physical barriers" did not become obstacles but that Black girls used them as a place to retreat and "think, imagine, strategize solutions, and look forward" (15). Indeed, while lacking in the comfortable furnishings that Mossell describes, we could consider Linda's attic hideaway as a kind of precursor to Mossell's lofty attic study. Jacobs's very chapter title, "The Loophole of Retreat," in and of itself, indicates how space can be used in complex ways. A loophole is ambiguous by nature. It's an out, but one that is murkily defined. It functions as an alternative to the standard or convention. Similarly, a retreat is a space of refuge or safety. As such, Linda's aptly named "Loophole of Retreat" – the garret – offers her a way to surveil her oppressor unobserved and find "mental freedom" even as she's physically confined.

I had long understood that America's architecture was important to its literature.[5] From Charles Chesnutt, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe to Shirley Jackson, Toni Morrison, and Carmen Maria Machado, haunted houses liberally dot the American

[5] The choice to use "America's" here and in the dissertation title is intentional. While America spans two continents and contains a host of countries, here, I refer to America not as a geographical entity but as a national imaginary. When I use "America" I mean how the United States of America envisions itself. In using the possessive "America's," I aim to indicate that these architectural structures are also an integral part of that national imaginary. They are part and parcel of the idea of "America."

literary landscape. But with Mossell, Woolf, and Walker in mind and with my new understanding of Jacobs's subversive use of space, I recognized that other architectural structures across literary texts were ripe for analysis. Linda Brent's garret and Nazera Wright's reading of it offered one such way to think about architecture and begot questions about whether the age of protagonists had anything to do with their experiences in various built environments. I wondered what other kinds of structures occupied our literary landscape especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I pondered how haunting appeared in different ways than the conventional early American haunted house. And I began to observe how shifting laws surrounding property and ownership altered our literary landscape. With that in mind, I decided to pursue a project that explored the patterns of possession and property in Black women's writing. I was endlessly enthralled by the ways architecture and space played fundamental roles in plot and character development from the kitchenette in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953) to the porch in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). I was especially interested in how those structures shaped the lives of youthful protagonists. As I read widely across twentieth and twenty-first century Black women's literature, I noticed the ways in which property and possession were available to white characters were not the same for their Black counterparts who had to deal with the haunting legacy of slavery in a nation built to exclude them. I observed youthful Black protagonists experience even more challenges as they journeyed toward adulthood and narrowed my research to coming-of-age narratives. As I returned to property, possession, and age again and again, I determined to make a study of how the architectural spaces that Black youth grew up in and around influenced their journeys to adulthoods and how they grappled with ghosts along the way.

In essence, this dissertation seeks to further the studies of Black childhood, particularly Black girlhood, by examining how African American women writers depict the troubled journey to adulthood in stories of segregation, immigration, and incarceration. I argue that authors of four representative literary works emphasize architectural structures as well as ancestral hauntings among which Black children grow up. Without examining the material structures, we cannot understand the strategies these haunted Black youth deploy to reach adulthood. Examining the architectural structures that the protagonists of *Maud Martha* (1953), *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), *Zami* (1982), and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) grow up in and around, this dissertation demonstrates how each protagonist develops an alternative model of adulthood to challenge whiteness as property and to reckon with haunting. Looking at structures from the kitchenette to the prison in these coming-of-age narratives, I endeavor, in the following chapters, to show how whiteness as property shifts shape to continue to subject Black youth and keep them from the full rights of adulthood. While each protagonist draws on a different mechanism to reckon with haunting: building interiority, claiming ancestral memory, using the erotic as power, and practicing conjure, in so doing, they construct homes, create spaces for survival, and develop models for adulthood outside of whiteness as property. Thus, they become self-possessed in a world built to dispossess them.

Each chapter that follows this introduction depends upon certain shared critical and historical contexts, which I now address in turn. Particularly, I now move on to lay out, first, a brief literature review that elucidates my methodological approaches to the fiction and memoir analyzed and, second, a tour of key historical contexts, including the

African diaspora, the Great Migration, redlining, the GI Bill, white flight and suburbanization, *Brown v. Board of Education*, and whiteness as property. Each of these contexts is germane to the stories written and lives lived by Gwendolyn Brooks, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, and Jesmyn Ward. Lastly, I provide a description of the chapters to follow.

Methodology and Critical Context

In this section, I expound on the methods I use to analyze the aforementioned literature. I draw on three central concepts that shape my work: architecture, haunting, and age. First, I clarify how architectural structures have functioned in literary works historically and what they can tell us about the characters that grow up in and around them, offering an example of the kind of analysis I will do in-depth in subsequent chapters. Then, drawing on Kathleen Brogan and Avery Gordon, I explicate the concept haunting. Finally, I discuss age as a social and cultural category establishing how theorization of age is integral to my study and to the understanding of U.S. rights and history at large.

A key intervention of my dissertation is its emphasis on architectural structures. I demonstrate that in examining the material structures of the United States, we can better understand how adulthood has been withheld from Black youth. Rashad Shabazz, whose work I return to in detail in chapter one, writes:

> Space is one of the most important and significant illustrators of uneven development, access, and social order. Its organization and how people are situated within it reflects social hierarchies. Geography makes social and political inequalities visible by situating them within physical space. It is not a coincidence that poor people, people of color, immigrants, the sick, the disabled, prisoners, women, sexual minorities, and other marginalized groups live in bracketed

> geographies. The scope of their political power often mirrors their spatial marginalization. (45)

In short, Shabazz argues that physical spaces are used to oppress marginalized people, and by examining these spaces, we can better understand the relationship between space and oppression. In particular, examining the ways in which spaces are organized, erected, maintained, and transformed across centuries illuminates how they persist in oppressing Black life.[6]

This understanding of the importance of space and its power is not unique to Shabazz though. Indeed, there is strong precedence in American literature from Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Harriett Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) to the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe for the importance of architectural structures in literary narratives and their relevance to American history and culture. William Gleason's work in *Sites Unseen: Architecture, Race, and American Literature* (2011), which examines "the built environments of slavery and segregation" to demonstrate the importance of race to domestic space, exemplifies the kind of work I seek to do with architecture and literature (27, 29). Using pattern books like *The Architecture of Country Houses*, Gleason argues that Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (c. 1853-1861) demonstrates the "search for black homeownership…is

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[6] Rashad Shabazz does significant work on the kitchenette which I will draw on in my analysis of *Maud Martha.* He posits that "policing, surveillance, and architectures of confinement were used to 'spatialize blackness' in Chicago, which produced racialized and gendered consequences for Black people on the city's South Side" (1). He further says that urban planning and architecture contributed to the creation of a "prisonized landscape" (2). Shabazz focuses on the effects of these carceral spaces on the development of Black masculinity. My project builds on his work by extending the concept of spatializing Blackness to Black women and girls. See Shabazz, Rashad. *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago*. University of Illinois Press, 2015.

inextricably linked to self-ownership" (28).[7] He argues that freedom is more than an escape from slavery or release from incarceration: "it demands a free and safe habitation. Complete self-ownership, in other words, requires homeownership" (44). This tension between ownership of property and ownership of self, between possession and dispossession is the hinge upon which my dissertation turns. Where Gleason's work limits itself to nineteenth century domestic spaces, mine moves beyond the home and into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In applying Gleason's thesis, we can see how built environments perpetuate segregation in the works of Gwendolyn Brooks and Paule Marshall. To complement and complicate Gleason's thesis, I not only examine the domestic spaces of midcentury America – the kitchenette and the brownstone – but also larger public spaces like the monuments of D.C. and Mississippi's Parchman Prison. In my analysis, I reveal how these architectural structures impede Black youth on their journey to adulthood as they reckon with ancestral hauntings.

My dissertation, in agreement with other critics, asserts that Black youth experience hauntings as a result of erased memory and disconnection from their ancestors' homelands. I engage with haunting, which has its roots in the gothic, on the level of cultural criticism. As such, I examine what haunting tells us about race, culture, and gender in the U.S. rather than what the gothic means for national identity or the canon.[8] Thus, Kathleen Brogan's concept of "cultural hauntings" is of particular import

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[7] Architectural pattern books were common nineteenth century texts that depicted architectural layouts for homes alongside author commentary on subjects ranging from the "ideal" American style to heating and ventilation.

[8] Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) established the Gothic as a serious critical endeavor in American literature. He argues that American fiction is "bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction...a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (xxiv). While Fiedler's work has been justly criticized for its overwhelmingly whiteness and maleness, his work is *the* text that justified the Gothic as a serious mode worthy of analysis in American literature. Fiedler posits that because America lacks significant national or literary history, its fiction is

to my project. “Cultural hauntings” are ghost stories in which an exploration of “a people’s historical consciousness” occurs, a literal ghost appears, and the plot moves from a negative to a positive haunting (5-6). I build on Brogan’s understanding of how haunting engages with erased history and invisibility, but where her analysis encompasses literature by women of color in general, mine limits itself to work by Black women. I expand Brogan’s argument by identifying architecture and age as key shaping components of the haunting. And I disagree with Brogan’s notion of a linear negative to positive haunting progression. Instead, I demonstrate that hauntings, like much of the gothic, are not linear but recursive. Furthermore, in contrast to Brogan, I examine literary works with corporeal ghosts, by which I mean ghosts that appear as bodies (however ephemeral) and ones with more amorphous, or unembodied, hauntings. To do so, I draw on Avery Gordon’s notion that ghost stories are ones “concerning exclusions and invisibilities” not necessarily ones with a corporeal ghost (*Ghostly Matters* 17). Indeed, Gordon asserts, “that which appears absent can be a seething presence” (17). There doesn’t need to be a ghost for the protagonist to experience haunting as a result of traumatic racialized and gendered inheritance. By my definition then, for a character to experience haunting, they must encounter a corporeal ghost *or* find themselves plagued by intangible exclusions and absences. This latter takes the form of a disconnection from culture, memory, and homeland, so fierce that it seems to have a “seething presence” and

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“doomed” to be haunted by its exploitation of the land and non-white peoples (xxvi). Ultimately, Fiedler concludes that the greatest horrors that haunt American fiction are “intimate aspects of our own minds” (xxxiv). See Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Criterion Books, 1960. Teresa Goddu further this argument in *Gothic America* (1997) by making race a critical point of analyses. She suggests that America can situate the Gothic historically and socially, not simply psychologically, pointing specifically to slavery. Where Fiedler relegates the female gothic novel to the margins, Goddu examines it alongside the Southern and the African American, arguing that which has been dubbed regional or marginal is actually a central part of our national discourse (10). See also Edwards, Justin. *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic.* Iowa UP, 2003.

affects all aspects of these young Black protagonists' lives. In short, haunting is the cultural residue of slavery and/or colonization made manifest

Moreover, I conceive of this haunting as a form of the uncanny. Uncanny elements necessitate "the constant blending of the self and other, the familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown" (Perry and Sederholm 16). Marisa Parham explains that haunting is a feeling that results from someone else's trauma that when encountered becomes both personal and truthful to the self (2). Similarly, Joanne Lipson Freed defines haunting as an encounter that "troubles the boundaries between past and present, here and elsewhere, real and unreal, familiar and strange" (4). This slippage between past and present and personal trauma and inherited trauma makes itself particularly apparent in these works as the protagonists grapple with the vestiges of slavery and/or colonization. In the subsequent chapters, I draw on additional scholars from Kameelah Martin to Yogita Goyal, to delineate haunting further as I grapple with each manifestation of it across these literary works.

The last key concept that frames my dissertation is age. Humans have always biologically aged; it is a constant of human life. But the meaning we assign to biological age has changed over the centuries. As Field and Syrett note, "Age is both a biological reality and a social construction" (1). While people biologically mature and change at different rates, it is a cultural construction to assign meaning to age (1). Ages that are culturally significant to us now, eighteen or twenty-one per se, cease to have meaning when we remove the legal privileges assigned to those ages. Because of racist law and policy, the protagonists in the representative literary works I examine, frequently are not afforded the same kinds of rights and privileges granted white people of the same age. As

such, culturally significant ages for white people mean differently for people of other races. For that reason, I am less concerned with a particular biological age or ages in this dissertation. When looking at Black female protagonists, in particular, I draw on Sari Edelstein's concept of "youth" (85). She argues that age functions differently for women than for men. "Youth" is not necessarily a biological timeframe but a mode in which there is "interior and exterior discovery and development" (85). For women, this can happen at any point and is not necessarily tied to a biological clock. Geta LeSeur similarly argues that Black female protagonists tend to be older than their white counterparts and sometimes have passed the physical age of adolescence (102). Thus, I am interested in the ability of youthful protagonists, who mostly happen to be teenagers and twentysomethings, to achieve culturally scripted maturity markers. Edelstein confirms that "maturity is a culturally scripted performance that requires conscious effort rather than an inevitable and intrinsic stage of life" (16). As such, I use the term "Black youth" for both male and female protagonists to describe the period in which they experience discovery and development as they attempt to meet societal maturity markers. For the protagonists in these texts, part of the journey to adulthood is reckoning with the haunting they have inherited and learning how to enact the script of adulthood when the markers of maturity society ascribes to have been denied them. Across decades, these markers have ranged from marrying and buying property to purchasing a car and becoming financially independent. But to understand the significance of maturity markers in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we must first examine how age and adulthood were constructed in the previous century.

Edelstein, in her examination of nineteenth century literature, demonstrates how we naturalized the cultural aspects of age so that they became societal norms which perpetuated power structures and social relations. For instance, in the nineteenth century, white men gained political power and greater social influence when they reached majority, but white women/girls, who could consent legally to sex as early as ten years old in some states, never achieved that same kind of political maturity. Edelstein argues that adulthood was "linked to autonomy, independence, and the privilege of visibility" and that it was withheld from white women, all people of color, and often, the elderly (15). Perhaps the theme of the nineteenth century, in terms of age anyway, is how adulthood was withheld from everyone but white men. Edelstein argues that white systems denied enslaved people the privilege of age (i.e., cultural privilege of achieving biological old age) by limiting their potential to age through hard labor (45). The denial of age status, especially as it concerned "manhood" – a white concept – became another denial of Black humanity (45).

In addition to being denied age status, when Black people were allowed to grow old, they were disadvantaged by uneven aging. Edelstein explains, "[T]he stresses of racism result in premature aging and shorter life spans, revealing that age is a measure wholly inflected by other subject positions and must therefore be considered from an intersectional perspective" (17). I take this into consideration throughout my dissertation by showing how maturity markers differ across race, gender, sexuality, and culture. The maturity makers available to Maud Martha, a married heterosexual Black woman in 1940s Chicago, are not the same as those available to Audre Lorde, the lesbian child of Caribbean immigrants, in 1950s New York City.

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, the ability for all women and Black men to reach what Corinne T. Field terms "equal adulthood" was virtually impossible, in large part because white men refused to treat Black men and all women as adults. Similar to Edelstein, Field approaches age as a social category and defines equal adulthood as "the idea that all human beings, regardless of race or sex, should be able to claim the same rights, opportunities, and respect as they age" (1). Within the context of the women's rights movement from 1770-1870, Field elucidates the development of equal adulthood alongside her examination of debates about maturity. In so doing, she allows us a better understanding of how "adulthood shaped democratic rights and freedoms and...how democratic ideals have shaped what it means to grow up and grow old" (5). At the same time, she demonstrates how the ability to be perceived as mature, and receive the rights of adulthood, historically, for women and racial minorities "has depended not on biology but upon the shifting understandings of political authority, economic opportunity, religion, and science" (10).

When the women's rights activists of the nineteenth century fought for greater equality, they chose to focus on a change in perception/status in terms of maturity rather than argue for an alteration to legal standing. To understand how this choice affected conceptions of adulthood from the nineteenth century through today, we must first understand how Enlightenment thinkers characterized age and maturity (12). In seventeenth-century England and America, Enlightenment, Puritan, and Whig reformers argued that authority had to be based on consent and that children could not provide such consent; neither could Africans or women since (as the reformers argued) they were so like children (12). With this line of thinking came an increased emphasis on "white male

maturation as the fundamental distinction between those capable of governing themselves and those naturally subject to the will of others" in both private and public settings. (12). John Locke, William Blackstone, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau greatly shaped our understanding of age in the Western world. These thinkers were not interested in raising the legal "age qualifications in criminal, statutory, and ecclesiastical law" but rather "each sought to prove that mature white men had the right to govern themselves…while all other people should remain in subjection throughout their lives" (13). Locke, Blackstone, and Rousseau asserted that white sons outgrew the care of slaves, servants, and mothers and achieved equality with their fathers (13). Locke and Blackstone declared twenty-one as this age of majority and Rousseau settled on twenty-five, which were the respective ages for the legal end of guardianship in England and France.[9] Essentially, these men made arguments that promoted their own self-interest.

Let's consider Locke and Blackstone in more depth as their theories would have a profound impact on U.S. law. Locke aimed to demonstrate that man was a being who asserted both freedom and rationality with age (13).[10] He was uninterested in debating twenty-one as *the* age of self-governance acknowledging that this was an arbitrary man-made law. He was more interested in asserting age as a marker of independence because it distinguished his line of thinking from the defenders of absolute monarchy (13-4). Historically, birth rank and status mattered much more than age (14). Locke suggested

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[9] As Rosseau did not have quite the impact that Locke and Blackstone did on U.S. law and culture, he is relegated to a footnote. Rousseau lined up particular natural stages with age and said it was imperative that young boys attended to their education within this timeline. Age was, obviously, of great importance. For women, he said they were primarily meant to please men and that this duty was the same throughout their life. Charm, beauty, and dependence were all to be used to make a man care for another person and make him more humane in general (20). And many white women claimed Rousseau as their champion because he emphasized the power of female influence (21).

[10] See Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government.* 1690, p. 291.

that nonwhite people's inability to rule had to do with environmental and educational factors rather than inherent deficiency leaving space for nonwhite maturity in the future while also justifying white supremacy at the time (16-7).

Then, William Blackstone, the first law professor at Oxford, arrived on the scene nearly a century later. He built on Locke's theories and tied in more explicit guidelines for property. Blackstone claimed that those without property could not be trusted to act with full maturity and that the gain of material property, and thus material independence, was necessary for self-governance (18). Blackstone asserted that women could not reach this stage even if they owned property because when they married their legal identity was suspended (18). Widows and heiresses were exceptions with no political rights. Blackstone argued "that wives, servants, and employees occupied a legal position exactly equivalent to children not yet of full age" (18). Thus, we can see a precedent in English law, which heavily influenced U.S. law, for how any person not white, male, and property-owning was infantilized and disenfranchised. Field writes, "It would be hard to overstate Blackstone's influence in America" (19). Indeed, as my dissertation makes evident in the subsequent chapters, we have and continue to use the ownership of property as a determining factor for maturity. As I turn to a discussion on whiteness as property toward the end of this introduction, we can see even more clearly how deeply Blackstone influenced U.S. notions of adulthood.

But for now, I want to stick with the concept of age. Field contends that maturity, rather than labor, allows a man to own himself (179). Indeed, my entire dissertation is predicated on the idea that achieving markers of maturity allows those who are dispossessed to become self-possessed. But what happens when the socially and

culturally accepted makers of maturity are not available? In Field's epilogue she asks, "In short, might it still be important to ask what counts as equal adulthood and who can achieve it?" (174) Of course, I would say. As such, the "what counts" and "who can" are, in part, the questions my dissertation answers.

Markers of maturity have shifted across the decades as culture has changed and developed over time. In midcentury America, expectations for adulthood were completing school, marrying, purchasing a home, and having children. Waters, Carr, and Kefalas, in their book *Coming of Age in America,* argue that achieving adulthood was attained by accumulating maturity markers which "in the immediate postwar period of the 1950s was…uniform, swift, and unproblematic" (1, 9). They assert that the journey to adulthood was easier because of the postwar economic boom and the GI Bill which allowed young people to access affordable housing and educational opportunities (12). This analysis is partially true. Adulthood was more attainable for white people, and especially white men. But for Black youth, achieving adulthood was significantly complicated by Jim Crow law and systemic racism which prohibited them from partaking of economic benefits like those offered by the GI Bill. My first chapter in particular explores how Black girls living in midcentury America invent new maturity markers when the conventional ones are withheld from them.

As we move into the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, economic and cultural conditions continue to change. Advances in women's rights and civil liberties opened new pathways for women to achieve adulthood outside of marriage and children. Recessions, like the one in 2008, made establishing independent housing more difficult. Changing attitudes around sex and marriage resulted in more children

born out of wedlock (2). And achieving adulthood for Black youth continues to be complicated by the insidious and ever-present threat of racism. Indeed, Edelstein argues that “Black adulthood in the early twenty-first century is still defined by threat of death, an anxiety that one’s life is not wholly in his/her possession, not guaranteed the right to mature and age without the specter of imminent theft or violence” (69). This inability to achieve culturally scripted maturity markers exacerbates the struggle to possess one’s self. The challenges faced by the protagonists I examine showcase the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality alter the markers of maturity. Young people continue to face a different cultural and world stage than their parents. Waters, et. al assert that in this context, America’s youth have become “more creative in the cultural scripts they adopt to think about what adulthood means” (15). They suggest that owning a car and a cell phone are two such points of maturity as these items allow youth to move and communicate without their parents. While the work of Waters, et. al concentrates on real American youth, their findings are reflected in America’s literature.

The markers of maturity that Waters, et. al identify are still fraught for Black youth. Mobility, home ownership, and other markers of maturity are complicated, dangerous, and difficult when one is Black, and the literature I examine reflects those real threats to Black youth in our current reality. In thinking about how maturity markers differ for Black and white youth, Geta LeSeur’s analysis on the bildungsroman offers some clarity. She asserts that the Black bildungsroman differs from the white bildungsroman because writers of African descent grappled with the conditions of slavery and racism; they wrote as “an affirmation of [their] emancipations” (21).[11] Indeed, the

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[11] In *Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman*, LeSeur sets out to make a comparative study between the African American and West Indian bildungsroman separating her analysis

journeys of Black youth toward adulthood demonstrate the struggles to gain that freedom and the resilience and creativity it takes to affirm it. In the following chapters, I demonstrate the ways in which Black youth must be innovative in their development of maturity markers in order to create an alternative path to adulthood and become self-possessed.

Historical Context

Before delving into chapter descriptions and outlining the trajectory of the dissertation, I establish a broader overarching framework by addressing some of the historical issues that not only affected the living conditions of Black people in midcentury America, but also deeply impacted the interpretation of property and adulthood throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These conditions include the African diaspora, the Great Migration, the GI Bill, redlining, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the creation of the suburb as a white space, and the concept of whiteness as property.

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by gender and nationality. She posits that the protagonist of a West Indian coming of age story looks to understand their cultural roots and the relationship between self and home (1). The African American bildungsroman, she asserts, works as a protest about slavery, racism, and white supremacy (1). LeSeur offers some truly insightful analysis, but in her strict binary opposition between West Indian and African American, she loses the nuance of works like *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Zami* which operate across national boundaries. Rather than classifying *Brown Girl, Brownstones* as West Indian, LeSeur categorizes it as African American. But as I show in my first chapter, Selina's struggle is very much about self and home, while it is also a protest against white supremacy. LeSeur also tackles *Maud Martha* arguing that Maud Martha experiences "self-hatred" because she (and others) view herself as ugly (148). This assertion glosses over Maud Martha's elevation of the everyday and especially ignores her comparison of herself to "cocoa straight" (Brooks 195). Finally, LeSeur argues that the African American novel is born of protest and the West Indian of interior consciousness (27). In my analysis in the first chapter, I break down this binary and argue that *Maud Martha* is a novel about interior consciousness which is harnessed to challenge white supremacy.

The African Diaspora

The term "African diaspora," made popular by scholars in the mid-twentieth century, is used to reference the scattering of African peoples across the world "to form a distinct, transnational community" outside of their original homeland (Butler 34). Deriving from the Greek work *diaspeirein*, diaspora, at its root, means to scatter or disperse (34). While there have been several African diasporas throughout history, that which scholars generally mean when they use the term, and the one of most relevance to this dissertation, is the diaspora created by the Atlantic slave trade and European colonization. This African diaspora is sometimes referred to as the Black Atlantic and "incorporate[s] the four continents of Europe, the Americas, and Africa" (Falola 1).[12] Over a period of almost four hundred years, approximately ten million Africans were forcibly removed from their homelands and enslaved in the Americas. Over ninety percent of these people were removed to the Caribbean and Latin America (Butler 35). The impact of the Atlantic slave trade and European colonization on Western and African peoples, cultures, and economies cannot be overstated. Indeed, Toyin Falola argues that African diaspora:

> involves complex networks and relations between Africa and the various places that have a black presence…The consequences of the diaspora are enormous and long-lasting. Distance and space are overcome in such a way that the past (history) informs the present (politics). If the West traumatized Africans in slavery and conquest, the African diaspora keeps the memory of slavery alive in the politics and practices of black solidarity. (3)

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[12] For a theorization of the Black Atlantic as a transnational culture that transcends nationality and ethnicity see Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness.* Harvard University Press, 1995.

In essence, the past traumas of slavery and colonization transcend national boundaries and inform the present course of politics and culture. Naturally, then, the legacies of slavery and colonization permeate a key aspect of Western culture: literature. And the four literary works I examine herein are no exception. In particular, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Zami* overtly grapple with the consequences of diaspora for their protagonists.

Examining the work of Kim Butler, a scholar of African diaspora, allows us to see how diaspora affects these works so thoroughly. Butler argues that there are several distinguishing factors that separate diaspora from other types of migration. For example, diaspora requires the dispersion of people from a particular homeland to various geographic locations for more than two generations. These transnational and multigenerational ties are evident across the literature I examine. But it's the two other factors that Butler names that offer especially relevant context for the work of Marshall and Lorde. First, Butler states that in diaspora, a connection between "an actual or imagined homeland" is maintained. She writes:

> Each segment of the diaspora shares a common bond with the homeland, the place from which they all originated….The reason that some homelands exist only in the imagination is that the process of diasporization—the departure of large segments of the population—is often the result of traumatic political or economic situations that sometimes destroy the homeland. (34)

In other words, diaspora is the result of a forced migration in which migrants bring the culture of the homeland to a new geographic location, and in so doing, establish transnational connections. Furthermore, because of the traumas of slavery and colonization, what was once an "actual" homeland might only now exist as an "imagined homeland" in the memories of its former inhabitants. These ties to both real and imagined

homelands are particularly significant in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Zami.* Selina and Audre, the respective protagonists, are born in the U.S. to families who have emigrated from the Caribbean. As such, their families are still very much connected to their homelands. Yet both protagonists struggle to construct and maintain ties with the Caribbean homelands they have never seen. The other factor that Butler discusses, which compounds the challenges that Selina and Audre face, is that diasporas have a group identity of which they are self-aware. They comprise communities that are "consciously part of an ethno-national group…defined by collective ethnic, or group, identity" (34). This identity connects them not only to the homeland, but also to each other. As such, these connections facilitate the survival of the culture and its people. However, for children of immigrants, like Selina and Audre, the added complication of navigating diasporic identity and culture with U.S. identity and culture complicates their journey to adulthood.

The Great Migration

Years later, another mass migration of Black people, this time within the United States, occurred. The Great Migration was the massive movement of Black Southerners to Northern and Western cities across the nation. Between 1915 and 1970, over six million Black Americans left the oppressive Jim Crow South for urban centers like New York, Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia (Wilkerson 9). Ta-Nehisi Coates emphasizes that migrants were not simply searching for higher wages and better work but were "fleeing acquisitive warlords of the South" and "seeking protection of the law." Isabel Wilkerson affirms that the Great Migration did not end until the 1970s when the effects of the Civil Rights Movement began to be felt across the South as the government

enforced integration and restored voting rights (10). Wilkerson writes that the Great Migration is evident across all urban life noting that the racial demographics of American cities, the expansion of housing projects, the "rise of a well-scrubbed black middle class," as well as white flight and suburbanization "grew, directly or indirectly, from the response of everyone touched by the Great Migration" (10). Chicago, for instance, which had a Black population of less than 50,000 people before the Great Migration had more than 1 million Black residents by its conclusion. On a national scale, only ten percent of the Black population lived outside the South pre-Great Migration, but by the end, forty-seven percent of Black Americans lived outside the South (10). The Black population increased from four percent in 1940 to sixteen percent by 1970 in Northern and Western destination cities (Boustan 418). This massive movement of people across the U.S. happened concurrently with significant changes to housing policy nationwide including the practice of redlining and the implementation of the GI Bill.

Redlining

The roots of racism in housing policy run deep. In 1917, the Chicago Real Estate Board (in response to the Great Migration) attempted to zone the entire city by race. The Supreme Court ruled that practice unlawful, and, consequently, other means of enforcing segregation – including redlining – were born (Coates). As evidenced by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, the government-sanctioned practice of redlining began in the private sector with the real estate industry.[13] In the 1920s, the National Association of Real

[13] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's *Race for Profit* offers a thorough treatment of how redlining and early racist housing policies set the foundation for re-envisioned racist housing policy after the 1970s. Taylor argues that midcentury racial discrimination in housing did not end but was remanifested in the HUD without the racialized language. She demonstrates that these private and public sector policies specifically targeted poor Black women because of the likelihood that they would fail their mortgages (5, 22-23). While her book focuses on the era after the passing of the Fair Housing Act (1968) and the implementation of the Housing and Urban Development Act (1968), some of her introductory information

Estate Boards stated that membership would be revoked to any real estate agent who "disrupted patterns of racial homogeneity on a given block or neighborhood" (Taylor 10). These private sector policies became public policy through the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), a government entity whose mortgages were underwritten by Fredrick Babock – a 1920s Chicago real estate agent (10). In essence, racist housing practices were embedded in U.S. infrastructure through the marriage of private sector practices and public policies.

Redlining, the term used to describe discriminatory practices in banking, lending, and housing, was one tactic used by both the government and the private sector in the mid twentieth century to prevent Black people from purchasing homes. Creating a system of color-coded maps, the Federal Housing Administration sectioned off city districts based on race and ethnicity and used those identity-based factors as reasons not to insure loans in those areas. Ta-Nehisi Coates gives a fuller explanation of this early iteration of redlining and how the FHA, created in 1934, used redlining to enforce segregation. He states that the FHA:

> adopted a system of maps that rated neighborhoods according to their perceived stability. On the maps, green areas, rated "A," indicated "in demand" neighborhoods that, as one appraiser put it, lacked "a single foreigner or Negro." These neighborhoods were considered excellent prospects for insurance. Neighborhoods where black people lived were rated "D" and were usually considered ineligible for FHA backing. They were colored in red.

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looks back at earlier twentieth century policies that paved the way for enduring racism and segregation in the housing industry. What sets Taylor's book apart from other similar works in her field (besides the fact that she investigates beyond the midcentury) is that she examines public policy in tandem with private measures specifically paying attention to the real estate industry and its investment in whiteness from the 1920s onward. See Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*. University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

Between the operating racism of the private sector and the codified racism of the government, the U.S. housing industry, in effect, barred Black people from obtaining a mortgage by any legitimate means. Thus, the practice of redlining significantly contributed to housing discrimination and aided in perpetuating segregation that remains in many areas today.[14]

Another major player in redlining was the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, a subsidiary of the FHA and an entity which Coates asserts, "pioneered the practice of redlining, selectively granting loans and insisting that any property it insured be covered by a restrictive covenant – a clause in the deed forbidding the sale of the property to anyone other than whites."[15] Logan and Parman also credit the HOLC with segregationist practices writing that the HOLC used "racial characteristics in rating neighborhood desirability for appraising mortgages in the 1930s" (410). Logan and Parman confirm that those areas with a higher Black population received lower ratings relative to those with largely white residents and that banks were more likely to lend to people in predominantly white neighborhoods (410). Logan and Parman assert that segregation increased white and Black home ownership by devaluing (and therefore decreasing the price of) homes in urban areas (410). The devaluing of Black homes as white families moved out of urban areas is an integral part of Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, which I examine alongside Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* in the

[14] For details on the racist housing policies of Wells Fargo and Bank of America and the lawsuits against them in the early 2010s see Coates's "The Case for Reparations." For an examination of racist banking and lending policies affecting housing as recent as 2018 see Patrick Rucker's 2020 article titled "Trump Financial Regulator Quietly Shelved Discrimination Probes Into Bank of America and Other Lenders" in *ProPublica.* Bank of America is an offender yet again.

[15] Restrictive covenants were rampant in Chicago. They were deemed unenforceable by judicial action with the *Shelley v. Kraemer* case of 1948. I address this issue in the next chapter as context for the discussion of Brooks's *Maud Martha*.

first chapter. Likewise, Brooks makes plain the difficulty with the Home Owner's Loan Corporation by devoting an entire vignette to Mr. Brown's (Maud Martha's father) trip to the HOLC office. In essence, the state sanctioned segregation in a way that not only allowed the white public to do what it willed, but also *encouraged* it to segregate through monetary incentives. Redlining was finally outlawed in 1968 with the passage of the Fair Housing Act.

GI Bill

Passed into law at the end of World War II, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill, assisted military veterans in their return to civilian life after World War II. It included compensation for unemployment, grants for college education, and low-interest business loans and mortgages. Theoretically, the bill should have supported all men returning from service regardless of race. But the bill was created in such a way that it became another pillar upholding systemic racism in the U.S. The bill was written in committees chaired by Mississippi's Congressman John Rankin who Ira Katznelson terms "an arch-racist" and Missouri's Senator Bennett Champ Clark who Katznelson describes as a "more moderate segregationist" (Katznelson and Mettler 523). Katznelson writes that "the [GI] bill protected Dixie's racial order by insuring that all its provisions could…conform to southern racial practices despite its formal universalism and the absence of any specific mention of racial categories" (523). In other words, the bill was written in such a manner to allow for Jim Crow practices in the South to be upheld which led to increased barriers in obtaining the benefits of the GI Bill while appearing to be democratic in nature. Katznelson further observes that the loan and home ownership programs were used at a much lower rate for Black veterans than they were

for white veterans (522).[16] Coates confirms that Title III of the GI Bill left veterans at the mercy of local VAs and banks who historically discriminated against them. Indeed, the ability for Black veterans to get the benefits technically afforded by Title III was so appalling that "it is more accurate simply to say that blacks could not use this particular title" (Frydl qtd. in Coates). The GI Bill codified another way for white people to socially and economically climb while limiting Black Americans. In conjunction with redlining, restrictive covenants, and private sector housing practices, the GI Bill perpetuated housing discrimination and created years of growing inequality. Indeed, Logan and Parman point to increased levels of segregation after the passing of the GI Bill. Collins and Margo demonstrate that in the years after World War II, the racial gap for home ownership widened for people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four (358). In other words, young white people were buying houses and young Black people were not. In a dissertation focused on Black protagonists coming of age, age is an important factor to consider in the data of home ownership.

White Flight and Suburbanization

White flight, the relocation of millions of white people to the American suburbs as Black migrants flooded urban centers, drastically altered city demographics and housing value. For every Black arrival, there were approximately three white departures (Boustan 417). As white people removed to the suburbs, Black families were left renting in central cities (Logan and Parman 410). Coates calls our attention to the linguistic nature of the phrase white flight which presumes an expression or act of preference. However, he notes

[16] Katznelson offers as evidence a report from *Ebony* that demonstrates this discrimination from the banks. The report states that "only 2 of the 3,229 guaranteed loans made in 13 Mississippi cities in 1947 went to black veterans" (523).

that white flight was actually "a triumph of social engineering, orchestrated by the shared racist presumptions of America's public and private sectors." White flight is a clear demonstration of institutional racism in action. Even if a white person was not motivated to move away from Black neighbors due to personal/individual racism, they were incentivized to do so by collective/systemic racism. The U.S. government incentivized white people to leave urban neighborhoods and move to suburban centers through housing policy. As Coates notes, if a white person claimed his home would lose value if a Black family moved in nearby, "he was not merely engaging in racist dogma—he was accurately observing the impact of federal policy on market prices." This is especially evident in *Brown Girl, Brownstones.* The white characters in the novel continually relocate resulting in the devaluation of the homes in Black neighborhoods, which is reflected in real-life historical records of housing prices and gentrification in Brooklyn neighborhoods.[17] Value played an important role in segregation and the housing market. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes:

> Where white housing was seen as an asset developed through inclusion and the accruable possibilities of its surrounding property, Black housing was marked by its distress and isolation, where value was extracted, not imbued. These racialized narratives of families, communities, and their built environments reinforced and naturalized the segregative practices among real estate brokers, mortgage bankers, and the white public. (11)

Furthermore, both Taylor and Boustan prove that Black people paid more than white people did for the same level of housing and that Black people were often pushed into

[17] See Kay Hymowitz's *The New Brooklyn: What It Takes to Bring a City Back* for an examination of gentrification across the centuries in Brooklyn's neighborhoods including Bedford-Stuyvesant, the area in which Marshall's Black characters live, and Crown Heights, the area to which they later aspire.

dilapidated housing and overcharged for it, which, as Taylor notes, is a "race tax" (Boustan 437, Taylor 11).[18]

Brown v. Board of Education

The 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education,* while about school segregation rather than housing policy, still had a significant impact on housing. In word, this ruling outlawed segregation in schools. But in deed, it took much longer for schools to integrate.[19] Even though *Brown* outlawed de jure (legally sanctioned) segregation, it did not impact de facto segregation which often arose from housing "choice." Lower courts established de facto segregation was permissible since it stemmed from "individual residential preferences" (Gooden and Thompson Dorsey 770).[20] This ruling, of course, ignores the role of the government in housing discrimination. Gooden and Thompson Dorsey assert that the lower courts showed "resistant White residents, school boards, school district administrators, and state legislatures" that while

[18] As our world reckons with the concept that racism is ingrained in our society rather than just a series of personal or individual choices/biases, it's important to point that out in the writing around these policies as well. Boustan suggests that white flight was in part due to the influx of Black migrants but also cites construction projects like new highways for the change (419). She writes, "Because poverty and race are highly correlated, I cannot distinguish here between a distaste for the race and for the income level of southern arrivals" (420). Collins and Margo, however, have no problem naming the white resistance to Black migrants settling in white neighborhoods and demonstrate that even when Black people had higher income levels, they were more likely to live in predominantly Black urban city centers (359). Boustan demonstrates an inability to acknowledge racism – systemic or otherwise as evidenced by her overt linguistic gymnastics. To avoid writing "racism," she instead says, "a distaste for the race." If I was unsure of her racist writing before, she then drops this gem: "Thus far, I have shown that each black arrival to a central city at midcentury prompted more than one white departure. This pattern suggests that white mobility not only was a response to higher housing prices but also reflected a distaste for racial diversity" (436). Again, she refuses to name *anti-Blackness* or *racism* as the driving force for white families departing the city. Even if the individual left because housing prices were cheaper for them in the suburbs, it's still racist policy as demonstrated by Ta-Nehisi Coates and elsewhere by myriad others.

[19] Mark A. Gooden and Dana N. Thompson Dorsey note that Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 defined desegregation but not integration which is a much loftier goal (769). They then demonstrate how this left the definition of terms open to lower courts (770).

[20] Gooden and Thompson Dorsey draw evidence from the following cases: *Bell v. School City of Gary*, 1963; *Deal v. Cincinnati Board of Education*, 1971; and *United States v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, 1966.

desegregation may be lawful "the broader relationship between housing and schooling created an opportunity for continued discrimination" (770). Gooden and Thompson Dorsey demonstrate that the relationship between housing and education propped up white privilege and allowed those with financial privilege (mainly white people) to effectively continue to segregate. With the unfettered access to home loans through the GI Bill and the FHA, white families gained greater access to housing in "good" neighborhoods which tied them to "good" schools and perpetuated the privilege and financial success of white families and children over Black families and children. In other words, by ignoring how racist housing policy supported racist school structures, the government tacitly upheld segregation. Taylor notes that white local and city officials also used alternative methods such as "segregation academies" to avoid integrating.[21] She writes, "It was not until 1968 that the Supreme Court ruled in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* that states must dismantle segregation 'root and branch'" (15). Additionally, white families had greater incentive to live in segregated neighborhoods since property taxes funded their schools and since their homes would appreciate in value more if they were in white neighborhoods.[22] Purchasing a home then

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[21] The *Yale Law Journal* notes that the "true segregation academy" popped up after *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968) and often received grant money from the government in addition to state owned textbooks and funded transportation. A great many of these schools were Protestant affiliated academies, and they often employed experienced former public educators and administrators. See "Segregation Academies and State Action." *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 82, no. 7, 1973, p. 1441-1451.

I discovered in this research that my own high school, Christian Academy of Louisville (CAL), was one such academy, founded in part by James E. Farmer, who left his position as deputy superintendent of Jefferson County Public Schools to establish CAL in 1975 – something conveniently left out of my eleventh grade U.S. history class. See Nichols, Wanda. "School Official to Join Private Academy." *The Courier-Journal*, July 3, 1976, p. B1.

[22] Taylor discusses how the midcentury concept of the suburban nuclear family as normative helped determine the home as a place of use value. She argues that houses owned by white people were seen as homes that could appreciate and expand to accrue surrounding property. She further suggests that houses inhabited by Black people were perceived as markers of "domestic dysfunction" and incapable of being a "home." Instead, living spaces of Black peopel became a space where value was extracted rather than

became an access point to many other privileges. Gooden and Thompson Dorsey coin the term "housing identity privilege" which they note is an economic privilege which often results in better schooling, housing, safety, etc. This privilege, in theory, can be attained by any race or ethnicity but because of historic housing discrimination policies, it is typically held by white people (771). Housing privilege and access to housing became increasingly important with *Brown*'s takedown of de jure segregation. With the court's ruling, the government incentivized white people to maintain de facto segregation to keep their school systems white and affluent. Essentially, with the passage of *Brown*, the insistence on maintaining racial boundaries within neighborhoods became a more insidious and localized effort.

Whiteness as Property

While *Brown* was a landmark case that greatly affected the literature I examine in this dissertation, it's important to bear in mind that it is not the only legal case of importance. Indeed, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) is the standing legal precedent throughout the first two novels I analyze: *Maud Martha* (1953) and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). But while *Zami* (1982) begins in a de jure segregated world, it encompasses the shift in legal interpretation as *Brown v. Board* (1954) takes effect during the course of events in the memoir. Finally, the last novel I examine in this dissertation, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), is firmly post-*Brown* as its events take place in present day. Throughout U.S. history, both before and after *Brown*, white privilege has been codified in law (rather than simply embedded in culture). To demonstrate how the U.S. has continually upheld

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imbued (11). Likewise, Gooden and Thompson Dorsey demonstrate that property values in primarily white neighborhoods appreciated (772).

whiteness as property through changing laws and legal interpretations, I turn my attention to the work of Cheryl Harris.

In her article, "Whiteness as Property," Harris draws connections from the first slave codes between 1680-82 to *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) to *Brown v. Board* (1954) to late twentieth century affirmative action to illustrate that whiteness is regarded as property in the eyes of the law which gives whiteness great value (Harris 1714, 1718).[23] From the beginnings of American colonization and the slave codes, Harris asserts that "Race and property were conflated by...establishing a form of property contingent on race" (1716). Black Americans were exploited for their labor and deemed property. Native Americans were displaced, exterminated, and conquered by white men in an effort to acknowledge the property rights of white people. Harris writes, "Only white possession and occupation of land was validated and therefore privileged as a basis for property rights" (1716). Together, the exploitation of Black labor and Native land contributed "to the construction of whiteness as property" (1716). She asserts that whiteness and property share a key commonality; they are both predicated on exclusion (1714).

[23] Harris's understanding of property and the law is that "the law has established and protected an actual property interest in whiteness itself, which shares the critical characteristics of property and accords with the many and varied theoretical descriptions of property" (1724). Harris argues that whiteness (the trait) is literally property because you have ownership over a particular right. It doesn't have to be physical for you to own it (1725). She asserts that whiteness functions as identity, status, and property together and/or separately (1725). "Whiteness – the right to white identity as embraced by the law – is property if by property one means all of a person's legal rights" (1726). She walks through several theories of property (names Lockean as one) and concludes: "Regardless of which theory of property one adopts, the concept of whiteness – established by centuries of custom (illegitimate custom, but custom nonetheless) and codified by law – may be understood as a property interest" (1728). Looking at property in a broader modern sense, she notes that intellectual property, graduate degrees, and other intangibles also are considered property (1728).

Jumping ahead to the late 1890s, Harris demonstrates how the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) reified whiteness as property in law. In 1891, Homer A. Plessy was arrested for riding in a white railway car in Louisiana. Segregation challenged the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments, but as Harris notes, segregation fit with the "political climate" of the time (1746). She says, "Plessy's claim...was predicated on more than the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Plessy additionally charged that the refusal to seat him on the white passenger car deprived him of property – 'this reputation [of being white] which has an actual pecuniary value' - without the due process of law guaranteed by the amendment" (1747). Plessy's appearance as white was of value. By being barred from the white car, he would be unable to pass as white elsewhere, which would cost him the status and reputation of a white man (1747). The first argument in Plessy's defense was the reputation of being white was property and that by allowing a train employee to take away that property, they were violating due process (1747). As Harris so aptly says, "Because of white supremacy, whiteness was not merely a descriptive or ascriptive characteristic – it was property of overwhelming significance and value" (1747). Harris notes that the Court avoided defining who was white and instead said that Plessy was not entitled to damages for his reputation because he was not white, but that if he were white, he would be entitled to said damages. In this way, the Court reinforced white status as property (1749).

With the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, the law shifts, but still upholds whiteness as property. *Brown* overturned *Plessy* and ended de jure segregation, but it had "ambiguous motives and clouded rhetorical vision" (1751). Harris claims that it's this

ambiguity that allowed the “property interest in whiteness” to continue (1751). She writes:

> *Brown I*’s dialectical contradiction was that it dismantled an old form of whiteness as property while simultaneously permitting its reemergence in a more subtle form. White privilege accorded as a legal right was rejected, but de facto white privilege not mandated by law remained unaddressed…In accepting substantial inequality as a neutral base line, a new form of whiteness as property was condoned. Material inequities between Blacks and whites – the product of systematic past and current, formal and informal, mechanisms of racial subordination – became the norm. *Brown* disregarded immediate associational preferences of whites, but sheltered and protected their expectations of continued race-based privilege. Redressing the substantive inequalities in resources, power, and ultimately, educational opportunity that were the product of legislated race segregation was left for another day, as yet not arrived. (1753)

In other words, the Court failed to address de facto segregation which permeates every aspect of our lives today and allowed white privilege to continue operating. As such, whiteness has continued to afford better housing, education, and opportunity. Indeed, Harris makes clear that whiteness continues to “shar[e] the critical characteristics of property even as the meaning of property has changed over time” (1714). In essence, the “conceptual nucleus” of both whiteness and property – the “right to exclude” – perpetuates (1714).

Harris clearly outlines the shift from status property to modern property created by the *Brown* verdict. During legalized slavery, “racialized privilege was…legitimated in law as a type of status property” (1714). Status property, according to Harris, is the kind of property that hinges on reputation. She writes that whiteness was conceptualized as “an external thing in a constitutive sense – an ‘object or resource necessary to be a person’” (1734). She explains:

> This move was accomplished in large measure by recognizing the reputational interest in being regarded as white as a thing of significant value, which like other reputational interests, was intrinsically bound up with identity and personhood.

> The reputation of being white was treated as a species of property, or something in which a property interest could be asserted. (1734)

Drawing on legal precedent in which calling a white person Black was considered defamation, she makes clear her point (1735). This form of whiteness as property also draws heavily on the right to exclude which is the common thread as whiteness as property shifts with changing laws. Even after abolition, whiteness was the standard, "Whiteness determined whether one could vote, travel freely, attend schools, obtain work, and indeed, defined the structure of social relations along the entire spectrum of interactions between the individual and society. Whiteness then became status, a form of racialized privilege ratified in law" (1745). With *Brown*, the legal interpretation shifts, but the preservation of whiteness remains. When de jure segregation was revoked, "whiteness as property evolved into a more modern form through the law's ratification of the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline" (1714). As such, modern property includes "jobs, entitlements, occupational licenses, contracts, subsidies, and indeed a whole host of intangibles that are the product of labor, time, and creativity, such as intellectual property, business goodwill, and enhanced earning potential from graduate degrees" (1728). Harris asserts that modern property is "a construction by society" and as such emphasizes "relative power and social relations" (1729). Furthering her argument, Harris draws on three Supreme Court cases to demonstrate that "the expectation of white privilege is valid, and that the legal protection of that expectation is warranted" (1769). Her work demonstrates how whiteness as property continues to be upheld through the law into the 1990s.

While Harris's work may be a bit older (1993), it remains relevant as evidenced by the continued housing discrimination outlined by Coates in "The Case for

Reparations" (2014) and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor in *Race for Profit* (2019) referenced earlier in this introduction. Indeed, as I demonstrate later in this dissertation, bringing Harris's work into the twenty-first century shows how the perpetuation of whiteness as property today is evident in the modern prison system. In essence, Harris's closing words still ring true: "Whiteness as property has carried and produced a heavy legacy. It is a ghost that has haunted the political and legal domains in which claims for justice have been inadequately addressed for far too long" (1791). The ghost of whiteness as property is not just one that has haunted the political and legal realms but one that haunts the literary world as well.

Throughout this dissertation, I seek to demonstrate how the legacies of slavery and colonization have been haunting forces. Whiteness as property is just one more of the afterlives of slavery that oppresses Black youth in the United States. Understanding how property is engrained in white America's mind as a right, privilege, and manifestation of personhood allows us to see how these same qualities were withheld from Black youth. Examining the literary works of Black women across the last seventy-five years elucidates how whiteness as property has shifted across time through the protection of the law appearing in racist housing policy, monumentally white infrastructure, and modern-day mass incarceration. In reckoning with the haunting, the protagonists of these literary works are forced to discover alternate ways of seeking adulthood when the markers of maturity (namely, property) are withheld from them.

Chapter Descriptions

In chapter one, "Segregated Spaces: Stepping Out of the History of Whiteness as Property in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953) and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl,*

Brownstones (1959)" I argue that the aforementioned novels demonstrate how Black girls are haunted as they grow up contending with desires for home ownership, property traditionally reserved for and by whites, which serves as a marker of adulthood historically unavailable to Black Americans. To step outside this history of whiteness as property, these girls cultivate interior spaces that challenge the structural reality and cultural construction of their homes. The architectural structures that Maud Martha and Selina grow up in and around, such as the kitchenette and the brownstone, are racialized and gendered spaces in which hauntings appear. These hauntings within domestic dwellings propel the respective protagonists to grapple with their cultural past – cultivating an interior as refuge in the tradition of Black women before them (Maud Martha) or reclaiming erased history as memory (Selina). In reckoning with haunting, these protagonists develop alternative models of adulthood when U.S. society's perceived marker of maturity – property – is withheld from them.

In chapter two, "Queering the Diaspora to Create a 'House of Difference' in Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982)" I shift from examining coming-of-age in domestic spaces to looking at how the monumental whiteness of the U.S. prohibits equal adulthood for Black girls. As a Black lesbian, Audre Lorde's journey toward adulthood is complicated by both her race and her sexuality. As such, she is denied access to conventional markers of maturity – homebuying, marriage, and children. Like Brooks and Marshall, Lorde provides alternative markers of maturity for young Black girls growing up in the white supremacist structures of the United States. As a child of immigrants, Lorde is haunted by her lack of connection with her foremothers' homeland and oppressed by a nation whose literal and figurative whiteness excludes her.

In response, Lorde queers the diaspora by writing herself in as a haunted "story of a phantom people" who are dispossessed of their homeland and by building a sensual "house of difference" with women identified women – zamis. In this dual embrace of the haunted and the erotic, Lorde can live more fully self-possessed beyond the contours of whiteness as property that shape her American world. In doing so, she develops an alternative model of adulthood and shows marginalized readers a different way to grow up.

In chapter three, "Shedding Skin: Resisting a Carceral Life through Conjure in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)," I bring my research into the twenty-first century and expand my analysis to include Black boys. I examine the novel's depiction of Parchman Prison to show that racist oppressive structures not only transform and survive through a metaphorical shedding of the skin but also that these structures continue to shape the coming-of-age of Black youth across generations. In other words, in *Sing*, the thread of whiteness as property haunting the American literary landscape persists in the twenty-first century and makes itself apparent through the structure of the prison; the government sheds its old skin by abolishing slavery but perpetuates violence against Black people through the guise of a prison. I argue that hauntings appear to serve as a warning. In response to that warning, Jojo and Kayla, Ward's young protagonists, create a different set of markers for maturity by engaging in conjure traditions and witnessing the ghosts. In so doing, they create a potential for an alternative journey to adulthood when their futures are constantly threatened by the possibility of incarceration.

Finally, in the coda, "Simone Leigh's *Brick House:* Reframing Black Female Subjectivity Through African Architecture" I turn toward Simone Leigh's monumental

sculpture *Brick House* to demonstrate how the cultural logics of the Black women writers I have examined extend to the real world. I argue that Leigh's sculpture serves as a house that embodies Blackness without oppressing it. Where the other dwelling structures I analyze challenge and prohibit the journey toward adulthood, *Brick House* champions it. Taking up space in the prominent High Line of New York City, *Brick House* serves as both monument and memorial to Black life.

CHAPTER 1. SEGREGATED SPACES: STEPPING OUT OF THE HISTORY OF WHITENESS AS PROPERTY IN GWENDOLYN BROOKS'S *MAUD MARTHA* (1953) AND PAULE MARSHALL'S *BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES* (1959)

The 1950s challenged African American women to confront cultural hauntings in the midst of profound changes to U.S. society, particularly attempts at desegregation. Although Maud Martha and Selina, protagonists of Brooks's and Marshall's respective novels, face similar problems regarding segregation in housing that arouse hauntings about belonging in America, they respond to the challenges differently. Maud Martha attempts to create a home out of her kitchenette. Selina attempts to return to her family's homeland in the Caribbean. In both cases, the cultural imperative to own a home as a marker of maturity looms large. In *Maud Martha* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, the lived spaces take on important roles for the respective protagonists, who represent how Black girls attempted to become Black adults when whiteness is the presumed marker of property and maturity.

These novels demonstrate that whiteness as property is a ghost that haunts not only American political and legal domains, as Cheryl Harris has argued, but also the United States's literary landscape of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Both *Maud Martha* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* illuminate how Black girls in particular are haunted as they grow up contending with desires (either theirs or their family's) for home ownership, property traditionally reserved for and by whites, which serves as a marker of adulthood and citizenry that are historically closed to Black Americans. To step outside this history of whiteness as property, these girls cultivate interior spaces that challenge the structural reality and cultural construction of their homes.

The architectural structures of the dwelling spaces inhabited by the protagonists: kitchenette, porch, kitchen, parlor, sitting room, and store window are racialized and gendered spaces in which hauntings appear and profound moments of change and growth occur for Maud Martha and Selina. Maud Martha is unable to own a home like her parents and eventually embraces the concepts of possession, secrecy, and the space of the child as a way to assert dignity and resist the haunting of whiteness as property. Home ownership is potentially within Selina's reach, but she rejects the social climbing and conformity it would require in favor of returning to Barbados. While Maud Martha and Selina are denied an equal adulthood by U.S. societal and government structures, they embrace an alternative path of adulting that showcases their resilience, determination, creativity, and resourcefulness – qualities they draw on in order to step outside the history of whiteness as property. These girlhood hauntings within domestic dwellings propel the respective protagonists to grapple with their cultural past – cultivating an interior as refuge in the tradition of Black women before them (Maud Martha) or reclaiming erased history as memory (Selina). In reckoning with haunting, the girl protagonists learn to navigate the oppression of both material and social structures and create ways to establish themselves in the world when the marker of maturity – property – is withheld from them. Rather than stories of strict triumph or total defeat, these are novels that intertwine the two and demonstrate the nuance of struggle in the life of these Black girl protagonists reinforcing their complexity and humanity.

To launch this discussion, I will provide specific context that takes into account the geographic and historical settings of *Maud Martha* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones.* To better frame my analysis of the connection between *Maud Martha* and housing in

Chicago, I will discuss *Shelley v. Kraemer*, restrictive covenants, and kitchenette housing before moving into a series of close readings of Brooks's novel. To offer a similar framework for Marshall's novel, I will include a brief history and context of West Indian migration and Barbadian culture in Brooklyn as well as an examination of Bedford-Stuyvesant, the specific neighborhood in which the Boyce family resides I will then use this context to then analyze several scenes from *Brown Girl, Brownstones.*[24] Finally, I will finish the chapter with a discussion on the space of the kitchen as a site of creativity in the novels.

Critical Context: Maud Martha

Upon its initial publication in 1953, critics read Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* as the straightforward bildungsroman of a young Black girl. Langston Hughes, for example, remarked that *Maud Martha* was the tale of "a normal Negro girl growing up into a normal woman finding love and being happy in it" (Hughes qtd. in Hardison 147). Hughes (and other contemporary critics) dismissed the quiet and ordinary nature of Maud Martha, classifying the novel as a charming series of vignettes, but nothing more.[25]

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[24] While the term West Indian has colonial roots, it is still widely used by Caribbean women in Brooklyn today to identify themselves. Tamara Mose Brown notes that the women she interviewed for her research over three years in the 2000s considered themselves pan-ethnic referring to themselves as Black, Caribbean, or West Indian (Brown 29). Meredith Gadsby, a Caribbean American scholar, makes a case for using Caribbean, Caribbean American, and African Caribbean rather than West Indian since West Indian perpetuates colonial terminology while acknowledging that many people from the Caribbean still use West Indian (Gadsby 10). In this dissertation, I initially tried to eliminate the colonial term altogether, but as both Marshall and Lorde employ it, that was difficult. Instead, I limited my use of West Indian. First, I employ the term when I quote or refer to the words of an author (chiefly Marshall and Lorde) who use the term West Indian in their own writing. Second, I use West Indian when it is the term employed by the scholar I gathered information from because the term West Indies technically includes fewer islands than the Caribbean. For instance, in this discussion of migration, I will use the term "West Indies" because it concerns population patterns and it's unclear if the gathered data includes the extra Caribbean islands.

[25] See Stephen Caldwell Wright, ed. *On Gwendolyn Brooks: Reliant Compilation*. The University of Michigan Press, 1996.; See Gertrude B. Rivers. "Review of Maud Martha." *The Journal of Negro Education* vol. 23, no. 2 (1954): 156. *JSTOR.*

In doing so, they minimized the work that the ordinary Maud Martha does in asserting Black dignity and offering a model for how to step out of whiteness as property. Thanks to the revisionist and revolutionary work of Mary Helen Washington, *Maud Martha* and the title character's quiet nature have been given the critical analysis and academic attention long due.[26] Lovia Gyarkye asserts that Brooks's uplifting of the ordinary, not just in *Maud Martha* but in her body of work as a whole, emphasizes the importance of Black life. She writes, "For Brooks, the survival of black people in America depended on a lifelong insistence that they too were ordinary" (Gyarkye). Indeed, from the first line of *Maud Martha,* we can see how Brooks insists on the importance of the ordinary for her characters. In this chapter, I build on the work of previous critics drawing especially on GerShun Avilez, Courtney Thorsson, and Michelle Phillips. I further examine how Brooks's focus on the ordinary becomes a means of humanization for Maud Martha, but I deviate from the focus on Maud Martha's silence and anger to the cultivation of her interiority as a means of combating oppressive haunting in her dwelling space. In turning inward, Maud Martha creates a way to navigate a world that refuses her the privileges of white adulthood and steps out of the history of whiteness as property.

Restrictive Covenants and Shelley v. Kraemer

In particular, restrictive covenants shaped the oppressive housing structures of Maud Martha's Chicago. Restrictive covenants were "legally binding covenants attached

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[26] Mary Helen Washington asserts that Maud Martha's moments of silence are complex, meaningful, and often suffused with anger. Washington's reading (which allows Maud Martha more complexity than Hughes's interpretation supplies) led to more serious critical attention for the work of Gwendolyn Brooks. However, much of that work has focused on expanding Washington's argument about Brooks's use of silence in *Maud Martha*, such as Kevin Quashie's chapter in *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, or in various readings of the mouse scene in comparison to Richard Wright's *Native Son*, as in the work of Megan K. Ahern and Malin Lavon Walther.

to parcels of land [that] prohibited African Americans from using, occupying, buying, leasing, or receiving property in those areas" (Schlabach 4). These covenants were legally binding agreements typically between white owners and white real estate agents that prevented the sale or lease of property to nonwhite persons (5). White property owners utilized these covenants from 1916 until 1948 when the Supreme Court dubbed their enforcement illegal (4). In fact, Chicago had more restrictive covenants than any other city in the North (Shabazz 40). With the expansive use of redlining and restrictive covenants converging with mass migration to Chicago, the Black population of the city found itself living in a small area of the South Side, once known as the Black Belt and later called Bronzeville, in dilapidated and deteriorating housing.[27] Landlords hiked up prices on poorly maintained housing knowing that Black inhabitants had nowhere else to turn. In the 1948 case *Shelley v. Kraemer*, the Supreme Court ruled that the state could not enforce restrictive covenants. While the Court did not outlaw restrictive covenants, it ruled that the state enforcing such a private covenant would violate the fourteenth amendment ("Shelley v. Kraemer"). Even so, Black life continued to be concentrated on the South Side. While living conditions were appalling, Elizabeth Schlabach notes that the concentration of Black people in Bronzeville allowed for them to "use the black public space in their lives to construct themselves – physically and metaphysically – in a new and often hostile urban environment" (7). She asserts that this space shaped the writing of Gwendolyn Brooks and cultural production of other Black artists like Richard

[27] The Black population of Chicago grew by 148.5 percent between 1910 and 1920 (Schlabach 5). During the Depression years, the population density on the South Side was 70,000 people per square mile (Schlabach 99). See also Rashad Shabazz's *Spatializing Blackness* on concentrated population in the Black Belt and restrictive covenants (40).

Wright and Archibald Motley (7).[28] The kitchenette was one such "public space" that shaped Brooks's novel.

The Kitchenette

Indeed, a key fixture of Brooks's novel is the kitchenette, likely arising from its importance in the author's own life.[29] Bronzeville kitchenettes were domestic spaces, but they offered little to no privacy with thin walls and communal bathrooms – making them a kind of liminal space passing between public and private spheres. One only need read the scenes of Maud Martha giving birth to see how a private moment became a neighborhood gathering. Kitchenettes, apartments made by subdividing larger apartments into much smaller ones, were often built in old apartment buildings or houses that once were inhabited by wealthy white Chicagoans (Schlabach 95). Kitchenettes were small and frequently in an attic or basement. They were usually equipped with a hot plate, an ice box, and only one or two rooms (Shabazz 34). Rashad Shabazz writes:

> For [Black people], kitchenette housing was dangerous and offensive. There were more people per bath (sixteen) and more per toilet (fourteen); the piping was leaky and corroded; the physical condition of the apartment was shoddy; the electrical wiring was exposed and faulty; the units were infested with rats and on average more expensive to rent… (36)

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[28] Elizabeth Schroeder Schlabach examines Black cultural production through aesthetics and spatialization positing that the aesthetic of the Chicago Renaissance rejects the Harlem Renaissance for a more realistic approach while further suggesting that Bronzeville itself (the individual streets, theatres, etc.) influence literary and artistic production (xii). She pays particular attention to the work of Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright and how the fixture of the kitchenette shaped their work (xvii). Schlabach, Elizabeth Schroeder. *Along the Streets of Bronzeville: Black Chicago's Literary Landscape*. University of Illinois Press, 2013.

[29] Brooks lived in a series of kitchenette apartments in Bronzeville in her adult life. She recalls the bleakness she felt after moving into a kitchenette shortly after she married, incidents with a mouse, the sudden birth of her son, and the dampness of a garage apartment where her son later contracted bronchopneumonia (Schlabach 88). She wrote most of her work while living in kitchenettes in Bronzeville (Schlabach 88-89). One would be hard pressed to miss how Brooks's own life in Bronzeville and its architecture shaped her only novel.

While the kitchenette was marketed as a modern convenience to white and immigrant families and as a liberating measure that required less domestic work for women, it was "a form of containment" for Black people (39).

Through the fixture of the kitchenette, we can see how racialized spaces function differently across gender. Shabazz posits that "policing, surveillance, and architectures of confinement were used to 'spatialize blackness' in Chicago, which produced racialized and gendered consequences for Black people on the city's South Side" (1). He describes Chicago architecture as one part of the "prisonized landscape" of the city (2). His work mainly focuses on masculinities, and he gives great attention to the role of the kitchenette as a confining space that led Black men to become violent and flee (52-3). According to Shabazz, the flight of Black men from women and the kitchenette was a "rational and pragmatic response" to being contained like prisoners and that their quest for mobility and freedom follows the "historical and ideological linking of masculinity with mobility" (52). In literature, this is evident in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) on which Shabazz draws heavily.

However, Brooks's *Maud Martha* and Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) demonstrate that reaction to and operation of the kitchenette differs when accounting for Black women. Shabazz briefly acknowledges this difference when he references the work of Brooks and Hansberry to note the distinction between male and female experience of the kitchenette. He writes that "lines of racial demarcation and techniques of containment" didn't lead to the flight of Black women (53). Rather, he asserts that "For [Black women] the confinement of the kitchenette meant finding ways to create a productive life, family, and community in the midst of struggle. Black women did what

Black men would not do, which was to organize the family in an effort to get everyone out of the kitchenette" (53). The assertion that Black women responded to the kitchenette in productive and creative ways hold true for Brooks's personal life and for her novel. However, the second assertation, that Black women organized to get families out, applies more aptly to *A Raisin the Sun* and not so much to the work of Brooks – a distinction that Shabazz glosses over. Maud Martha – unable to procure a home of her own – instead sets her sights on possessing that which she inhabits. Through interior decoration and attention to domestic ritual, Maud Martha seeks to possess her kitchenette as a way to step outside the historical script that she – as a Black woman – must be possessed by someone else. Wright's Bigger Thomas flees. Hansberry's Mama Younger organizes to own. Brooks's Maud Martha – without the ability to flee or own – chooses to possess in order to belie the cultural script that would mark her as property herself. In actively participating in making her kitchenette her own, in possessing it, she challenges and strains against the notion that she herself is possessed.

The kitchenette and its embodiment of segregated Black life in Chicago is at the crux of Brooks's novel. In the words of Elizabeth Schlabach, the kitchenette building was "the locus of urban segregation" and the kitchenette itself "the material embodiment of the suspending conditions of segregation in the mid-twentieth century American city" (98). And yet, "for Brooks…possibilities emerge from the problematic kitchenette" (99). Much of Maud Martha's life takes place within the confines of the kitchenette, and it is a prominent shaping figure in who Maud Martha becomes. When she is denied the external marker of maturity and adulthood, purchasing property, she turns to internal markers instead. For Brooks, the kitchenette "allowed her to engage the realities of mobility and

constraint" (97). Her work was "determined by the internal, intangible, expansive possibilities of consciousness" (97). Examining how Maud Martha cultivates interiors to challenge the structural realities that insist on whiteness as property is at the core of the dissertation chapter.

Since Maud Martha is unable to own property, she turns to the interior of her dwelling space, focusing on small domestic objects like curtains, tablecloths, and teapots – small adornments that allow her to possess the space and mirror the way she pays careful attention to her own interiority – a kind of curation of self which leads to self-possession. The kitchenette functions as a space that disallows Maud Martha to be seen as an adult by the outside world. When she is unable to own property and establish herself as a secure adult and American citizen with it, she must discover how to step outside that narrative. One such way is in taking possession of the kitchenette. As Nazera Wright has noted, "African American women writers reconceived rigid spaces by showing their value" (15). While Wright's examples draw on nineteenth century Black girls in literature, including Linda Brent in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents of the Life of a Slave Girl*, Wright's argument (and that nineteenth century legacy) can be extended to Maud Martha and her kitchenette (15). Wright suggests that Black girls used small physical spaces as places to retreat and "think, imagine, strategize solutions, and look forward" (15). This is precisely how the kitchenette functions for Maud Martha, and within Brooks's novel, the reader sees how Maud Martha ultimately makes a space that was intended for oppression into one in which she can cultivate a rich interiority which allows to navigate a world made for whiteness.

Maud Martha's creative reconception of this space does not come easily though especially considering that the kitchenette was one tool that allowed white people to continue enforcing segregation and oppressing Black people. GerShun Avilez[30] argues that the bodies of those living in a kitchenette "become linked to the structural realities of the building" (142) asserting that Maud Martha's permeating feelings of "grayness" arise from the kitchenette structure itself.[31] Despite her attempts to clean the dwelling, it remains unchanged and this fixed grayness permeates her senses thoroughly. He further suggests the housing of the Black body in "mid-20th-century segregation narratives becomes a representation of how [Black bodies] are 'housed' in the body politic: estrangement in one parallels disenfranchisement in the other" (Avilez 147). In other words, the marginalization of the Black characters in books like *Maud Martha* serves as a representation of the marginalization of Black people in the real-world political processes of the 1950s at large. This is evident as Maud Martha moves in and out of public spaces and realizes the only place to retreat is inside her own mind. Where Avilez's analysis focuses on how the physical structure affects the physical body and external realities, with which I agree, I further this argument by suggesting that the physical structure of the kitchenette affects internal matters as well as external ones. In other words, the strict

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[30] Avilez overarching claim builds on Cheryl Harris's argument in "Whiteness and Property" and connects it to *Maud Martha* specifically suggesting that the Black domestic space is a threat to the "value" of white domestic space (Avilez 136). Avilez suggests that even though restrictive covenants and neighborhood associations are never mentioned, *Maud Martha* is written with those in mind.

[31] In the vignette "the kitchenette" Maud Martha and Paul have just moved in and Maud Martha is trying to make her dwelling feel like a home. After noticing a roach, she internally wonders, "Why was he here? For she was scrubbing with water containing American Family Soap and Lysol every other day" (Brooks 205). In the paragraph immediately following, Maud Martha notices the grayness of the kitchenette: "She was becoming aware of an oddness in color and sound and smell about her, the color and sound and smell of the kitchenette building. The color was gray" (Brooks 205). Despite incessant cleaning of her kitchenette there is no improvement to the structure and Avilez suggests that the permeating grayness that Maud Martha feels demonstrate the connection between body and structure.

physical boundaries of the kitchenette propel Maud Martha to cultivate an expansive interiority which in turn allows her to step outside the history of whiteness as property.

Avilez makes a similar argument to Shabazz about the confining nature of the kitchenette, arguing: "The attempt to confine a subject to a particular place, which characterizes the practice of segregation, can paradoxically engender a feeling of having no place for that subject inside and outside of the segregated area. The sense of having no place travels, as it were, and has the motility of a policing force" (Avilez 145). Avilez and Shabazz both see the kitchenette as *only* confining. While it certainly is an oppressive structure, Maud Martha's reaction – to develop a rich inward life – is drastically different from Bigger Thomas's in *Native Son* or even Walter Younger's in *A Raisin in the Sun.* Brooks's writing allows for hope, possibility, and nuance for the Black woman within the kitchenette. With limited mobility and no opportunity to own, Maud Martha instead seeks to possess. She strains against the physical limitations of her home, but she also sees possibility in it, and it leads her to cultivate a careful and thoughtful interior – both literally in decorating the interior of the kitchenette and figuratively in attending to her own emotions, thoughts, and dreams. In intentionally possessing her space and herself Maud Martha consciously seeks to step outside of the history of whiteness as property marking both herself and her home with value not ascribed to them by the white dominated world.

As the scholarship of Avilez and Shabazz demonstrates, examining Brooks's novel through a lens that accounts for gender is paramount in order to attend to the nuance and differences in how the kitchenette functions for Black women as opposed to Black men. There is a legacy of Black women drawing on and cultivating interior worlds

in order to understand, survive, and move about in the exterior world. This legacy is evidenced in particular through the work of Courtney Thorsson who asserts that *Maud Martha* produces a domestic aesthetic based in Black female thought and practice. She emphasizes how Brooks's exploration of the Black private sphere comments on and shapes the public sphere writing: "Brooks's characters have the potential to create social change in their almost exclusively black contexts because they have strong interior lives" (151). Thorsson draws on Toni Cade Bambara's concept of an "inner nation" (essentially an inner life that projects outward) and Hortense Spillers's concept of an "altered exterior" in which ones draws the exterior inward and then translates it to an "altered exterior" (151). This rich interior cultivation and the ability to translate external events into creative interior ideas and understand confining spaces in subversive ways is at the cornerstone of Maud Martha's ability to navigate a world that refuses her the privileges of white adulthood.

The inward turn and cultivation of interiority by Black women is a political act which allows them an alternative to the history of whiteness as property. Thorsson writes, "Black feminist uses of the inner nation to create an altered exterior are distinct from the second-wave feminist idea that 'the personal is political.' The history of black women's work in the public sphere means that the personal was political for African American women long before twentieth-century movements, including the largely white Women's Liberation Movement" (151-2). Thorsson evidences her remarks through the example of the competing work that Black women did in chattel slavery when they tended to the kitchen/home of white people as well as to their own. Essentially, she concludes that because of these historical circumstances that inform Black women's work, "engaging

the radically local, cultivating the domestic, and nurturing one's inner nation have specifically African American cultural functions" and that those functions are political well before white women took up the phrase *the personal is political* (152). Thorsson argues that the "cultural functions" aforementioned manifest in Brooks's insistence on the humanity of Black life (153). By including "intimate details" of Maud Martha's home life, Brooks compels the reader to see beyond the way that Black women are portrayed in "other public discourse (legislation, newspapers, economic and sociological studies, and so on) and invites…pleasurable identification and lessons in empathy" (153). Essentially, by including intimate domestic details, Brooks insists on and elevates Maud Martha's humanity. Emphasizing her humanity forces the reader to confront her as a human being – challenging the legacy of slavery and the perceived superiority of whiteness. Maud Martha's interior cultivation and domestic attention then is a critical political act that performs the cultural work of resisting the history of whiteness as property and one that connects her to a long legacy of Black women who cultivated rich interior lives to resist oppressive societal structures.

While the exploration of the interior has been well catalogued as a political act particular to Black women in literature, less attention has been given to how that interior is shaped by the age of the protagonists. Michelle Phillips suggests that the space of the child operates as a space of empowerment for Maud Martha. She writes that *Maud Martha*'s "central concern [is] with the outcast, child-identified, and -identifying protagonist" (146). She further argues that the novel engages:

> in a spatial dialectic between interiors and exteriors, between the respective spaces of childhood resistance and social conventionality, ultimately expanding the possibilities of the child's limited geographies to create interiors that multiply and layer. Making creative use of these spaces becomes a way for many of

> Brooks's child and female protagonists alike to resist the public, established narratives of their subordination. In other words, Brooks suggests that moving into the geographies of youth can be a way for blacks, women, and children collectively to step outside of the history of their disenfranchisement. (146)

Phillips offers an important understanding for how to navigate a life in which adulthood is withheld through the withholding of property where space operates on two levels – both the physical space of the tangible world Maud Martha inhabits (the kitchenette, the beauty parlor, etc.) and the abstract space of age that Maud Martha maneuvers in. Phillips demonstrates how Maud Martha's attention to her interiority allows her to create a world within in a world. I suggest that it's Maud Martha's physical surroundings and haunting oppression that inform this turn inward.

When that haunting arises and Maud Martha feels dispossessed in her own space, she creates what Phillips calls a "double interiority or a home within the home" (150). By this, Phillips means that Brooks's child characters create alternative interiors to the emotions or events experienced or understood in the exterior or the physical aspects of their lives. We see Maud Martha engage in this kind of double interiority frequently – a prime example being her external reaction to the racial slur uttered in the beauty parlor in contrast with what happens internally in her mind. Phillips further posits that the children in Brooks's works use secrecy to "[maintain] childhood autonomy" (151). Phillips equates secrecy with a "spatial property" suggesting that, "Privacy for adults is not definitively tied to secrecy; it is tied to property, ownership, and self-possession" (152). Owning one's home allows adults a degree of independence and privacy not afforded to children. In keeping secrets, Brooks's protagonists lay claim to a kind of "spatial property" in possessing something (a secret) that belongs to them alone. It makes sense then that Maud Martha – when the privileges of adulthood are denied her – would turn to

toward the space of childhood which offers her "spatial property." Cultivating her interior and secret-keeping challenges the narrative that to be self-possessed one must own a home. Additionally, the space of childhood is one that can be returned to – internally at least. Phillips writes: "As an interior, as *the* interior, childhood in the twentieth century conceptually acquires a special temporal and spatial dimension. Childhood becomes imagined as a time that is never lost and as a space that can always be re-entered" (154). For Maud Martha the ability to re-enter this space allows her to "step outside the history of [her] disenfranchisement" (146). In the space of childhood, decorating and inhabiting her kitchenette in the way she desires becomes a kind of possession as does owning her own mind and secrets. Where Phillips notes that stepping into the space of childhood offers Maud Martha an alternative to the disenfranchisement and denigration, I further this argument by asserting that it is one component that allows her to step outside of whiteness as property as well.

When the exterior world acts as a haunting force, Maud Martha looks to her rich interior to reject the history of whiteness as property. No one can police her thoughts but herself and so her secrets and her interiority become a kind of "spatial property." Maud Martha's retreat into childhood is a subversive act that aligns with my reading of adulthood as withheld from Black girls.[32] Without access to property and markers of maturity, Maud Martha turns inward to the imaginative life of the child. For in this space, dignity and possession are within her reach. One such scene where this plays out is Maud

[32] It appears that for punitive purposes Black girls and boys are treated as adults without innocence but for power structure purposes, they are treated as ignorant and childlike. In Robin Bernstein's *Racial Innocence,* the author demonstrates how "the exclusion of black youth from the category of childhood" was just as "libelous" and "damaging" as that of the "childlike Negro" trope (16). See also Monique Morris and Ruth Nicole Brown.

Martha enacting a tea party when her mother comes to visit. The ritual is both childlike and womanish. Children play at tea parties, in part, because they see women having tea. A tea party is a symbol of refinement and re-enacts elements of upper class living. In setting out her "really good white luncheon cloth" and "white coffee cups and saucers, sugar, milk, and a little pink pot of cocoa" Maud Martha sets all the pieces in place to enact a domestic ritual that the owner of a large house might indulge in. Brooks writes: "Mother and daughter sat down to Tea" (Brooks 309). This enactment of domestic ritual which can certainly read as childlike is also an assertion of independence. Maud Martha tells her mother that she has things including "a clean home of [her own]" to which Belva Brown replies, "A kitchenette of your own" (309). With such a response, Belva reminds Maud Martha of her lack of privacy and property by emphasizing the communal nature of a kitchenette and mentioning her lack of private bathroom (309). When Maud Martha's mother concedes a few pages later that her daughter "makes the best cocoa in the family" Maud Martha states that she will never share her secret (311). When reminded that she doesn't own her own home and can't, Maud Martha moves into alternate ways of configuring herself and her relationship as a Black woman to property and public discourse. If she cannot own property, she can at least own secrets. Houses might be possessed by ghosts and haunted by the history of whiteness as property, but this secret of cocoa can be her own personal possession. Indeed, Phillips writes, "Like *Native Son*, *Maud Martha* and *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* are set in Chicago, yet Brooks's female and child characters are capable of moving through an alternate geography. They have access, which Bigger does not, to the geography of the interior: the geography of the secret, of the withheld, and of the dream" (153). Childhood might be coded as a space of

imagination, secrets, and dreams, but it is these properties – not a false optimism – that allow Maud Martha to be resilient and to resist the haunting of whiteness as property and the carceral confinement that Wright's Bigger Thomas feels and Shabazz's analysis reveals. Moving into the space of childhood gives Maud Martha the opportunity to assert possession of herself and her space in ways that her Blackness and femaleness would otherwise preclude from her as an adult in a white male dominated world.

Her possession and pride in her cocoa is made more poignant by the fact that Maud Martha thinks of herself as the color of "cocoa straight" (195). She muses that, "Pretty would be a little cream-colored thing with curly hair. Or at the very lowest pretty would be a curly haired thing the color of cocoa with a lot of milk in it" (195). Maud Martha's observation demonstrates her keen awareness of colorism. It also further emphasizes the value of whiteness. Prettiness is equated with lighter skin and lighter skin is granted more privilege by society because of its proximity to whiteness. Maud Martha understands this and recognizes that as a dark-skinned girl she is unlikely to be thought pretty or given the benefits that those with lighter skin receive. In creating a comparison to cocoa, Maud Martha circumvents these strictures by using a new standard to understand her worth. She compares herself to "cocoa straight" knowing her cocoa recipe is the best in the family as her mother later acknowledges. In this way, she aligns herself with something valued as the best. In maintaining the secret of her cocoa and in comparing herself to cocoa, Maud Martha makes a connection between possession and value. Maud Martha is unable to change her skin or embody the overarching narratives around whiteness as property. However, within the space of childhood, she can hold tight to the secret of her cocoa and in doing so, keep possession of it. Furthermore, in equating

herself to this same cocoa, she emphasizes her self-possession and offers an alternative narrative for dark-skinned Black girls undervalued and marginalized by a white world.

Brooks make a similar assertion about Maud Martha and her conceptions of worth and value through a novel-long conceit on the dandelion introduced in the opening chapter. As Kevin Quashie notes: "dandelions, in their blend of the ordinary and extraordinary, are the discourse on which Maud Martha recognizes and shapes her identity" (49).[33] Her connection and affinity with the flower demonstrate her resilience, brightness, commonness, and ability to re-define beauty. From the porch view, Brooks describes the dandelions: "Yellow jewels for everyday, studding the green patched dress of her backyard" (Brooks 144). Through metaphorizing dandelions and grass with gems and dresses Brooks emphasizes the value of ordinary Black life in a world where whiteness is valued both legally and socially to a much higher degree. In identifying the dandelion as pretty, Quashie argues that "[Maud Martha] is active in assessing and redefining the notion of beauty so that it can include her" (50). Similar to her secret with the cocoa, Maud Martha's redefinition of beauty in terms of the dandelion challenges whiteness. She may not be light skinned or a property owner, but she can be beautiful and

[33]In his chapter on *Maud Martha*, Kevin Quashie argues that Gwendolyn Brooks creates a character whose deep interior life is expressed in the quiet, mundane moments of life. He notes that the novel is "remarkable for its emphasis on the ordinariness of Maud Martha's life" (47). Rather than focusing on deep, pivotal moments of change or epiphany, Brooks puts a collection of vignettes before the reader that allow us to see Maud Martha as a human being dealing with life's indignities. Indeed, Quashie argues the quiet core of Maud Martha – her "paying attention, asking questions, and considering" – allows her agency and meaningful interior life (48). Quashie further posits that *Maud Martha* is an existential novel in its "explicit meditation on the meaning of life" particularly examining the chapter in which Maud Martha's Uncle Tim dies (51). He discusses the themes of quiet and reflection at length noting that Maud Martha's thoughts, her interior receive just as much space and time as the action. Her deliberation is privileged just as much as the actual action is. In essence, Quashie concludes that Maud Martha is a novel about one woman's struggles, about the quotidian nature of her everyday life and her navigating that life through interior reflection.

possess both her living space and herself. In so doing, she offers an alternative narrative for the life of a Black girl.

This alternative narrative takes place in the space of childhood. Phillips argues that for Brooks, the space of childhood becomes one in which characters can gain social power and write not just individual histories but alternative histories (155). She suggests that there's an alternative doubling interior which can be hidden from outside, but also that children in Brooks's work are associated with the outside. They turn to the out-of-doors as another place of invisibility in all its vastness and its remove from parental eyes. Phillips writes that the move outside demonstrates the distance between the child's life and the adult life. We can see this manifest in Maud Martha's choices to literally seek the physical outdoors as she does in the first and final chapters. Phillips suggests that this separation of child life from adult life (demonstrated in the move outdoors) in not just to afford privacy, but it is also a form of "protest against degradation" (155). I assert that it's not only the move out of doors that is a protest but also the move into spaces that are suffused with color and life. Furthermore, this move serves to combat haunting which I will elucidate in the following close readings.

Close Readings of Maud Martha

These close readings serve to demonstrate how whiteness as property acts as a ghost that haunts Maud Martha through the years appearing in both the Brown family home and the kitchenette Maud Martha inhabits as a newlywed. These haunted spaces function as oppressive sites where Maud Martha turns to interior geographies of girlhood to resist haunting and claim dignity in a world that seeks to belittle her. Maud Martha's attention to physical interior spaces mirrors her attention to the development of her

interiority. Stepping into her rich interior life is also her way to step out of the history of whiteness as property and challenge the ghosts it brings with it.

Maud Martha's introduction to the reader takes place on the porch – a liminal space that historically served as a site of leisure, power, or surveillance and was often occupied by women.[34] We can see Maud Martha aware of her ability to both surveil and to be surveilled at the young age of seven. As she surveys her back yard from the porch she thinks about meadows and wishes to "either fling her arms or want to fling her arms, depending on who was by, rapturously up to whatever was watching in the sky" (Brooks 143-4). With these short lines, Brooks reveals that Maud Martha is already aware of her body and how even in a space such as the back porch, she could still be watched. Her self-consciousness at such an early age demonstrates how Black girls were required to be more aware of themselves and their bodies than their white counterparts. Indeed, in her extensive work on Black girlhood, Ruth Nicole Brown has noted, "Black girlhood is invisibility in the midst of hypervisibility" (*Black Girlhood Celebration* 21). In other words, to be a Black girl is to be viewed but not seen – to be looked on or over with eyes but not understood or acknowledged. Maud Martha's desired expression to "fling her arms" is tempered by her possible visibility even when she goes unnoticed. This self-denial and constant awareness of body and action is a kind of self-policing. Monique Morris states, "it has to be acknowledged that most Black girls experience forms of

[34] In nineteenth century literature, particularly in the conjure tales of Charles Chesnutt, William Gleason reads the porch as a place of surveillance and power for the white man to oversee the black person. Gleason notes how the porch becomes a site of resistance and power when these roles are reversed. Sue Beckham Bridwell reads the porch as a place of liminal community where tentative relationships are formed and where a feeling of "communitas" can be created if only temporarily (75). Jocelyn Donlon, studying the contemporary Southern porch, asserts that the porch is a transitional space where individuals can seize power and create an identity (27). She suggests Southern life is grounded in community and family and demonstrates how porches are used to enforce boundaries in regard to family/community, race, gender, and sexual orientation (27-8).

confinement and carceral experiences beyond simply going to jail or prison" (12). While Morris's work centers on Black girls in twenty-first century school settings, I would argue that similar principles apply in this porch scene. In meditating her actions and restraining her body's movements, we see Maud Martha internalizing and embodying confinement. Black bodies are policed because that's the cultural residue left over from Black bodies once being the property of whites. Brooks locating this scene on the porch underscores that cultural residue since the plantation porch served as a site of surveillance where white men and women exerted power over enslaved Black people. Maud Martha's self-policing is a survival mechanism that demonstrates a deep embodiment of centuries of surveillance and policing. She is keenly aware of what she "should" be acting like as a young Black girl – and "flinging" – a wild and carefree gesture is not an action she feels she could engage in without repercussions.

Brooks further draws our attention to policing behaviors and their connection to the built environment in *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945). In examining her poem "A Song for the Front Yard" alongside the opening vignette of *Maud Martha*, it is evident that freedom for Brooks's Black female protagonists only comes when there is a lack of surveillance – whether felt or actual. In the poem, the front yard is perceived as the place of "roses" and well-groomed and well-behaved girls. The backyard is a place "where it's rough and untended and hungry weed grows" (28). It is also where the speaker of the poem wishes to be considering she's been "in the front yard all [her] life" – a metaphor for being a "good girl" (28). Like the speaker of the poem, Maud Martha finds the backyard less constraining than the front. Maud Martha's introduction to the reader on

the porch both reveals and foreshadows that her girlhood is shaped by the architectural structures (and the privacy they do or do not afford) she grows up in and around.

The intertwining of whiteness and property and its effect on Maud Martha emerges again in chapter five: "you're being so good, so kind" in which a white boy, Charles, is supposed to come to Maud Martha's home. Just as the specter of slavery (and the white surveillance it entails) haunts the porch and Maud Martha's actions while on it, so the white gaze modifies her perception of her home and affects her understanding of self. Where Maud Martha's experience on the porch is merely tinged with the cultural residue of slavery, her experience inside her home in chapter five is saturated with it. When she looks around the furnishings of the Brown family home as she waits for Charles to come call on her, she sees only the negative. When Maud Martha looks at the scrollwork on the mantel which "usually seemed rather elegant" it becomes "unspeakably vulgar, impossible" as she looks at it through Charles's imagined gaze (158). She also notes the nick in the piano, a hole in the "sad-colored rug," and the sagginess of the leather armchair (158-9). These items which typically present no offense to her suddenly take up great room in her consciousness. The interior of her home consumes the interior of her mind when she knows it will have to house a white presence. In this way, her mind is haunted by the potential degradation of home and consequently of herself.

Furthermore, Brooks describes the meeting as carrying the weight of racial representation as well. Maud Martha recognizes that, to Charles: "She was the "whole 'colored' race…" (159). It's important to note that Brooks chooses to write that Maud Martha *was* the race rather than a representation of Blackness. In making it a direct metaphor she emphasizes the weightiness that Maud Martha feels in this moment, the

burden that is on her shoulders. Ruth Nicole Brown writes that Black girls are often "the expected carriers of heavy loads, made to feel invisible and inferior in spite of a historical legacy that suggests anything but defeat" (*Hear Our Truths* 47). The manifestation of that burden is made plain in Brooks's characterization of Maud Martha in this scene. The end of the sentence is equally important: "Charles was the personalization of the entire Caucasian plan" (160). Charles becomes an intimate manifestation of whiteness. And not only that, but rather than be a representation of whiteness, he *is* the "entire Caucasian plan" (160). Brooks use of the word "plan" emphasizes the methodical, meticulous, planned nature of white supremacy. Whiteness doesn't simply exist. It is an identity that is also a plan – one of dominance and superiority, and as Cheryl Harris has proven, one that is valued by law above Blackness. In the presence of whiteness, Maud Martha cannot ignore her own traumatic legacy as a Black woman.

This scene almost reads like horror in that the physical furnishings become dark and pernicious and that Maud Martha's heart starts to physically beat faster in response to Charles's impending visit. Brooks notes that in Charles visiting, "the theory of racial equality [was] about to be put into practice, and [Maud Martha] only hoped she would be equal to being equal" (159). Maud Martha recognizes the gravity and opportunity within this situation and as a young girl, she carries that weight – a responsibility not given to her white counterparts. Brooks notes as she waits: "No matter how taut the terror, the fall proceeds to its dregs…" (159). In other words, no matter how tense and afraid Maud Martha felt, it would remain until the situation came to a conclusion; fear would be her companion until the end of Charles's visit. The ellipses indicate that perhaps the fear would remain even after he left. However, at the end of the chapter we see that Maud

Martha feels a "sort of gratitude" and is immediately "sickened" by her realization. In this way, her exterior surroundings invade her interior thoughts and the long reach of white privilege and Black trauma invades the space. In feeling grateful, Maud Martha realizes the effect of white supremacy on her identity and her conceptions of self-worth, and she's horrified at how society has conditioned her to react. This incident also speaks to the way that even in a Black owned space, whiteness has power to demean, diminish, and possess.

This debasing of her home and her worth simply through the potential of white presence demonstrates the disparity between the legal and societal value of whiteness and Blackness. All Charles had to do was show up and he was "so good" (160). Brooks notes the paternalism and the long legacy of slavery that Maud Martha recognizes in just three words: "Recipient and benefactor" (160). In this one scene, we can see how the interior of the house becomes a manifestation for the physical structures of white supremacy and that even something that is owned and valued by a Black family can lose some of its perceived value in the presence of whiteness under law and custom that values whiteness. By recognizing her gratitude and feeling sickened by it, we see Maud Martha reject this narrative for her own life. This scene stands as both an indication of how past trauma haunts and physically sickens and how in the presence of whiteness Black girls are viewed as the sum of their property and possessions rather than dignified human beings.[35]

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[35] This notion of property as of greater or equal import to humanity is clear throughout Cheryl Harris's work. But it's also an idea that is central to Robin Bernstein's work in *Racial Innocence.* Bernstein notes that the question of who is a person and who is thing has long informed American society and that with the Emancipation Proclamation humans that had been defined as things were then defined as persons (17). Even so, she reiterates that the American question of who is a person and who is a thing is evident throughout children's culture in the twentieth century (242-3). For the presence of whiteness to reduce Maud Martha to the sum of her furnishings (which are now perceived as shabby) is another form of whiteness denying the humanity of Black people and reifying the legacy of slavery through emphasizing things and equating persons with things.

In cutting Charles from the story after this moment, we see Brooks prioritizing Black life and Maud Martha's internal growth which will be key to her ability to navigate the lack of external freedom she gains as an adult.

Additionally, Maud Martha grows up haunted by the fact that stable shelter is not a given and home ownership is a luxury easily revoked. This haunting is apparent in the short vignette "home" in which Maud Martha ruminates on her family's potential loss of their house, in which they've lived for 14 years. She, her sister, and her mother await the return of her father from the Home Owners' Loan office. She begins the chapter with a nod to a long desire and an inherited fear about the loss of the house: "What had been wanted was this always, this to last, the talking softly on this porch…" (170). First, it's significant that there is no subject in this sentence as if Maud Martha does not have the privilege or the right to assert her own desires as a Black girl in a house whose loan most likely comes from a white bank. Second, the whispers suggest fear and uncertainty and perhaps even a hesitancy to disturb the space with their own Black presence. And lastly, the desire for "this to last" demonstrates Maud Martha's awareness that the loss of their property was always a possibility.

Brooks writing this scene on the porch is significant because Maud Martha is not quite inside the house and because porches are historically a fixture in which white people luxuriated and surveilled. The residual presence of white power and white possession resides in the minds of the women (and the readers) as Maud Martha waits for her father's return in the liminal space of the porch. Additionally, it's significant that this scene takes place on the front porch rather than the back. The front porch functions as a space in which to watch for someone coming home, but it puts one on display. If we

return to "A Song in the Front Yard" we can see that in the front yard, a girl must be put together like a "rose" rather than an "untended and hungry weed" (28). In sitting on the front porch, one announces possession and asserts oneself, but also makes oneself available to be seen. There is a nuanced tension in Maud Martha waiting for her father to return. She is both watchful and being watched.

Of the HOLC itself, Brooks is reticent. She writes, "There was little hope. The Home Owners' Loan was hard" (171). Brooks's terse description stresses how indescribable the magnitude of the situation is. A long-winded explanation of the systemic racism of the FHA and HOLC would hardly fit Brooks's narrative. Instead, the idea that this place is "hard" and there is "little hope" in a novel that focuses on humanity and the beauty in the mundane is enough. Similarly, Brooks's reader as soon as they read the words "Home Owners' Loan" would likely understand the gravity of the situation. By offering little extra description, she allows the unspoken to haunt the reader as the assumption that whiteness is synonymous with property haunts her life.

Throughout the chapter, the third person narrator focalizing through Maud Martha makes a series of corrections to language describing inanimate objects that emphasizes the loss of possession. In the opening, she thinks fondly of the plants, the view, and the poplar tree which she can survey from the porch. The narrator says: "These things might soon be theirs no longer. Those shafts and pools of light, the tree, the graceful iron, might soon be viewed possessively by different eyes" (171).[36] This sentence draws the reader's

[36] Maud Martha's understanding of loss of location in addition to the property and objects itself highlights the value of geography and green space. Her attention to the "western sky" and the "shafts and pools of light" demonstrate how location and surroundings are also part of the property and greatly affect the home's inhabitants. If we draw connections to today, we can see how neighborhoods full of trees and light and green are of higher monetary value – better for both mental and physical health – so this too is loss.

attention to the idea of possession reminding the reader that currently Maud Martha views those items as in *her* possession. When Maud Martha looks out at a robin in a tree in the yard she thinks: "the tree, her tree" (172). At the same time, we learn she is trying not to cry. Her internal correction from "the tree" to "her tree" is her attempt to hold on to hope in this moment and to reassert herself as possessor of both the tree and the property on which it stands. This happens again a page later but with Papa. When he comes home, the narrator notes, "He passed the Kennedys', he passed the vacant lot, he passed Mrs. Blakemore's" (174). Here again, there is emphasis on possession by calling the houses by their owner's names and using the possessive form. This makes it all the starker when the narrator says two lines later: "He opened his gate – the gate" (174). This time the shift is from possession to dispossession inferring that the haunting and the white bank prevailed. By the end of the chapter, we know that the Browns get to keep their house, but in correcting the pronouns rather than just writing them once, the narrator forces the reader to contend with the shift taking place in the minds of Maud Martha and her family as well as to recognize the real fear and haunting that loss of property – and loss of self and safety – that came with it.

While Maud Martha experiences this haunting, she also resists it by privileging and elevating the ordinary about her home. Her sister Helen complains about their home, while her mother envisions a new flat for them, arguably participating in the structures that oppress them by denigrating their own home. Maud Martha interjects to speak fondly of the fires that warm them inside the walls and to silently appreciate the particular vantage of the sky from her yard. This moment of rich interior is an exemplar of Maud Martha's resistance to her haunted surroundings and her complex relationship with

housing. Indeed, Valerie Frazier when reading this scene notes that Maud Martha's childhood home serves as a site of both "distress" and "succor" (135). Her childhood experience of housing discrimination shapes Maud Martha's relationship to self and demonstrates the way that whiteness as property haunts not just political and legal realms, but literary ones as well. We can also see how this kind of precarity shapes Helen, Maud Martha's sister, who at the end of the chapter says that she's going to throw a party – a thing she hasn't done since she was eleven years old – to show all her friends "casually" that they're "homeowners" (174). Helen's desire to make this kind of display demonstrates how much of a symbol of status, privilege, and pride owning a home was. It's also a place of safety and security. In the relief of seeing that the loss is put off (at least for now) and to challenge the haunting and the fear of loss retuning, Helen chooses to assert herself and their home by showing it off.

After Maud Martha marries, she and Paul embark on the search for their own place. Maud Martha begins with high hopes thinking that they will have a beautifully appointed apartment and that perhaps the *Chicago Defender* will come photograph it (203). She originally envisions lots of green – "a green [Venetian blind] for the kitchen, since the wallpaper there was green" and "green drapes for the windows" as well as a green rug (203). Maud Martha's penchant for green harkens back to the opening vignette when she describes her backyard "the green patched dress" and imagining of greenness indicates hopes for prosperity and liveliness and a bringing of the freedom she found out of doors indoors (144). However, her hopes are dashed when the janitor tells her that "the Owner would not allow the furniture to be disturbed" because it wasn't "worth the Owner's financial while to make changes, or allow tenants to make them" (204). In

capitalizing the title "Owner" Brooks signifies how much power and status society bestowed on this person down to Maud Martha's decorating choices. Maud Martha learns she "would have to be satisfied with 'the apartment' as it was" (205). The fact that the word "apartment" is in quotes indicates that the Owner thinks or refers to the space as an apartment. Meanwhile, Maud Martha is keenly aware that it is *not* an apartment but a two-room kitchenette created by subdividing a single apartment. Additionally, in writing that she would "have to be satisfied," Brooks indicates that Maud Martha would or could find satisfaction in such a place. She doesn't say that she "should" but that she "would." In other words, it's not a requirement or a duty but rather a hopeful pronouncement that Maud Martha adopts in a realization that finding contentedness is a strategy for both survival and perhaps a small kind of happiness.

It's this attitude of resilience that prevents her succumbing to the grayness of the kitchenette. After Maud Martha encounters her first roach, Brooks writes:

> And these things – roaches, and having to be satisfied with the place as it was – were not the only annoyances that had to be reckoned with. She was becoming aware of an oddness in color and sound and smell about her, the color and sound and smell of the kitchenette building. The color was gray, and the smell and sound had taken on the suggestion of the properties of color, and impressed one as gray, too. The sobbings, the frustrations, the small hates, the large and ugly hates, the little pushing-through love, the boredom, that came to her from behind those walls (some of them beaver-board) via speech and scream and sigh – all of these were gray…There was a whole lot of grayness here. (205-6)

In emphasizing the grayness, Maud Martha draws attention to the lack of life. Gray is drab, dreary, sad, and amorphous. The very architecture, the very walls of the kitchenette embody this grayness. They carry the past anger, pain, and sadness of Black families that lived there before, and they hold the pain of those that live their now. Their lives are inextricable from Maud Martha's because they are inextricable from her living space. We

might think of the grayness as the pervasive haunting of Maud Martha. She cannot escape her living situation, and the pressing grayness is a constant reminder of the lack of dignity and personhood that her kitchenette affords her. If white society is the dominant class and they ascribe to Western notions of individualism and property as markers for adulthood, these are things Maud Martha cannot achieve in a communal living space where she isn't even given autonomy over her furniture choices.

However, through the act of sparing a mouse, Maud Martha offers an alternative narrative of adulthood – one that is predicated on creation rather than domination. Maud Martha is often compared to Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* when he kills the rat in his family's kitchenette dwelling.[37] In reading against Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, Megan K. Ahern suggests that Maud Martha finds creation (of a self) in "defying, counteracting the fearsomeness of the world defining herself as an exception to, rather than an excess of, that fearsomeness" (319). Ahern asserts that while Bigger needs to be scarier and more fearful than the world, Maud Martha sets herself outside of those definitions. Maud Martha, when she sees the mouse, imagines its life and ascribes to it a humanity. She sees that "the little creature seemed to understand that there was no hope of mercy from the eternal enemy, no hope of reprieve or postponement – but a fine small dignity" (Brooks 212). As the mouse "wait[s]" it looks at Maud Martha and she begins to ascribe human worries – particularly the worries of a mother – to the mouse. She names its potential children Betty and Bobby and thinks about their lack of nutrition and their education. Maud Martha goes so far to think of the mouse worrying about cleaning and its home. She then says, "No more the mysterious shadows of the kitchenette, the

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[37] See also Valerie Frazier, Courtney Thorsson, and Megan K. Ahern for readings of Maud Martha and the mouse against Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas and the rat.

uncharted twists, the unguessed halls" (212). After ascribing a humanity to the mouse, Maud Martha lets it go. And then "she was conscious of a new cleanness in her. A wide air walked in her" (212). The way in which Maud Martha describes herself in this moment of mercy is significant. She feels trapped by the kitchenette. She cleans its endlessly, but still the grayness and its inescapability haunts her. In this singular moment, she counteracts that haunting and that grayness. Brooks draws our attention to Maud Martha's interiority with the use of the word "conscious" and demonstrates that cleanness is not necessarily about literal external cleanliness but some internal morality. Secondly, the fact that Maud Martha feels "a wide air" is important because Maud Martha's invitation of the outdoor elements into her kitchenette is a repeated way by which she dispels the haunted nature of the enclosure and brings both figurative and literal light into her home. Creation – sparing the mouse, birthing a baby, making cocoa, decorating with curtains – becomes a mechanism by which Maud Martha can resist the haunted and carceral nature of her dwelling space to step outside the history of whiteness as property.

Ahern also suggests that the novel (particularly in opposition to the naturalism that preceded it) emphasizes "the interiority of the individual" and makes clear that Maud Martha's interior "is as important an object of study as her environment" (314). She writes, "The protagonist's capacity for understanding and insight, however, is essential to survival in the case of Maud Martha; it is what gives her character its depth" (321). In line with Ahern's thinking, I suggest that both Maud Martha's surroundings *and* her interior are of equal importance to the narrative. Indeed, it is her surroundings that cause her to turn inward. As demonstrated in my earlier discussion of Shabazz, mobility is an option for men, which allows Bigger to lash out and look for ways to assert himself

outside of his dwelling. Confined to her living space with few options for literal or figurative mobility, Maud Martha turns inward and looks for ways to cultivate creation as a means to challenge the cultural script that values whiteness, maleness, and property above Black life.

In the final chapter of *Maud Martha*, Brooks again demonstrates her protagonist's resilience and how she combats the haunting she feels within her own home. While not much is said about the kitchenette itself in the last few chapters, in the final scene, we learn that Maud Martha has obtained the green shade she so longed for earlier in the novel. Brooks takes care to mention it twice. First, "the sunshine had broken through the dark green of that shade and was glorifying every bit of her room" (319). The language in this line is positive and uplifting. The idea that the sun had "broken through" demonstrates there was a barrier to overcome. Whereas the kitchenette had previously been described as gray and odorous – here the sun makes it glorious – a word that also connotes divinity and elevation from the mundane. From the opening vignette, we know that Maud Martha feels freer (when not surveilled) in the outdoors. In allowing that in, she pushes against the haunting hanging over her. When natural light and her creative efforts permeate the architecture, Maud Martha becomes unfettered from the social structures that bind her as well. Brooks's double mention within a single paragraph of the "dark green shade" draws our attention to this décor. The second mention reads: "[the sun] made her sit up in bed and stretch, and zip the dark green shade up to the very top of the window" (Brooks 320). In the kitchenette chapter, Maud Martha yearns for "green drapes for the windows" (203). In fact, most of the décor she wishes for is green: a shade for the kitchen, drapes for other windows, and a rug. In attaining the green shade, Maud

Martha demonstrates resilience – an indomitableness even in the face of haunting grayness. She may not be able to purchase furniture or a home and thus meet markers of value and status deemed necessary for successful adulthood in white America, but she can make the home that she does inhabit more valuable to her. She possesses rather than being possessed.

The final chapter recognizes lynching, divorce, death, and in the face of those things the resilience of Black girls like Maud Martha as represented by the dandelion. Brooks writes: "it was doubtful whether the ridiculousness of man would ever completely succeed in destroying the world – or, in fact, the basic equanimity of the least and commonest flower" (321). She asserts that their "kind…would…come up again in the spring…if necessary, among, between, or out of – beastly inconvenient! – the smashed corpses lying in strict composure, in that hush infallible and sincere" (321). In reckoning with the dead, Brooks demonstrates that Maud Martha recognizes the harshness of life as a Black girl, and yet acknowledges that the dandelion, the "commonest flower," the Black girl can grow out of and in the face of death. They have the ability to rise and blossom out of death and tragedy. It is "beastly inconvenient" – it is perhaps grotesque, but they can still possess life and resilience. Maud Martha cannot escape her traumatic and haunted past but she can contend with it. Maud Martha thinks, "And was not this something to be thankful for?" (Brooks 321). Couching Maud Martha's thought here in terms of a question underscores the fact that gratitude for survival through trauma was not something to be thankful for unequivocally but rather a measured gratitude that acknowledges the toll of said trauma. Maud Martha's ability to find gratitude in the most difficult of circumstances gives rise to her resilience. It allows her to survive and perhaps

even thrive in the rays of the sun. In the face of a harsh reality, she chooses to be a creative force, finding refuge from haunted dwellings through her own interior and the outdoors. This does not rid the world of redlining or inequality or the legacy of whiteness as property. Nevertheless, Maud Martha can possess the property she inhabits even if she can't legally own it. Surviving, as does the dandelion, in the face of racialized violent death is the property of Black humanity that cannot be parceled up and redlined.

Critical Context: Brown Girl, Brownstones

In this section, I look at a different kind of haunting. Rather than the abstract, amorphous grayness of the kitchenette, I examine the corporeal ghosts who haunt Selina in Paule Marshall's bildungsroman *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). Growing up in a brownstone haunted by white ghosts whose presence serves as a reminder that U.S. society markers of adulthood are directly tied to whiteness creates a sense of dispossession in Selina. Unmoored from her cultural heritage and dispossessed within her own home, she struggles to mature according to culturally scripted markers of adulthood. In seeking an alternate way to "become an adult" (as opposed to buying and remaining in a brownstone as her mother would have her do) Selina chooses to engage with the spiritual via creative expression (dance) and search for memory. Where Maud Martha seeks to become possessor of home, her secrets, and her mind to step outside the narrative of whiteness as property, Selina seeks to become possessor of ancestral memory by returning home to Barbados. Returning to her ancestral homeland is an option for her, unlike Maud Martha, and we see Selina experience a kind of epiphany at the end of the novel when she makes the decision to return.

Maud Martha and Selina's differing experiences of girlhood and racism are rooted in their pasts. Maud Martha comes from a staunchly African American community whose haunting arises from slavery and Selina from a West Indian identifying community whose haunting arises from colonialism as well as the legacies of slavery in the United States. Jacqui Alexander, however, is quick to remind us that while the evils of slavery and colonialism appear differently, they are both threads of oppression in the same vein. Indeed, she calls them "first cousins" (273). With this in mind, I contend that while these two novels have different cultural backgrounds and their protagonists experience oppressions that appear different, their oppression is rooted in being both Black and female. Nevertheless, Selina's identity as the daughter of Bajan immigrants is important to parsing some of the differences in the novel as it allows Selina access to her ancestral history that is unavailable to Maud Martha and thus gives Selina a different set of tools to combat her own cultural haunting. In the following pages, I elucidate some of the authorial and historical background that contextualizes this novel – looking at Paule Marshall's positioning as both African American and West Indian as well as a patterns of West Indian immigration. I then engage in close readings of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* that demonstrate that Selina grows up in and around hauntings that arise from past trauma which she manages through creativity and recovery of memory in order to become possessor rather the possessed and step outside of whiteness as property. Finally, I address the space of the kitchen which serves as a site of creation and empowerment in both *Maud Martha* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

Where Brooks's writing is deeply rooted in Black Chicago, Marshall's arises from a convergence of identities and geographies. Marshall brings both an African-American

and an Afro-Caribbean perspective to the table. Marshall has described herself as uniquely situated:

> I know that people have trouble defining me as a black American or Caribbean writer. I fall between two stools, I'm neither West Indian nor black American…I have got my feet in both camps, so that I am able to understand and respond to black American culture as well as West Indian writers…This is what my work is about: to bring about a synthesis of the two cultures and, in addition, to connect them up with the African experience. (Marshall qtd. in Ogundipe-Leslie 37)

Marshall's understanding of herself and her writing as cross-cultural, as both/and, falls in line with Alexander's explanation of her own diasporic identity in *Pedagogies of Crossing*. Alexander discusses a three footed identity recognizing that one's identity comes from many markers and is unstable if one marker is excluded. She identifies as a Black lesbian with "one foot" in the Caribbean, one in the U.S., and another in the Kôngo (8-9). Both Marshall and Alexander draw on the language of having a "foot" in a cultural and geographic location while acknowledging that the whole of them cannot fully belong to any one fixed space. Alexander attributes this understanding of diasporic identity to the crossing of the Middle Passage. Throughout her text, "crossing" is her central metaphor and framework for making sense of herself and ways of being. She suggests that "there is no crossing that is ever taken once and for all" and thus modes of being and knowing how to be is a constant learning process (Alexander 6). This framework of crossing as a continual process or a kind of liminal space relates to both Marshall's position as a writer and to Selina's position as a Black girl born in Brooklyn to Barbadian parents. Even when Selina leaves Brooklyn for Barbados, it's not a "once and for all" crossing meaning that Selina cannot rid herself of either her Bajan roots or her U.S. upbringing. Instead, in returning to Barbados, she lays claim to and possesses what has been a part of her all along. Alexander sees "memory as antidote to alienation, separation, and the amnesia that

domination produces" (14). In returning to Barbados, Selina seeks "memory as antidote" to domination and possession.

As a child of two cultures, Selina is subject to the aftereffects of two variations of white domination – colonialism and slavery. Her identity as both Barbadian and American enriches her cultural heritage, but it also complicates her struggle toward adulthood. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's understanding of hybrid identity – what she terms "hybridity" is useful in understanding Selina's struggle to meet markers of girlhood, femininity, and adulthood across cultures. Brown-Guillory asserts that, "Hybridity -- the mutability of identity -- echoes loudly as one resolution in these narratives of separation and loss" (3). This falls in line with Alexander's assertion that in a return "home" to geographical roots, even metaphorically (i.e. an understanding of "particular histories"), there is a new kind of self-making at work (268). In other words, there must be an understanding of both the origin place and the place of residence and an ability to change and shift as new information about identity is gathered rather than to remain in a "fixed" identity in order to find healing and understand self.

Alexander's understanding of the importance of the spiritual emphasizes how haunting and spirituality function in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Maud Martha*. She argues that "the Sacred" is necessary for making sense of self and for the crossing (18). She argues that "the personal is not only political but spiritual" (7) asserting that which we see cannot be separate from the invisible and that which works internally (320). Finally, she suggests that "home is a set of practices" and that the way feminists have characterized home disallows for an understanding of the Sacred within the home (328). She says that spiritual practices can help make a home writing, "…being at home in the

body is one of the meanings of surrender, as in a handing over not a sacrificial giving up" (329). As we saw in *Maud Martha*, the interior and the self can become a kind of home, and Maud Martha's cultivation of her interior can be read as a kind of spiritual practice. In a similar vein to Alexander's assertion, Brown-Guillory suggests that in diasporic literature, spiritual healing rituals "empower women to resist the systems of oppression that are both internal and external to community" (3). She asserts that there is a commonality amongst all members of the diaspora and that they are still haunted by the Middle Passage today (4). Spirituality then can be interpreted as the healing side of haunting. In other words, if we take Alexander's assertion that memory is antidote and Brown-Guillory's argument that spiritual ritual is healing, then we can see how Selina's journey to engage in a spiritual dance and then to return to Barbados and uncover memory are restorative practices. They allow her to dispel the haunting that possesses her and model her journey toward adulthood outside the confines of white definitions.

Barbadian Property and Caribbean Migration Patterns

Deighton Boyce's concern with his "piece of ground" and Silla's insistence on purchasing a home in Brooklyn becomes even more resonant when factoring in the legacy of property in Barbados. Legal slavery ended in Barbados in 1838, but white landowners continued to seek ways to maintain power over "their former human property" (Beckles 147). Barbados's social and economic structure was built on a plantation model. With emancipation, white landowners sought ways to keep this system intact for their own benefit. Since the planter community owned the land and formerly enslaved peoples were unable to accumulate much property, a tenantry system emerged. Leading Barbadian historian Hilary McD Beckles writes: "The two circumstances

combined to create a situation whereby after emancipation a workforce that did not own homes, or have access to land, was created with an inbuilt dependency on the plantation, and by extension, on the white community for survival" (150). The legacy of property in Barbados is deeply embedded in its history and contributed to the creation of a class of "dispossessed and alienated" people (245). By 1848, "less than one percent of the agricultural land in Barbados was owned by blacks" and Black Barbadians were beholden to the white planter class (158). Not until the 1930s did land ownership trends begin to shift due to an influx of funds from men gaining wages working on the Panama Canal, but by that point, many people had already left Barbados for other opportunities.

West Indians began immigrating to the U.S. in the late 1800s. Higher wages in neighboring countries, inability to purchase land, and a famine in 1863 made emigration a more enticing prospect to Barbadians in particular. (Beckles 151, 166-7). The end to legal slavery and lack of employment in the Caribbean and opportunity for employment in the U.S. increased migration rates between 1900 and 1910 when 30,000 West Indians immigrated to the U.S. (Mose Brown 24). Between 1910 and 1924, more West Indians immigrated because of the declining sugar industry bringing the number up to 100,000 (Mose Brown 24). Then the Immigration Act of 1924 limited the number of nonwhite immigrants allowed in the U.S. Immigration continued, albeit at a lesser volume, and by the 1930s, ninety percent of the Black immigrants in New York were of Caribbean descent and made up about a quarter of New York's Black population (Mose Brown 25).

Brooklyn

Marshall's novel takes place in Brooklyn, and the Boyce family's brownstone sits in the historic neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant. The family lives on Chauncey Street

by Fulton Park and within walking distance of Fulton Street.[38] The neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, colloquially called Bed-Stuy, was a predominantly white area inhabited by Dutch, German, and Jewish people before the 1930s (Hymowitz 32, 94). When the A subway train was completed in 1936, Harlem and Bed-Stuy found themselves on the same train line and more accessible to one another (32, 94). By 1950, the Black population of Bed-Stuy had reached fifty percent, and by 1960 was up to seventy-four percent (95). Like Chicago's Bronzeville, Brooklyn's Bed-Stuy was subject to redlining by the HOLC (94). Additionally, many owners altered their brownstones to make them more suitable for renters which we can see in the Boyces's situation as they rent before Silla buys the brownstone and then let out rooms to other tenants like Suggie (95). Even so, Bed-Stuy had higher levels of home ownership than other similar areas and a thriving Black middle class (96). The Black community in Bed-Stuy formed homeowners associations, ran banks, and engaged in civic activity (97-8). We can see this community engagement reflected in the pages of Marshall's novel perhaps most specifically with the Barbadian Association. Bed-Stuy was vacated quickly by remaining white residents in the 1940s (95), and even in the novel, we can see how the Barbadian community attempts to continue to elevate their socioeconomic status as evidenced with the Chancellor family moving to Crown Heights when brownstones in Bed-Stuy become devalued by white flight (Marshall 164). This is the Brooklyn in which Selina grows up.

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[38] Chauncey and Fulton Streets are described early in the novel: "Chauncey Street languished in the afternoon heart, and across from it Fulton Park rose in a cool green wall….the park was the fitting buffer between Chauncey Street's gentility and Fulton Street's raucousness" (10). After its initial mention, Chauncey Street reappears often to locate the reader at the Boyces's brownstone (Marshall 10, 31, 43, 54, 90-91).

As the challenges to homeownership in Chicago shape Maud Martha's world, so do the challenges of homeownership in Brooklyn shape Selina's experience.

Close Readings of Brown Girl, Brownstones

Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* opens with a description of brownstones in Brooklyn – four paragraphs of their history and character before we get to the name of any person including our protagonist – Selina. In these descriptions, we learn that the Barbadian community "loved the houses with the same fierce idolatry as they had the land on their obscure islands" (Marshall 2). Marshall's emphasis on the fixture of the home as incredibly prized and significant to this community is made all the more resonant when we consider the history of property as a privilege only for whites in both the U.S. and Barbados. Selina's girlhood is shaped by her mother's struggle to "buy-house" and the first mention we get of Selina is in connection with the brownstone in which they reside: "The house was alive to Selina" (2). The novel opens on Selina as a ten-year-old girl, but the narrator indicates that Selina appears to be beyond her physical years noting that she did not have "the eyes of the child" (2). Rather:

> Something too old lurked at their centers. They were weighted, it seemed, with scenes of a long life. She might have been old once and now, miraculously, young again – but with the memory of that other life intact. She seemed to know the world down there in the dark hall and beyond for what it was. (2)

The description of Selina – her eyes, her youth, and her memory – demonstrates that she has a connection to memory of which she is not fully conscious or aware. The "scenes of long life" and "memory of that other life intact" reside deep within her though she is not in touch with them as of yet. Framing the novel with Selina's connection to her ancestors is important for her access to cultural heritage and the haunting that she experiences.

Selina's engagement with the architecture of the house demonstrates her conflicted sense of self and her obstacles toward adulthood and possession. In the scene immediately after Selina's description, she is called "the child" and when she "leaped boldly to the edge of the step" she at the same time "reached back to grasp the bannister and the contradiction of her movement flung her back on the step" (2). On the one hand, she seems to carry memory within her as evidenced by her eyes in the "dark hall" and on the other something holds her back as made apparent by her moment of struggle on the stairs. Her hybridity and the way her lack of connection with the Barbadian part of her identity constrains her is demonstrated in later lines when she notes that her arms were "circled by two heavy silver bangles which had come from 'home' and which every Barbadian-American girl wore from birth" (3). It's evident through her inability to move forward on the steps that she's vacillating between Barbados and Brooklyn and reconciling those identities. She feels constricted as represented by the bangles, and she doesn't identify Barbados as "home" based on its in-text quotations. In other words, Selina, from the opening pages of the novel struggles to balance the two ends of her hybrid identity, and this tension is represented in her interaction with the stairs. After she shakes her fist, where her bangles (physical representations of the homeland) sit, "the house, stunned by the noise, ceased breathing and a pure silence fell" (3). This moment foreshadows that Selina's key to banishing the haunting in the home is her embrace of the cultural heritage that is within her but not yet known, understood, or embraced by her. She must make Alexander's crossing and use memory as the antidote to understand her hybrid identity and to reckon with her own haunting. Where Maud Martha turned to her interior for creation, Selina must turn outward to Barbados to release that which is within

her. The understanding of self and the interior is of utmost importance to both protagonists, but the journey and tools to get there are markedly different.

The ghost of Selina's brother appears often to her mother Silla, but Selina finds herself haunted by the white people who previously occupied their brownstone. In the opening chapter of the novel, Selina interacts with the ghosts feeling like she is "one of them" as she walks down the stairs. She initially feels welcomed by the "white family…no longer a dark girl alone and dreaming at the top of an old house" but when Selina enters the parlor – a room which was full of décor the white family had left – she feels rejection. The parlor is described as "a museum" to the lives of the white people who lived there before with a "floor-to-ceiling mirror" which "retained their faces as the silence did their voices" (3). Through their haunting, the white people retain possession of the brownstone. The parlor itself acts as a monument to the white occupants. As Selina walks into the mirrored parlor still feeling welcomed and familial with the white ghosts, she sees her reflection and immediately recognizes her unbelonging and dispossession: "the mirror flung her back at herself…She did not belong here…The room was theirs…it belonged to the ghost shapes hovering in the shadows" (5-6). Upon seeing her Blackness, Selina feels alienated from the ghosts, and she recognizes that even though she physically occupies the house, it doesn't really belong to her. She doesn't possess it. As Alexander asserts and Marshall makes evident through Selina's experience here, Black and brown immigrant women share a "nonbelonging" in the U.S. (Alexander 263). The opening scene of the novel establishes Selina's place within the home and within her own family as one of alienation, unbelonging, and dispossession distinctly connected to her upbringing in a Bedford-Stuyvesant brownstone.

After the disenchanting encounter with the mirror, Selina continues her tour of the house and ends up in the dining room where she looks at the picture of her family, notably without her in it, and feels a similar sense of disconnection to that which she experienced in the parlor. When she looks at the photograph on the buffet, she desires "to send up a loud importunate cry to declare herself" (4). Seeing herself in the mirror but not in the photograph both removes her from the company of white people and affirms her feeling of unbelonging to her family. The house itself and the objects it contains function as constant reminders of Selina's dispossession and shape her understanding of cultural identity as she moves through girlhood. At age ten, she desires to "declare herself" but she cannot until the end of the novel when she recognizes the need to cast off the brownstone and journey to Barbados. Removed from her country of origin and its history (and as the only one of her family born in the U.S.), Selina struggles to navigate the structures of white ownership/oppression and the demands of her own West Indian community as they try to achieve a kind of whiteness (or at least economic success and upward mobility that white immigrants before them achieved through possession of property). These opening scenes lay the groundwork for Marshall's coming-of-age narrative to model how to grapple with history – in particular the ghost of whiteness as property – through Selina's journey toward adulthood.

Selina's engagement with what Alexander terms the "Sacred" is another important aspect in moving from possessed to possessor and grappling with the specters that haunt her. A clear moment where ritual connects Selina to her past and to her ancestors is the dance recital scene. The first night, she dances with Rachel, Selina's "dead-white" Jewish friend (239) who is the first to make the suggestion that Selina go to

the Caribbean "since [her] family's from there" (241). Rachel is held in contrast to Selina and her girlhood. When they dance together Selina feels that "they were simply reflections of each other" but later when Selina sees herself in Margaret's mother's eyes, she realizes that she and Rachel are *not* reflections of one another – a realization which causes her not to want to talk to Rachel after this incident (242). When Selina dances by herself, the narrator returns to a discussion of her eyes which we learned were knowing beyond years at the beginning of the story. During the dance sequence, they are described as: "old as they had been old even when she was a child, suggesting always that she had lived before and had retained deep within her, the memory and scar of that other life" (243). Here, Marshall nods to the inherited trauma and the passed down cultural memory through generations of Black women. As yet, Selina has not fully understood or owned it, but it resides within her all the same.

This moment of her dancing is related to a sacrament. She imagines herself "giving each [audience member] something of herself, just as the priest in Ina's church…passed along the row of communicants, giving them the wafer and the transmuted blood…" (243). This comparison to the act of Christian communion makes clear Selina's engagement in the spiritual and the sacred; it's this moment and this movement that leads up to her self-recognition and her declaration of desire. In dancing and connecting with the spiritual, Selina begins to reconnect with her alienated memories and take possession of them. She taps into the "scar of that other life" (243).

It's appropriate then that when she leaves the stage after the recital and walks through the city, New York is described in different, less cloying terms than earlier in the novel. Indeed, the narrator notes, "The buildings slid back, it seemed, to give them room"

(244). Here, Selina is traveling with a large group of white people and the city makes way for them. It expands for their presence in a way that it does not for Selina. When she enters the home of Margaret's mother, it is described as an "old and ponderous greystone apartment house, whose grandeur had been eclipsed by a modern apartment house that was all lightness and glass beside it and whose future was hinted in the decrepit row of tenements on its other side" (245). This ominous description foreshadows the white flight that takes place from the 1950s on and how Margaret's family could likely be part of that. The ongoing oppression of Black people through the withholding of property is underscored by Selina's understanding of herself as Black and what Blackness means in the eyes of white people within this old, established home of a white person.

Selina's feelings of haunting manifest in the home of Margaret's mother when she calls Selina to her small sitting room to talk. Selina and the other members of the dance troupe are at the Benton home celebrating post-recital when Margaret tells Selina that her mother has requested to meet Selina. Margaret's mother begins the conversation, perhaps more accurately described as an interrogation, by positioning herself as superior in knowledge to Selina. Mrs. Benton tells Selina that she was "much too young to know anything about birth or death" which was the subject matter of the recital (286). But, as the reader knows, Selina experienced death first-hand with the loss of her father and drew on the memory of Miss Mary's passing as inspiration for her dance (243). Selina resists Mrs. Benton's attempts to discover Selina's family origins with terse responses which force Mrs. Benton to be more direct. When Selina finally reveals that her parents are from the West Indies, Margaret's mother "sat back, triumphant" and discloses that a West Indian woman named Ettie used to clean for the Benton family (248). Margaret's mother

– who is referred to as "the woman" throughout the novel – calls Ettie, the West Indian woman that used to clean for them, "a girl" (248). In the face of Selina's silence, Margaret's mother says, "Oh, she wasn't a girl, of course. We just call them that" (248). She "smiled apologetically" and acknowledges that calling "them that" is a "terrible habit" but she offers no actual apology and continues to call Ettie a girl in subsequent conversation (248-9).

In a room of leisure, literally named for being sedentary (the sitting room), Margaret's mother both infantilizes Selina and Others her by minimizing her life experience, calling a woman older than Selina "girl," and using "we/them" binary language. The juxtaposition between naming Margaret's mother "the woman" and Ettie "a girl" draws out several important distinctions. First, in using "the" for Margaret's mother she is made singular connoting importance or at the very least distinction. There is only one of her. She is "the woman." In using "a" to describe Ettie, she is made one of many emphasizing her lack of singularity and her belonging to a different group: girls. The "a" emphasizes her replaceability and lack of distinction in the eye of her employer – despite her declaration that Ettie was "just like one of the family" (249). Secondly, in using "woman" to describe the white woman and "girl" to describe the Black woman, the hierarchy of white society is put on display. Black women – particularly West Indian domestic workers – are infantilized through the language used to refer to them. By refusing to call Ettie a woman, Mrs. Benton positions herself on a different plane of existence than Ettie and uses her language to subjugate her. Mrs. Benton demonstrates that she further demeans and underestimates Ettie by assuming that Ettie genuinely

agrees with her during “long discussions on the race problem” not once considering that Ettie might simply be placating her employer in order to keep her income (249).

This extended interaction between Selina and Mrs. Benton demonstrates that no matter how old or mature Selina is, Margaret’s mother – and white people like her – will perpetually label Selina a girl and see her as the equivalent of the rest of her race rather than as a singular person. In Mrs. Benton’s eyes, Selina is another manifestation of Ettie. Selina expresses internal frustration that the woman can’t see that Selina “was simply a girl of twenty with a slender body and slight breasts and no power with words, who loved spring and then the sere leaves falling and dim, old houses, who had tried, foolishly perhaps to reach beyond herself?” (250). By including these descriptors of herself, Selina’s thought process does for the reader what Maud Martha’s internal reflections often did – they serve to humanize and emphasize the dignity of each Black girl who is put in dehumanizing situations and talked to in a demeaning manner. These ordinary things about Selina are not remarkable except that they make her singular and distinct which is to say they excise her from the totalizing racism that made all Black “girls” interchangeable as bought and sold commodities. As she ascribes personalizing characteristics to herself, Selina reminds herself and the reader that while she is human, under the gaze of the white woman she is seen as interchangeable property.

This realization is made clear in the subsequent scene which parallels the beginning of the novel. In the opening scenes, Selina encounters herself in the parlor mirror and realizes while she inhabits the brownstone, it’s still possessed by the ghosts of white people. At the end of the novel, she sees her reflection in the white woman’s eyes and rather than Selina seeing herself as she or her community members see her, she sees

herself how Mrs. Benton sees her. The woman's eyes are "a well-lighted mirror in which, for the first time, Selina truly saw – with a sharp and shattering clarity – the full meaning of her black skin" (250). After throwing off Mrs. Benton's hand, Selina flees the apartment. She looks at herself in a store window after she runs away and sees "clearly, for the first time, the image which the woman – and the ones like the woman – saw when they looked at her" (251). Selina's recognition of herself as an interchangeable commodity in the eyes of white people is underscored by the reflection of her face in a *store* window – a place where goods are purchased. Selina's reflection in the window becomes a part of the display and emphasizes the way that white people have historically seen and treated Black people as property to be bought and sold. Selina strikes the window and tries to blot out her reflection in an attempt to erase the image of her as commodity.

Additionally, her reflection is just that – a reflection. It's not actually her, but an incomplete imitation of her. This "illusion" is all that people like "the woman" will see. Selina's reflection haunts her as she realizes that while white people's image of her as indistinguishable property "was only an illusion" it was "so powerful that it would stalk her down the years" (252). In other words, she would be haunted by the legacy of slavery and the equation of Black humans with property by white people. She grasps that she was "like all her kinsmen" and "must somehow prevent [the illusion] from destroying her inside and find a way for her real face to emerge" (252). That recognition alters Selina drastically, and she begins looking for a way to dissociate herself from property.

Part of this recognition results in a sudden feeling of kinship with her mother that Selina didn't possess before. She taps into the memory, the scar, that's been inside her

this whole time and begins to feel a connection toward the Bajan women that sit around her mother's kitchen table. She thinks that "she was one with them: the mother and the Bajan women, who had lived each day what she had come to know" (253). This is the beginning of her reclamation of her Caribbean heritage. It took the Gothic moment of dispossession in the mirror, the understanding of herself as property in the eyes of the white woman and the window, and the specter of being equated to an "illusion," to push Selina to see herself as part of a community Black woman and to tap into the memory that lived within – to see the trauma, the weight, and the strength of the women around her. She notes that the mother's anger is a result of this trauma and the subjugation by white people. The anger Silla harnesses is how the mother "endured, she who had not chosen death by water" – a bleak allusion to Silla's survival – both in reference to Deighton's death by water and perhaps also those who died by water in the Middle Passage voyages.

Selina's journey from girlhood to adulthood is not clearly marked by one moment but rather a series of moments at the end of the novel. Selina's recognition in the mirror, her dance, her encounter with Margaret's mother, her reflection in the store window, her understanding of her own mother, and her refusal of the Barbadian Association's scholarship. At the banquet, she is awarded the scholarship but refuses it saying that she wanted things to be simply good or bad but they are not. Rather, they are tangled and nuanced. She says that "children can't understand it. Now that I'm less of a child I'm beginning to understand" (262). Moments later when Selina's mother confronts her in a rage Selina is "no longer the child who used to succumb, without will, to that powerful onslaught" (263) and she openly rejects her mother's investment in property. Silla has

spent the novel trying to "buy-house" and now has her eyes set on a new place in Crown Heights. Selina screams, "I'm not interested in houses!" (265) In this strong reply, Selina declares herself separate from that pursuit and announces her intention to create a life and a self outside of owning a home. She chooses to opt out of the structure of commodification – both of herself and her life and in doing so rejects the Western notion of purchasing a life. She reiterates (after expressing understanding of her mother's desire for a house) that she doesn't "scorn" her mother but that buying a house is "just not what [she] wants" (265). It's important that this scene comes after Selina understands how white people will view her. Silla even asks her daughter "Girl, do you know what it tis out there? How those people does do yuh?" and when she sees "the sad knowing" in Selina's eyes, Silla bows her head – a gesture connoting resignation. Selina tells her mother that she loved hearing how her mother came to the U.S. and was her "own woman" at eighteen. Selina declares "that's what I want. I want it!" (265). She asserts her desire to be possessor of her own life without ties to property. In rejecting both Barbadian and white standards for adulthood, Selina sets out to create her own metrics of womanhood – knowing full well what she will be measured against.

The final moments in the novel tell us that Selina's identity will always be split but that she's setting off to understand and find the Barbadian half. Her friend Rachel agrees to set her up as a dancer on a Caribbean cruise line, and the novel closes with Selina wandering among the destroyed brownstones that have been cleared for a city project. She particularly notes a staircase which leads to nowhere. We might compare this staircase to the one she feels caught on at the beginning of the novel – unable to move forward or back – except this time it's the architectural property that leads to nowhere.

She hears the voices and feels the presence of "all the people she had ever known" and wanting "to leave them something" she flings one of her silver bangles – which all Barbadian girls are given at their birth – into the heap of rubble (268). Selina's keeping of one bracelet and casting off of the other demonstrates her position in a liminal space. Even as she is beginning to shed her childhood identity, she is embracing her hybrid identity as Barbadian and American. In undertaking her journey to Barbados and leaving her bangle behind, she represents her identity as fixed in two locations. Like Marshall and Alexander describe their identities as springing from differing geographies, Selina sets out to find her other foot. Alexander's understanding that a crossing is never once and for all is important here and connects to Selina's symbolic gesture with the bangle. By allowing herself to embrace both aspects of her identity, she unshackles herself from an identity bound to property. And by keeping one bangle, she demonstrates she's still grounded in Barbadian culture. In other words, she is both/and. She sees her crossing as not once and for all. This journey will be a recursive one that doubles back on itself. But without the crossing, she cannot engage that memory and scar and the knowing that is deep within her in the first chapter. To gain that self-possession she sees in her mother and (so desires for herself) and to be seen as an adult on her own terms, she must leave the community she's grown up in and come to understand her hybrid identity through a reclamation of her cultural heritage. In throwing the bangle, she leaves part of herself to the haunted brownstones, but declares that that property will not be her ultimate defining feature.

When Selina realizes an adulthood measured by anything other than property is unattainable in Brooklyn, she leaves for the Caribbean to recover her erased history. For

Selina, engaging with the structures owned by white people forces her to see herself how they see her. Rather than "buying house" (achieving economic/adult success) or accepting her identity as described by Margaret's mother's, Selina rejects the narrative script written for her and returns to the Caribbean to engage with her erased heritage. In this way, she removes herself from the white structures surrounding her that would deny her humanity and define her in terms of property. Leaving for the Caribbean, Selina unfetters herself from the oppressive structures in Brooklyn, and journeys to claim the tools she needs to become her own possessor.

The Sacred Space of the Kitchen: A Link Between Maud Martha *and* Brown Girl, Brownstones

The kitchen is defined in white female and Black male texts as a place of confinement or of imprisonment, but in the work of Black women's literature, it becomes something more nuanced.[39] While the home itself can serve as a site of oppression, this stems less from the physical confines of the space itself and more from the inability to own or the possess the space. When Black women are in possession of the space, they can redefine the kitchen – or in Brooks's case the kitchenette – as a space of creative expression.[40] What we can glean from reading *Maud Martha* and *Brown Girl,*

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[39] See also Crystal Wilkinson's essay "Praise Song for the Kitchen Ghosts" in which the author reflects on the food traditions in her family and how they've been passed down through generations of Black women in Appalachia. While the food aspect doesn't relate so much to this dissertation, the idea that Black women find solace and refuge in the kitchen does and that knowledge, lineage, and narrative are passed down through the generations from the maternal line. Indeed, Wilkinson says that she was "always reaching back" to the memory of her grandmother in the kitchen and even further. She details how one evening she awoke to the voice of her ancestor, Ma Aggy, "coming through [her] loud and clear" and Wilkinson sat down to write the words of her ancestor, who was an enslaved woman in Kentucky in 1808, and her words were about her life, food, and work. Wilkinson recognizes that women show up as "kitchen ghosts" and that she hopes to be one for her own descendants one day.

[40] There is, of course, a long history of Black women working in the kitchens of white people. Maud Martha spends a day as a domestic worker for Mrs. Burns-Cooper. After enduring heaps of indignities, Maud Martha chooses to quit thinking, "Why, one was a human being. One wore clean

Brownstones together is that though Maud Martha and Selina live in different U.S. cities and come from different cultural backgrounds, the kitchen in both narratives becomes a place of refuge and creation in a way that it does not for Richard Wright or white feminist writers.

In fact, the kitchen in these two novels functions as a space of what Jacqui Alexander terms "the Sacred." For Maud Martha the kitchenette feels oppressive with its pervasive grayness. But she chooses to foster life, saving the life of a mouse, and offering a kind of ritual communion with her mother when she makes hot cocoa and serves it with nutmeg – Maud Martha's specialty that receives a rare compliment from her mother. The once oppressive space while not ideal or even desirable becomes a refuge and retreat in the tradition of Linda Brent's garret in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.[41] Proving Jacqui Alexander's assertion that home is a set of practices built out of the Sacred, the Black female protagonists in these novels create rather than purchase homes. The potential for Black women's spaces to function as a site for creation, interior cultivation, and political work becomes apparent through the final chapters of Maud Martha with its hopeful tone and Maud Martha's question: "What*, what*, am I to do with all this life?" (320). Growing up in a space created to confine, cramp, and restrict, haunted by past trauma and its amorphous gray ghosts, Maud Martha learns to cultivate her interior to resist the ghost of whiteness as property. Without a house to inhabit expansively, she learns to expand inward to take possession of herself and her space.

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nightgowns. One loved one's baby. One drank cocoa by the fire – or the gas range – come the evening, in wintertime" (305). These descriptors reinforce Maud Martha's humanity and act as a defense against Mrs. Burns-Cooper's perception of Maud Martha as interchangeable property. This scene demonstrates that the kitchen can only be a place a refuge when it is *possessed* by Black women.

[41] See Wright, Nazera. *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*. University of Illinois Press, 2016, p. 15.

Selina's engagement with the kitchen as creative Sacred space differs from Maud Martha's. Early in the book, Selina and Silla face off in the kitchen "immured within its white walls" (36). Here, Selina feels trapped because she has not yet entered womanhood and does not yet connect with her mother. But in the space where the West Indian women living in Brooklyn gather, Silla finds strength to speak about the difficulties of growing up as a girl in Barbados and to warn Selina of her harsh life there cutting sugar cane. The mother in her telling "became the collective voice of all the Bajan women, the vehicle through which their former suffering found utterance" (39). Selina resists outwardly acknowledging her mother's pain and her inherited legacy but inwardly she fears the mother's pain (39). She pushes it from her mind with anger when Silla says Selina is Deighton's through and through. Nevertheless, this kitchen space and the power and refuge it affords Silla forces an interior reflection in Selina and later becomes the space in which she acknowledges her connection to the Barbadian women and declares her desire to be her "own" woman like Silla – to be a woman of self-possession.

Selina's ultimate recognition of herself as from and part of the group of Barbadian women who sit around her mother's table is likely founded in Paule Marshall's own experience. In the author's essay "From the Poets in the Kitchen" Marshall claims her greatest influence as the women that sat around her mother's kitchen table talking. In listening to their everyday language, she learned to write lyrically and meaningfully. Marshall asserts that the kitchen space informed her writing and offered a respite for the women from their husbands and their employers, describing their talk as therapy and "a refuge" (Marshall 629). She quotes Czeslaw Milosz who wrote, "Language is the only homeland" (qtd. in 630) and says this is what happened at the kitchen table for the

women in her community. She compares the women to Ralph Ellison's invisible man, but she says they are triply invisible because they are Black, female, and foreign (630). Selina, of course, differs slightly from the real-life women around Marshall's mother's table because she is a girl – not yet a woman – and perhaps is more reflective of Marshall herself. Regardless, what remains apparent is the importance of the kitchen in shaping Selina's life. She does not perceive it as a refuge or a place of connection until she comes to reckon with and own her haunting. And even then, she realizes her need to return to Barbados and claim her ancestral memory in order to take possession of her own life outside the white-centric metrics of property ownership.

Throughout this chapter I have endeavored to demonstrate that *Maud Martha* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* function as models for how to step outside of the narrative of whiteness as property. In insisting on the humanity of and demonstrating the singularity of their Black girl protagonists, Brooks and Marshall reinforce that Black girls are not interchangeable property. They equip their characters with a specific set of tools – creativity, cultivating the interior, engaging with the Sacred, recovering ancestral memory – that allow them to become possessors rather than possessed. In rejecting the script that insists on equating property with human life, Maud Martha and Selina reject white Western metrics of adulthood.

CHAPTER 2. QUEERING THE DIASPORA TO CREATE A "HOUSE OF DIFFERENCE" IN AUDRE LORDE'S *ZAMI: A NEW SPELLING OF MY NAME* (1982)

In chapter one, I looked at two novels published in the 1950s about Black girls and how segregation affected their ability to grow up. In this chapter, I turn my attention to Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982), a memoir of sorts that Lorde dubs her biomythography. In so doing, she marks it as a work that both tells her own biography and establishes a mythology rooted in the Black women that came before her. Where Paule Marshall's Selina returns to her actual homeland, Audre instead finds home within the arms of women. She derives this practice from the zamis of her mother's homeland "who survived the absence of sea-faring men easily, because they came to love each other, past the men's returning" (Lorde 14). The word "zami," also the title of Lorde's work, is the island patois for lesbian. It comes from the French *les aimes* meaning women friends (Chinosole 385). Where Maud Martha, unable to purchase a home, focuses on possessing one, Audre seeks to possess her own body. In exercising her bodily autonomy, Audre creates a conceptual house out of her own materiality as she connects with women.

As a Black lesbian, Audre is denied opportunities to achieve conventional markers of maturity – homebuying, marriage, and children. Her coming of age is complicated by her race and sexuality. These complications propel Audre to seek an alternative way to create a home and become a woman. Haunted by her lack of connection with her foremothers' homeland (Grenada) and oppressed by a nation whose literal and figurative whiteness excludes her, Audre Lorde finds home in the arms of women like the zamis of her mother's country did. When the material structures of the U.S. exclude her, Lorde makes a home out of women connecting over their dissimilarities. She calls this a "house of difference" (Lorde 226). For Audre, being a "woman centered woman" is an alternative

way to grow up that allows her to embrace the haunting of an immigrant born in a nation built on whiteness. She cannot meet the normative markers for adult maturity in the U.S., which require whiteness, marriage and/or homeownership, and she cannot retreat to Grenada. But she can, and does, adopt the women-centeredness of her heritage by turning to the arms of women and the power of the erotic. In doing so, she subverts unwritten rules about what marks maturity in the U.S.

Published in 1982, *Zami* takes place throughout the 1940s and into the late 1950s. It is a memoir in which Lorde mixes myth and memory to establish her own ancestry and narrate her coming of age as a Black lesbian child of immigrants in the United States. The narrative follows Audre from childhood in Brooklyn to adolescent trips to D.C. to moving out of her parents' house. It describes her search for self and home in Mexico and New York. And it details her female friendships and romantic affairs demonstrating how erotic encounters with women shaped her as a writer, poet, and woman.

While the two novels I examined in the previous chapter take place during the 1930s and 1940s primarily, *Zami* extends into the 1950s. Audre's coming of age in the 1950s distinguishes her journey to adulthood from both Maud Martha and Selina because, in the 1954 landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled to desegregate schools. This challenge to segregation had remarkable ramifications for Audre, in part, because of the way *Brown* altered the interpretation of whiteness as property. Harris writes, "whiteness shares the critical characteristics of property even as the meaning of property has changed over time. In particular, whiteness and property share a common premise – a conceptual nucleus – of a right to exclude. This conceptual nucleus has proven to be a powerful center around

which whiteness as property has taken shape" (1714). Harris goes on to say that for the period of slavery, "racialized privilege…[was] legitimated in law as a type of status property" (1714). Then, when de jure segregation was revoked by *Brown*, "whiteness as property evolved into a more modern form through the law's ratification of the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline" (1714). *Zami* straddles this shift of whiteness as property from status property to modern property. As we will see, this shift is most apparent in Audre's experience in D.C. where the ice cream parlor excludes her because she is Black. This is a legal exclusion based on de jure segregation – pre-*Brown*. Later, after *Brown*, Audre acknowledges that she can now have ice cream in D.C. but that "Eating ice cream in Washington, D.C. was not the point; kids in the south being able to go to school was" (Lorde 172). Legally, children in the South could go to school. In practice, we know that desegregation was messy, and whiteness was still privileged in continuing legal decisions. Additionally, while de jure segregation had ended, whiteness as property still undergirded the law and remains evident throughout the memoir (i.e., when the bouncer attempts to exclude Audre from the Bag.).

To frame my argument, I first offer critical context and my intervention in the current literary criticism on *Zami.* I resist reading it in terms of genre and measuring it against previous genre traditions as so many scholars have. Instead, I read *Zami* as a diasporic coming of age memoir whose focus on the material subverts the confining material structures of the U.S. that work to exclude Black girls as they journey to adulthood. Then, following this examination of the criticism, I offer insight into how Audre Lorde's conception of the erotic functions as a framework to resist those materially oppressive structures with material creations of her own. Next, I look at the

historical contexts for *Zami,* providing background on material whiteness and the architecture of Washington, D.C. Finally, I move from context to text with a set of close readings to expand my argument that engaging in erotic relationships with women is Lorde's way of creating and meeting alternative markers of adulthood while embracing the haunting of her foremothers so that she can be self-possessed.

Critical Context

Over the years, critics have analyzed *Zami* in terms of language, the erotic, and depictions of motherhood.[42] But particular attention has been paid to genre, which is perhaps unsurprising since Lorde coined her own term for her text: biomythography. Critics have read Lorde's *Zami* as bildungsroman, künstlesrroman, a coming-out-story, literacy narrative, autobiography, and more.[43] Each one of these critics examining *Zami* through the lens of genre reads it *against* some other previous or dominant iteration – usually white, male, or heterosexual. Charlene Ball argues that *Zami* re-visions Eurocentric and Afrocentric myth by creating a "heroic quest narrative" with an African American lesbian hero (61). Her reading is emblematic of other kinds of genre criticism

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[42] For a reading about subversive motherhood, see Bethany Jacobs's "Mothering Herself: Manifesto of the Erotic in Audre Lorde's *Zami*" (2015) in which Jacobs argues that *Zami* offers a new depiction of the mother pushing back against patriarchal models and ones that caricature the Black mother: "Resisting a culture that often reduces black women to sexless maternal tropes such as the mammy, Lorde's Erotic Mother embraces sex and nurturance in equal measure" (110).

[43] For an examination of *Zami* as autobiography see Jennifer de Hernandez's "On Home Ground: Politics, Location, and the Construction of Identity in Four American Women's Autobiographies" (1997) who builds on Sayre's argument that American autobiographies are like American architectural structures particularly houses in that they draw from many different influences asserting that "the autobiographeme of home, whether in men's or women's autobiographies, enacts a complex politics of location, set into a foundation of cultural history and socioeconomic positioning, that goes far beyond the narrow confines of domestic space" (21).

While my reading contends with architecture and the erotic, I am uninterested in analyzing Lorde's work through the lens of genre or motherhood – instead focusing on how the erotic functions to challenge confining architectural structures as Audre comes of age.

that proliferate around *Zami.* For instance, both Sarita Cannon and Monica Pearl look at the historical roots of *Zami* in slave and literacy narratives. Cannon reads *Zami* as an autobiographical literacy narrative in the vein of Harriet Jacobs (335). She demonstrates that autobiography is a place for "Black women to record and construct their intersectional identities" (338).[44] Similarly, Pearl argues that *Zami* stems from "the African American slave narrative and the lesbian coming out story" (297). She suggests that Lorde needs to invent the biomythography genre to "contain all her identities" (298). Indeed, each of these critics explains how *Zami* revises or reinvents past literary traditions and genres by centering a Black lesbian protagonist.

Another genre critic, whose work affords closer consideration since I contend with it more directly, is Barbara DiBernard. Examining *Zami* as a künstlerroman, DiBernard compares the development of the female artist (Lorde) against the development of the male artist. DiBernard suggests that *Zami* offers "an alternative model of female development as well as a new image of the poet and of female creativity" (196). In *Zami*, the artist is in relation to those around her rather than an artist in exile or isolation as in the male model (196). Importance is placed on the connection with the women who serve as Lorde's muses and "support her, nurture her, [and] enable her to write" (197-8). While Lorde's experience of artistic inspiration from women is undeniable, I move beyond DiBernard's analysis to suggest that Lorde is not forming connections simply for the sake of art. Rather, these connections serve as an alternative to the dehumanization and infantilization of Black girls and women. They offer Lorde a way to embrace her haunting and subvert the narrative of whiteness as property as she

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[44] Cannon also acknowledges that *Zami* has roots in the lesbian women of color autobiographical tradition of the 1980s in the vein of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (339).

matures. Rather than reading against a previous genre, like the aforementioned critics, I examine Lorde's coming of age as a Black child of immigrants in opposition to a white nation's prescribed markers of maturity.

Furthermore, existing genre criticism fails to engage holistically on a collective and political level. Instead, it looks toward the individual and/or specific literary traditions.[45] My work, however, moves beyond that to demonstrate that *Zami* is overtly political not simply through innovation in genre but through its concept of a "house of difference." I read *Zami* through a diasporic lens with a particular interest in haunting and the material. In other words, I examine how Lorde's position as the child of Caribbean immigrants affects her access to the rights of adulthood in a nation materially and institutionally crafted out of whiteness. I suggest that Lorde's lack of rootedness in her mother's homeland haunts her. I further suggest that Lorde embraces this haunting by working her ancestral knowledge into a re-envisioned mythology as part of her erotic encounters with a Black woman (i.e., Afrekete/Kitty) and draws on the power of the erotic to create new markers for maturity and adulthood that work outside of material whiteness and whiteness as property.

In addition to the plethora of generic criticism, scholars have also paid particular attention to the use of language in *Zami*. An early foundational and oft-cited critic, AnnLouise Keating, argues that language is at the core of self-invention and at the heart of *Zami* (20). Many critics have discussed the importance that Afrekete plays in Audre's development. However, Keating asserts that other critics' "distinction between the

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[45] A brief notable exception is Charlene Ball who notes that Lorde's work is political by nature and that we must pay attention to its political implications. She writes, "Revisionist myth such as Audre Lorde's…challenges and displaces existing myth, making visible what had been made invisible and making political what had been naturalized" (63).

spiritual and the political prevents them from recognizing the novel's wider, transpersonal implications" (21). I would take this statement further to suggest that many critics lose sight of larger cultural and historical implications. They fail to see how Lorde's biomythography is not simply an alternative model of womanhood and development but one which grapples with the very material structures upon which the nation is built. Keating argues that Lorde "creates…a spirituality rooted wholly in the physical," (21). Despite this recognition of the importance of the body, Keating continues to assert that it's language between women rather than touch that builds bonds of unity (21). She writes, "When women overcome their fear of difference and speak, words create bonds uniting them in new ways, making possible their acts of self-revelation" (25). But examining Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" makes clear that language cannot be the only connecting factor; physical touch is imperative. Reading Lorde's essay alongside scholarship from Chinn, Hua, and Bolaki illuminates how the physical and diasporic aspects of *Zami* help us understand and interpret it.

Sarah E. Chinn exhibits a clear understanding of why material touch is so important in representations of the erotic arguing "that Lorde's representations of lesbianism can provide a key to thinking about sexuality and bodily experience more generally" (182). She asserts that visual interpretations of sexual pleasure fail to accurately render our sexual experiences because they cannot capture the tactile sensations of sex. They cannot show "what desire feels like *inside* our bodies" (182). In this assertion, she homes in on a key aspect of *Zami* that other critics, such as Hua and myself, identify: the importance of physical touch and materiality. However, Chinn does not take into consideration how the material connection between women challenges the

confining material structures of the physical world. While she acknowledges the existence of the U.S. as a white male patriarchal culture and *Zami* as a counterpoint to that, she doesn't make the connection between the two forms of materiality – the materiality of whiteness exemplified by Washington, D.C. and the material home created by two physical Black bodies.

Chinn sees *Zami* "as a guidebook with which all of its willing readers— lesbian or not, black or not, disabled or not, female or not, working-class or not—can feel their own way out of the punishing strictures of heterosexuality, white supremacy, male dominance, and visual primacy" (196). However, it's not simply that one can "feel their own way out" but that in *Zami*, we see Lorde adopt a new set of rules for maturity and adulthood replacing rules that have kept marginalized people from fully participating in society. Like Chinn, my analysis emphasizes the physical and the material and pays particular attention to the ways that erotic touch between women subverts norms and offers new points of connection. But where Chinn's ultimate conclusions are individual, mine are systemic. She casts *Zami* as a guidebook for an individual and their journey rather than a demonstration of how systemic frameworks and historical patterns can be disrupted by adhering to the principles of adulthood as developed by a Black lesbian child of immigrants. *Zami* isn't just a guide for an individual's journey to growth and connection but one that demonstrates an alternative to whiteness as property.

Anh Hua's ideas expound on both those of DiBernard and Chinn as she demonstrates how the physical relationships between women in *Zami* are more than just an indication of Lorde's maturity and growing up. They make clear the importance of the alternative model of womanhood. Lorde's biomythography offers a way to be a Black

lesbian daughter of immigrants and still possess a self and a home. Hua emphasizes the importance of erotic memory and argues that Lorde affirms herself through writing about the “embodied erotic” building a balance between the individual and the collective (113). Hua writes:

> Throughout the memoir memory narratives serve as a way to deal with the tension between Lorde’s wish to cherish the Afro-Caribbean creolized legacy and cultural memories she inherits from her mother and foremothers, and her need to break away from cultural and social traditions and expectations in order to write her own subjectivity and history toward a narrative space of freedom and self-autonomy. Lorde’s text, in working through this tension, is a manifestation of both individual and collective or cultural memories and of self-invention. (113-4)

Lorde’s memoir and her use of memory establishes a new biomythography and thus a subjectivity for her. But, I would argue that this is less about autonomy and space of freedom in reference to her foremothers and her ancestry. Rather, it’s more about the inability for those same collective memories of her foremothers to be all that informs her subjectivity when she is removed from the place of her foremothers’ birth. Instead, Lorde’s memoir offers an alternative girlhood journey to adulthood. The journey isn’t simply one of self-invention or fulfillment but one that offers alternative markers of maturity for Black girls and women. It creates a path for those who fall outside of the white patriarchal heteronormative mode that insists on dehumanizing them and removing their rights and ability to belong and who don’t have access to the homeland the way their ancestors do. In other words, Lorde’s use of memory isn’t just about balancing the pull she feels between the individual and the collective but about offering an entirely new framework for the journey to adulthood.

In a similar vein, Hua's analysis of the mortar and pestle scene accurately assesses Audre's mix of emotions toward her mother but fails to account for how Linda and Audre's different childhood experiences factor into Audre's own feelings. Hua writes:

> The mix of love and tension between Lorde and her mother is telling of Lorde's wish to cherish the Afro-Caribbean creolized legacy she inherits from her mother and foremothers and her need to break away from any rule-bound tradition in order to write her own subjectivity and history toward a narrative space of freedom and self-autonomy. (117)

While Audre's wish to cherish the legacy of her foremothers is true, Hua's assertion that Audre needs to "break away from any rule-bound tradition" is so broad as to be generalized as any adolescent need to break from one's parents rather than a specific understanding of Audre as a Black lesbian child of immigrants in the U.S. queering her understanding of diasporic knowledge. Because Linda grew up in the Caribbean, her journey to adulthood was not impeded by the same kinds of strictures that Audre encounters in the 1940s U.S. In Carriacou, neither Audre's sexuality nor her race would cause her to face the kind of exclusion and discrimination she experiences in the U.S. It's not simply that Audre needs to break away from her foremothers' tradition to be "autonomous" but only in embracing haunting and remythologizing it can she use that cultural and ancestral memory to move as a Black lesbian adult in the U.S.

Because Lorde's body exists in a different place than her mother's homeland, Lorde must create an alternate set of "rules" or markers for herself to be self-possessed and reach adulthood. Indeed, existing in a nation predicated on whiteness and heteronormativity impels Audre to create a space of belonging for herself. Hua writes:

> In a national space such as America reclaiming home and belonging, for women of color, does not have to involve only physical space or home but also "the house of self," feeling at home in one's body, flesh, and skin. For those "migratory subjects" who cannot seem to find a relatively "safe" space to live in, who must

> constantly travel across various borders and boundaries, leaving old homes and rebuilding new ones, feeling at home in one's body, flesh, and skin is an important embodied state of being and becoming. (129)

While Hua's assessment of a migrant's struggle to find a safe place rings true, she focuses too much on "the house of self." Audre's yearning for a "house of myself" comes early in the memoir when she is still a child feeling the pressures of living under her parents' and society's expectations (Lorde 43). This is the beginning of her maturity, but not the end. As she grows, she recognizes the need for building a house in and with community that forges connection across dissimilarities, what she calls a "house of difference." One cannot construct a "house of difference" in solitude and Lorde's construction of home is obviously collective and inclusive. Only in accepting and physically creating space and connection with other bodies does the house form. Its very materiality is important because other U.S. material structures are built to exclude. And Hua later writes, "More than remembering and reconstructing the cultural past, the figure of Kitty/Afrekete allows Lorde to remember Afro-Caribbean cultures and traditions while inventing an individual and collective erotic embodied memory" (130). I would suggest that Lorde's erotic connection in the moment allows her to build that house of difference by remythologizing her foremothers' cultural past. In an erotic embrace, Lorde forms new material structures that refuse to conform to U.S. and Caribbean patterns. Instead, she draws on that from her homeland which will help her subvert an adulthood that requires whiteness, heterosexuality, or maleness to achieve.

In turning to Stella Bolaki's queer diasporic reading of *Zami*, we can see how Lorde's journey to adulthood is predicated on her identity as lesbian, Black, and immigrant. Where DiBernard argues that Lorde departs from a künstlerroman by

demonstrating an alternative journey to womanhood, Bolaki suggests that Lorde departs "from the Anglo-American tradition of the lesbian Bildungsroman" and in so doing "queers the ancestral homeland and the childhood home through a kind of translation that demonstrates the dynamic relationship between ethnicity and sexuality in female queer diasporic narratives" (779). She suggests that the "lesbian community" becomes a "theoretical home" and "requires continuously attaching home to, and detaching it from, relationships, communities, and places or, in Lorde's words, living in the 'house of difference'" (779). I generally agree with Bolaki's argument except for Lorde's home being theoretical. Something that exists in theory is intangible. But Lorde's concept of home is rooted in the physical. It's the very materiality of the physical, of the erotic embrace, that creates the home. While it doesn't look like a home built of brick and mortar, it is a material home, nonetheless.

Bolaki observes that Audre's search for home starts as a "house of myself." She notes that Audre feels trapped by her inability to find privacy in her mother's home and the push toward heterosexuality and racial assimilation within that space (782). Bolaki astutely asserts: "Audre's coming out coincides with moving out, which is what creates a distinctively queer migrant subject…" (782). As other critics have noted, Audre feels a tension in her identity and subject formation as she struggles with her ancestral history and her sexuality. When Audre moves out, she doesn't reject her family home or that which she gained from her mother. Instead, "Audre attempts to create a new relation to them so as to be able to blend her Caribbean heritage with her lesbianism" (782). The fact that Carriacou is not a physical space accessible to her but a conceptual one she carries with her allows her to reinvent her concept of home and "to fill [Carriacou] with new

meaning and rescue it from its status as a colony…" (783). For Lorde, becoming queer, "emerges…from the very fabric of a queer (in the broader sense) family home and through a process that resembles translation. The familial home, situated in a liminal space of in-betweenness given its diasporic status within white mainstream America, becomes a useful tool in fashioning a queer identity" (783). In other words, Lorde's queerness and her concept of home are inextricable from one another.

Bolaki argues that home isn't a particular destination in *Zami* but rather that it is "attached to relationships, faces, and bodies" (Pratt qtd. in Bolaki 789). Indeed, "Lorde's image of 'the house of difference' shows the radical potential of a certain form of belonging that hinges on unbelonging" (792-3). Bolaki concludes that *Zami*'s contribution to the queer diasporic narrative is to represent "home as a contingent space of attachment" (793). However, Bolaki fails to take into consideration the material. Her focus on home as a theoretical space minimizes how the physical connections between women allow for "the house of difference" to exist to begin with. In essence, even if the home is conceptual and moves with each erotic encounter, the home is still material. When Lorde says, "Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me," and when she describes the emotional resonance of her encounter with Kitty as a "tattoo," she emphasizes the importance of the physical (255, 253). What my analysis incorporates from Bolaki is that the home is *made* and that Lorde's identity as a lesbian is integral to its creation. But I diverge from Bolaki in my assertion that this home hinges on the material.

The Erotic as Material

In "Uses of the Erotic" Lorde insists on the linkage between physicality, spirituality, and creativity. Lorde argues that the erotic is spiritual and physical, founded in feeling, and a source of creativity and empowerment (49, 51). She writes, "When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (50). Throughout *Zami,* erotic touch is a connection point between women that is rooted in the physical but is also deeply spiritual. Lorde acknowledges that the erotic is a tool of reclamation for women, and in *Zami*, Lorde does this reclamation of ancestry, history, language, etc. She reframes the rules for achieving adulthood and the markers of maturity by measuring them through the erotic instead of white male patriarchal heteronormativity.

In so doing, Lorde also claims the erotic and sensuality as a way to reject commodification of the female body and, along with it, the tenets of whiteness as property. By emphasizing the spiritual and emotional aspects alongside the tactile and material aspects of the erotic, Lorde denies that her body is property. She asserts that women have been distanced from the erotic by its confusion with the pornographic; she maintains that the pornographic is about "sensation without feeling" whereas the erotic is about depth of feeling and respect of self (49). In terms of the pornographic, the female body is an object. In the erotic, the female body is a subject – an active participant. By intentionally emphasizing sensuality and the feelings of the erotic while rejecting the objectification of pornography, Lorde also rejects the treatment of her body as property and claims her own subjectivity and self-possession. Where porn demonstrates a sexual immaturity that disallows agency, the erotic represents a sexual maturity that requires

active participation through both mind and body. Rather than her body becoming a possession of the viewer, she possesses self through erotic maturity – i.e. sensual encounters with women that require both physical and emotional feeling. In embracing this understanding of the erotic, Lorde carves out space for an alternative model of maturity – one which is predicated on respect, depth of feeling, and self-possession and denies objectification, commodification, and dehumanization.

Indeed, Lorde sees the erotic as a subversive power in the larger structures of the world. Explaining the dynamics of the erotic within established systems, she writes:

> The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need — the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities…As women, we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them. (50)

In this passage, Lorde acknowledges that the structures of our capitalist society are created to support profit over "human need" which encompasses emotional needs. Lorde calls women to reexamine how we value things and to place greater emphasis on the erotic. Her framework – to value emotional, spiritual, physical, creative need over profit – allows us to see how erotic touch and erotic relationships in her biomythography serve as challenges to established U.S. frameworks for adulthood. Lorde examines how things can be different by inviting the erotic into her life and using it has her measuring stick for adulthood rather than the maturity markers that society insists on. In so doing, she challenges the "horror of such a system" and imbues erotic power into her own relationships and being to liberate herself from the confines of whiteness as property.

Furthermore, Lorde demonstrates that the erotic is physical, spiritual, *and* political. She writes:

> The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic — the sensual — those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings. (51)

Where other protagonists I've examined seek cultural memory to dispel haunting, Audre embraces her haunting. In the absence of cultural memory, she seeks knowledge and connection through the erotic. Indeed, she writes, "The erotic is the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge" (51). In embracing the erotic, Lorde nurtures that knowledge which would be withheld from her otherwise. When return to the homeland and acceptance as a full adult with the rights of citizenship in the U.S. is not an option, she cultivates the erotic and develops an alternative model for adulthood. In this model, difference is not a threat but a bridge for understanding (51). She writes that in her power for creativity and her capacity for joy, "satisfaction is possible, and does not have to be called *marriage,* nor *god,* nor *an afterlife"* (52). Lorde rejects societal and religious markers of satisfaction and fulfillment. Her rejection of marriage is particularly poignant because it has been a marker of maturity for (white) heterosexual women for years.

Furthermore, Lorde's conception of the erotic explains how turning toward an internal power to create tangible external action subverts external material structures that suppress the marginalized. She writes:

> When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that

> power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within. (53)

In this passage, Lorde demonstrates that by drawing on the well of the erotic from within, women can challenge constricting external structures. They can push back on "suffering and self-negation" and find self-possession by following different markers. In other words, Lorde encourages her readers to draws on the power of the erotic to shape their action in the world and challenge oppressive external structures that embody patriarchal white supremacy. She further recognizes that the erotic can only be used in this way when women refuse "to operate under an exclusively european-american male tradition" (54) acknowledging that the power of the erotic was unavailable to her when "[she] was trying to adapt [her] consciousness to this mode of living and sensation" (54). She asserts that when women share erotic power, it can create systemic change writing, "For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (54). In other words, drawing on the power of the erotic as a collective group of women is a blatant challenge to the societal structures which suppress women and people of color. The erotic, then, is the power behind Lorde's "house of difference" which manifests on a spiritual and physical level in material bodies and acts as a subversive force.

Historical Context: The Whiteness of Washington, D.C.

A moment that shapes both the memoir and Lorde's life is her experience of whiteness in Washington, D.C. To understand why this moment in the nation's capital is

so pivotal and how it's representative of larger patterns in the U.S., we need to examine the whiteness of D.C. and how its architectural whiteness reflects the racial whiteness of (and the valuation of whiteness within) the United States. In an article from ArchDaily on architectural design in Washington, D.C., Eric Baldwin asserts, "From the White House to Lincoln Memorial, Washington's architecture was built to symbolize the nation's values."[46] Baldwin goes on to discuss the use of public spaces, civics, and access to knowledge, but he never overtly discusses what the values of the U.S. are. Tellingly, the two most iconic structures that he mentions are white. While the intent of the author is unclear, his statement nevertheless brings to light a foundational American value – the preservation of whiteness. Washington, D.C.'s city website claims, "From [D.C.'s] beginning, it has been embroiled in political maneuvering, sectional conflicts and issues of race, national identity, compromise and, of course, power." The nation's capital has been and continues to be a physical manifestation of the intangible structures the nation is built on – chief of which is the value, preservation, and supremacy of whiteness.

The neoclassical aesthetic whiteness of D.C. was rooted in what, at best, can be described as an historical, archeological, and/or preservationist mistake and, at worst, can be dubbed an intentional eschewing of facts in order to preserve whiteness as racially superior. The whiteness of Washington, D.C. is rooted in European neoclassicism (Eyres). Or rather, more accurately, this popular architectural style is rooted in the work of one art historian's writings and misinterpretation of classical sculpture. In the 1760s, Johann Joachim Winckelmann lauded the simplicity and grandeur of classical Greek art and architecture maintaining that whiteness was a key component behind the aesthetic

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[46] ArchDaily is a weblog that covers architectural news, projects, products, and events.

(Eyres). In his multivolume work *The History of Art in Antiquity* (1764), Winckelmann established himself as the first modern art historian as he crafted accounts of ancient Egyptian, Roman, and Greek art (Parker).[47] In his book, he "celebrate[d] the whiteness of classical statuary and cast the Apollo of the Belvedere — a Roman marble copy of a Hellenistic bronze original — as the quintessence of beauty" (Bond). Winckelmann eschewed modern art and asserted that classical Greek sculpture was the height of art – worthy of imitation even if it could not be done to the same standard (Parker). He originated the idea that a work of art was "a creation of a particular nation and period with its own special geographical, social, and political conditions, which expresses the style of the spirit of the milieu as a whole" (Tonelli). In other words, art was an expression of a nation and its culture as well as testament to its historical and geographical origins. He asserted that the male Greek form was the ideal beauty as he surmised that Greek men were "the most spiritually and ethically balanced, and therefore the most physically perfect" (Tonelli). In ascribing moral and ethical value to these classical Greek forms, which Winckelmann insisted were white, he also ascribed value to whiteness itself placing it at an aesthetic and moral center.

Winckelmann's written work influenced art historians, art, architecture, and design for centuries to come. His ideas contributed greatly to the neoclassical movement of the eighteenth century which emulated Greek and Roman classical art and placed emphasis on "dignity, restraint, and grandeur of scale" (Johns). Furthermore, while neoclassicism was a stylistic movement in art and architecture, it also placed great emphasis on virtue, ethics, and morality in reaction to the perceived frivolous and

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[47] The title above is a translation. The original German is *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*.

licentious values of the elite (Johns). We can see the influence of Winckelmann and his ideals of beauty and art in the tenets of the neoclassicist movement. His direct influence can be traced through the work of famed British architect Robert Adam and, more relevant to my work, the planners of Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson and Pierre Charles L'Enfant (Eyres).[48]

In 1790, Washington, D.C. was established by an act of Congress which authorized a federal district situated between the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. While Thomas Jefferson had already drawn up some simple sketches and plans for the capital, in 1791, George Washington asked the well-known French architect, Pierre L'Enfant, to plan the city (Fletcher). In Jefferson's correspondence with L'Enfant, he gave advice for how the buildings should appear, writing that he thought L'Enfant should adopt the style of some "models of antiquity" (Jefferson qtd. in Stephenson 27). Here, "antiquity" refers to Greek and Roman classical architecture and art demonstrating the neoclassical influence at work in the development of D.C.'s government buildings. Jefferson further suggested that the president's house should resemble the "celebrated fronts of Modern buildings which have already received the approbation of all good judges" citing the Louvre and The Garde-Meuble de la Couronne as such examples (Jefferson qtd. in Stephenson 27). Both structures are off-white and include elements of neoclassical architecture seen in their columns and arches in particular. Jefferson's quote demonstrates that those with power in the world of art and architectural criticism deemed neoclassicism

[48] Robert Adam was an influential British architect who worked in the Neoclassical style in beginning in the 1750s. With his brother, Adam published *Works in Architecture* (1773) which helped popularize the style beyond the elite to the British masses by the end of the decade. See "V&A · Robert Adam: Neoclassical Architect and Designer." *Victoria and Albert Museum*, https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/robert-adam-neoclassical-architect-and-designer. Accessed 3 May 2022.

a "good" style. Additionally, Jefferson's words show the ways in which established practices and traditions entrench their more nefarious aspects with them – including whitewashing in neoclassical design. As city planner, L'Enfant's duties included supervising "the laying out of the streets, avenues, and public lands" as well as "preparing plans for public buildings" and creating a "final drawing of the city plan" (48). With a project of this magnitude never having been conceived before, Washington and Jefferson had what Stephenson suggests were "unreasonable" expectations of L'Enfant, especially within the timeframe given him (48). When the city map took longer than anticipated, Jefferson wrote on Washington's behalf that though they would like to retain L'Enfant's services, he would have to be subordinate to the Commissioners; L'Enfant refused and subsequently resigned (45).

Andrew Ellicot, the city surveyor took over and simplified L'Enfant's plans (Fletcher). However, in 1901, the McMillan Commission, a team of architects and planners put together by the Senate, used L'Enfant's original plans to update the capital. They cleared the Mall and made space for two of D.C.'s most iconic memorials: the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials (Fletcher). Even today, as D.C. grows and expands, L'Enfant's neoclassical vision, and the white supremacist ideals behind it, influence the city. John V. Cogbill, who served as chairman of the National Capital Planning Commission from 2001-2009, stated, "We take [L'Enfant's plan] into account for virtually everything we do…I don't think any city in the world can say that the plan has been followed so carefully as it has been in Washington" (Cogbill qtd. in Fletcher). Ralph E. Ehrenberg, chief of the Geography and Map Division of the Library of Congress, supports this assertion writing that L'Enfant's plan "has guided the design of the nation's

capital for two centuries" (Ehrenberg qtd. in Stephenson ix). L'Enfant's influence, one steeped in the whiteness of neoclassicism, cannot be overstated.[49]

However, the very whiteness that defines neoclassical design is based on incorrect information from Winckelmann about Greek and Roman sculpture. Indeed, in her essay "The Myth of Whiteness in Classical Sculpture," Margaret Talbot argues:

> The idealization of white marble is an aesthetic born of a mistake. Over the millennia, as sculptures and architecture were subjected to the elements, their paint wore off. Buried objects retained more color, but often pigments were hidden beneath accretions of dirt and calcite, and were brushed away in cleanings…In time, though, a fantasy took hold. Scholars argued that Greek and Roman artists had left their buildings and sculptures bare as a pointed gesture—it both confirmed their superior rationality and distinguished their aesthetic from non-Western art.

In other words, the whiteness so lauded by these scholars never actually existed but was presumed in order to assert Anglo superiority. Most sculptures were colored and through wear and tear from natural erosion and archaeologist and preservationist "cleaning" lost their color. Eyres notes, "Not long after Winckelmann, other scholars and archaeologists, beginning with Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy, began to point out that much Greek sculpture was brightly coloured. Even the Parthenon would originally – at least on the inside – have been a riot of colour." Quincy produced writing on archeology and art from the late 1700s into the early 1800s – only decades after Winckelmann's famous volumes. Nevertheless, scholars continued to ignore this profound discovery that both art and architecture from the classical period were bathed in color.

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[49] For an incredibly detailed account of the plans and origins of Washington, D.C., see *A plan whol[l]y new: Pierre Charles L'Enfant's Plan of the City of Washington* by Richard W. Stephenson. This volume was published by the Library of Congress and includes not only facsimiles of sketches, maps, and notes created by L'Enfant, Jefferson, and Ellicot, but also a detailed historical account of how the site was chosen, how the maps evolved, how streets were planned and created, and much more.

This intentional eschewing of historical data goes beyond what Talbot describes as a mistake and moves into a blatant structuring of history to continue to tell a story (however false) that upholds whiteness as valuable and superior. Sarah Bond, a classics professor at the University of Iowa demonstrates that color was a very real part of classic architecture and sculpture, and these colors represented a wide array of skin tones. She writes, “Although Romans generally differentiated people on their cultural and ethnic background rather than the color of their skin, ancient sources do occasionally mention skin tone and artists tried to convey the color of their flesh” (Bond qtd. in Talbot). Ancient Greeks and Romans were not monolithically white. They were a diverse group of people and their skin tones reflected that as did the paint used in their art. In insisting the art and the people were white, we erase their heritage and perpetuate a myth of whiteness, excluding people of color from this ideal of beauty. Bond further asserts, “The equation of white marble with beauty is not an inherent truth of the universe; it’s a dangerous construct that continues to influence white supremacist ideas today” (Bond). In truth, the idea of white-centric neoclassical architecture as clean, simple, and the height of beauty is based on a pervasive misconception about Greek and Roman sculpture that perpetuates the misplaced value on whiteness. And the United States’ adherence to this value is reflected in the material infrastructure of Washington, D.C.

The material whiteness of D.C. is inescapable: the White House, the Washington Monument, the Jefferson Memorial, the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol, the Supreme Court Building; even Union Station is bathed in whiteness. According to the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), the entity that has been responsible for new construction and preservation of historical government buildings since taking over from the Treasury

Department after World War II, Greek and Roman influences dominated the architectural scene from the origin of the U.S. into the mid-1800s. What the GSA dubs the Federal Style, dominated from 1780-1830, drawing "inspiration from the monuments of ancient Rome" and was eclipsed by the Greek Revival Style by 1830 ("Architecture and Government"). While the GSA makes these distinctions between Roman and Greek inspiration, both are part of the neoclassical movement and follow the principles of neoclassical design including symmetry and unity. The neoclassical bent of government architecture in the nation's capital from its earliest founding is undeniable.

However, one new construction, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which opened in 2016, is notable for its distinct lack of neoclassical influence and subsequently, its lack of whiteness. Government officials declared that "the museum could not overwhelm the [Washington] monument or be taller than the neighboring museums and Depression-era office buildings in Federal Triangle" (Shin). This stipulation demonstrates the very real consequences of systemic racism – one that was made manifest in the materiality of a city and its planning. By demanding that the museum not "overwhelm" established architectural structures which were built on white supremacist principles, the government officials, knowingly or not, perpetuate the myth that whiteness (and the structures that represent it) are superior. Despite these government restrictions, the museum's building stands in clear contrast to its surroundings and offers a physical and material indictment of America's whiteness before you even enter the museum's doors.

Rather than following the neoclassical bent of D.C., the museum's structure pays homage to the people it represents. The structure is, "three tiers of inverted half-

pyramids, sheathed in a shimmering bronze-hued screen cut in an abstract pattern based on the intricate ironwork created by freed slaves in New Orleans and Charleston, S.C." (Shin). In color, construction, and historical representation, the structure rejects neoclassical principles that perpetuate the preservation and superiority of whiteness for ones that honor the legacy of Black people in the U.S. Four key architects including Adjaye, a British architect and son of Ghanian diplomats, worked on the design and construction of the museum (Shin). Adjaye declared he did not want the structure to be just another "stone box with things in it" but that he wanted the museum to draw on African heritage and influence (Adjaye qtd. in Shin). His goal was for the museum to stand in contrast to the other iconic white monuments, memorials, and museums which he referred to as a "row of palaces" (Adjaye qtd. in Shin). Lonnie Bunch, the director of the museum, described the distinctive bronze color of the museum as reminiscent of "a strong, dark presence not recognized in American history" (Bunch qtd. in Shin). Bunch's comments demonstrate his understanding that the materially dark structure represented the dark-skinned presence that was so often ignored in the annals of U.S. history, and, in many ways is only beginning to be recognized by white supremacist-built government entities. Constructed near the site of former slave markets, the building's interior also includes an oculus with water that streams into a pool that Adjaye envisioned as representing a slave auction pedestal. A marvel of architectural engineering, the building stands out and demonstrates a shift in the material structures of D.C. and hopefully a shift in the government itself.

In examining the structures of D.C. and the history of neoclassical art and architecture, we can see how the United States is built on conceptual and material

whiteness. The perceived superiority of whiteness is built into our laws, our architecture, and our culture. These structures are built to exclude anyone "other," and it's with these structures that Lorde contends in *Zami.* As I move into a series of close readings, I'll draw on this context about the whiteness of D.C. to elucidate how young Audre's experiences in the capital city were both a pivotal point in her journey to adulthood and emblematic of the problems of systemic racism in growing up at large.

Close Readings of Zami

In this set of close readings, I illustrate that haunting in *Zami* demonstrates the ways in which Audre is removed from her foremothers and her cultural memory. I suggest she embraces this haunting and her zami heritage in the form of erotic power. In so doing, Audre queers the diaspora, becomes self-possessed, and challenges the structures that marginalize her. Furthermore, I demonstrate through the examination of the whiteness of Washington, D.C. and Lorde's experiences there how the United States was built to uphold white male superiority and exclude all others. Finally, I aim to demonstrate that in crafting a "house of difference" Lorde creates an inclusive place in an exclusive nation where she can adhere to alternate understandings of what it means to be an adult.

To understand Audre's later experiences in D.C. and her development as a woman, it's important to understand her experiences of childhood – particularly paying attention to her identity as a Black daughter of Caribbean immigrants growing up in New York City. Lorde's writing demonstrates that, from her youth, she understands privilege is tied to age; this is one of the things that makes her "coming-of-age" experience in D.C. so traumatic. She might have aged, but she gains none of the privileges she anticipates.

As I noted in the previous chapter, privacy is a key part of adulthood and independence and one that is afforded by home ownership. Maud Martha seeks to gain this kind of privacy through creating "a double interiority or a home within a home" (Phillips 150). As a child, Audre struggles for this kind of privacy and independence coveting what her sisters and parents have and explaining how she struggles to find any kind of privacy. When reading these scenes, it becomes easy to see why creating a "house of difference" in her adult life is a kind of solution to a lifelong lack of privacy, autonomy, or independence within her own home.

Audre learns early in childhood that her unique position in the world, being the youngest daughter of a Caribbean immigrant family, would make her challenges toward adulthood more difficult. She writes: "Being the youngest in a West Indian family had many privileges but no rights…[and] even those privileges were largely illusory" (35). Her phrasing here demonstrates her understanding that her identity as young, Black, and immigrant offered her very little in the way of power and position in the larger world. And within her only family, her age continued to contribute to her lack of privilege. Lorde further acknowledges that age is intimately tied to privilege writing that she "was always very jealous of [her] two older sisters, because they were older and therefore more privileged…" (43). Lorde describes Phyllis and Helen's room as "tiny but complete, with privacy and a place to be away from the eternal parental eye which was my lot, having only the public parts of the house to play in. I was never alone, nor far from my mother's watchful eye" (43). Privacy – the ability to possess a space of one's own is a kind of freedom that is unattainable for Audre. She yearns for this kind physical space in which she can exist as herself without fear. This longing foreshadows her building her own

"house of difference" later to accommodate that which she is unable to gain as a child. Additionally, where Maud Martha turns to the interior, Audre turns to the exterior and the material. Where Maud Martha turns inward to self and cultivation of self, Audre turns out toward women and cultivation of relationship and community. And so, age, from the very beginning of *Zami,* is established as crucial part of gaining privilege – one which Audre struggles against and understands very keenly as she grows up in a small space with older sisters.

Like Maud Martha, Audre struggles to find privacy and therefore privilege within her dwelling space. Where Maud Martha turns to her own interiority and develops it as "spatial property" in lieu of her inability to gain privacy and therefore privilege and self-possession, Audre struggles differently. In her home, "A request for privacy was treated like an outright act of insolence for which the punishment was swift and painful" (83). In high school, Audre rejoices when her family gets a TV, a material object, which allows her to close her door and retreat into a separate space away from her family (83). Indeed, Lorde shows keen awareness of how the privilege of privacy allows one to become an adult and possess oneself. She writes: "The first time I ever slept anywhere else besides in my parents' bedroom was a milestone in my journey to this house of myself" (43). Here Lorde expresses understanding that to be an adult is have space to oneself. And for Lorde, it's a very material, tangible understanding. She refers to the "house of myself" – her physical body then is the home, but it requires the material to be the home unlike Maud Martha who turns inward. This incident also foreshadows Audre's inability to receive the privileges of adulthood within the U.S. Just as she can't experience any kind of freedom or privacy until she gets her own room as a girl, she is prohibited from being

treated as an adult deserving of dignity until she leaves the United States for Mexico. It's there that Audre feels the privileges of adulthood for the first time. Audre's yearning for space, home, and self-possession becomes more complicated when she is forced to acknowledge the role racism plays in her growth toward adulthood.

Lorde says that when she was a child, she "had no words for racism" (81). She had experienced it, but her mother and father refused to acknowledge its existence explaining away racist incidents in her childhood or ignoring them all together. Still, Lorde writes: "On the deepest level, I probably knew then what I know now. But it was not serviceable to my child's mind to understand, and I needed too much to remain a child for a little bit more" (82). Here we see how Audre is already having to fight to keep her childhood innocence and youthfulness — that safety and freedom that she refers to later. However, her experience in Washington, D.C. forces her to confront the racist forces of the United States.

After Audre graduates from the eighth grade, her family takes a trip to Washington, D.C., much like many eighth graders continue to do today. However, Audre's experience brings her into direct confrontation with the whiteness of Washington, D.C., and the nation itself. In this scene, Audre's family is forced to confront how their ill treatment is a result of their Blackness in a white nation. What is intended to be a celebratory trip of Audre's impending adulthood is one in which she realizes that adulthood for Black people does not grant the rights of citizenship the same way that it does for white people. She writes, "The first time I went to Washington, D.C. was on the edge of the summer when I was supposed to stop being a child. At least that's what they told us all at graduation from the eighth grade. My sister Phyllis graduated at

the same time from high school. I don't know what she was supposed to stop being" (68). There's a lack of clarity around the expectations for Black girls here. Audre is supposed to "stop being a child" but the expectations for her sister Phyllis are unclear. This moving bar for Black girls is apparent throughout my dissertation, the literature it examines, and the world at large. Whatever most benefits white people tends to be how Black women and girls are classified. If adultifying Black girls offers white people power, then that is how Black girls are perceived. Indeed, in classifying Black girls as adults and criminalizing their behavior, our society strips Black girls not only of the safety childhood innocence should afford, but also denies them the rights of future adulthood. Within the judicial system, trying Black girls as adults jeopardizes their future rights and privileges – enfranchisement, employment, and access to housing. What Lorde effectively communicates here is that there is no way for her to meet the markers of maturity that would grant her rights and privileges within the U.S. because in order to meet them to society's satisfaction, she needs to be white.

Because Lorde's family is Black, they are denied the ability to buy and eat ice cream at a parlor counter in D.C.; it's this incident of denied freedom that is her first initiation into what Black adulthood in a white U.S. means. In other words, the privileges that are granted white children when they transition to adulthood are withheld from Black people even as adults. The ice cream incident happening in the capital represents Lorde's status in the U.S. in general. In the immediate aftermath of being refused the ice cream, Audre notices the whiteness of her surroundings:

> The waitress was white, and the counter was white, and the ice cream I never ate in Washington, D.C. that summer I left childhood was white, and the white heat and the white pavement and the white stone monuments of my first Washington

> summer made me sick to my stomach for the whole rest of that trip and it wasn't much of a graduation present after all. (71)

This passage is important for several reasons. First, it emphasizes the material and structural whiteness of the city. D.C. is a city made of whiteness in terms of the stones and materials used to build the monuments and memorials. But this whiteness is also a literal embodiment of the racial whiteness that the United States is built upon as evidenced in the earlier historical context section. The neoclassical principles that guided the building of the city were based on white supremacy and whiteness as the ideal beauty. In being denied the white ice cream, Lorde is also, both literally and symbolically being denied full participation in a white America. As Black and immigrant, she is denied the privilege of the consuming the memorial whiteness that is her nation. The moment then of her adulthood here is not that she gets to experience D.C. or that she is able to have celebratory ice cream but rather that she is confronted with the reality of racism in a way that cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the language used in the passage, is that she "left childhood" rather than entered adulthood. There is no privilege or right included here. Instead, she is stripped of an innocence and gains nothing for it but a harsh understanding of the way Black people are treated in the U.S. This moment of reckoning with the racist structures of the United States forces Audre out of childhood without offering her any of the privileges or rights of adulthood, and so she's left in an in-between stage of neither adult nor child. She embodies the concept of "not-yet" as espoused by Hortense Spillers and delineated by Nazera Wright who asserts that black girls "occupy a space of in-betweenness" and "are not yet citizens and not yet women" (Wright 10). Where Spillers and Wright refer to nineteenth century girls who are literally not yet citizens because they are enslaved, the Black girls of the 1950s are citizens in name only. They are subject to

the laws of the nation, but these same laws offer little to no rights or protections for them. In this instance, Audre has neither the freedom or privilege of adulthood nor the innocence or safety of childhood. She's stuck in the liminal space of adolescence, but also in the confines of Jim Crow which limit her rights as an American citizen.

This entire incident takes place around the 4th of July, white America's Independence Day, which makes the situation that much more fraught with meaning. Lorde writes: "I viewed Julys through an agonizing corolla of dazzling whiteness and I always hated the Fourth of July, even before I came to realize the travesty such a celebration was for Black people in this country" (69). Lorde's poignant prose "an agonizing corolla of dazzling whiteness" indicates the ways in which the whiteness was blinding, painful, and overwhelming even when she didn't fully understand it until she was older. Her experience of the holiday itself as a part of "dazzling whiteness" intertwines with Audre's trip to Washington and that of her experience of America's celebration of independence which ignores the fact that Black people were actively denied independence and treated as property upon the founding of the nation.[50]

Indeed, Lorde's feelings of hatred toward the month of July, even at a young age, perhaps indicate a subliminal understanding of the implications of the holiday itself for

[50] Lorde is not the first, nor the last, to demonstrate how the 4th of July means differently for Black people – that it ignores the racist founding of the U.S. while espousing freedom and liberty for all. Frederick Douglass broaches this very issue in his 1852 address "What, To the Slave, Is the Fourth of July?" delivered on the 5th of July to the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester, New York. In his address, he asks his audience what he has to do with "your national independence" clearly setting himself apart from the nation as the nation as set him apart. His response to the titular question is: "a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim." Douglass calls the celebrations, prayers, hymns, and thanksgivings "fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages." See: *(1852) Frederick Douglass, "What, To The Slave, Is The Fourth Of July."* 25 Jan. 2007, https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1852-frederick-douglass-what-slave-fourth-july/.; Waxman, Olivia B. "'What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?': The History of Frederick Douglass' Searing Independence Day Oration." *Time*, https://time.com/5614930/frederick-douglass-fourth-of-july/. Accessed 20 May 2022.

Black people. Lorde tells us that her parents handled racism as a "crushing reality" and a "private woe" so that racism became, "Like so many other vital pieces of information in [her] childhood" something she "was supposed to know without being told" (69). The lack of conversation surrounding racism and its embeddedness in the U.S. wasn't something Lorde's parents spoke about or prepared her for explicitly. But it was a part of their lives constantly. When young Audre wanted to go to the dining car on the train to D.C., her mother didn't tell her it wasn't open for Black patrons but that the food "cost too much money" and that one couldn't determine if other people had put their hands on the food (68). When her family was refused service from the ice cream parlor, they exited as if they "had never been Black before" (70). Her parents refused to speak about the incident "because they felt they should have anticipated it and avoided it" (70). Lorde's parents' choice not to speak about racism may have been a kind of self-preservation for them and their dignity, but it left their daughter confused about what the U.S. would allow her. It left her feeling alone in taking action (in this instance writing a letter to the president of the United States) to express her outrage at injustice (70).

This scene in D.C. is Audre's precursor, both in the memoir pages and in her life, to a more traditional coming-of-age encounter. Many bildungsroman narratives include sexual encounters or menstruation as the coming-of-age moment. *Zami* follows suit with an important distinction. With her experiences in D.C., Audre comes to an understanding of herself in terms of race and age before she experiences the bodily changes that mark maturity. Audre has "left childhood" but has not yet entered adulthood. Audre's more traditional coming-of-age moment arrives mere paragraphs after she narratives her trip to

D.C. And, in line with genre, this moment begins with the arrival of her menstrual cycle described in erotic terms.

At the onset of her menstrual cycle, having been recently denied participation in the memorial whiteness of Washington through her inability to eat the white ice cream, Audre seeks to connect with her Caribbean heritage. Her mother, recognizing the beginning of Audre's period as a momentous occasion, permits Audre to choose the meal. Lorde tells us that whenever she was allowed to choose a meal, she chose one from her mother's homeland. Dispossessed of her heritage, Audre tries to claim possession of it through the making of food. As she cooks a Caribbean dish, she connects the womanly power of menstruation and the womanly power of her ancestors. In this pivotal scene, we witness where haunting is made manifest in Audre's life as she attempts to understand the materiality and physicality of self-possession.

Audre begins the recounting of this coming-of-age moment not with the food or her period, but with her mother and her mother's mortar. The primacy of Linda and her mortar indicates to the reader how important these two are to Lorde's conception of self and her coming-of-age. She writes, "Every West Indian woman worth her salt had her own mortar" (71). Lorde notes that if a Caribbean woman's mortar broke, she could get a Puerto Rican mortar at the market but "they were never really as good as West Indian mortars. Now where the best mortars came from I was never really sure, but I knew it must be in the vicinity of that amorphous and mystically perfect place called 'home.' And whatever came from 'home' was bound to be special" (71). From the beginning, Lorde connotes the mortar with women, her mother, and home. It is a symbol of the diaspora, and a way for her to connect with her mother, her homeland, and her womanhood. It is

the epitome of the diaspora meeting the erotic in the material. In queering the use of the mortar and pestle, Lorde claims it as her own while also embracing her heritage. She writes, "My mother's mortar was an elaborate affair, quite at variance with most of her other possessions, and certainly with her projected public view of herself. It stood, solid and elegant, on a shelf in the kitchen cabinet for as long as I can remember, and I loved it dearly" (71). The mortar is a stand-in for her mother and for womanhood in general. It is made of dark wood, and it is described in erotic terms with sensual descriptions of the fruit that is engraved on the outside. Lorde writes, "I loved to finger the hard roundness of the carved fruit" (71). The erotic fruit imagery makes a reappearance at the end of the biomythography when Lorde describes her encounter with Kitty. She writes that the mortar made her "feel secure and somehow full: as if it conjured up from all the many different flavors pounded into the inside wall, visions of delicious feasts both once enjoyed and still to come" (72). This imagery again is both erotic and material. The use of the word "conjure" indicates that this scene is not simply the beginning of Audre's sexual awakening and coming-of-age. It's the moment when her haunting manifests as she realizes she cannot access her heritage in the same way as her mother did before her.

Unable to consume the white ice cream of Washington, Lorde seeks to consume the food of her mother's homeland – souse. When Audre's sisters chose the meal, they always requested something American like hot dogs, baked beans, or fried chicken (73). But Audre typically requested souse, a popular Caribbean dish with a "colonial past" ("Grenadian Saltfish Souse"). Marinated in seasoning to the point of pickling, souse is comparable to ceviche ("How to Make Souse").[51] For Audre, it's not just about the

[51] From the Dominican Republic to Trinidad, there are many versions of souse deriving from pig, chicken, or cow. However, most sources agree that souse is a special occasion or weekend meal that relies

consumption of the food itself, though this is important as it's a material manifestation of her heritage, but also about the use of the mortar. Audre emphasizes the mortar, the feminine/woman-centered piece, rather than the phallic pestle. She writes, "I knew that I would get to use my mother's mortar, and this in itself was more treat for me than any of the forbidden foods" (73). Lorde emphasizes the importance of the mortar by writing that the tase of the meat "had become inseparable in [her] mind from the tactile pleasures of using [her] mother's mortar" (73). The mortar is a piece of the inaccessible homeland, a representation of the sexually forbidden (rather than "forbidden foods"), and a demonstration of Audre's early attempts at understanding the erotic as a means of empowerment.

Lorde's explanation of her fascination with and use of the mortar coincides with her recounting of her first period. Audre was fourteen and a half and her mother was taking her to multiple doctors because Linda was concerned that Audre hadn't gotten her period yet. This occurrence for Audre, in many ways, was akin to her experiences of racism. She was given no language to understand the things that happened to her because of the body she possessed. Audre's experiences as Black, female, child of immigrants, and lesbian, are experiences, at least at first, that she undergoes without words. Her race, her culture, her sexuality, her gender, are all identifiers she is removed from and the history of which are withheld from her. She must discover them on her own through books and through connection with women. She writes, "Yet, since [my mother] had

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on potent spices and marination. See: "Are You Looking for Souse?" *Simply Trini Cooking*, Simply Trini Cooking, https://www.simplytrinicooking.com/search/souse.; "Dominican Souse Recipe." *Dominica Gourmet*, 14 July 2020, https://dominicagourmet.com/dominican-souse-recipe/.; Mulraine, Lloyd E. "Barbadian Americans." *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*, edited by Jeffrey Lehman, 2nd ed., vol. 1, Gale, 2000, pp. 195–205. Gale eBooks, *Gale*, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3405800025/GVRL?sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=089b459d.

never discussed this mysterious business of menstruation with me, I was certainly not supposed to know what all this whispering was about, even though it concerned my own body" (75). Here, her mother would keep Audre dispossessed through ignorance. But Audre finds books in the library and seeks to understand and claim possession of her body. Even so, she still fails to understand much of the female reproductive system. Audre's lack of knowledge surrounding her body and cultural heritage coalesces as she prepares the souse. She gets her first period, "one hot July afternoon" (76). Likely, this is about a year after the D.C. incident. In the midst of the explanation of her period from her mother, Lorde writes, "It was difficult to talk about double message without having a twin tongue" (76). This line indicates that something about being a woman was unable to be articulated by one of them. Or perhaps that for Audre not having access to the culture or the secrets of womanhood, she couldn't divulge. Or that because she wasn't *supposed* to know particular things about menstruation that she couldn't speak freely without giving herself away. How ever we interpret it, there is a lack of transparency and clarity between mother and daughter, and this lack of understanding one another only intensifies as Audre prepares the souse.

Moreover, Audre embraces herself and her body in ways her mother is not comfortable with. Audre demonstrates this comfortability when working on the souse writing that she smells "the delicate breadfruit…that was my own womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious" (77). Cut off from access to the homeland and given limited access to knowledge about sex, her body, and sexuality, Audre turns to the mortar and souse for connection and comfort. But instead of following the same motions that her mother taught her, she "gently altered its rhythm to include an up and down beat"

(78). In changing the rhythm of the mortar and pestle as she pounds the spice, Audre embraces this symbol of her heritage while queering it to make it her own and possess it. The inability to have full access to the homeland and the inability to consume the whiteness of America, leaves her haunted, but Audre chooses to embrace this haunting and create something new from it. In queering the actions of the mortar and pestle, Audre takes a piece of her homeland and re-envisions it to better fit her identity as a Black, lesbian, child of immigrants growing up in the United States. Indeed, she sees preparing and eating this culturally rich food as a way to engage with her culture and her sex. She writes: "And within that basin was a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information" (78). The erotic imagery and the connection of the mortar to female anatomy is undeniable. The mortar is at once representative of the womb and external female genitalia. And in this material object representative of the material erotic, young Audre finds "strength and information" (78). In other words, in this moment, Audre embraces her cultural haunting through taking ownership of the mortar and the souse. She queers diasporic knowledge by changing the rhythm of the mortar and pestle. And she uses her new understanding of the erotic, divulged with the onset of her menstrual cycle, to establish a different kind of marker for maturity. Rather than a maturity reliant on white society's benchmarks of marriage and property, this maturity is predicated on understanding and claiming erotic power to allow a possession of one's own body.

Audre feels elation and relief at this epiphany that, within her body, she can find knowledge. She hums "thinking with relief about how simple my life would be now that I had become a woman…my body felt strong and full and open" (79). However, when

Linda arrives back home, she scolds Audre for pounding the spice in a different way. Linda takes the mortar and pestle away from Audre, and her mother grinds the spice in "the old familiar way" (80). Audre tears up as she realizes "that in my mother's kitchen there was only one right way to do anything. Perhaps my life had not become so simple, after all" (80). In this moment, Audre recognizes that her ways of being and her markers of maturity don't line up with her mother's. Paired with her realization in D.C. that she cannot consume the memorial whiteness of the United States, Audre has no recourse for reaching markers of maturity outlined either by her Caribbean mother or her white-centric nation. Instead, in taking pieces of her diasporic knowledge and queering them, she sets the stage for her embrace of the erotic which will ultimately allow her to embrace her haunting and establish alternate models of maturity for herself and girls like her.

Six years later in June 1953, Audre, legally considered an adult, returns to Washington, D.C. to protest the execution order for the Rosenbergs. Her experience of their trial and execution coming alongside her narrative of racist exclusion in Washington, D.C. further demonstrates the way that nonwhites are couched within the nation. Additionally, it underscores how privileges and rights are denied to them despite their status as U.S. citizens. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were American citizens convicted of espionage and put to death on June 19, 1953. Julius was a child of immigrants and both he and Ethel were Jewish – an ethnic distinction which often landed Jewish people outside the exclusive confines of whiteness. Given their immigrant and "other" status, the Rosenbergs offer a representation of a parallel alienation to the kind that Audre faced. On this second trip to the nation's capital, Audre pickets the White House and submits petitions of mercy for the Rosenbergs noting that "*whether or not*

[she] could eat vanilla ice cream at the soda fountain never came up" (148). She finishes her reminiscence of that trip by writing, "*One week later, President Eisenhower signed into law an executive decree that said I could eat anything I wanted to anywhere in Washington, D.C., including vanilla ice cream. It didn't mean too much to me by then*" (149). Eleven days after this effort toward desegregation, the Rosenbergs were executed.

To fully understand Audre's apathy about her ability to eat anywhere she wanted in D.C. in the context of the Rosenberg execution, we need to take a closer look at what Lorde refers to as Eisenhower's "*executive decree"* (149). The history is a bit more complicated than how Lorde presents it. Eisenhower had promised in his first State of the Union address to end segregation in Washington, D.C., but it was the Supreme Court case *District of Columbia v. John R. Thompson, Co., Inc.* (1953) that desegregated D.C. restaurants (Quigley).[52] The case was brought by NAACP charter member Mary Church Terrell. The nation's capital was thirty-five percent Black at the time and downtown restaurants routinely refused service to Black people. The case didn't confront *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) like *Brown v. Board* (1954) would, and the refusal to engage with *Plessy* "made the [*Thompson*] case a vehicle for the court to deal with segregation in private business" (Quigley). On June 8, 1953, the court both ruled unanimously against Thompson allowing Black patrons to eat anywhere in D.C. and scheduled *Brown* for oral arguments again in the fall. While *Thompson* opened the way for the later *Brown* decision, the court refused to engage with *Plessy.* Thus, the ramifications were limited to

[52] None of Eisenhower's executive orders during this time correspond with desegregation in D.C., so I'm working under the assumption that Lorde was thinking about the impact of *Thompson* instead. See: "1953 Executive Orders Disposition Tables." *National Archives*, 15 Aug. 2016, https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/executive-orders/1953-eisenhower.html.

For the full court case see: "U.S. Reports: District of Columbia v. Thompson Co., 346 U.S. 100 (1952)." *Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA*, https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep346100/.

only private businesses within D.C. Public spaces in D.C. and all spaces outside of D.C. were not affected by the case making the verdict insignificant to Audre. It didn't affect her life in New York, and it didn't change the structure of the nation. Significantly, it didn't deal with public spaces – those created by the nation and upheld by it. Without the benefit of seeing how *Thompson* would help pave the way for *Brown*, the real time results of the case likely felt insignificant. Additionally, when we factor in the context of the Rosenbergs, we can determine that in the light of the execution of people that are othered, Audre felt the ability to eat where she wanted in one city was inconsequential. *Thompson* made no meaningful change across the nation that Audre could see. Thus, to her, it was a symbolic gesture that didn't make real change to the structure of a nation built on exclusion.

Furthermore, the exclusion and execution of the Rosenbergs made a deep impact on Lorde. She notes: "The Rosenbergs' struggle became synonymous for me with being able to live in this country at all, with being able to survive hostile surroundings" (149). The Rosenbergs could not survive in hostile surroundings and as Audre grows up in and around whiteness, she sees that the very structures themselves are hostile to her existence as a Black lesbian. After the Rosenbergs are executed, Audre attends a memorial rally in Union Square Park. As she walks through the Village, she "wonder[ed] whether there was any place in the world that was different from here, anywhere that could be safe and free, not really even sure what safe and free could mean. But it did not mean being lonely, disillusioned, betrayed" (149). If safety is a tenant of childhood, it is not afforded to Audre, and if freedom is a tenant of adulthood neither is that. As Black and lesbian, Audre is not granted a place of safety or a place of freedom. The rights and privileges

afforded to heterosexual white men do not apply to her in this U.S. As she wanders around a physical space – the Village – Audre looks for both a literal and figurative place to belong in this nation of exclusion and whiteness. The inability to find an existing place where she can be safe and free becomes a pivotal one for Audre that pushes her to materially create a house of difference. If a home doesn't exist for her, if no material structure is built with her inclusion in mind, then she must build one herself. Additionally, she follows her declaration of loneliness and disillusionment with the statement: "I felt like I was thirty years old" (149). We can surmise that she feels tired, but also because she states she is "lonely, disillusioned, betrayed," there's an additional well of sadness and cynicism that belies her youth. She feels older than her biological age because the world has forced her to deal with death, exclusion, and rejection in ways that wear down one's innocence. Again, we see how the privileges of adulthood are withheld from her and its responsibilities weigh heavily. Unable to find belonging or access the rights and privileges of adulthood in the United States and haunted by her inability to access cultural knowledge, Audre leaves for Mexico.

Her relocation to Mexico brings two important things to light. First, it highlights how Audre can only find a home outside of the nation in which she was born. The exclusionary nature of the United States' white supremacist founding leaves Audre on the outside. Second, her relationships in Mexico – specifically with Eudora – demonstrate how Audre can create a tangible, physical home out of erotic touch with women and in doing so embrace her haunting by connecting with the woman-centered-woman aspect of her Grenadian heritage. On arriving in Mexico, Lorde states that she "felt filled with the excitement of curiosity and more and more at home" (155). The irony that she felt more

at home outside of the place she was born and lived her entire life demonstrates the ways in which the U.S. is hostile to Black and brown bodies. Furthermore, Audre experiences belonging by seeing faces that look like hers. She writes that in Mexico, as opposed to the U.S., she walked with her head up and that “there were brown faces of every hue” that met hers as she walked offering her “affirmation” (156). She observes that this was the very first time she felt visible; before this moment, she was unaware of that lack (156). Audre’s sense of home comes only outside of the U.S. where she is accepted as part of the everyday currents of life.

It’s not just her physical removal from the confining structures of the United States that propels Lorde toward a sense of belonging. It’s her relationship with Eudora. Before Lorde leaves the U.S., she engages in sexual relationships with women – namely Ginger and Bea. Lorde finds making love to Bea to be a kind of “home” as “feeling the physical tensions of hope and despair loosen[s]” with the erotic encounter (150). Yet, Audre notes that Bea’s lack of overt sexual response is “disappointing” (150). These early encounters might offer Audre a brief respite, but they aren’t a permanent resting place –a lasting “house of difference.” While she’s still physically in a pre-*Brown v. Board* U.S., she is unable to reach the markers of adulthood placed before her. Those markers disappear outside the border of the nation. In Mexico, she is not beholden to the same racial hierarchy and its intersection with adulthood. And outside the confines of her mother’s home, she can embrace her heritage on her own terms.

Audre has a brief but impactful romantic relationship with Eudora, a 48-year-old breast cancer survivor, former journalist, and expat. Eudora is the first person Audre knew that called herself a lesbian (162). When Audre tells Eudora that she wants to sleep

with her, Eudora questions her certainty. As Audre assures Eudora that she's certain about physical intimacy, Audre feels "some half-known self come of age" (167). Just before, she thinks "If I did not put my mouth upon hers and inhale the spicy smell of her breath my lungs would burst" (167). This moment of physicality with a woman – of erotic thought centered on erotic touch – is what pushes Audre toward adulthood. While her epiphany about racism in the U.S. is what pushed her into the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, she finds womanhood as she interacts with the mortar (symbolic of women) when she gets her first period. But this attempt at maturity and connection with her heritage is thwarted by her mother who insists she follow Linda's particular rules. It is only outside of the confines of the U.S. and away from her mother in the arms of a woman that Audre can meet other markers of adulthood and so become a woman. She makes an adult decision to be with Eudora in Mexico. Eudora affirms her decision, her belonging, and her beauty telling Audre that she is "beautiful and brown" (167). Lorde observes, "It was in Mexico that I stopped being invisible" (173). Though Audre's liaison was short-lived, it allowed her to understand what it is to be seen and accepted as a woman. When Eudora ends their relationship, Lorde writes: "I was hurt, but not lost. And in that moment, as in the first night when I met her, I felt myself pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with other women in an intricate, complex, and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths" (175). This exchange of strengths, this community of women, this connection through the erotic, is the way that Lorde challenges the markers of adulthood that are ascribed to her and finds an alternate way of meeting them. She may be haunted by her inability to access cultural knowledge, but in connecting with women erotically, she claims the Grenadian practice of being zami for

herself. Her time in D.C. contrasted with her trip to Mexico demonstrates that she can only achieve adulthood and the full privileges of that adulthood outside of the U.S. but also foreshadows that in a post-*Brown* world, Audre can find self-possession and empowerment as an adult through the erotic and connection with women.

The passage of *Brown v. Board* in 1954 comes the year after the execution of the Rosenbergs and changes the landscape of the U.S. in such a way that pieces of what Audre found in Mexico could be possible in the U.S. Lorde writes:

> That spring, McCarthy was censured. The Supreme Court decision on the desegregation of schools was announced in the english newspaper, and for a while all of us seemed to go crazy with hope for another kind of america. Some of the *café con leche* crowd even talked about going home…The Rosenbergs were dead. But this case…could alter the whole racial climate in the states. The supreme court had spoken. For me. It had spoken in the last century, and I had learned its "separate but equal" decision in school. Now something had actually changed, might actually change. Eating ice cream in Washington, D.C. was not the point; kids in the south being able to go to school was. (172)

This moment comes while Audre is still in Mexico, and she demonstrates her newfound maturity and adulthood in this series of thoughts. First, she names America as "home" something she has not done up to this point even if it's in her summarization of the feelings and words of other expats. Her lack of capitalization for the U.S. and for the Supreme Court is a subtle way to subvert – even if just within her own writing – their power and the power they have over her and Black people specifically. In using such short sentences, specifically the terse "For me," Lorde emphatically punctuates the sentence with her own body and subjectivity. The Supreme Court did something that would benefit a young Black woman. And in determining the importance of this change, she recognizes that it's not about where she can eat ice cream but about where children all across the South can go to school. In other words, it's about holistic, systemic change

that affects every Black person not just about where one individual family can eat. Even so, the imprint of the rejection Audre received in D.C. as a child carries through to this moment as she demonstrates its indelibility. Also, this event notably happens when she's in Mexico, a place that affirms her self-possession, dignity, and adulthood, which facilitates her hopeful reaction.

Nevertheless, Lorde is clear that the passage of *Brown*, while life-changing, is not a panacea for all race related issues. When she returns from Mexico, she looks for work and is discouraged by the "bleakness of [her] prospects" (187). She writes: "I had survived McCarthy and the Korean War, and the Supreme Court had declared desegregated schools illegal. But racism and recession were still realities between me and a job, as I crisscrossed the city day after day, answering ads" (187). Audre's immediate reality may have altered, but it isn't totally restructured. She still deals with structural racism as a roadblock to her gainful employment.

Audre struggles to find her place and recreate feelings of belonging and connection once she's back in the United States with its racially restrictive laws and society. This struggle is obvious in the ways that Audre is excluded and discriminated against even in the gay bars – places where much of her community finds solace, safety, or freedom. But because she's Black, Audre's relationship to the gay bar scene is more complicated. Frequently, Audre was asked for her ID to enter a gay bar, but the white women she was with weren't, even though Audre was older than them at the time. This action on the part of the bar workers is a form of infantilization. Even when Audre is biologically an adult, she is treated as a child. It's assumed that she does not have the rights or privileges of an adult or that she needs to be legally checked in ways that the

white women are not demonstrating the way in which whiteness is status property. Despite the Bagatelle being "the most popular gay-girl's bar in the Village" Audre didn't frequent it (180). Lorde writes:

> [T]he bouncer was always asking me for my ID to prove I was twenty-one, even though I was older than the other women with me. Of course "you can never tell with Colored people." And we would all rather die than have to discuss the fact it was because I was Black, since, of course, gay people weren't racists. After all, didn't they know what it was like to be oppressed? (180)

Lorde's ironic tone here suggests that of course gay people can be racist. Any individual from a marginalized people group can be prejudiced toward a member of another. Her description of the incident also demonstrates the ways in which, as Black and gay, she faced multiple forms of discrimination. Even at a gay bar, which should be a place of acceptance for her, the full rights and privileges of adulthood are withheld. She refers to this repeated incident as the "ID 'problem'" with "problem" bracketed by ironic quotation marks. The offset quotes indicate that the problem wasn't necessarily with the ID or with Audre but with the implications that "acceptance had a different weight for [her]" (181). In other words, the problem was that she was still being excluded on the basis of her race even if it happened in different ways than it did at the ice cream parlor in D.C. Lorde recognizes that as a Black lesbian with no access to tangible ancestry via her foremothers' homeland and excluded from the made home of much of the gay community, she would have to try harder "merely to stay alive, or rather, to stay human" (181). In this statement, Lorde acknowledges the importance of home "to stay human" – i.e., to be self-possessed.

While the Bag is not her home, Lorde's writing emphasizes the importance of place because it affords her the connection to the erotic that becomes her lasting home.

She affirms that both she and Muriel, one of Audre's lovers and her first long-term relationship once she returns from Mexico, "needed…the atmosphere of other lesbians" (187). If the source of empowerment, creativity, and the ability to challenge racist and sexist structures comes from erotic connection with women, as Lorde argues in her "Uses of the Erotic" then the necessity of "the atmosphere of other lesbians" cannot be overstated. Lorde reinforces how important it was "to have a place" where you could "refuel and check your flaps" – a place to relax and be a part – "[w]hether or not it did justice to whatever you felt you were about" (225). If, as a child, Audre understands the power of architecture and structure to exclude during her trip to Washington, D.C., as an adult, she recognizes how important it is to find a material structure where she is included.[53] She sets about to make a place for herself in a world that builds structures to exclude her. She states, "At the Bag, at Hunter College, uptown in Harlem, at the library, there was a piece of the real me bound in each place and growing" (226). Each of these places offers acceptance or education or allows for difference in stark contrast to most of the white and heterocentric places in the U.S. Nevertheless, even in this search, she uses the word "bound." This rhetorical choice indicates that a piece of herself is tied to the aforementioned places and that that particular piece is left invisible in the other places. Lorde can't bring all pieces of self to one place. She writes: "Downtown in gay bars I was a closet student and an invisible Black. Uptown at Hunter I was a closet dyke and a

[53] Lorde's ability to search for these structures and find belonging outside of the nuclear family unit stems from the rise of capitalism and the industrial city. In his iconic article, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," John D'Emilio argues that the rise of late capitalism along with the conditions surrounding World War II allowed lesbian and gay people the "social space" to cultivate an identity. He demonstrates that government and war sponsored jobs, with their sex-segregated housing, created opportunities, not just for same-sex desire to be acted upon, but for same-sex identity to be developed. See D'Emilio, John. "Capitalism and Gay Identity." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, edited by Henry Abelove et al., Routledge, 1993, pp. 467–76.

general intruder. Maybe four people altogether knew I wrote poetry, and I usually made it pretty easy for them to forget" (179). In order to be included or accepted, Audre had to leave out integral parts of herself and show only some of her many facets to each group of people. It further demonstrates how even the structures that appear to be inviting and inclusive, such as public libraries and gay bars, can become oppressive. Even a supposed haven can cause a person to feel dispossessed when it fails to acknowledge and accommodate intersectional difference.

As she searches for an inclusive material structure, Lorde comes to the realization that it's tangible touch between women that offers her acceptance and a physical place to call home. She writes that often the only thing she shared with her friends (who she describes as "the hippies of the gay-girl circuit") "was that [they] dared for connection in the name of woman, and saw that as [their] power, rather than [their] problem" (225). Here, we can see how Lorde's later ideas that appear in "Uses of the Erotic" also arise in *Zami.* Lord makes clear how connection between two women – physical, material beings – can become her home. She writes: "It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather the security of any one particular difference" (226). The "we" Lorde refers to is women (specifically her friends). The "house of difference" is the material structure she builds when she connects – physically, romantically, spiritually – with women. The power of the erotic is that which encompasses the material and the spiritual; it allows women greater access to power, self-possession, and creativity when they connect with one another. Rather than focusing on differences as points of divergence, Lorde acknowledges their possibility as points of connection. She observes that they can connect over the fact that they each experience

different kinds of exclusion in white patriarchal America. In the search for "our place" Lorde keeps looking for a material, tangible structure. She doesn't initially recognize that the materiality was in the bodies of women themselves. Their physical connections could become the place where they found the belonging and acceptance denied to them by a white supremacist and homophobic nation.

Growing up without a tangible connection to her foremothers and her ancestral and cultural memory, Lorde is haunted by a self she cannot access. Specifically, she is haunted by that self tied to her ancestral history of women-loving-women. Her lack of connection to place creates a haunting that she embraces through loving women. If she cannot physically be in Carriacou and participate in the zami culture of her mothers, then using the power of the erotic to create those kinds of connections in the U.S. is a way to embrace that haunting and honor that heritage. Lorde writes, "I knew what it was like to be haunted by the ghost of a self one wished to be, but only half-sensed" (190). In other words, Lorde is aware at this point in her life of that which is missing: the erotic connection with women and the ancestral memory of the zamis. She is haunted by the lack of access to her foremothers and cannot fill this gap without connection to women – especially other Black women. She recognizes that her place is not a bar or a museum or a college but the place that allows her to love women fully. Lorde states, "Any world which did not have a place for me loving women was not a world in which I wanted to live, nor one which I could fight for" (197). These become the parameters for her place – a house of difference where women are empowered through the erotic. In claiming the erotic and redefining the zami connection for herself in the U.S., Lorde embraces the haunting of her foremothers and remythologizes that ancestral knowledge. At the same

time, she rejects the material structures that would exclude her or relegate her to property within the U.S.

Lorde's connection to women, especially Black women, as shown, first and foremost, by her relationship with her mother and later by her relationship Afrekete, is how Lorde embraces the haunting left by the lack of access to her homeland, her matrilineal heritage, and the language of the mother. Her struggle to possess the self that haunts her is illuminated in a poem she includes in her biomythography dated April 20, 1952. Lorde writes that her poems from that period are "of death, destruction, and deep despair" (118). In this particular poem, the speaker claims deathlessness as an asset showing a certain kind of defiance. The speaker sees this haunting and deathlessness as power and embraces it. The second stanza of her poem begins: "I was the story of a phantom people / I was the hope of lives never lived / I was the thought-product of the emptiness of space" (118). The speaker acknowledges that she is removed from her ancestry but also that some of her ancestry can never be fully known even as it still exists. She claims that ghostly presence as her lineage. She is "the hope of lives never lived" meaning that she continues as a descendant of a people who didn't have the kind or variety of choices that she has even if hers are still limited in certain ways. Also, in claiming that she was the "story of a phantom people" she claims that her very self – her material body – houses the narrative of her people. She is a material vessel of history, culture, ancestry, and life. She embodies the afterlives of colonization and slavery.

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker proclaims that they hanged her on the "tree of mourning…forgetting how long I was / in dying / how deathlessly I stood / forgetting how easily / I could rise / again." (118). In the closing of the poem, the speaker

demonstrates that defiance through her claim that she “could rise / again.” (118). In separating that into two different lines, she places an emphasis on “again” which is both end-stopped and the final line of the poem. The juxtaposition of the finality of the line with the end-stop against the recurrent/recursive nature of the word “again” works to create a strong line emblematic of a speaker who has perhaps risen before and, certainly, can rise again. It’s a strong, short, impactful line. Additionally, it falls in the tradition of Black women’s literature drawing on the gothic to fill in the gaps. In that vein, the poem works to explain the ancestry that still haunts but is unknowable or unattainable in some way. Black people and their history refuse to disappear, and in rising again they demonstrate their resilience even in the face of death. One can be deathless if one’s name and story and purpose live on. While we cannot ascribe the speaker to Lorde herself exactly, in penning the poem, Lorde demonstrates that she understands the emotions behind the despair and the haunting. We can infer that she, too, is from a “phantom people” (118). Indeed, in creating a biomythography and in fashioning herself as a different manifestation of the zamis of her mother’s island, Lorde carries on the legacy of a forgotten people.

The notion of difference is the crux of Lorde’s identity, the connection point for her erotic encounters, and the intangible thing behind her material structure of housing. All of this goes back to her mother, the matrilineal heritage upon which she builds her identity even as it’s kept from her. She connects with other Black women in a material, erotic encounter to fill in the gap of her phantom people. She writes: “To me, my mother’s physical substance and the presence of self-possession with which she carried herself were a large part of what made her *different*” (16). Note that Lorde writes,

“physical substance” (16). For her, the material matters. Linda’s “self-possession” comes from her physicality. Additionally, Lorde emphasizes her mother’s difference from women; it is this physicality that creates the difference. Lorde seeks to emulate these qualities in order to connect with the phantom people from which she comes. Furthermore, in her admiration of her mother and her mother’s example, we can see how the idea of “difference” and connecting with women over their “difference” becomes her home. Her mother and her homeland become the early foundation upon which Lorde later creates alternate markers for maturity that allow her to conceive of different notions of womanhood outside those that whiteness and heteronormativity prescribe. In queering the diaspora and welcoming the erotic, Lorde reframes her connection to her heritage, embracing haunting and rejecting whiteness as property.

Indeed, women are at the crux of Lorde’s biomythography and at the core of her conception of self. Women are the ones that offer her connection to her past and allow her to embrace haunting to find home and subsequently develop alternative maturity markers on her journey to adulthood. She writes: “Images of women, flaming like torches adorn and define the borders of my journey, stand like dykes between me and the chaos. It is the images of the women, kind and cruel, that lead me home” (3). From the first page of the book, Lorde positions home as a material structure that is found in the arms of women. The connection between them is the place of home, and she roots this in her understanding of zamis. To be with another woman or to emulate her mother is also to have the kind of self-possession that embraces haunting and uses it to her own advantage to create different markers of maturity. In the opening of her book, she writes:

> Once *home* was a far way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother’s mouth. She breathed exuded hummed the fruit smell of Noel’s Hill

> morning fresh and noon hot, and I spun visions of sapodilla and mango as a net over my Harlem tenement cot…This now, here, was a space, some temporary abode, never to be totally binding or defining, no matter how much it commanded in energy and attention. For if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back *home*. (13)

Lorde's conception of home is created from her connection to her mother who she views as a woman-centered-woman. Even though Lorde had never been to Grenada or Noel's Hill, in listening to and connecting with her mother, she connected with that place. Indeed, the materiality of the space itself is not even within her reach via map as she notes she couldn't find Carriacou on a map until the age of twenty-six (14). But home is a material place, so Lorde describes her connection to home in terms of materiality. Home came from her "mother's mouth" a physical shaped entity (13). Additionally, Lorde's conception of home is flexible – "never…totally binding or defining" (13). Lorde can grow and move with it as long as she has the point of connection. Tied up in her understanding of home, too, is a feeling of safety; if she "lived correctly and with frugality" she would end up back home. But Lorde's experiences of childhood in the U.S. demonstrate that this conception of home is not true for a Black girl growing up in and around the structures that uphold whiteness as property. Her childhood notion that right or good behavior will lead to the freedom and safety of home does not hold because this conception was built out of her mother's experience of home in Grenada. Instead, Lorde discovers that she can find safety and freedom in the arms of another woman. This tangible, physical touch becomes a structure that supports a "house of difference" for women. Within it, they can reach maturity. They can attain the rights and privileges of adulthood even as the rest of the U.S. excludes them from its structures and denies them the rights of white and heterosexual adults.

The biomythography ends with Audre's affair with Kitty/Afrekete who many critics have noted stands in for a female iteration of Esu/Elegbara, the West African trickster god (Ball 68). But what I want to draw attention to is the tangibleness in which her affair is founded. Their lovemaking is detailed in terms of bodies and fruits with an emphasis on the very physicality of it. In many ways, it is emblematic of the earlier fruit-laden mortar and pestle scene. If that was a failed or immature erotic encounter, the one with Kitty is a mature erotic encounter that allows Audre to embrace her haunted heritage and realize the diaspora in a queer way. After it's over, Lorde writes, "I never saw Afrekete again, but her print remains upon my life with the resonance and power of an emotional tattoo" (253). The permanence and material nature of a "tattoo" emphasizes the importance of the material connection. Additionally, it underscores the way erotic touch is a source of power rooted in the physical which leads to spiritual transcendence because the power of Kitty remains even after the physical union is over. Indeed, Lorde acknowledges that the women she's been with have been a source of lasting life and creativity writing, "Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me…" (255). At the end, she describes her life in terms of the material and the erotic: "And in those years my life had become increasingly a bridge and a field of women. *Zami. Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers"* (255). Her encounters with women are the erotic power that allows her to subvert the patriarchal material structures of the U.S. She adopts the ancestry and language from her Caribbean heritage and redefines "zami" in a new context to create maturity markers that she can meet to define her womanhood, power, and self-possession.

To conclude, in this chapter, I have demonstrated that the infrastructure of the U.S. itself acts as an oppressive force on Lorde as she up grows surrounded by its architectural and institutional whiteness. As a child of immigrants, Lorde is haunted by her disconnection from Grenada, unable to conjure it up correctly according to mother, and disallowed full participation as an adult in the monumentally white United States. To move out of this double bind, Lorde queers the diaspora by writing herself in as a haunted "story of a phantom people" who are dispossessed of their homeland and by building a sensuous "house of difference" with women identified women. In this dual embrace of the haunted and the erotic, Lorde can live more fully self-possessed beyond the contours of whiteness as property that shape her American world. In doing so, she shows readers a different way to grow up. Like Brooks and Marshall before her, Lorde provides alternative markers of maturity for young Black and brown girls growing up in the white supremacist structures of the United States. More so than Brooks and Marshall, Lorde's focus on sexuality and sensuality emphasizes the realm of the physical for Black womanhood, making the body itself – rather than the kitchenette or house – her home.

So far, I have concentrated my work on Black girls/women and the space of home. My chapters have examined how external structures (i.e., the kitchenette and the white monuments of Washington, D.C.) have acted as confining structures for Black women and girls. I have demonstrated how creating a home space subverted those structures and allowed the protagonists to challenge whiteness as property in various ways across decades. In the first chapter, I concentrated primarily on private dwelling spaces. In the second, I looked at home space and the structure of the nation. In this third chapter, I look primarily at a private plantation turned public prison. In each chapter, I

have moved forward in time, tracing how whiteness as property has transformed over the ages. As I turn to Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, (2017), in this final chapter, I carry forward my research on whiteness as property and shifting maturity markers for Black youth into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, I expand my analysis to include Black boys/men. Moving away from an urban perspective, I turn toward Ward's rural Mississippi, a space haunted by the ghosts of slavery, to examine how one family uses conjure as a means of survival in a world made for whiteness.

CHAPTER 3. SHEDDING SKIN: RESISTING A CARCERAL LIFE THROUGH CONJURE IN JESMYN WARD'S *SING, UNBURIED, SING* (2017)

Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is concerned with what Yogita Goyal terms "the afterlives of slavery" (1).[54] Ward's novel follows an African American tradition of grappling with the cultural residue of slavery through the genre of the gothic. *Sing* speaks to a particularly American afterlife of slavery, with which Goyal does not contend, the mass incarceration system.[55] In Ward's *Sing*, the ghosts demonstrate that slavery didn't end with abolition in the post-Civil War era but rather transformed. In this final chapter, I use Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* to argue that racial violence from the past, present, and future converge to create hauntings that cut across time. The novel uses the institution of the prison, specifically Parchman Prison, to show that racist oppressive structures not only transform and survive through a metaphorical shedding of the skin but also that these structures continue to shape Black boys and men as well as Black girls and women resulting in a suspension of the typical notion of time – collapsing it and facilitating haunting across generations.[56] In other words, in *Sing*, the thread of whiteness as property haunting the American literary landscape persists in the twenty-first century and makes itself apparent through the structure of the prison; the government sheds its old skin by abolishing slavery but perpetuates violence against Black people through the guise of a prison.

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[54] Goyal's book investigates not only the depiction of slavery in global literature but also in how slavery echoes across African and African American literature creating new genres that are based in ones foregrounded in slavery. Specifically, she examines how the slave narrative has been reinvented and reimagined in contemporary literature in sentimental, gothic, and satirical forms.

[55] Here, I use mass incarceration as defined by Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* – not just the prison complexes themselves but also "the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison" (15).

[56] See Grabenstein, Hannah. "Inside Mississippi's Notorious Parchman Prison." *PBS News Hour.*

The Mississippi State Penitentiary, better known as Parchman Farm or Parchman Prison, is a real maximum-security prison located in northern Mississippi and a key fixture in Ward's novel. A structural embodiment of white supremacy, Parchman is slavery in different skin. Through her depiction of Parchman, a plantation turned prison in which Black people do not own their labor or their bodies, Ward demonstrates that white structures and institutions have the ability to "shed [their] skin" in order to maintain their power, perpetuate whiteness as property, and bring past oppression into the present under new names (Ward 171). As Harris asserts, when *Brown v. Board* (1954) overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the law widened to protect whiteness as "modern property" which Harris explains is intangible property akin to a graduate degree or intellectual property – property that is non-transferable but that retains value and one owns all the same (1714, 1746).[57] This novel takes place in present day, well past *Brown v. Board,* and thus, whiteness has become modern property. Conversely, Blackness deprives people of the right to ownership and possession of their labor and their future selves; Black skin does not have legal value in the way that whiteness does, which becomes particularly apparent when we examine race within the context of the modern criminal justice system. In Ward's novel, we witness whiteness as property transform across institutions. It appears first as plantation era slavery, then Jim Crow era Parchman Farm, and finally the current day system of mass incarceration. While the surface of each system appears

[57] Harris argues that white privilege was written into the law and then continued to be protected by the law even as interpretations of that law changed from *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) to *Brown v. Board* (1954). She suggests that through these Supreme Court cases we can see how whiteness transitions from what she calls "status property" to "modern property" (1714, 1746). With the revocation of de jure segregation, "whiteness as property evolved into a more modern form through the law's ratification of the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline" (1714). Harris draws on three Supreme Court cases that demonstrate that "the expectation of white privilege is valid, and that the legal protection of that expectation is warranted" (1769).

different, each one operates with oppression and containment of Black people at its center because, as Harris argues, whiteness is valuable only so long as it subordinates and oppresses Black people (1758). The carceral space's connection to history is so expansive that the ghosts affected by its various iterations appear all together at the end of the novel wearing clothing styles from the 1800s to present day. All the while, Black and brown bodies cannot shed their skin in the way that the aforementioned institutions have. Harris argues that whiteness has been "resilient" and "adaptive" and that despite legal changes, its exclusionary nature has prevailed (1778). She asserts, "Within the worlds of de jure and de facto segregation, whiteness has value, whiteness is valued, and whiteness is expected to be valued in law" (1777). The adaptation of whiteness as property is evidenced in *Sing* through the evolution of Parchman. Ward's novel showcases how white institutions change their veneer to keep whiteness valuable and perpetuate commodification of Black bodies under different guises across centuries.

The characters in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* exemplify the ways in which Black bodies are commodified to keep whiteness valuable. The novel tells the story of thirteen-year-old Jojo and his family. Born to a white father and Black mother, Jojo has been raised by his maternal grandparents, Pop (River)[58] and Mam (Philoméne), in Bois Sauvage, Mississippi, a rural area on the Gulf Coast. Against Jojo's wishes, his mother, Leonie, decides to take him and his younger sister, Kayla, on a road trip to pick up their father, Michael, upon his release from Parchman Prison. When they arrive at the prison, Jojo encounters the ghost of twelve-year-old Richie who was an inmate alongside Pop at

[58] Throughout this chapter, I primarily use the name Pop to refer to this character as that is how he is referred to by Jojo in present day. But, I will use the name River when referring to flashback sequences and River's interactions with Richie who called River by his given name. The distinction should help reader's know what timeframe I refer to as well – Pop for present day and River for 1940s Parchman.

Parchman in the mid twentieth century. In examining the lives of Richie and Jojo alongside the evolution of Parchman, we can see how growing up in the shadow of a prison denies childhood to young Black male adolescents and forces them to "adult" to stay alive even as all the privileges of adulthood and hope of a future outside the threat of incarceration are withheld from them. Additionally, through the depiction of Ward's female characters, Leonie and her toddler Kayla, we see how the prison is not just an institution that threatens the lives of Black men but one that binds Black women and girls as well.

To frame my argument, I first offer critical context and my intervention in the current literary criticism on *Sing,* which is to read it primarily as a gothic. Then, I support this contention by examining conjure as a means of resistance in *Sing*. Following this discussion of conjuring as resistance to establish the novel in a literary critical context, I look at the historical contexts for *Sing,* providing background on Parchman Prison. Finally, I move from context to text with a set of close readings to expand my argument that conjure is a means of survival, a way to recall and witness ancestral memory across time and space while white supremacism haunts Black lives beyond any material structure.

Critical Context

In her *New York Times* review of *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, U.S. poet laureate Tracy K. Smith first described the book as "a road novel" and then as "a slender epic of three generations and the ghosts that haunt them" (Smith). Likewise, Adrienne Green described *Sing* in *The Atlantic* as "a road novel and a ghost story" (Green). Literary criticism of the novel – while slim at this point – has followed a similar trend examining *Sing* as a

haunted road trip novel. Marcus Charles Tribbett argues that the novel's categorization as a road trip story bolsters his assessment of the novel as a blues story since both "exist in a kind of tension-filled dialectic" (25).[59] Many scholars, like Greg Chase, are quick to point out the novel's similarities to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*.[60] Others, like Nicole Dib, focus on how the haunted roadscape serves to demonstrate the perils of the road for Black drivers.[61] In this chapter, I further interrogate the novel as a space of haunting, but I deviate from the scholarly assessment of *Sing* within the road trip novel genre. Instead, I suggest that it's not just the road that is haunted, but rather the entirety of the South. The region is a haunted landscape, and while this haunting is not limited to the structure of Parchman, the haunting is made apparent through the prison. I agree with Tribett's assertion that the novel is full of juxtapositions and ambiguities, but where that leads him to a blues reading, it leads me to a gothic reading. Likewise, the similarities to Faulkner

[59] Tribbett writes that "The fundamental dialectic at the heart of the blues—joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain—engages with similar tensions, and the landscape on which the road story of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* unfurls is steeped in the blues tradition" (25). He traces these tensions through the novel looking at the blues in Parchman and at the juxtaposition between black and white and death and life in particular. Ultimately, he asserts neither forgetfulness nor despair offer healing. Rather, one must "access the blues tradition of hope and comfort in the face of sorrow and loss" (42).

[60] Greg Chase argues that *Sing* is in intimate conversation with Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. While it's obvious that Faulkner's work is influential to Ward, Chase's argument makes Ward's work seem almost derivative, and it's not. Her work is specifically about what it means to Southern, Black, and poor in rural Gulf Coast Mississippi. To say that this makes her work a direct comparison or continuation of Faulkner would mean that any literature that deals with being Southern, Black, or poor is somehow born of Faulkner. Having read, studied, and taught Ward's body of work, I would say her own life is her chief source of inspiration, and that while she draws on Faulkner, her work also demonstrates the legacy of Black women writers before her like Toni Morrison. In construing the article in the way that Chase does, he unnecessarily prioritizes a white male author instead of emphasizing the work of a Black women writers.

[61] Dib argues that mobility, specifically automobility, in America is racialized meaning that the American notion that the "open road" as a form of freedom is true for white people and created in opposition to Black immobility and the threat of violence Black drivers face on the road. She writes: "Black automobility, or the unique experience of the road for racialized drivers, reveals the political and social dynamics that shape our conception of the road for all drivers: it is indeed black people's subjection to violence and immobilization that makes possible white fantasies of mobility and freedom" (135). In essence, Dib's argument, which says that white notions of mobility and freedom are made in exact opposition to Black immobility and violence, is a mirror of Toni Morrison's argument about freedom and individualism in her book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in which Morrison draws on 19th century American literature to demonstrate that white men created their understanding of and claim to freedom and individualism in direct contrast to the Black man's enslavement.

are undeniable, but in focusing in on Faulkner, Chase misses how Ward fits into a long tradition of Black women writing about haunting and horror in the South. These scholars, as a group, fail to take into account three key elements that my argument contends with: conjure, Black women's literary tradition, and age. Drawing on Black women scholars Kameelah Martin, Marisa Parham, and Yogita Goyal, I firmly place *Sing* in a tradition of Black women's literature on haunting and emphasize the use of conjure as a form of resistance and means of survival. In accessing their maternal inheritance through the conjure tradition, Ward's young protagonist Jojo and his baby sister Kayla are able to navigate a world that threatens their future with incarceration. When the privileges of maturity are withheld and being perceived as an adult only holds a greater threat for incarceration, Jojo and Kayla draw on conjure to provide alternate ways of knowing and being in the world outside of the narrative of whiteness as property. In communing with ghosts, who live outside walls and time, Jojo and Kayla undermine the oppressive haunting structures that seek to contain them and resist the narrative of whiteness as property that would condemn them to imprisonment.

A minor exception to the aforementioned lack of scholarship on age from the literary critics examining *Sing* is Nicole Dib who grapples with Jojo's age and what she dubs "forced maturation" (139). However, by failing to assess how conjure plays a part in Jojo's aging and survival, her work misses an integral point of analysis. Dib writes, "We learn that River taught Jojo about car maintenance when his grandson was only ten years old, which demonstrates Jojo's forced maturation before the trip and signals the future rushed maturity he will face on the road" (139). The interaction Pop and Jojo have before the family departs demonstrates that Pop's inquiry into whether or not Jojo remembers

how to change a tire is about more than just assuring he has the skills necessary to physically survive the road as a Black boy. Before Jojo gets in the car with Leonie and Kayla – the baby sister whom he effectively parents – Pop looks at Jojo and says, "You a man, you hear?" (61). In this interaction, he demonstrates his worry but espouses confidence in Jojo. Pop knows Jojo will be treated like a man and threatened like a man, so Pop respects Jojo and offers him confidence as a man. But when Pop looks at Jojo, Jojo hears (the way that he does when animals sing): "*I love you, boy. I love you."* (61). This exchange presents a contradiction of terms that indicates that Pop still thinks of Jojo as a boy – knows he is a boy – but understands that equipping him with the skills of a man and trying to give Jojo confidence is integral to his survival in a world that refuses him the mistakes of childhood. Furthermore, it's Jojo's conjure ability to hear that allows him access to Pop's words of love and affirmation along with the moniker "boy." In this way, Jojo is able to gain knowledge which he needs to survive both physically (the car maintenance skills), which Dib notes and assess, and emotionally (Pop's love for him and responsibility for him), for which she does not account.

While Dib's assessment of age isn't inaccurate, it misses how conjure becomes an empowering force in a world that refuses to grant Jojo the privileges of adulthood while burdening him with its responsibilities. She writes:

> At the end of the trip, Jojo is mature enough, although the bitter lesson is that this is not growth he experienced. Ward does not assert that Jojo's growth and maturity fit the positive mold of a bildungsroman; rather, he has grown enough, by virtue of his near death experience on the road, to learn a horrible story. The story that we hear at the end is for Jojo as much as for Richie. The ghost becomes a politically effective cultural mechanism through which we learn of the racist forces that turned a boy into a specter so that Jojo, the other boy, can grow up and avoid a premature death. (148)

This analysis takes for granted Jojo's interaction with Richie which leads to the unveiling of the story. Without Jojo's ability to see – an ability he possesses because he is descended from conjure women – he would not have pushed Pop to tell him the end of the story. Through conjure, Jojo has alternate ways of knowing (a concept I delineate in the following section). In other words, he learns of Richie's horrific death through a story rather than experiencing a "premature death" of his own, but he only has access to this story because Richie's arrival at Pop and Mam's house prompts Pop to finally reveal the ending.

Furthermore, for the Black male characters in the novel, age is malleable. By that I mean that men are seen as boys and boys are seen as men as it so suits white people and institutions. When they are still biologically teenagers, River, Richie, and Jojo are all treated as men by institutions and people who are a part of the prison and policing systems. But the language used to describe the three teens by other characters is the language of the child – "boy." As I demonstrate later in this chapter, once a person is in the mass incarceration system, they are effectively stripped of all the rights that make them an adult – voting, access to housing, education, etc. By treating boys as adult threats during police stops (like Jojo's experience and that of real life Black boys), police (and the associated government institutions) not only risk the literal lives of Black boys through gun violence, but they also risk these Black boys becoming lifelong children in the sense that once they become part of the mass incarceration system, they are made uncitizens and stripped of their rights. In this way, white supremacist institutions twist age to work for them, treating Black boys as adult threats for a brief moment in interactions with the police, and then conversely treating these same boys as children to

reduce the perceived threat and strip them of all the privileges that white adults are privy to.

Historically, we can trace this treatment to slavery, where Black children were considered laborers and through to the convict leasing system, the stepping stone between slavery and institutional prisons. Emancipation did not grant Black children innocence, rather, they continued to be criminalized and used for their labor as they had been as enslaved children. In 1880, a quarter of all convicts were children (Oshinsky 46-7). A young Black girl named Mary Gay was imprisoned for stealing a hat at the age of six years. In 1901, an eight year old Black boy named Will Evans was convicted of stealing change from a dry goods counter and sentenced to two years in prison (47-8). No matter the age, white lawmakers and enforcers saw a labor force rather than a human being. This long established precedent makes an appearance in Ward's novel through the imprisonment of Richie as a child for stealing food to feed his siblings and in the cop's treatment of Jojo as a man despite his youth.

The blurred dichotomy between boy and man and the way that Parchman created and erased distinctions is also apparent in River (Pop) and Richie's story. To River's eyes, Richie appears to be eight years old (24). Referring to his time in Parchman, Pop tells Jojo, "*It's hard enough for a man of fifteen, but for a boy? A boy of twelve?...He walked into that camp crying, but crying with no sound, no sobbing"* (23). The gap between River and Richie is minimal – three years. But River thinks of himself as a man and acknowledges that Richie is a child. River takes on the adult responsibility of caring for Richie. Just pages after this recounting in the novel, Pop calls Jojo a man but thinks of him as a boy, and Jojo is only one year older than Richie. Parchman, and the threat of

Parchman, steals childhood from Black youth and haunts them with the threat of incarceration. In naming Richie as a boy repeatedly, while still a boy himself, River shows that the prison's treatment of Richie is even more unjust because he is a child. River demonstrates his humanity and integrity in taking on the responsibilities of adulthood while a child himself and while all of the rights of adulthood are stripped from him and he is left with only its burdens.

The concept of age is further defined through Mam's reflections on a conversation she had with Pop. He says to Mam when they are courting, *"There's things that move a man. Like currents of water inside"* (68). In talking to Jojo, Mam says it took her days to understand Pop's words. She explains to Jojo, "getting grown means learning how to work that current: learning when to hold fast, when to drop anchor, when to let it sweep you up. And it could be something simple as sex, or it could be something as complicated as falling in love, or it could be like going to jail with your brother, thinking you going to protect him" (68). In other words, becoming an adult is not an age but rather a set of experiences, or a particular experience, that propels you forward. For Jojo, the moment of his adulthood is fairly clearly defined in the novel. It's when he hears the end of Richie's story. When Jojo asks for more of the story, he notices that Pop is sizing him up: "Looks at me like he's trying to figure out how tall I am, how big my hands are, how long my feet" (249). And then Pop continues with the story and tells Jojo of Richie's violent end and Pop's part in it. Shortly after Mam dies, Leonie looks at Jojo and thinks "all the little boy gone from his eyes" (272). By offering community markers of maturity, rather than legal ones bound to citizenship, Mam and Pop gift their children and

grandchildren alternate ways to know and understand themselves and offer them respect that a world which considers whiteness as property does not.

Where Jojo must mature quickly and faces the consequences of adulthood even when he is still biologically a child, Misty, a full grown white woman is seen as innocent. In the incident where the car gets pulled over, the cop has to choose who to handcuff – Misty or Jojo – and he chooses the thirteen-year-old Black boy instead of the white woman (who orchestrated the drug trade that made this cop stop even more dangerous). Misty, riding on the coat tails of white women's infantilization and innocence, particularly rampant in the South since the nineteenth century is given a pass, and Jojo is looked on with suspicion.[62] This is corroborated by the white women that were convicted of murder and not sent to Parchman in the early twentieth century. Tellingly, Oshinsky writes, "So few white females reached Parchman that a clear profile of them is impossible" (175). Rather, what stands out is the white women who did *not* go to Parchman despite being convicted of crimes including multiple women who were found guilty of (or confessed to) murder. In 1935, Sara Ruth Dean was pardoned by the governor despite being convicted of killing her lover. In 1929, Marion Drew confessed via a poem to killing her husband. The DA released her without bond and no trial on the terms that she "behaved herself in the future" (176). The myth of white female innocence, so overt in history, is mirrored in the novel. For instance, when Misty sees a sign for

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[62] In *Adulthood and Other Fictions: American Literature and the Unmaking of Age,* Sari Edelstein examines nineteenth century literary works and how adulthood was withheld from white women and people of color. She specifically argues that white women were infantilized, and after they hit milestones of marriage and motherhood, they ceased to have whatever little political capital they wielded beforehand. Indeed, she suggests that if white women lived long enough – i.e. middle age – they would experience a kind of death and be seen as children once again bereft of any of the political power or privileges belonging to older white men (14-15, 74). While white women have evidently gained more political capital and privilege in the twenty and twenty-first centuries, their worth is still often measured by their youthfulness or appearance, and they are granted a kind of childlike innocence not afforded to other populations.

Medenhall, Mississippi that reads "*Home of Mississippi's Most Beautiful Courthouse"* on the way to Parchman Misty wants to stop and see it telling Leonie that it might be "really pretty" (95). But this architectural structure is another one that is built on white supremacy and inevitably will fail Leonie and her family while it buoys white people and their privilege. Leonie describes what Michael has told her about Parchman: "he told me about somebody getting jumped in the showers, beaten purple and black…he told me about guards beating an eighteen-year-old boy who had been convicted of kidnapping and strangling a five year old girl in a trailer park….he bled to death like a pig in his cell" (96). She thinks: "*That,* I want to say to Misty, *is your pretty courthouse*" (96). The beauty of the architecture belies its actual substance which is corruption and violence. In Michael's last letter to Leonie he writes, "*This ain't no place for no man. Black or White. Don't make no difference. This is a place for the dead"* (96). Here, we see the way in which Parchman robs inmates of time and humanity and its specter haunts the future of Mississippians. Michael – poor and white – is still at risk for Parchman, but he does not experience the added racial elements that Jojo and Leonie do. Misty, a white woman, is virtually a paragon of innocence in the court system.

The Mendenhall courthouse is another example of the way that white supremacy sheds its skin and dons another guise. The town depicts the courthouse as a pretty tourist attraction, but in reality, it's a structure that enslaves people. It is representative of how the government can shift, change, and adapt to continue to confine and control Black people when they cannot shift or shape their skin to escape. Since the government persists from the past to the future in a different shape, there is the added element of a haunted future which is ever present in Ward's novel. Avery Gordon argues that the only

way to resist a haunted future when living a carceral life is through subversive acts like a man with a life sentence telling his wife "see you in a minute" every time he ends a phone call.[63] The courthouse persists – an ever-present threat – for the Black characters in the novel in particular. To resist this haunted carceral future and equip himself to survive, Jojo engages in the conjure tradition that has buoyed his family through generations.

Haunting, Conjure, and the Gothic Tradition

The very title of Ward's novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing* has a repetitive lyrical phrasing reminiscent of the blues that calls the dead to raise their voices. In creating a story filled with ghosts and particularly in giving Richie narratorial voice, Ward establishes her novel in the gothic tradition, a tradition which forces the reader to sit in haunting and horror with the dead. Indeed, Yogita Goyal notes that sentimentalism "relies on a progressive narrative of redemption" but that "[t]he gothic refuses such narratives of progress or salvation, intent on raising the dead" (32). Unwilling to give tidy answers to the South's dark history or allow her reader the ease of clear resolution, Ward's novel instead compels the reader to contemplate haunting and examine how the afterlives of slavery are at work in the present day.

Ward is not alone in this gothic style. Goyal has noted that it is distinctly African-American (77), and Vinson Cunningham of *The New Yorker* situates Ward's style in the historical tradition of Black women's writing, specifically Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Toni Morrison. Cunningham asserts that Ward is part of a "counter-tradition whose banner has often been carried by black women" in which

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[63] Gordon, Avery. "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity," *Borderlands*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2011.

lyricism and ambiguity are favored over the clarity and plain prose of Puritan origin often seen in (white) American literary traditions. He writes:

> region and religion matter: the Catholicism of the Gulf, tinged with aspects of African-derived belief, acts in 'Sing' as a refutation of Protestant clarity. Frankness, here, is a lie. There's a quality of the gothic at work: the elements of the novel—sudden violence, black spectres, an interminable past—are reminiscent of Melville's great story 'Benito Cereno,' in which Catholic mystery and African presence come together uncannily.

In other words, Ward's novel is built upon a gothic tradition which belies easy answer. While echoes of Faulkner and Melville are present, Ward firmly ensconces her work and her characters in a Black female literary tradition, first, by emphasizing the conjure tradition through Mam's set of syncretic beliefs and second, by giving voice to the dead.

This emphasis on conjure tradition and the legacy of Black women is where my work both builds on that of Nicole Dib as well as departs from it. Kathleen Brogan and Avery Gordon are the key theorists on haunting with whom Dib contends. Brogan asserts that hauntings in contemporary literature work to offer an alternative to mainstream or dominant history (Brogan 13). And Gordon posits that ghosts "set in motion inquiries into a parallel, if invisible, present" (Gordon qtd. in Dib 145). In line with these understandings of haunting, Dib argues, that in Ward's novel, the haunting serves to demonstrate the faults in the U.S. justice system, with which I agree. She draws on Leonie's conversation with Misty about the courthouse and Leonie's thoughts about Michael in prison as well as the lynching of Given and subsequent haunting Leonie experiences to demonstrate how these hauntings operate to highlight failed justice (142). However, Dib goes into very little detail about Parchman choosing instead to focus on the road itself as a "political space" and how Ward uses this space and the American familiarity with road trip narratives and tropes "to critique the immobilization that

threatens automobility for black subjects" (135). Dib argues that the road, first and foremost, is a space of violence against Black bodies and secondly that it is a space in which violent memories emerge through ghosts (135). She asserts that Ward's road trip novel becomes a way to critique the entire system of mass incarceration (136). While I certainly agree with the critique of the mass incarceration system and even can see the use of the road as a political space, branding the narrative "a roadtrip novel" limits the analysis. I suggest that we expand our idea of "political space" outside of the road arguing that the space of Parchman Prison, inherently a political space, becomes a spectre which overshadows every piece of the landscape and becomes so expansive that the ghosts of Parchman gather outside of it to commune with Kayla and Jojo at the end of the novel. Indeed, Parchman itself cannot contain the haunting which expands to the entirety of the South, but it is Parchman through which we can most effectively see and understand the haunting.

I largely agree with Dib's use of Brogan and Gordon as their theories surrounding haunting are ones I've drawn on throughout this dissertation and detail in the introduction. However, Dib's critical work comes up short in that it stops with Brogan and Gordon, white scholars writing in the 1990s about ethnic women's literature at large, who do not contend with the concept of conjure. To extend Dib's analysis of haunting, I focus on conjure and turn to Marisa Parham, Yogita Goyal, and Kameelah Martin, whose work helps us situate Ward's novel in the context of other haunted literary works by Black women.

Parham's concept of conjure encompasses corporeal ghosts and felt haunting while it also places emphasis on memory and the act of witnessing. Parham describes

conjure as the smells, echoes, and specters that arise "to make meaning out of one's encounter with a site of memory" (10). In the novel, these sites of memory include encounters like Jojo's with Richie and felt (but not seen) haunting that Pop, Mam, and Leonie experience in regard to past familial trauma like the enslavement of Pop's grandmother's great grandmother and the legacy of family members chained like animals. While a physical ghost may not be present, the conjured image of past trauma or memory acts as a haunting presence. Furthermore, Parham notes that bearing witness is an integral part of her engagement with haunting as a Black woman. She suggests that her role in engaging with haunted fiction is to accept the haunting as a reader and act as witness and testifier to remember unwitnessed events (109). She acknowledges (drawing on the work of Saidiya Hartman and Dominick LaCapra) that there will be a certain amount of slippage between self (witness) and other (subject of suffering), but she asserts that as an African American woman she is beholden in some way to the memory of slavery as it informs her own subject position (5-6). Ward, too, feels this responsibility to bear witness to how the afterlives of slavery manifest in her own personal life.[64] She positions this act of witnessing and testifying as a particularly female trait, at least in her community, writing in her memoir *Men We Reaped:*

> As the eldest daughter of an eldest daughter, and having just borne a daughter, I hope to teach my child these lessons, to pass on my mother's gifts. Without my mother's legacy, I would never have been able to look at this history of loss, this future where I will surely lose more, and write the narrative that remembers, write the narrative that says: *Hello. We are here. Listen*. (251)

[64] In the September 2020 *Vanity Fair* special issue edited by Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ward contributed an essay called "On Witness and Respair" in which she viscerally and evocatively recounts the loss of her Beloved to what was likely an undiagnosed case of COVID-19. She maintains that witnessing the movement over the summer of 2020 with Black Lives Matter protests is important – that there is importance in standing as witness to these events and that she feels hope in the amount of people paying attention. She's also quoted in Grabenstein's article as saying one of the reasons she wanted to write about Parchman was so that people realized the very real suffering that people experienced there because it is a presence and a threat that has loomed over her childhood and the lives of her family members.

Ward's memoir demonstrates her investment in witnessing as part of her heritage.

In the gothic tradition, *Sing* complicates this witnessing. As a gothic text, *Sing* unsettles the witness and resists simple empathy as a solution to suffering. Indeed, as Yogita Goyal suggests in her examination of the gothic: "disallowing empathy as the primary response to suffering, something much more complex emerges [in the novels]: an expansive sense of the connections of space to history…" (214). Rather than perceive suffering and be moved by it via an empty empathy, Goyal suggests that the gothic insists the witness make the connections across space and history that created and continue to perpetuate the moments of suffering. Rather than an emotionally visceral response of affectation, the gothic, and *Sing* in particular, invites the witness to understand the larger systems at work that result in suffering. In witnessing Richie's suffering, the reader should be unsettled and moved to the point of action – action that begins with a listening that leads to an understanding of how systemic racism is at work rather than an individual feeling sorrow or sadness or guilt for a single boy. The lack of closure that Richie and the other ghosts receive at the end of the novel further emphasizes this point that the witnessing and testifying are integral to the survival of Black people, but that these actions don't resolve the suffering or placate the ghost. Rather, they are necessary for future generations to connect themselves with past trauma, understand their own possible futures moving forward, and equip themselves and others to survive. Thus, these insights about witnessing from Goyal and Parham illuminate *Sing* as part of Black women's literary tradition.

It follows then that the witnessing, the purview of Black women's literary tradition, is gendered within the novel. While Kayla looks toward and listens to the

ghosts and Ward herself writes their story, Jojo turns away from Richie at the end of the novel indicating that the burden of witness has fallen on and continues to be carried by Black women. Even though the voices are male and much of the examination in this chapter will center on male adolescent perspective, Ward positions her writing and her work as the work of Black women's literature. It insists on the humanity of Black people and reminds the reader that they are still here and still talking, and we need to listen. This is a something of a departure from the previous two chapters that focus on Black women writing about Black women and girls; nonetheless, this novel is very much the work of Black women – bearing witness. Ward does this work as a writer herself, and she also imbues it in her characters, particularly Kayla, who bears witness to the ghosts in the final scene of the novel, which I will examine in-depth in the close reading section.

Witnessing is not the only act of conjure relevant to the novel though; Kameelah Martin's work elucidates the ways in which conjure works as a subversive force within *Sing*. Martin argues that conjure is often a practical means of using the spiritual to fulfill physical needs. She suggests that by including alternate ways of knowing (the epistemology of conjure) alongside Christianity in their texts, Black women authors assert that Christianity is not enough "to calm the troubled lives of Africa's displaced children" (126). These alternate ways of knowing become important for each character in Ward's novel and alternatively work to heal illness, ferry the dead to the beyond, and create kinship connections with the displaced ghosts. Additionally, Martin posits that the conjure woman (a title that would aptly fit Mam though *Sing* is not discussed in Martin's work) offers a subversive characterization of Black women that resists marginalization and provides an alternative to stereotypical depictions of Black women such as the

Mammy. In *Sing*, Mam enacts what Martin calls "conjuring moments" which she defines as "identifiable points in the text where conjuring or African-derived ceremonial practices occur and advance the narrative action" and "highly improvisational constructions of the author…often based on…folk healing remedies and rites" (5-6). Mam, of course, is one such subversive character who relies on knowledge handed down from Black woman to Black woman to deliver babies, cure colds, and take care of her family. Her conjure traditions allow her to invest in her family's survival and her paying attention and teaching her grandchildren about sight and hearing affords them the tools they need to survive in this world

Martin and Parham make clear that the gifts of conjure are distinctly part of a Black women's tradition, and in *Sing*, Mam declares that the gifts of conjure are passed through the maternal line to female relatives. Mam describes her own conjure ability as a "humming" sound (40). She says that the woman who trained her, Marie-Therese, could "look at a woman and hear singing" if she was pregnant (40). When Mam was a child she heard her mother's stomach saying, "*We eat, we eat, we eat"* and she later realized it meant her mother had ulcers (41). Mam says of the gifts: "I think it runs in the blood, like silt in the river water. Builds up in bends and turns, over sunk trees…Rises up over the water in generations. My mama ain't have it…it skips from sister to child to cousin. To be seen. And used. Usually come around full-blown when you bleed for the first time" (40). Mam's assertion that the gifts of conjure are meant to be seen and used supports the idea that the conjure tradition is one that ensures survival in the face of haunting. Conjure allows ancestral memory and the stories of Black ancestors that might otherwise have

been lost have witnesses to bear them forward. Everything that Mam describes indicates that conjure traditions are the lineage of Black women.

However, Mam's legacy does not pass onto to her daughter Leonie. She surmises that her family's conjure tradition might be why she sees Given when she does drugs, but he only appears when she is high, and she doesn't hear him. Leonie is what Martin would term a "nonbeliever." The nonbeliever refuses to acknowledge the centralization of Africa in the work of hoodoo and root work and often suffers consequently. Martin writes: "The nonbeliever's refusal to acknowledge Africa, and thus the Ancestors, as the source of divine power evokes the wrath of Spirit, who then finds any number of ways to punish the nonbeliever for his or her irreverence" (7). Leonie's nonbelief is passive rather than active. She is not actively defying Mam or the spirits of conjure, but she places no hope in them, and offers them none of her time. Her disregard for conjure shows up in her inability to cure Kayla with Mam's conjure remedies. Leonie is stuck in a cycle of drug abuse, and while she is not overtly "punished" by active entities in the novel, her lack of alternate ways of knowing provided by conjure leaves her in the same places she started the story – addicted to drugs and haunted by the deaths of her family members. Her one act of conjure, helping ferry Mam from this world, is aided by the other characters and is not enough to negate a lifetime of nonpractice.

However, the lineage doesn't end with Leonie; instead, Jojo receives the maternal inheritance of the conjure women in his family which allows him to engage with Richie and eventually Given. While Mam asserts that a Black girl's abilities might be made manifest by her first menstrual cycle, we see a different kind of blood initiation for Jojo. The novel begins with the line: "I like to think I know what death is" (1). Jojo ruminates

that he's "earned these thirteen years" and is ready to be considered mature by his grandfather. He thinks: "I want Pop to know I can get bloody" (1). Then, he stays as Pop bleeds, skins, and butchers a goat for Jojo's birthday meal. Where the first blood of a girl marks her transition to womanhood and potential to create life, it also marks the death of girlhood and the potential for increased sexual violence. For Jojo, the blood of the goat stands in as this marker of life and death: "it's the smell of death, the rot coming from something just alive, something hot with blood and life" (6). He vomits after this encounter. The animal blood connotes sacrifice as he purges himself of bodily fluids, and so while he doesn't bleed himself, this metaphorical bleeding marks his moment of coming fully into his conjure gifts which results in his first ghost sighting mere days later.

Jojo's conjure abilities manifest as "hearing" like Mam, but also as "sight." We learn early on in the book that Jojo can hear animals: "I looked at them and understood, instantly, and it was like looking at a sentence and understanding the words, all of it coming to me at once" (15). The thoughts of the horse and the pig and the goats that Jojo hears are written in italics the same way that the words of song Mam hears from the ulcers are (14). But Jojo's sight sets him apart. Mam says she never had the talent for sight, but the woman that taught Marie-Therese (Mam's mentor) did – "*she could see. Old woman looked damn near White. Tante Vangie. She could see the dead"* (50). Jojo, too, can see the dead. Ward's choice to include the detail of Tante Vangie's near whiteness is not innocuous especially given that this detail is included alongside a seemingly rarer gifting: sight. Likewise, Jojo as the son of a Black woman and a white man bears increased proximity to whiteness, and he, too, can see. I suggest that Jojo's position as biracial which is a position of both/and – a kind of inherent in-betweenness –

puts him on the same plane as ghosts who are also in-between. Because of his ability to see and talk with Richie, Jojo gains an alternate way of knowing about the precarious fate of Black boys without having to experience the violence of death and incarceration himself. In this way, he uses the very tools granted by sharing blood with white oppressors to resist and safeguard him against those same people and their institutions.

While Jojo's sight may have manifested because of his white father, he wouldn't have had any conjure abilities without his blood relation to Mam. Richie attests to Mam as a source of Jojo's abilities upon Richie's first encounter with Jojo and Kayla. Richie notices Jojo's voice "like the waves of a calm bay lapping against a boat" and then realizes that Jojo's "scent in his blood" is what sets him apart from River: "it is the salt of the sea, burning with brine. It pulses in the current of his veins. This is part of the reason he can see me while the others, excepting the little girl, can't. I am subject to that pulse, helpless as the fisherman in a boat with no engine, no oars, while the tide bears him onward" (140-141). Richie is drawn to the water in Jojo which comes directly from Mam who Richie refers to as "saltwater woman" (244) – a moniker that draws attention to her roots.

Mam's conjure roots and Creole ancestry are made apparent throughout the novel through references to the Caribbean, water, and voodoo. Her French name, Philoméne, and her use of term "Tante" for aunt allude to her Creole heritage. Her connection to the Caribbean is emphasized through the reference to "saltwater" in her veins and in her use of Haitian voodoo traditions seen specifically when Mam asks Leonie to call on "Maman Brigitte, Mother of all the Gede. Mistress of the cemetery and mother of all the dead" to

ferry Mam to the afterlife (268).[65] Her title as "saltwater woman" marks her as one connected to conjure and to life as water plays an important role in the book's conjure tradition and conceptions of the afterlife. Water represents life, death, and the Middle Passage. When Mam finds out Leonie is pregnant with Jojo she calls on Our Lady of Regla, "Yemayá, the goddess of the ocean and salt water, with her shushing and her words…her arms all the life-giving waters of the world" (159).[66] The goddess's ocean and salt water are the source of life and Mam connects them to the life and the "waters" of the womb. In this moment where mother comforts daughter through a call to a goddess, we see how Mam uses conjure to comfort and soothe as well as draw power – the soft shushing of waves juxtaposed with the raw power of ocean. This image of maternal life-giving arms is paralleled by Kayla in the final scene of the book when her song makes a shushing noise, and she opens her arms to the ghosts.

That inability of the ghosts to receive definitive comfort and connection from Kayla in the final scene is foreshadowed by the way that Richie is drawn to the saltwater in Jojo but excluded from belonging with the Stone family. Outside of the Mam and Pop's home, Richie feels a connection, through water, to the afterworld: "I'm so close, I

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[65] Maman Brigitte, also known as Grande Brigitte, is the Haitian voodoo loa of death and fertility. Her identity is a syncretic one – a blend of African diaspora goddess, the Celtic goddess Brigid, and Saint Brigid of Kildare. She is the spiritual mother of the family of Ghede spirits who govern life and death. See Férère, Gérard Alphonse, and Pascale Bécel. "Vodoun." *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora*: *Origins, Experiences, and Culture*, edited by Carole Boyce Davies, vol. 3, ABC-CLIO, 2008, pp. 959-966. *Gale eBooks*. Accessed 29 July 2021. See also Allen, William C., and Brittney L. Coscomb. "Deities of Life and Death." *Encyclopedia of Death & the Human Experience*, edited by Clifton D. Bryant and Dennis L. Peck, vol. 1, SAGE Publications, 2009, pp. 343-346. *Gale eBooks*. Accessed 29 July 2021.

[66] Elements of Yoruban religion spread from Nigeria across the Americas because of enslavement and the diaspora. Yemayá is the Yoruba *orisha* (deity) of the River Niger. As a result of the diaspora and religious syncretism she is also depicted as the goddess of the ocean in Cuba and Brazil. Yemayá and other *orishas* have become integrated into Cuban Santería and Brazilian Candomblé and Xangô as well as other Caribbean spiritual practices. See Ayorinde, Christine. "Yoruba Religion and Culture in the Americas." *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, edited by Colin A. Palmer, 2nd ed., vol. 5, Macmillan Reference USA, 2006, pp. 2343-2347.

can hear the sound of the waters the scaly bird will lead me over tumbling with the wind…And I sing songs without words. The songs come to me out of the same air that brings the sound of the waters: I open my mouth, and I hear the rushing of the waves" (240). In this moment, Richie can hear the water that would ferry him beyond, but he is stuck *underneath* and outside of Jojo's home. His positioning beneath the house is a symbolic moment in which we understand that Richie is without home, kin, or community. Saidiya Hartman writes, "The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger. Torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of outsider" (5). While Richie's ghostly form is not beholden to labor as we think of in chattel slavery, he is an outsider and a stranger, and this designation follows him even in ghost form. Richie's yearning to belong is evidenced by his description of the afterlife. He notes that people in the afterlife are all singing: "Ever present is their singing…It comes from the water. It is the most beautiful song I have ever heard, but I can't understand a word" (241). Unable to open the doors to that world, he narrates: "Absence. Isolation. I keen" (242). His pain in isolation is manifested as an animal cry and further reinforces his position outside of Jojo's family structure.

In turning to Goyal's conception of the gothic and the child, we can better understand Richie, a character who evokes both horror and pity, and is, in many ways, akin to the ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. In examining global gothic literature, Goyal suggests that the child soldier "emblematizes horror and terror in addition to sentiment" (72). While Richie is not a child soldier of Africa, but a ghost of a child prisoner from the U.S. South, Goyal's framework is useful for understanding Richie's

function in the text. Gothic fiction insists that the child is capable of both being complicit in atrocities and experiencing them himself and undermines the idea of "linear narrative of progress and redemption" (73). Richie, like Beloved, is killed by someone he loves. While Sethe is Beloved's literal mother, River acts as Richie's surrogate father, and it is at River's hand that Richie dies. While Richie experiences this atrocity, he also, like Beloved, becomes aggressive and violent in his attempt to claim a family member for himself. Where Beloved latched onto Sethe, Richie reaches for Mam. When it's her time to go, only the conjure ritual and Given's interference stop Richie. Finally, like Beloved, Richie receives no tidy ending or redemptive narrative. We last see him alone in the woods, ignored by Jojo and still yearning for home. Of the gothic fiction featuring child soldiers, Goyal writes:

> instead of promising the reader an education in sympathy and allowing for an imaginative substitution, these fictions create no such possibility of exchange, leaving the endings inconclusive and using various techniques of direct address to corrode any prospect of comfort, rightly insisting that a reckoning with the figure of the child soldier should not make for an easy reading experience. (73)

While Goyal refers to child soldiers, it's evident how this model works for Richie as well. Ward's novel refuses to give the reader clarity or resolution when it comes to Richie forcing the reader to contend with the violence and horror that Richie, and his many real-world counterparts, experience.

Goyal's work also elucidates the complexities in giving voice to ghosts of the past like Richie. She examines a child character in one novel who "cannot speak [which] literalizes the subaltern's silence, but also insists that the story must be told" (95). In *Sing,* we see this balance between voice and silence through song. Richie can hear "the most beautiful song" from the afterlife, but he "can't understand a word" (Ward 241). It

is inaccessible to him. Likewise, at the end of the novel, the ghosts tell fragments of their stories and their deaths but each one breaks into and occludes the next. In response, Kayla sings to the ghosts "a song of mismatched half-garbled words" (284). She speaks and listens and sings to the dead in a language that no one can understand, and yet, it's still spoken. Goyal writes, "The tendency of the gothic toward opacity and occlusion – where the story cannot get out, it cannot be told or heard…emphasize[s] opacity as a reading practice as well as the necessary concept of registering the consciousness of the subaltern" (95). In other words, in creating opaque stories that that leave out pieces and use ambiguous language, the gothic novel forces the reader to grapple with and accept ambiguity surrounding the consciousness of marginalized characters while at the same time noting their distinct consciousness. Ward's novel translates the incommunicable nature of the violence done to the ghosts and the illegibility of comfort and closure while at the same time honoring the consciousness of the marginalized ghosts. In other words, she allows the unburied to sing.

Ward adds to this gothic language of illegibility that somehow still translates meaning with her titular word choice: "unburied." In choosing "unburied" rather than ghost or dead, Ward emphasizes her own lyricism in the tradition of Black women writers, but also pointedly demonstrates the way in which the dead are not at rest. The dead are *un*-buried. They have not received that final act that provides closure because their stories and voices have gone unheard. The prefix "un" is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, "used to express negation." To be unburied then is to be decidedly not buried. In many cases, the prefix "un" is used to express that something is distinctly opposite, and it is often more forceful than a simple non or not. Consider "unacademic"

as opposed to "nonacademic" in which the former has a negative connotation and the second is neutral. To be unburied then is to not only be not buried, neutrally or passively, but to be un-buried negatively and actively. They are in a continual state of unrest, and so, they haunt. The unburied are *not* buried, but neither are they exhumed or revealed. They are in the ghostly plane of in-betweenness. In calling them unburied, using this ambiguous, difficult word, Ward communicates that part of their experience is the illegible gothic that we can listen to but perhaps never fully understand. In calling on them to sing, Ward calls on them to reveal themselves and their stories, urging us to listen to their unheard cry, even when it's not fully communicable, reminding us of what is at stake when we witness that which is unburied but ignored.

The occlusions of the gothic genre appear not just in the ambiguity of the novel's title or the garbled language of the ghosts, but also in the nonlinear telling of Richie's story, and indeed, in Richie's nonlinear existence itself. Mam tells Jojo that Pop can't "tell a story straight" and the story of Richie and him in Parchman unfolds in starts and stops throughout the novel in a nonlinear manner (67). Furthermore, Richie's ghost is tied to Parchman, but he alternatively sleeps and wakes up at Parchman throughout time – when it was a plantation, when it was inhabited by Native Americans, and as it is in present day with cement cell blocks. Goyal writes, "Because gothic fictions so often reveal the present as structured by the relics of the past that refuse to die, their temporal structure immediately poses the question of the relation between history and the present" (94). The relationship here is one in which the future is still shaped by the past and each thread of time is so intertwined in one another that present day oppression cannot be understood without historical context. Hartman writes: "I, too, am from the time of

slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it…If slavery feels proximate rather than remote and freedom increasingly elusive, this has everything to do with our own dark times. If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison" (133). As Hartman makes clear, the gothic is an apt way for Ward to tell this story as she examines how the "ghost of slavery still haunts our present" through Parchman.

Ward's gothic portrayal of Parchman, a manifestation of slavery in a different skin, forces a reckoning not just with the carceral space itself but with the history it encompasses. Goyal asserts that those writers who reject sentimentalism in favor of "ghostly haunting, or lyrical ambiguity" – two descriptors which aptly fit Ward's novel – "disallo[w] empathy as the primary response to suffering, [and] something much more complex emerges: an expansive sense of the connection of space to history..." (Goyal 214). Ward's depiction of Parchman as a carceral space whose connection to history is so expansive, that it affects not only Richie's ghostly existence and haunts the characters in the text, but results in all the victims of Parchman coming together in one space though they are from different times. In other words, in resisting easy solutions and forcing the reader to exist in a gothic space, Ward also draws them into the historical framework connecting the fictional novel and its ghostly inhabitants to the real world and those who are gone from it because of racialized violence born of places and iterations of Parchman.

The haunting from the architectural structure of Parchman reverberates through space and time touching everything connected with the system of mass incarceration – Parchman, the courthouse, the road, and the very landscape of Mississippi itself. Goyal writes that the gothic novels she analyzes, "offer not so much ruined mansions or eerie

castles but entire national or regional landscapes ravaged by war. The nation becomes the haunted house where the complete space of the postcolony is coded as gothic" (93). While Goyal's assertion refers to African landscapes – particularly those of nations which have been mired in war and violence after colonization and imperialism – her understanding of the landscape at large, rather than a particular structure as the space of haunting, applies to the U.S. South as well. Where the former has been ravaged by the aftereffects of slavery in the form of colonization, the latter has been ravaged by the aftereffects of slavery in the form of institutionalized white supremacy. The whole space of the U.S. South is a gothic landscape littered with ghosts that remain the property of white-owned structures – the plantation, the prison, the system of mass incarceration. Slavery, in all its forms across the history of the U.S. South, cannot be contained, and for this reason, it's the region at large rather than any one single structure that haunts. Parchman, a structure with no walls, demonstrates the ways in which the legacy of slavery spills out beyond its ephemeral bounds and permeates the South.

Parchman Prison, Mass Incarceration, and the Lasting Legacy of Slavery

Rather than redlining and enclosure techniques we saw in *Maud Martha* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones,* which create tangible physical boundaries, the South's confining strictures arise from absence rather than presence: the absence of jobs (demonstrated by Leonie's work as a waitress and Michael's lack of legal employment after his stint on an oil rig), the absence of healthcare options (as seen in Mam's conjure and midwife remedies and her own illness and death), the absence of a just legal system (as seen by the sheriff naming Given's murder a "hunting accident"), and the absence of other supporting infrastructures. Without these vital infrastructures, communities suffer.

Michelle Alexander notes that, "The safest communities are not the ones with the most police, prisons, or electronic monitors, but the ones with quality schools, health care, housing, plentiful jobs, and strong social networks that allow families not merely to survive but to thrive" (xxxi).[67] In other words, the lack of these important support systems is what works to confine Black families in the rural South immobilizing them on multiple levels including physically and economically. The constricting presence in rural Mississippi then is both the absence of positive government infrastructure and the presence of the only government infrastructure remaining: the prison. Even when it doesn't physically appear, the threat of prison works as a haunting mechanism. The possibility of prison and the violence of the police is the felt structure that haunts and contains. Arising from the vestiges of slavery, the prison industrial complex (specifically Parchman Prison in this case) does the kind of work in the present day South that redlining did in the midcentury North. It oppresses, contains, and subjugates all within the bounds of the law. But unlike redlining, which one can clearly see on a map, the boundaries of containment in the South are invisible. For just as the postcolonial space in African countries is a haunted landscape, so is the U.S. South, and Parchman demonstrates this as it works to contain and subjugate beyond its physical boundaries and outside of its nonexistent walls.

Parchman Prison is not only the backdrop against which Ward's novel is written but also the shaping presence of many men's lives in Mississippi. Parchman Farm,

[67] Josie Duffy Rice makes a similar argument in her piece "The Abolition Movement" in which she writes: "White safety, itself built on a foundation of enslavement and segregation, is ensured through familial wealth, home ownership, well-funded public schools, stable employment, and health care. Black safety is ensured by 'zero tolerance policing' and 'stop and frisk.' White safety is cancer prevention. Black safety is all-day chemotherapy." See Duffy, Josie Rice. "The Abolition Movement." *Vanity Fair*, The Great Fire, Sept. 2020.

otherwise known as the Mississippi State Penitentiary, is a 20,000 acre plantation located ninety miles south of Memphis in Mississippi's Yazoo Delta (Oshinsky 1, 109). Parchman, named for the white family that used to own the property, has been made legend through work chants, blues music, and the literary works of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Shelby Foote (2, 109). Modeled on a traditional Southern plantation and in operation since 1905, Parchman is known for its cruelty, poor conditions, and perpetuation of slave labor operating as a working plantation with corporeal punishment until reforms in the 1970s (Grabenstein). David Oshinsky writes, "Parchman is the quintessential penal farm, the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War" (2).[68] By its second year of operation, it had earned the modern day equivalent of $5 million ("The Lasting Legacy of Parchman Farm"). Profit and property rather than attention to penological rehabilitation have fueled Parchman.

To understand how Parchman operates and to follow how whiteness as property has adapted to remain legally relevant even when laws changed, it's important to examine the historical events that allowed Parchman to come into being. With the end of the Civil War, and legalized slavery, life changed for the affluent planter class of the South. They lost their human property and thus much of their known lifestyle, but for the lower class white farmer, the end of slavery removed one of the two distinguishing differences between himself and the Black man. Oshinsky writes: "The farmer was white and free; the Negro was black – but also free. How best to preserve the remaining distinction – white supremacy – would become an obsession in the post-Civil War South" (14).

[68] Oshinsky's book *"Worse Than Slavery": Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* is, to date, the most comprehensive history of Parchman. It details the Mississippi conditions and environment that lead to Parchman, the white men behind it, and the ins and outs of its history and operation. Almost every source I consulted on Parchman quoted from Oshinsky.

Mississippi's first reaction to try and maintain white power was a turn to convict-leasing. When this system proved displeasing to lower class white men, Parchman was born. The governor of Mississippi at the time, James K. Vardaman, conceived of Parchman Farm as a way to benefit lower-class whites who resented a system they believed drove down labor wages (Grabenstein). Parchman, then, was created in direct relation to loss of property. In 1886, Whitelaw Reid wrote in the *New York Tribune*, "However these men may have regarded the negro slave, they hated the negro freeman. However kind they may have been to negro property, they were virulently vindictive against a property that had escaped from their control" (Reid qtd. in Oshinsky 15). Without the distinguishing factor of free/slave, the potential for a closing economic position between races became apparent. On the one hand, there was the loss of Black slave labor and on the other, the loss of distinction between poor white and poor Black men – i.e. the devaluation of whiteness as property. Without slavery, the white man's capital for existing as a white person went down. In this manner, even if a white man didn't own slaves, he lost something when enslaved Black men were emancipated as it devalued his status property of being white.[69]

White supremacy fought against this on all fronts including through the law. One of the most enduring efforts is mass incarceration, which, in effect, made Black people property again and allowed for legalized slave labor as long as the laborer was a prisoner. While Black people in the antebellum era became private property as slaves, they became

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[69] Harris argues that "the reputational interest in being regarded as white [w]as a thing of significant value, which like other reputational interests, was intrinsically bound up with identity and personhood. The reputation of being white was treated as a species of property, or something in which a property interest could be asserted" (1734). When Black men gained freedom, it made the status property of being white less valuable.

public property of the state as prisoners after the Civil War. And while that war might have ended, the war for white supremacy and the racial trauma experienced by Black people at its hand is ongoing. The U.S. South's war is not the conventional battle of warring armies that Goyal refers to when she discusses the war-ravaged landscapes of African nations that led to a postcolonial haunted landscape (93). The war for white supremacy can and does become violent, and Black lives continue to be lost, but this modern iteration of war is primarily through public policy and legal battles. It plays out in lack of funding for education and healthcare and increased funding for police and prisons. The creation of Parchman as a response to the devaluation of whiteness as property after the Civil War and the convict leasing system, exemplifies the kind of strategy the war for white supremacy relies on and demonstrates how Parchman is just one piece of the post-Civil War haunted landscape.

Parchman was more plantation than modern day prison and despite its lack of physical containment features, it did its job of subordinating Black people expertly. In 1917, Black people made up 90% of the Mississippi prison population. Parchman had "no walls or guard towers, no cell blocks or stockades. From the outside, it looked like a typical Delta plantation, with cattle barns, vegetable gardens, mules dotting the landscape, and cotton rows stretching for miles" (Oshinsky 137). The only visible boundary were some strands of barbed wire that marked the edge of the forty-six square miles (137). The plantation was split into fifteen camps which were a half mile apart each. The camps were divided by race and sex but no distinction was made for age, mental disability, or crime severity which led to a "brutal, predatory culture" (138). Instead of cells, the prison had barracks with barred windows and bunk beds spaced out

two to three feet apart with a dining hall in the center to separate the trusties from the regular convicts (138-9). The lack of walls was deceiving in its ability to project a kind of freedom, but in truth, it reinforces the way in which Parchman is part of a larger haunted landscape. The trauma of slavery cannot be contained by walls and Parchman's inmates and ghosts permeate the prison's boundaries carrying the trauma of slavery with them.

Furthermore, the prison itself perpetuated the use of Black bodies as capital and, in both operation and appearance, was virtually identical to a plantation: "Both systems used captive labor to grow the same crops in identical ways. Both relied on a small staff of rural, lower-class whites to supervise black labor gangs. And both staffs mixed physical punishment with paternalistic rewards to motivate their workers" (139). The hierarchy from top to bottom at Parchman was as follows: superintendent, sergeant, assistant sergeant, trusty-shooters, regular convicts. The Parchman superintendent was akin to a plantation "master" living "in a Victorian mansion, complete with spindles, gables, and a wrap-around porch. A small army of convict servants attended to his every personal need" (139). Likewise, each camp had one sergeant who essentially functioned as an overseer. Beneath him were two assistant sergeants often called drivers who supervised the fields and the barracks (139-140). This hierarchal system worked to keep prisoners subjugated, reward the most violent, and created a lack of trust between inmates.

One of the more insidious roles in the Parchman hierarchy was a "trusty-shooter." These men were convicts given .30-.30 Winchesters and placed as guards or watchmen over the other convicts (140). There were no requirements for being a trusty. Typically, they were intimidating and forceful men serving sentences for murder. Trusties weren't

paid, but they were given better food, lodging, and privileges. They had more likelihood of being pardoned, and they escaped more often than regular convicts (140-1). Rather than fencing or walls, Parchman relied on a line drawn in the dirt patrolled by trusty-shooters who had freedom to shoot anyone who approached within twenty feet (147). One such trusty shooter named Clarence E. Grammar and known as Hogjaw "because of his huge head and burly physique" also appears as a character in Ward's novel (Oshinsky 193). This system of trusties was in place until the 1970s reforms.

These reforms were brought about by Roy Haber, a civil rights attorney from the North who took interest in the plight of prisoners at Parchman while working on *Anderson v. Nosser*. Haber filed the suit on February 8, 1971 in federal court charging Parchman with depriving inmates Nazareth Gates, Willie Holmes, Matthew Winter, and Hal Zachery of "rights guaranteed by the First, Eighth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution" (245). Conditions were truly untenable. Camps were unsanitary with raw sewage in ditches. The buildings had poor electrical wiring and broken windows, and the kitchens and bathrooms were decaying and infested with vermin and insects (245). The maximum security unit "contained the gas chamber, death row, and the so-called black hole, a windowless compartment six by six feet, without a sink, a bed, a light, or a toilet" (247). When convicts entered solitary confinement, they were given "minimal food and water, denied soap and toilet paper, and kept there without clothing for up to seventy-two hours" (247). Judge Keady made two bold moves in response. First, he determined the suit eligible for class action. And second, "He added a subclass of black convicts, who faced additional hardships based solely on their race"

(245). His second action made a statement about the racism inherent in the prison system and reinforces Harris's argument about whiteness as property.

On October 20, 1972, Judge Keady released a twenty-page opinion and ordered an end to racial discrimination, corporal punishment, and segregation (247). The judge mandated the prison hire professional guards and end the trusty system as well as increase protection measures to keep inmates from assaulting other inmates (247). With a mind toward long term change, the court required plans for construction of improved housing and medical facilities as well as sewage systems and clean drinking water. Additionally, Keady "closed the worst prison camps, ordered an inmate classification system, established a prison law library, upheld the right of Black Muslims to meet and worship, and required at least fifty square feet of living space for each new convict" (249). A place that functioned on fear and guns to keep prisoners contained hired actual guards, built walls, and created cells (Grabenstein).

The farm still operates today. But in place of cotton, the inmates work the ground for fruits and vegetables ("The Lasting Legacy of Parchman Farm"). Still, "Parchman remains a site of forced labor, deadly violence, and unsanitary conditions. Recent videos and photos have exposed inhumane conditions that match those from a century ago: Rat-infested cells without power or mattresses, unusable showers and toilets, and unidentifiable food" ("The Lasting Legacy"). It is as Ward says through Richie, "Sometimes I think [Parchman] done changed. And then I sleep and wake up, and it ain't changed none…It's like a snake that sheds its skin. The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside is always the same" (171-2). Parchman may have made reforms, but it continues to be an instrument of subjugation and confinement deployed

against Black people where "Black Mississippians account for 70% of Parchman's incarcerated population, while making up 37% of the state's population" ("The Lasting Legacy"). From slavery to Jim Crow to incarceration, white America continues to find ways to lawfully, but unjustly, subjugate Black people.

Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* examines this subjugation and its manifestation in the prison system at length and allows us to see how the racism inherent in the criminal justice system is not an issue unique to Mississippi or the South of the past but one that continues to plague the U.S. at large today. Alexander's basic premise is that "mass incarceration in the United States [is] a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow" (5). This system effectively strips Black people of the rights of adulthood while punishing them as adults. Alexander notes that it is legal to discriminate against felons in the ways that Black people were discriminated against during the Jim Crow era including "employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service" (2). This stripping of rights removes integral aspects of citizenship and adulthood for Black people disempowering them and reducing them to dependence. With the end of Jim Crow and the rise of mass incarceration, we didn't end the racial caste system in the U.S., we "merely redesigned it" (2). Alexander describes the massive prison system in the U.S. as "a *gateway* to a much larger system of racial stigmatization and permanent marginalization" (15). She terms this larger system "mass incarceration" naming it as "the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those

labeled criminals both in and out of prison" (15). Mass incarceration then is not just physical imprisonment but disenfranchisement, increased surveillance, probation, and a host of other laws and systems bent on decreasing mobility and freedom. Alexander writes that mass incarceration is the New Jim Crow, another version of a caste system which the United States has used to control and suppress Black people: "To put the matter starkly: the current system of control permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy. The system operates through our criminal justice systems institutions, but it functions more like a caste system than a system of crime control" (16). In other words, the criminal justice system works more to legally subjugate Black people than it does to suppress crime.

This caste system is made all the more oppressive for its wide reach across the nation. The United States has "the highest rate of incarceration in the world" surpassing other developed nations (8). There are over 2 million people in U.S. prisons and there are over 4 million people who are on probation or parole (xxix). "More than 70 million Americans – over 20 percent of the entire U.S. population, overwhelmingly poor and disproportionately people of color – now have criminal records to authorize legal discrimination for life" (xxix). These statistics demonstrate that the U.S. is an outlier in regards to other similar countries. What makes the U.S. stand out even more is the racial component: "No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial and ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid" (8). Alexander traces much of this inequality back to the War on Drugs which resulted in imprisonment of large groups of racial minorities for nonviolent offenses (7, 9). She notes that the majority of people sentenced

to prison are convicted of nonviolent crimes (xxiv). In 2019, only 5 percent of the 10 million arrests made by police in the U.S. were for violent offenses (xxiv). She writes:

> The lie that most people sent to prison are "violent offenders" is dangerous because it perpetuates the false notion that our system of mass incarceration is primarily concerned with violence and that it is well designed to keep communities safe. In fact, our system is primarily concerned with perpetual control and marginalization of the dispossessed. (xxvi)[70]

Additionally, drug crimes (which are usually nonviolent) still account for the largest number of arrests. Alexander effectively demonstrates that the mass incarceration system is not one that works to prevent crime but rather one that seeks to continue to oppress the dispossessed.

If we trace this legacy of oppressing the marginalized through the prison system back to the Pig Laws and convict leasing, we can see how the modern mass incarceration system is not an aberration but rather a calculated development of legal discrimination meant to subjugate Black people.[71] Laws are changed (in the nineteenth century theft laws and in the twentieth drug laws) to keep Black people in a state of dependence and withhold the rights of adulthood through legally discriminatory means. In any hierarchal system, people loathe to lose their power. Alexander writes:

> Time and again, the most ardent proponents of racial hierarchy have succeeded in creating new caste systems by triggering a collapse of resistance across the

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[70] In the preface, Alexander addresses a critique of her book. She notes that 52% of people in prison have been convicted of violent crimes so that any given time there are more violent people in prison, but the sheer volume of people serving shorter sentences for nonviolent crimes demonstrates how there are actually more people overall that are suffering from this system that are nonviolent convicts (xxiv-xxv).

[71] By 1875, the convict leasing system was entrenched in Mississippi and bolstered by the passage of the Leasing Act in 1876 which formally allowed for the leasing of convict labor throughout the state (Oshinksy 41). In conjunction with this act, the Pig Law was placed in effect. This law changed the definition of grand larceny "offenses punishable by up to five years in state prison – to include the theft of a farm animal or any property valued at ten dollars or more" (40). This change resulted in a dramatic surge in arrests: "the number of state convicts quadrupled, from 272 in 1874 to 1,072 by 1877" (40). The laws were designed to keep a ready supply of Black labor available to the state as evidenced by convict leasing statistics from the 1880s: "In 1882, for example, 126 of 735 black state convicts perished, as opposed to 2 of 83 whites. Not a single leased convict ever lived long enough to serve a sentence of ten years or more" (41, 46).

> political spectrum. This feat has been achieved largely by appealing to the racism and vulnerability of lower-class whites, a group of people who are understandably eager to ensure they never find themselves trapped at the bottom of the American totem pole. (20)

Of course, this assessment by Alexander is in line with what I've written about Parchman and Vardaman's campaign to engage poor whites. It further bolsters my argument about whiteness as property as well. If there is no difference between poor Black people and poor white people, then whiteness ceases to have value. Supporting racist laws and policies then behooves poor white people who see (and experience) their whiteness as a valued commodity. The problem then is not just a singular prison like Parchman; rather the problem is a larger system – a system of mass incarceration that works to legally uphold white supremacy. In her novel, Ward deftly demonstrates numerous aspects of this system at work – the war on drugs, surveillance, parole, imprisonment, and the threat of imprisonment.

Close Readings of Sing, Unburied, Sing

In this set of close readings, I illustrate that haunting in *Sing* operates to warn its characters about the threat of racialized violence and that conjure is used as a survival mechanism. Furthermore, I aim to demonstrate that by witnessing and recalling ancestral memory, the characters are given tools to survive even when it means they must mature quickly. Finally, I demonstrate through examination of Parchman and its ghosts how white institutions shed their skin to continually subjugate Black people and keep whiteness as property valuable.

The scene in which Leonie's car gets pulled over by the police on the way home from Parchman demonstrates how race, age, and gender work to either exonerate or indict characters in their interactions with the law. As this scene unfolds, we witness

Leonie absorbing the repercussions of her and her companions' actions. When they get pulled over, Leonie is in the driver's seat. She's switched with Michael while driving because he doesn't have a license, and he could get sent back to Parchman for this offense. Michael frantically tries and fails to hide the drugs that they had picked up from Al, Michael's lawyer. Leonie swallows the contraband to conceal it, literally absorbing the danger. Dib writes: "as the black woman, [Leonie] had to literally consume the risk that she, her white friend, and her white male partner all took" (Dib 147). Leonie's physical body then works as a protection for Misty and Michael. However, her actions do not stop Jojo – the Black boy – from continued risk in this situation.

As the cop evaluates the situation, his racism becomes evident as he treats Jojo, the thirteen-year-old Black boy, as a threat and Misty, an adult white woman, as an innocent. The cop assesses Misty and Jojo "and makes his decision and walks toward Jojo, his third pair of handcuffs out." (163). Leonie thinks:

> It's easy to forget how young Jojo is until I see him standing next to the police officer. It's easy to look at him, his weedy height, the thick spread of his belly, and think he's grown. But he's just a baby. And when he starts reaching in his pocket and the officer draws his gun on him, points it at his face, Jojo ain't nothing but a fat-kneed, bowlegged toddler. (163)

Leonie's characterization of her son emphasizes his innocence and youth. The idea of shooting a toddler or pulling a gun on a baby is unfathomable, and this hyperbole of Jojo's youthfulness draws the reader's attention to the fact that we should feel similar horror at a gun being drawn at a thirteen-year-old, who is still very much a child.

When the officer continues to hold his gun on Jojo, Kayla acts as a physical barrier. She leaps out of Misty's arms and "throws herself on [Jojo's] back, and wraps herself, arms and legs, around him. Her little bones: crayons and marbles. A shield"

(164). Kayla's vulnerability and youth are accentuated by the description of her "little bones" as "crayons and marbles" – items associated with childhood and innocence (164). Despite the presence of other adults and people less vulnerable than Kayla (chiefly Misty who is white, female, and has no criminal background), Kayla is the one that acts to protect her brother and uses her body as a physical barrier. She kicks the cop and stands as Jojo's shield until Misty comes to take her away. When Leonie's high from the ingested drugs hits, Given appears, and Kayla can see him too. He looks at her and "goes rigid all at once, and then a golden toss of vomit erupts from Michaela's mouth and coats the officer's uniformed chest" (166). This purging allows Kayla to extricate herself from Misty and protect Jojo again while "Phantom Given claps silently, and the officer freezes" (166). Kayla – a tiny child – uses her body (and its rejection of the not quite conjure medicine that Leonie tried to enact) to protect Jojo because the biological adults in this scenario have failed the children on every front.

Ward switches from Leonie's narrative perspective to Jojo's for the same incident, but continues to place an emphasis on youth and age. The officer refers to Jojo as a "young man" (169). As discussed earlier in this chapter, categories of age are malleable for the male Black characters and are often used to assert the will of white supremacy. Historically, white people have used the term "boy" to infantilize Black men and assert white dominance. By using "young man" the police officer is justifying – whether conscious or subconscious – his choice of treating Jojo as an adult threat (170). When asserting his dominance and asking what Jojo has in his pocket, the police officer calls Jojo "boy" (170). This interchange and use of both "boy" and "man" within minutes of one another equally demonstrates the ways in which law enforcement treats Black

boys and men as either child or adult depending on whatever gives them more power and authority in the situation. By calling Jojo a man, the officer puts himself in a position to use more force. By calling Jojo a boy, the officer reasserts years of white dominance over Black people and puts himself in a dominant position. Additionally, he only calls Jojo "boy" once Jojo has been handcuffed, kicked, and pushed to the ground. Once the officer has "neutralized the threat," then he can assert himself as the dominant force in the interaction. By using "boy" he emphasizes his power and calls on years of white men dominating and using Black bodies for labor and treating them with violence and disrespect. Thus, this interaction encapsulates the way in which the law perceives age and uses it to subjugate Black males accordingly.

Additionally, Jojo's experience during this incident demonstrates how the threat of Parchman is a looming specter that continues to haunt his future even as it features in his past and present. Both his grandfather and his father have been inmates at Parchman, and it's a very real threat for Jojo as well. After the cop stop ends, Jojo thinks: "The image of the gun stays with me…even after we are all in the car…that black gun is there. It is a tingle at the back of my skull, an itching on my shoulder…I rub the indents where the handcuffs squeezed and see the gun" (171). He is haunted and traumatized by this terrible experience where his future was threatened. Jojo is constantly under threat for existing as Black and male in the South and the specter of Parchman or death is always an imminent possibility. Before Jojo gets out of the car, Richie says to him "They going to chain you" (169). The use of "chain" instead of handcuff is a deliberate diction choice that reminds the reader of chains on the Middle Passage crossing and at slave markets as well as later chain gang labor. Just a few short paragraphs later, Richie brings this idea of

slavery in a different skin full circle. In lines alternating with Richie's spoken words and Jojo's thoughts, we get the following:

" 'They don't send them there as young as you no more.'

My wrists won't stop hurting.

'Sometimes I think it done changed. And then I sleep and wake up, and it ain't changed none.'

It's like the cuffs cut all the way down to the bone.

'It's like a snake that sheds its skin. The outside look different when the scales change, but the inside always the same.'

Like my marrow could carry a bruise." (171-172)

In this exchange where Ward switches from Richie to Jojo line by line almost in the middle of each one's words, she demonstrates the chain (slavery) reinvents itself and how its pain and immobilizing ability has a different name: chain to handcuff (slave to prisoner), but remains a restraining and imprisoning device of confinement.[72] While Richie makes the comparison of white supremacy to a snake that sheds its skin but stays the same, Jojo experiences the lingering effects of the handcuffs on his wrist. While the cuffs aren't physically there anymore, he can still feel their effect. The idea that he would

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[72] Chains and the treatment of Black human beings as animals is repeated throughout the text, and the first nod we get to it is also the first historical instance of it for the Stone family. Early in the narrative, when River launches into his Parchman story a second time, he interrupts his own story to speak about his own grandmother's great grandmother. Her people knew of the ships taking the Middle Passage, and "*they stayed in the shadows of they houses. But still, they came for her. Kidnapped her from her home in the middle of the day. Brought her here, and she learned the boats didn't sink to some watery place, sailed by white ghosts…That her skin grew around the chains. That her mouth shaped to the muzzle. That she was made into an animal…*" (69). The language used to describe the grandmother's experience with chaining and muzzling is akin to the language that Richie uses to describe his experience with Parchman. He thinks of it as "terrible and formative as the iron leash that chains dogs" (191). The language of enslavement is parallel to the language of incarceration and both have dehumanizing – animalizing – effects on those that they chain.

carry the bruise in his marrow is a demonstration of its permanence and its ability to seep inside rather than just affect the external. Because Jojo is unable to shed his skin, he likewise can't shed the effects of the cuffs so easily. Richie's comparison of Parchman as slavery in another skin plays out throughout the novel. The cop pulling over Leonie in present day Mississippi and putting a gun to her son's head is the same snake as the white crowd of men and boys that chased, skinned, and lynched Blue, the Parchman prison escapee, in 1948. In putting Richie and Jojo's thoughts next to one another in the way Ward does, she draws a direct comparison between the two boys. Jojo is the modern day version of Richie, and Jojo, like Richie, could easily have been lynched in that encounter. The prison complex, the trigger ready officer, and the lynch mob are each the white oppressor – simply in different skin. The novel evidences how slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration is a snake in a different skin in the long war for white supremacy. While oppression based on race has different names and appears to be different each generation, it has the same effect of hindering, constraining, and confining Black people and keeping whiteness as property valuable.

Richie's explanation that that the racist infrastructure undergirding the United States hasn't really changed but simply shed its skin is further emphasized by the novel's treatment of time. As a ghost, Richie's experience and explanation of time is not linear and his understanding of time is further reinforced by the lack of meaningful change for Black people across decades. As evidenced in the historical context section on Parchman, the prison used to be a plantation and for all intents and purposes functions like one in its subjugation of Black men and use of their labor. Richie tells Jojo that he "doesn't know

shit about time" (184). But then Richie declares in an internal monologue that he didn't know about time either when he was young. He thinks:

> How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once. (186)

Richie's internal monologue both reinforces Goyal's assertion that the gothic is nonlinear and shows that Parchman has a hold on him outside of time. While Parchman changes externally, the intent behind the institution does not – the subjugation and domination of Black men and the theft of their labor and their lives. The letter of the law changes, but the driving forces behind the law – the valuation and protections of whiteness as property – remain the same. As a ghost, Richie wakes and sleeps and wakes and each time he visits a different version of Parchman:

> I wandered the new prison, night after night. It was a place bound by cinder blocks and cement. I watched the men fuck and fight in the dark, so twisted up in each other I couldn't tell where one man ended and another began…[I] rose to witness the newborn Parchman: I watched chained men clear the land and lay the first logs for the first barracks for gunmen and trusty shooters…when I slept and woke I was in the Delta before the prison, and Native men were ranging over that rich heart, hunting and taking breaks to play stickball and smoke…I burrowed and slept and woke to the new Parchman again, to men who wore their hair long and braided to their scalps, who sat for hours in a small windowless rooms, staring at big black boxes that streamed dreams. Their faces in the blue light were stiff as corpses. I burrowed and slept and woke many times before I realized this was the nature of time. (186-7)

In Richie's ghost state, he exists across time and his experience is mirrored across time by boys and men like him. Only when the Native peoples occupied the land is there no prison. Otherwise, there is always a confining piece of the Delta whether it's the "cinder blocks and cement" or the "trusty shooters" or the "small windowless rooms" (186-7). The form of confinement and subjugation changes, but the place stays the same. Richie's

waking and burrowing across time shows the expansive nature of slavery in a different skin and how he is still entrapped within in it. Before Mam dies, she tells Jojo that even though she won't be a ghost, she'll still be there. When he asks her how so, she replies: "Because we don't walk no straight lines. It's all happening at once. All of it. We all here at once" (236). Her notion that time collapses in on itself rather than functioning linearly reinforces the notion of slavery and Parchman being one in the same in perpetuity and bolster my gothic reading of the novel.

Richie's first moments as a ghost reflect Jojo's and Kayla's first step onto Parchman's soil showcasing how Parchman's reach is so expansive that it stretches across time to make historical connections. When Richie first awakens after his death, a white snake approaches him, turns into a scaly black crow, tells him there are things he needs to remember, and then gives him a scale to fly and move (134). The crow-snake takes Richie to Parchman, and he remembers: "I remembered my name: Richie. I remembered the place: Parchman prison. And I remembered the man's name: River Red" (136). He sleeps to try and escape the memory but he cannot and when he begins to search for River, he can't find him. He notes that "Men left, men returned and left again. New men came…my time measured by all those Black faces until the scaly bird returned and led me to the car, to the boy the same age as me sitting in the back of the car. Jojo" (136). The recurrence of the men and the "Black faces" demonstrates the way Parchman stays the same. It is a place filled with Black men who are contained even without walls. The images of Black men across time not only appear to Richie, but to Jojo and Kayla as well. When the siblings first arrive at Parchman, Kayla tells Jojo she sees "birds" and Jojo in response looks out at the field: "…I don't see birds. I squint and for a second I see

men bent at the waist, row after row of them, picking at the ground, looking like a great murder of crows landed and chattering and picking for bugs in the ground. One, shorter than the rest, stands and looks straight at me" (125). The birds, who Jojo perceives as men, are former inmates, and the shorter one, is Richie. Jojo, as he steps onto Parchman's soil, sees through time. When Kayla asks again if he sees the bird, Jojo blinks and "the men are gone and it is just fog rolling, wisping over the fields that stretch out endlessly, and then I hear Pop telling me the last bit of the story he is willing to share about this place" (126). The birds are the men, and for a moment, time collapses for Kayla and Jojo, and they see how Parchman exists as a space of containment across the ages illustrating the "expansive sense of the connections of space to history" that Goyal so clearly describes (214). The fact that Jojo immediately thinks of Richie's story at the moment the "birds" disappear demonstrates that Jojo's conjure ability combined with his access to ancestral memory not only warns him of a threatened future but gives him (and the reader) an understanding of how his life fits into a larger historical framework. Thus, this moment of time collapsing in Ward's novel at Parchman demonstrates that U.S. legal framework continues to value whiteness over Blackness and use governmental institutions to reinforce this hierarchy changing "skin" across the ages but remaining the same in principle.

The architectural structure of Parchman makes not only literal escape from the prison difficult but also demonstrates the inescapability of mass incarceration, the afterlives of slavery, and the white supremacy baked into our legal institutions. When Pop tells Jojo about Parchman, he makes sure to describe the illusory nature of potential escape it portrayed. Pop says, "*Parchman was the kind of place that fool you into*

thinking it ain't no prison, ain't going to be so bad when you first see it, because ain't no walls. Back in the day, it was just fifteen camps, each one surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. Wasn't no brick; wasn't no stone" (Ward 21). Pop's description of the prison is historically accurate and a reminder that while this is a work of fiction, the consequences for the characters mirror those of people in the real world. Furthermore, the lack of walls and the illusion of freedom at Parchman in the 1940s mirrors the illusion of freedom that Black people have in the U.S. today. There are not literal walls and shackles for many Black citizens, but there are laws that reduce voter access and no laws to fix historically ingrained systems like housing discrimination. In other words, just because the walls aren't visible doesn't mean that the people aren't contained in other ways. Additionally, the lack of walls emphasizes the ways in which the haunted landscape of the South extends beyond Parchman – its ghosts speckle the region and remind us that the reach of the white-owned structure of Parchman extends far beyond its figurative walls. Pop makes this clear by focusing on the trusty shooters – the real threat and containment measure of Parchman during his time there. He tells Jojo that it feels like you can escape because of the open fields and flimsy fencing:

> *But the reason you think that is because you don't see the trusty shooters. You don't know the sergeant. You don't know the sergeant come from a long line of men bred to treat you like a plowing horse, like a hunting dog – and bred to think he can make you like it. That the sergeant come from a long line of overseers. You don't know that them trusty shooters done been sent to Parchman for worse than getting in to a fight at a juke joint. Just know the trusty shooters, the inmate guards, was sent there because they like to kill, and because they done it in all kind of nasty ways, not just to the other men, but to women and* – (22)

The trusty shooters were other inmates tasked with containing those under their watch and with capturing or killing those attempting escape. In using trusty shooters instead of walls, the prison gives the appearance of freedom. It alludes and taunts with its open

walls and thin fences. It shows what could be, but certainly isn't. Pop emphasizes the legacy of trusty shooters as the descendants of overseers and draws the parallels between runaway slave and runaway inmate and the unseen but felt threat of violence at every turn. The end of the quote with the dash emphasizes that the men have killed worse – likely children which foreshadows the end of Pop's story with Richie's death and the ever-present threat on Jojo's life. But Pop cuts himself off because he hasn't gotten to the point where he feels Jojo is ready for the story of Richie's death. This is just the beginning of the story and that dash represents the coming violence, the wait, the holding out.

The reach of Parchman was so long that it affected everyday economics as well. River says: "*Lots of folks was in there for stealing food because everybody was poor and starving, and even though White people couldn't get your work for free, they did everything they could to avoid hiring you and paying you for it"* (21). This statement is significant on multiple levels. First, it demonstrates that paying work was difficult for Black people to find. Second, it emphasizes that many people were incarcerated because they needed to eat, and they had no other way to get food. Third, this statement is filled with irony because the Black men that went to Parchman then worked the land that resulted in profit for white men. They did get the work for free. It was just wasn't under the name of chattel slavery. Even more ironic is that while much of the land was plowed with cotton, there was still plenty that served to grow other kinds of crops – the kind that feed people directly. In such a way, white people took the labor, the food, and the freedom of Black people and reasserted white ownership through the system of the prison.

The final piece of Richie's story, told to Jojo right before Mam dies, allows Jojo and the reader to see the connections between himself and Richie and demonstrates the ways in which age is dismissed in order to contain Black boys. Richie was forced to flee Parchman with another inmate – Blue – because Richie witnessed Blue rape and beat a woman. He ran, but River, with the hounds he was in charge of, and the trusty shooters followed them. They caught up to Blue first, but River hung back with the dogs knowing they scented Richie going north. River tells Jojo, "They were going to do the same to [Richie]. Once they got done with Blue. They was going to come for that boy and cut him piece from piece till he was just some bloody, soft, screaming thing, and then they was going to string him up from a tree…He wasn't nothing but a boy, Jojo. They kill animals better than that" (255). Pop emphasizes Richie's youth in the telling. He is a child – a boy guilty only of stealing food to feed his siblings. But he would be treated the same as Blue – a violent adult man who raped and killed. To ensure Richie avoids the animalization and dehumanization that Blue experiences, River takes action. On finding Richie, River tells him he'll help Richie home. Then, River uses a shank from his boot to kill Richie to stop him from reaching the end that Blue did. Pop tells Jojo that he still smells and feels the blood on his hands saying he felt no kind of peace until Jojo was born. Then Jojo holds Pop, and he finishes the story. In this moment, Jojo takes on the responsibility of manhood, and he also sees that Richie's fate is a potential end for himself too. In the learning of it, it's another warning of how to avoid racialized violence. Even when Pop was released from prison, it was because he killed Richie. The threat of violence against Richie forced Pop into violence against Richie so that worse violence wouldn't take

place. In this way, Parchman contains and owns its prisoners even after they leave – for years on end.

Before discussing the fallout from Pop finishing Richie's story, we need to first turn to the story of Given, Leonie's brother, to understand the parallels and differences between the two deaths and how they demonstrate the way the long history of racialized violence perpetuates in different guises to protect whiteness and oppress Black people. While Richie's death occurs in the 1940s during Jim Crow and before *Brown v. Board*, Given is the victim of a modern-day lynching, and, like Richie, he becomes a ghost because of his violent death.[73] Given goes hunting with some white boys from his football team betting one of them (Michael's cousin) that he can take down a deer with a bow before the cousin can with a rifle. When Given makes good on his promise, the cousin becomes enraged and shoots Given. Big Joseph – Michael's dad and the cousin's uncle – is the sheriff and covers up the murder by calling it a "hunting accident" (50). The way that white people animalize and dehumanize Black people becomes evident through the stark comparison that Leonie offers of the "hunting accident" in her narration: "A hundred yards off, the buck lay on his side, one arrow in his neck, another in his stomach, all of him cold and hard as my brother" (50). Leonie's direct comparison of the two demonstrates how the white cousin ascribes similar value to the buck as he does to Given. The white lynchers in the novel see no difference between Blue, the

[73] Jojo and Kayla see Given's ghost at various times, but Leonie is the one most actively haunted by him. Initially, she only sees him when she does drugs, but then at the end of the novel right before Mam dies, when Leonie has engaged in an act of conjure for Mam (collecting stones from graves including Given's), Leonie sees him while sober. She thinks it must be dregs of meth, but she feels "sober as a lead weight" and sees Given "burnished and tall, in the living room" – a place she hasn't seen him since he died (259). Her act of conjure then allows her to see Given's ghost who Jojo can also see rather than Phantom Given which is the hallucination Leonie sees when she's high. Leonie's drug use is an act of rebellion and a way to try to escape her life, but sober or high, she cannot escape the violence of Given's death or the way that violent future hangs over Jojo.

violent rapist; Richie, the hungry child; and Given the talented athlete. In their prejudice and hatred, they not only dehumanize and devalue Black life, they also refuse to see humanity and individuality – collapsing all Black males into a single threat to their white male privilege. After Given shot the buck, the cousin shot Given because "*He was supposed to lose"* (50). The cousin's assumption that he would win simply because he is white is both appalling and unsurprising, and it further supports my assertion that the fight for white supremacy appears as a modern-day war in the novel.[74] Harris notes that whiteness is valued and expected to be valued in law (1777). It's this expectation of the value and superiority of whiteness upon which the cousin structures his worldview. When something, the cousin's loss of the bet, doesn't fit his understanding of the world, he alters the world around him by killing Given. In removing the Black man who threatened his worldview, the cousin reasserts himself as the winner and upholds his understanding of the world. In a white officer of the law labeling the incident a "hunting accident," the cousin's worldview is reinforced: his whiteness is still legally valued and protected. Given's lynching demonstrates another potential fate for Jojo but also illustrates how whiteness as property adapts and develops to stay relevant even in a post *Brown v. Board* world.

Now, understanding Given's place in Ward's novel, we can return to the moments in the immediate aftermath of Pop finishing Richie's story which serve as the climax of the book, and which demonstrate how interconnected haunting and conjure are for the

[74] Harris writes that even after rigid social hierarchies have been softened, "whiteness retains its value as a 'consolation prize': it does not mean that all whites will win, but simply that they will not lose, if losing is defined as being on the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy - the position to which Blacks have been consigned" (1758-9). When the cousin finds Given upending this hierarchy by winning the bet, the cousin kills Given in order to reorient the hierarchy to the way the cousin believes it should be. If Given wouldn't lose because he was "supposed to" then the cousin would cause Given to lose by taking his life.

Stone family. Leonie has returned from collecting the materials Mam asked for to ease her passing to the afterlife and encounters Given's ghost in the living room. Together, through the screen door, they watch Pop and Jojo on the ground in the backyard. They see Jojo hugging Pop and rubbing his back. Given mouths "*Oh, Pop*," while Leonie thinks that this is not a world she knows – the kind of world where Jojo holds Pop and not vice versa (260-1). Kayla then tries to get Leonie's attention stating a "bird" is trying to take Mam away. Given, Leonie, and Kayla enter Mam's room to see the "bird" is Richie. Distraught after hearing what River – the man he looked to as father – did, Richie latches onto Mam. Given keeps repeating, "Not. Your. Mother." as Kayla and Leonie listen. At this moment where life and death and ghost converge, so does time. Leonie thinks: "Michaela is crying in a way I've never seen her before: mouth working, but no sound. There's no time. This moment done ate it all up: the past, the future" (267). Given and Richie are two ghosts – one representative of the not so distant past and one representative of our current moment. And Jojo, the still living corporeal boy is the uncertain future. Leonie calls on Maman Brigitte to take Mam as Jojo and Pop enter the room. Jojo, angry at Leonie who has so rarely engaged in conjure, tells her to stop. He tells Richie to leave – that there aren't any more stories for him and that nobody owes Richie anything (268). Then, Jojo, compels Richie to release Given where he has trapped him in the corner. Leonie says it's "as if Jojo has unlocked and opened a gate, because Given pushes through whatever held him" (268). The entire family is involved in this moment of conjure and ghosts. Given acknowledges Jojo and calls him nephew, and Kayla looks at Given and identifies him as her uncle. Then, Given goes to his mother saying he's come for her with the boat (269). And then Mam's gone. When Given and his

mother look at one another before they depart, Leonie sees "love, clear and sweet as the air in between them" (269). Jojo notes that Leonie "let in a river" with her call to Maman Brigitte hearkening back to the role of water in conjure and the afterlife – the water that Richie can hear but not reach. Children and grandchildren of a conjure woman, Leonie, Jojo, and Kayla use the conjure abilities handed down to them to dispel Richie from the house and allow Mam to go to the afterlife with Given.

Where conjure continues to be a guiding force for Jojo that allows him to operate outside of containment structure, Leonie abandons conjure; she returns to Michael and drugs which function as another form of containment – trapping her inside herself and in destructive cycles even as she tries to break free from loss and haunting. For Jojo, after Mam's death, his ability to see and hear is a way to engage with her. It's a connection and a carrying on of the memory even when he feels the itch to run and flee and forget like Leonie who says she "*can't remember*" as in she feels physically unable to carry the weight of the memories (274). She *needs* to forget, and so she sinks into Michael and drugs. Jojo, however feels connection and remembrance when he listens. He notes when he walks through the woods listening: "then that feeling of dissatisfaction, of wormy grief, eases a little, because I know I see what Mam saw. I hear what she heard. In those meetings, she's a little closer" (280). The conjure acts as a connection point, a balm that guides him forward in a threatened future.

Jojo's final encounter with Richie emphasizes the gothic nature of the novel and the lack of resolution for Richie; there are no tidy endings for a ghost without family who met a violent end. When Jojo last sees Richie, he says that for him to move beyond where he is – there has to be "some need, some lack" but there isn't any need or lack with Jojo's

family anymore – at least not in that way. Richie says that after everything with Given, Leonie, and Mam that Jojo has “changed. Ain’t no need. Or at least, ain’t no need big enough for a key” (281). In other words, Jojo doesn’t need Richie anymore and perhaps Richie doesn’t need them either. He heard his story and in the hearing, Jojo received warning and stood witness. He will carry Richie’s story with him, and it will act as a talisman against a future like Richie’s, but also as a way to understand his own connection to time, space, and history through memory.

The final scene of the novel disallows neat resolution as it illustrates the perpetuation of violence across time and emphasizes how whiteness as property has changed and adapted through various laws and institutions in ways that Black people cannot. During Jojo’s final walk in the woods, he looks into the trees and sees ghosts of people perched like birds in the branches. He says: “They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies…Black and brown and the closest near baby, smoke white” (282). Rather than hearing them, Jojo sees their stories in their eyes which “reveal their deaths” (282). They say:

> *He raped and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard and they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me still I was sick and he said I was an abomination and Jesus say suffer little children so let her go and he put me under the water and I couldn’t breathe.* (282)

Their stories bleed into one another drawing parallels between the antebellum South and the violence of slavery and the current day South and the violence of police encounters while demonstrating that this violence is perpetual. The snake is the same; it simply sheds

its skin. The white person gouging out a Black person's eyes for reading and a police officer shooting a Black person eight times while their hands are up occurred centuries apart, but the violent incidents are born of the same white supremacy protected by law. The cell death by hanging demonstrates the way that systemic racism reinvents itself and that modern day lynching exists even if it is in prisons and police encounters rather than at the hands of public mobs outdoors. This, then, is what Richie means when he tells Jojo that he "doesn't know shit about time"(184). But now Jojo does, and he sees all these ghosts and realizes that their stories are repeated in different scales but the same skin.

The vast number of ghosts wearing varying clothing that Jojo witnesses in this final scene reveals that where white institutions are snakes that shed their skin and survive throughout time, Black people cannot shed their skin; no matter how they clothe themselves, they have been and continue to be subject to violence across time and age. Jojo's description of what the ghosts clothe themselves in draws our attention to how historically it has not mattered who they were or what they wore; they were Black and living and so they were treated violently and became ghosts. Jojo notes: "the ghosts catch the color [of the sun], reflect the red. The sun making scarlet plumage of the clothes they wear: rags and breeches, T-shirts and tignons, fedoras and hoodies" (283). The "scarlet plumage" is a poignant allusion to the red of blood representing the violence that touches these Black bodies. The clothing listed is coded with meaning. Rags and breeches are the clothes of enslaved peoples. Hoodies are associated with modern day Black boys and particularly Trayvon Martin. The emphasis on the variety of clothes and on clothes that are coded as Black (i.e. tignon, hoodie) in particular is important. It again underscores the way in which clothing can be changed but skin cannot. Black people cannot shift and

escape their skin and so despite them changing their look and donning different clothing, they are still subject to the violence of white institutions that *can* shed their skin in a world where whiteness is considered the default. Furthermore, the collection of ghosts across time periods hearkens back to my point built on Goyal that this kind of gothic literature "disallows empathy as the primary response to suffering" pushing instead for a more complex understanding of the "expansive sense of the connection of space to history" (214). In bringing all the ghosts together in the same space across time, Ward demonstrates that racism is systemic and connected to the very land itself. A simple individual empathy is not effective for change nor does it change the fate of the ghosts. As the ghosts converge outside Parchman, it also reinforces the idea that the entirety of the South is a haunted landscape. Parchman cannot contain the haunting, though it is a primary cause of it, because it is just one more iteration of slavery, and the ghosts of slavery continue to haunt all across the South.

Kayla's treatment of the ghosts that Jojo describes demonstrates the need for kinship and connection that the ghosts feel. Standing witness to the loss of Black life is integral to humanity, resistance, and survival. Kayla tells the ghosts to go home, but they stay, and so she begins to sing:

> a song of mismatched half-garbled words…the ghosts open their mouths wider and their faces fold at the edges so they look like they're crying, but they can't. And Kayla sings louder. She waves her hand in the air as she sings, and I know it, know the movement, know it's how Leonie rubbed my back, rubbed Kayla's back, when we were frightened of the world. Kayla sings, and the multitude of ghosts lean forward, nodding. They smile with something like relief, something like remembrance, something like ease. (284)

With her song, Kayla offers the ghosts a way to remember the feeling of love and ease inside the womb and the love of a mother comforting her child the way that Mam once

did for Leonie reminding the reader of the invoking of Yemayá. Kayla's language without words is a form of communication that doesn't belong to a specific culture but is understood by all the ghosts and which demonstrates the necessity of articulating the pain and loss of racialized violence while at the same time acknowledging that language cannot fully render the experience. In this way, she invites the stranger, the outsider, the slave back into the folds of community and kinship.

Even so, what Jojo notes is that the ghosts feel "*something like* relief, *something like* remembrance, *something like* ease" (284, emphasis added). The repeated refrain underscores the fact that even with Kayla's song and the witness, the ghosts don't quite get full relief, remembrance, or ease. Instead, they get partial bits of their stories coming through conjure song – an occluded gothic tale partially told in a limited language – which both witness and reader can only understand to a limited degree. Mam says that the gifts of conjure are meant to be used, and the Stone family employs them to allow alternate ways of knowing. In that vein, listening to the song of the ghosts allows Kayla and Jojo to see the long arm of white supremacy through history. The song and stories of the ghosts connect Kayla and Jojo to ancestral memory and the racialized violence of the South that has shaped their present. Despite Kayla's witness and song and the ghosts repeating the word "home" as the closing line of the novel, the ghosts don't depart. The witness, the song, the acknowledgement offers "something like" but, in the vein of the gothic, it doesn't offer full resolution. The South is still a haunted landscape, and the unburied cannot rest while the war for white supremacy rages on. At the end, when Kayla turns toward the ghosts to continue to bear witness, Jojo and Pop turn away.

In this chapter, I have endeavored to demonstrate that hauntings appear to serve as a warning but that by engaging in the tradition of conjure and witnessing and listening to the stories of past ghosts and ancestors, members of the Stone family are better equipped to survive threatened futures. The architectural structure of Parchman represents a greater system of mass incarceration and serves as a haunting force that looms over the past (River), present (Leonie/Michael/Given), and future (Jojo/Kayla) of the Stone family. The ghosts work as mechanisms to demonstrate a collapse of time and show that while the snake sheds its skin, it doesn't really change. Parchman and the experience of racism shifts and manifests but it persists. Only through learning from the ghosts and calling on conjure can Jojo and Kayla hope to survive and navigate a world of threatened futures when they cannot shed their own skin.

CODA: SIMONE LEIGH'S *BRICK HOUSE:* REFRAMING BLACK FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY THROUGH AFRICAN ARCHITECTURE

In the last three chapters, I have endeavored to demonstrate how Black youth are excluded from the privileges of adulthood by analyzing the paths of youthful protagonists in coming-of-age narratives. In so doing, I examined the architectural structures that these youth grew up in and around as I analyzed the haunting they experienced to better understand how they coped with the challenges of residing in a nation built to exclude them. I traced these challenges through three significant American institutions: segregation, immigration, and incarceration. As such, I identified the key architectural structures that corresponded with each category. This led me to investigate housing, monuments, and the prison in stories of segregation, immigration, and incarceration. First, I analyzed the kitchenette and the brownstone, housing structures that upheld segregation in midcentury America, in *Maud Martha* (1953) and *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959). Next, I studied the monumental whiteness of Washington, D.C., and how its structures excluded a Black immigrant girl in *Zami* (1982). Finally, I turned my attention to Parchman Prison which loomed over Jojo's future in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) and illustrated the threat of incarceration for Black youth at-large in the U.S. By isolating these particular stories, we can see, even in the face of shifting U.S. law, culture, and society, how the nation has continued to uphold whiteness as property. We can witness the external transformation of U.S. architectural structures and institutions, even as the internal essence of them – the preservation and protection of whiteness – has remained the same. In explicating these stories of segregation, immigration, and incarceration, I made clear how different architectural structures, in response to legal and

cultural shifts across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, have been used to prohibit Black youth from reaching adulthood.

When I looked at novels from the midcentury, one of the primary mechanisms of oppression for Black women was the inability to buy a home. During a period when white people, through the GI Bill, were given greater access to housing, Black people were continually prohibited through redlining and other racist measures. As I demonstrated in my analysis of *Maud Martha* and *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, purchasing a house was an important marker of maturity. But it was unavailable to Maud Martha and rejected by Selina, who determines she would have to give up part of her cultural heritage and therefore, herself, in order to buy a home. Instead, these girls create alternative maturity markers; Maud Martha develops a rich interiority, while Selina returns to her cultural homeland to reclaim memory. In so doing, these girls demonstrate a way to access a different kind of adulthood outside of whiteness as property.

After *Brown* (1954) and, later, the Fair Housing Act (1968), housing became more accessible for Black people. While it continues, to this day, to be a source of discrimination and segregation, it does not have the same level of oppressive power that it did in the 1940s and 1950s. Audre Lorde's *Zami* makes clear how incidents of exclusion through segregating retail establishments, such as an ice cream parlor, indicate exclusionary policies and aesthetics that are literally the bedrock of national belonging. Lorde emphasizes the materiality of whiteness – the stone and marble of Washington monuments – to attest to its permanence in American society and government. As Black, second-generation, and lesbian, Audre is triply excluded from privileges of adulthood and citizenship. She experiences unbelonging on multiple fronts. She is excluded from

traditional makers of maturity, so Lorde fashions her own, again emphasizing materiality and the physical. She determines that physical, erotic relationships in the arms of women conjure homeland and create a place of belonging in a world that seeks to exclude her. In so doing, she fashions an alternative set of maturity markers and queers the diaspora.

Finally, I moved into a study of the architectural spaces associated with incarceration. Racist housing still exists. Discrimination toward immigrants and queer people certainly persists. But, in this cultural moment, Black people face, perhaps the clearest discrimination, in the criminal justice system. With the expansion of the Black Lives Matter movement, the nation has focused on police brutality and mass incarceration. To meet this moment, I looked toward Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) in my final chapter and turned my attention to Parchman Prison, an architectural structure that haunts every aspect of Jojo's life. His grandfather and father have both been inmates, and Jojo's future is threatened by the potential of incarceration. Drawing on his family's legacy of conjure offers him a way to engage in an alternative path toward adulthood – one that gives him hope and possibility in the face of a threatened future.

By examining the architectural structures Black youth grow up in and around in these coming-of-age narratives, I not only elucidated the alternative models of maturity they develop to achieve adulthood, but I also demonstrated that the way in which the U.S. government, and its structures shift, in shape, if not in substance, to perpetuate exclusion and uphold whiteness as property. Starting with housing segregation, moving to immigrant discrimination, and ending with unjust incarceration, I illustrated how the varied architectural structures of the U.S. transform externally while remaining

substantively the same. Only by facing the haunting arising from the legacies of slavery and colonialism, and by developing alternative models of adulthood in its wake, can these Black youth hope to survive and become adults. These Black women writers set up models for how Black youth can survive in a world built to exclude them. While their words are contained in literary worlds, their implications are not. If Maud Martha, Selina, and Audre's stories show us how adulthood could be achieved in the past, Jojo's demonstrates how it might be achieved in the future. The journey to adulthood remains precarious for Black youth in the twenty-first century. In the face of that reality, we can observe that these literary stories are not a fix for, but rather a reflection of, cultural and institutional injustices. These narratives offer patterns and alternatives for a way forward for Black youth while drawing attention to the wrongness inherent in the nation's treatment of its Black youth.

In the introduction I asked how Black women writers constructed depictions of physical and architectural spaces and how the historical inability for Black women to own their selves or other property shaped their literary work. I hope I have demonstrated that built environments and dispossession shaped the literary work of Black women fundamentally and that, as such, they wrote characters who responded to oppressive spaces in unique and resourceful ways. When dispossessed, their protagonists sought subversive means to become self-possessed. By writing their own scripts, these authors show how Black youth can achieve adulthood even when the socially and culturally accepted makers of maturity are not available. While these Black women writers offer alternative means to meet maturity markers, it does not mean that these characters can achieve the kind of safety, privileges, and rights that white men do. Indeed, the problems

these protagonists face are not isolated to the literary realm but rather are so pervasive in nature that they exist across cultural artifacts.

In turning toward Simone Leigh's *Brick House*, one such artifact, we can see the cultural logics that informed the writing of Brooks, Marshall, Lorde, and Ward at work in monumental art as well. An African American visual artist specializing in sculpture, Leigh is best known for her *Anatomy of Architecture* series which combines architectural forms with the bodies of Black women and girls. Of her own work and methods, she says, "By associating the body with the idea of a dwelling, refuge, container, tool, even loophole of retreat, I'm working in a long tradition of associating women's bodies with architecture or vessels" (Leigh qtd. in Wortham). Leigh explicitly situates herself in a long history of women using architecture to comment on the body and subjectivity. Her work, then, is a natural extension of the aforementioned Black women writers who make clear the linkage between Black bodies, architectural spaces, and self-possession. Like the architectural spaces I have discussed previously, Leigh's architectural influences derive from oppressive and racist structures. Yet, her influences also come from distinctly African architectures. The result is a monumental structure, *Brick House*, which embodies Blackness without oppressing it. Where the other architectural structures I examined challenge and prohibit the journey toward adulthood (and thus self-possession), this one champions it. Like the monuments of D.C. I discussed in chapter two, *Brick House* represents a subjectivity rather than a particular person. It, in that sense, is a bastion of Black life and Black identity. In a nation built to exclude Blackness, the existence of *Brick House* in a public setting in New York City challenges that exclusion and insists on the right of Black life to be included in the very structure of the nation.

Figure 4.1 Margaret Kelly. Photograph of Simone Leigh's *Brick House*. Author's personal collection.

To trace how the same cultural logics of Black women writers appear in *Brick House*, I first describe the sculpture and its setting. Next, I move into a brief discussion of the architectural influences behind the structure. Then, I transition into my personal experience seeing *Brick House* for the first time, before reflecting on the future of my research. Leigh's *Brick House,* a sixteen-foot-tall bronze bust, was unveiled at the High Line in New York City on June 5, 2019, where it remained until May 2021.[75] *Brick House* was the first in a new series of large installations featured at the Plinth, an area of the High Line on the Spur at 30th Street and 10th Avenue which is "dedicated solely to a

[75] *Brick House* was erected on Breonna Taylor's last birthday.

rotating series of new, monumental, contemporary art commissions" in which the featured art becomes "part of the cityscape itself" ("Plinth"). Facing 10th Avenue, the statue bears the head of a Black woman on a dome-like structure that "combines the forms of a skirt and a clay house" ("Brick House"). While the bust features no eyes, she has lips, a nose, and an afro style hairdo framed by cornrow braids that end in cowrie shells. *Brick House* is part of Leigh's ongoing *Anatomy of Architecture* series "in which the artist combines architectural forms from regions as varied as West Africa and the Southern United States with the human body" ("Brick House"). Other pieces in this series typically have the name *Cupboard* followed by a numeral. The name of Leigh's 2019 Guggenheim exhibition, "Loophole of Retreat," in which many of the *Cupboard* series appeared, was inspired by Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and recalls the architectural form of Linda Brent's garret as well as the woman herself (Wortham). Since *Brick House* is part of the *Anatomy of Architecture* series, it is both visually and thematically connected with the *Cupboard* iterations. However, because it is the first monumental sculpture, it adds a new dimension to the series, which is evident in its construction, style, and name.

Figure 4.2 Margaret Kelly. Side view of Simone Leigh's *Brick House.* Author's personal collection

While the maquette for the Plinth piece was originally titled *Cupboard VII*, Leigh changed the final product to *Brick House.*[76] As changes were made to the structure in terms of hair style and eyes, and as this was the first monumental structure in the series,

[76] Maquette is the French word for model and is the term used to described smaller scale models used to plan sculptures especially those of monumental proportion. The maquette for *Brick House* was a ceramic model made in Leigh's Brooklyn studio. It had rosettes instead of the Afro and cowrie shell tipped braids of the final piece. See "The Making of Brick House." *The High Line*, 14 Jan. 2019, https://www.thehighline.org/blog/2019/01/14/the-making-of-brick-house/.

Leigh chose a name that diverged from the previous works in *Anatomy of Architecture* (Benke). The title bears the same name as the popular Commodores song, but as Leigh constructed the piece, she tried to distance her sculpture from the sexual objectification inherent in the song lyrics (Benke). The Art Production Manager of the High Line, Jordan Benke, who worked directly with Leigh on the technical production of *Brick House* noted that Leigh tried "to remove a lot of the references to [the song] in [the High Line's] literature about the piece." Leigh aimed to challenge the sexualized objectification of Black women in the song. In creating a different kind of object, particularly since Leigh crafted the clay for the mold of *Brick House* herself, she reclaimed the phrase "brick house" (Benke). Indeed, the High Line's website says, "The title comes from the term for a strong Black woman who stands with the strength, endurance, and integrity of a house made of bricks" ("Brick House"). The choice of name demonstrates that Leigh understood the strength and resilience the term would imbue to her structure. Perhaps in thinking about how Audre Lorde claimed the erotic as power instead of as objectification, we might have a model to see how *Brick House*, too, can draw strength from the sensual.

Another factor that makes Leigh's *Brick House* so unique, and makes the name a fitting title, is that Leigh crafted the sculpture from clay. Most monumental sculptures are made from computer generated foam models. However, Leigh insisted on hand-crafting her model using clay from a French quarry (rumored to be the same one Rodin used), so that she could include personal touches. Such details included Leigh's use of steel wool and sponges to create a textured base that resembled the texturing on the Mousgoum *teleuk* as seen in Figure 4.3 ("The Making of Brick House"). Creating her sculpture this

way allowed her to be the direct architect.

Figure 4.3 Margaret Kelly. Detailed view of *Brick House* texturing and Plinth base. Author's personal collection.

As the architect, designer, and creator of *Brick House*, Leigh drew from many architectural structures to create a transnational diasporic sculpture that brings in African influences willingly rather than through forced dispersion. *Brick House* has referents to "Batammaliba architecture from Benin and Togo, the *teleuk* dwellings of the Mousgoum people of Cameroon and Chad, and the restaurant Mammy's Cupboard in Natchez, Mississippi" ("Brick House"). Taking a closer look at these architectural structures, especially the *teleuk*, in combination with Leigh's explicit references to Linda Brent's garret from Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* in her *Anatomy of Architecture* series illuminates the depth of meaning in Leigh's work. In short, examining these literary and architectural

influences reveals how *Brick House* is a multi-faceted structure that uses existing cultural referents to create an embodiment of Black female subjectivity.

First, I turn my attention to the Batammaliba architecture of Benin and Togo. The name Batammaliba, the people of Togo, means "those who are the real architects of the earth" which fittingly describes the Batammaliba people who recognize the connection between humans, architecture, and their environment ("The Making of Brick House"). Leigh, too, emphasizes the importance of the connection between architecture and person. The "Tata Somba," meaning fortified house, is a personified structure of the Batammaliba people. Its architectural adornments parallel the clothing worn by Batammaliba people including base molding that matches cords and belts worn as well as "protective straw granary caps" that mimic "the straw hats that young men wear to go to initiation duels or war combat" ("Tata Somba, Batammaliba Architecture at Its Height"). Similarly, during funerals, the house is dressed in youthful styles to remember the deceased at their most vital. As such, cowrie shells are often placed on the house or door to recall the donning of the cowrie shell at coming-of-age ceremonies. And perhaps most compelling is that "the Batammaliba word for 'house,' *takyenta*, is also the word for 'family'" ("Tata Somba, Batammaliba Architecture at Its Height"). The inclusion of the cowrie shell and the blending of human body and architectural structure in Leigh's *Brick House* makes clear how the sculpture alludes to Batammaliba architecture.

In addition to these aspects of Batammaliba architecture, Leigh also drew heavily from the architecture of the Mousgoum people. Specifically, *Brick House* refers to the *teleuk*, an integral piece of compound life and homestead architecture made from a mixture of grass, soil, and animal dung (Nelson 2). Like the Batammaliba people, the

Mousgoum people have deeply incorporated architecture into their society, and it often reflects their social relationships. Steven Nelson, an expert in Mousgoum architecture who did field work in Cameroon, argues that a *teleuk* is a way to build a subjectivity (6).[77] He writes, "To build a home is to build a discrete world, a stage for all of life's phases...home is inextricably tied to a sense of self and it is the source of the tales that we weave and the ways in which they are retold…" (18). In essence, home and self-possession are inseparable. In combining African homes with the physical forms of Black women, Leigh literally merges home and body, rather than metaphorizing them, which draws our attention to their intertwined relationship.

Furthermore, understanding the context of Mousgoum architecture uncovers more about this interconnection of home and body in Leigh's work. The placement and structure of the architectural dwelling of the Mousgoum people represent important social distinctions. The patriarch of the family has his own *teleuk* and his wives and male children (usually older than 15) have their own *teleukakay* (pl.). Set up in a circular compound with walls or thickets enclosing the area, the patriarch or the granary is at the center (14, 34). Whether this central building is the granary or the patriarch's *teleuk* does not matter because both are the property of the patriarch and represent his control and power. Both where the structure is physically located and in which direction the *teleuk* faces have cultural significance. The "entrances of Mousgoum family enclosures faced south" (22). Furthermore, "South" and "high" are the same Munjuk word – *amáy* – as are

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[77] Nelson completed interviews with many Mousgoum people including some of the masons in Pouss, Cameroon. His book also includes enormously helpful diagrams, drawings, photos, and a pronunciation guide for the Munjuk language. See Nelson, Steven. *From Cameroon to Paris: Mousgoum Architecture In & Out of Africa.* The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

"North" and "low" *azemay* (34). In regard to the semicircles of male/female homes: "the open (male) semicircle would be south, the closed (female) semicircle north. In hierarchical terms, to be south is to be in the privileged position" (34). Where Simone Leigh's *Brick House* is obviously female, she takes the Mousgoum position of power typically reserved for men as she faces south. Facing south is also significant because it's the direction from which African diasporic influences arrive – from the African nations themselves to the U.S. South.

Leigh's *Brick House,* like the Mousgoum people's *teleuk,* is a structural embodiment of Black peoples and their cultures. Nelson argues that in "revising and rebuilding the teleuk" the Mousgoum people "chang[e] [the teleuk] from merely a home or a place in which everyday life is lived to a mnemonic symbol, a repository of cultural patrimony and ancestral knowledge. It is the library that cannot burn" (174). In making *Brick House*, Simone Leigh creates that kind of cultural repository for people of the diaspora whose ancestral knowledge has been taken from them over generations. In erecting this kind of sculpture, which is both monumental in size and in theme, Leigh memorializes Blackness. Mousgoum poet Claude Abanga calls the house "illustrious eternal memory" (Abanga qtd. in Nelson 177). Nelson writes: "In the poem as in what can be called ancestral architecture, the understanding of the past, the utilization of old customs is a means of empowerment through agency as well as the reclamation and preservation of memory" (177). In *Brick House*, Leigh creates a structure that reclaims memory, preserves culture, and empowers Black women. She brings the cultural memory of Black peoples through architectural allusions to the U.S. where many of its enslaved daughters have been cut off from this knowledge. Nelson writes that "the teleuk not only

represent[s], but also become[s] memory, cultural heritage, and knowledge [itself]" (177). We could say the same of *Brick House*. As a monument to Black women and girls, she is not just representative of cultural heritage, memory, and knowledge, but she *is* cultural heritage, memory, and knowledge. In New York City, before *Brick House*, there was only one monument of a Black woman (Harriet Tubman) and only four permanent sculptures by Black women artists ("The Making of Brick House"). In placing *Brick House* on the High Line, Leigh emphasizes the Black woman's right to take up space and emphasizes her visibility in a public setting. In creating a structure that reflects so many Black cultures, Leigh creates a monument to Black subjectivity and creativity.

Nevertheless, we cannot forget that Leigh's structure also draws on the Mammy's Cupboard restaurant in Natchez, Mississippi. Built in 1939, the restaurant is a twenty-eight-foot-high building made in the shape of a woman wearing a hoop skirt. It was built to resemble a mammy figure and originally had white hair and a red head scarf with dark skin and bright red makeup reminiscent of minstrel imagery (Wilson). During the Civil Rights Movement, the restaurant was briefly repainted to resemble a Native American woman. Shortly thereafter, she was repainted again to lighten the skin tone to ethnic ambiguity. Nevertheless, the remaining hoop skirt and scarf recall the stereotypical mammy image. In creating a structure that draws not just on African architecture, but racist representation of Black women, Leigh demonstrates how Black female subjectivity has been informed in complex ways. There is freedom and power in the African heritage that she draws on. She makes clear that architecture is a way to embody, build, and embrace subjectivity. But in drawing on Mammy's Cupboard and naming her series after Linda Brent's garret, Leigh acknowledges that the legacy of slavery is deeply engrained

in the lives of Black women. And like Linda Brent's creative use of her garret, Leigh redefines this image into one that empowers Black women without erasing the challenges of their past.

Indeed, in Leigh's explanation for her Guggenheim exhibition title, *Loophole of Retreat*, she demonstrates the complexities of existing as a Black woman in oppressive architectural spaces. She observes how Black women repurpose and reclaim these spaces as she does with *Brick House*, stating:

> I chose the title "Loophole of Retreat" for my exhibition…because it's a description of a point of view of a woman who was incarcerated, while hiding in a cramped crawl space above her master's house. Yet she recognized that she held a certain kind of power, because she was able to observe so much. I was thinking about the ways women have stepped out of line and resisted, despite our de facto incarcerated states of being, and the way that has not been widely recognized….The point was to focus on our agency. Our point of view from a position of power. (Leigh qtd. in Wortham)

In other words, like the protagonists that I examine, who develop resiliency and alternative markers of maturity in the face of challenges as they journey toward adulthood, so does Leigh's *Brick House* demonstrate the resiliency, agency, and power of Black women even when they are oppressed. As she oversees Manhattan from 10th Avenue, facing South, *Brick House* occupies a position of high visibility and power. The words of Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, who wrote an essay to accompany the catalogue for *Loophole of Retreat*, offer greater clarity on the nuances and complexities contained in Leigh's work. Rhodes-Pitts states that Leigh's use of form allows for a multiplicity of meaning: "the pot may also be a woman, and the woman may also be a house, and that house may also be a cage. It may have a door, but perhaps one hovers at the threshold. Or its doors may be shut up – none may enter" (2). In other words, empowerment and

imprisonment can be contained in one of Leigh's structures as she seeks to demonstrate the spectrum of the Black female experience.

One of the much remarked upon aspects of Leigh's work, which is worth discussing in more detail here, is that her sculptures lack eyes. *Brick House*, despite being in a position of powerful surveillance, has no visible eyes. Rhodes-Pitts suggests that this omission indicates an inward gaze (2). Leigh, in an article for *The Brooklyn Rail*, discussed how she hopes the art world would allow more Black artists to gaze inward and create from that space. Rhodes-Pitts takes that concept of the inward gaze and expands on it. She writes:

> Maybe this same inward gaze accounts for the unseeing eyes of Leigh's busts, an ongoing series whose proliferation suggests a repopulation imperative. Typically appearing on intimate scales, these sculptures, which Leigh refers to as maquettes, suggest the plinth -- monumental figures visible across the great distance of an interior plain. Though without eyes, they are not without affect. How many emotions can be read from the tilt of a chin, the slope of a nose, and the many varieties of coiffure styled from hundreds of miniature hand-rolled porcelain rosettes? Sometimes they have no face; there is an abundance of roses where the face should be; maybe they have seen too much. Perhaps through their unseeing eyes we might comprehend the riddle of private and public and publics winding across Leigh's multiple arenas of engagement. Perhaps it is a riddle Leigh answers as easily as she sometimes offers and entry and elsewhere seals it up. (2)

While *Brick House* had not been created at this time, Rhodes-Pitts's assertion remains relevant. Given that the maquettes were made in the style of a plinth sculpture and that *Brick House* is a plinth sculpture, it's important to think about the relationship between viewer and sculpture. *Brick House* was meant to be viewed by the public. Even more so, as a monumental sculpture, she was meant to be seen from a great distance. Yet, with her lack of eyes, she never meets the gaze of the onlooker. Here, I recall Nazera Wright's assertion that Linda Brent's garret was a space of "mental freedom" (15). Perhaps, *Brick House*, in denying the viewer's ability to meet her gaze, privileges her own interiority.

Given Leigh's statement that her art is about Black women's "point of view from a position of power," we might surmise that *Brick House* has, and is about, a Black woman's point of view even without eyes we can meet. And whether that point of view is reflected inward or facing out, in omitting eyes from *Brick House*, and denying the viewer the ability meet her gaze, Leigh privileges the point of view of *Brick House*, an embodiment of Black female subjectivity, rather than the gazer. Like Linda Brent, she can experience a kind of freedom in her position of observation. Where Linda was hidden within the walls of her garret, *Brick House* is meant to be seen and viewed by the public. In hiding her gaze, Leigh allows *Brick House* a different kind of shelter – privacy in the midst of public visibility. As such, Leigh creates a nuanced sculpture, that is at once accessible and inaccessible. In so doing, she emphasizes *that* the interiority of Black women and the inward gaze to the Black woman's own subjectivity is more important than meeting the gaze of an onlooker.

I had the opportunity to see *Brick House* at the High Line in New York City and become one such onlooker. Five days before Breonna Taylor was shot to death in her apartment in my hometown, I stood looking up at Simone Leigh's sculpture and thought about what it meant to have a bronze bust of a Black woman displayed so prominently in an area known for housing inequity. It was March 7, 2020, and we had no idea what was coming our way in a matter of days. It had snowed on my 6:00 a.m. walk to Boston's Back Bay Amtrak station. I rode in the quiet car all the way to Penn Station looking out the window at the snow and marveling that I was finally heading to NYC for the first time. I met my sister at our hotel in SoHo where we dropped our bags before heading out for lunch at Chelsea Market. We planned to stay in the city for a few days. I had just

finished presenting at an academic conference in Boston and tacked on this trip to see *Brick House* for my dissertation research. March 7 was predicted to be the coldest day of our trip. The other days would turn out to be sunny and in the 50s and 60s – positively balmy for early March in Manhattan. We would walk through Central Park with our jackets over our arms and sit on the steps of the Met with the sun beaming down on us. But on that day, the wind cut through our coats and the cold numbed my ears. We could have picked a better day to visit the High Line but since *Brick House* was the reason I was in the city, I didn't want to wait.

Figure 4.4 Marlowe Eaves. Author looks up at Simone Leigh's *Brick House*. Author's personal collection.

The wind stung my face as I walked up the steps to the Spur. I felt reverence, awe, and beauty when I saw her. She is magnificent. I marveled as I sat watching her and observing people of a variety of races with different accents and languages interact with her. One woman called her beautiful. Many people stopped and took photos with her. Some hurried by. I watched several Black families interact with her with obvious joy. I experienced it all at a slight remove because my whiteness was decentered if not indicted. *Brick House* was made by a Black woman about Black women for Black women. As a white person, I know *Brick House* was not made for me. As such, my embodied experience was undoubtedly different from those who saw their Blackness reflected in Leigh's art.

This led me to wonder how the protagonists I examine in this dissertation would have experienced *Brick House*. What would it have meant for Selina or Audre, New York City natives, to see *Brick House* in their hometown? How would Maud Martha or Jojo react? My gut instinct is that they might have thought: *I've never seen myself like this before*. Nothing like her has existed in the U.S. before. *Brick House* is not only monumental in scale but also an actual monument. She memorializes Black life on such a scale that she cannot be easily ignored. She is a representation of Blackness in a world built on whiteness in the most famous city in the nation, and arguably, the world. Unlike the white monuments of Washington, D.C., which proclaimed the nation's foundations on white supremacy as they reflected the white population, *Brick House* offers inclusion to Black Americans as a representative reflection of Black female subjectivity. She is a house that embodies Blackness without oppressing it, unlike the houses that Selina and

Maud Martha grew up in. I imagine that in *Brick House* these protagonists might have seen the embodiment of belonging and self-possession for which they so struggled.

Figure 4.5 Margaret Kelly. Mirrored skyscrapers reflect *Brick House*. Author's personal collection.

Brick House serves as a mirror to these Black protagonists even as her reflection is mirrored in the skyscrapers that surround the High Line on all sides. This is reminiscent of Selina's experience seeing her reflection in a store window at the end of *Brown Girl, Brownstones* which I discussed in the first chapter. There, Selina recognizes how white people view her – as a commodity. Significantly, she comes to understand this in the reflection of a store window. But for *Brick House*, I think this mirrored reflection is more nuanced. She is reflected in the windows of skyscrapers that sell commodities, but

also house dwelling spaces. She is reflected in a space where Black people have been historically excluded and where their labor has been exploited.[78] Yet, in her face being mirrored a hundredfold, she takes up even more space. She asserts her right to be there, and her presence becomes inescapable.

As I reflect on my experience with *Brick House* in the days before Breonna Taylor's death, I want to acknowledge how the real and immediate stakes of studying property, legacies of slavery, and Black lives were made manifest in my hometown as I worked on this project. I was born and have lived most of my life in Louisville, Kentucky, where police murdered Breonna Taylor in her home on March 13, 2020. Since that May, my city has been under curfew twice. We experienced daily protests. We held vigils and marches and sit ins. There has been continued national media attention and occasional National Guard presence. But when I would take my daily walk with my dog around the neighborhood, it appeared as if nothing had happened – because in my predominantly white neighborhood, it hadn't. If you look at the old redlining maps from the New Deal Era, you will see that most neighborhoods in West and South Louisville are graded "definitely declining" and "hazardous" and areas in North and East Louisville are graded "best" and "still desirable."[79] To this day, East Louisville is predominantly white,

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[78] The High Line is built on an elevated rail line, a section of which was abandoned in the 1980s. It was originally the West Side Line. The railroads throughout the U.S. were built chiefly on the labor of enslaved Black people and Chinese immigrants. See Sayej, Nadja. "'Forgotten by Society' – How Chinese Migrants Built the Transcontinental Railroad." The Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jul/18/forgotten-by-society-how-chinese-migrants-built-the-transcontinental-railroad. Accessed 18 Oct. 2022.; Cavanaugh, Maureen. "The African-American Railroad Experience." KPBS Public Media, 23 Mar. 2010, https://www.kpbs.org/news/living/2010/03/23/african-american-railroad-experience.; Jefferson, Alison Rose. "The Transcontinental Railroad, African Americans and the California Dream." California Historical Society, 18 June 2019, https://californiahistoricalsociety.org/blog/the-transcontinental-railroad-african-americans-and-the-california-dream/.

[79] See *Mapping Inequalities: Redlining in New Deal America*. https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/#loc=12/38.233/-85.753&city=louisville-ky. Accessed 19 Sept. 2021.

and West Louisville is predominantly Black. My home is situated in Windy Hills – an affluent area in East Louisville. The specific neighborhood we live in is a few streets of townhomes and condos marketed toward older white Louisvillians. My grandparents own a townhome here and graciously have allowed my husband and me to live with them rent free while we finish our respective graduate degrees. We benefit from an accumulation of generational wealth that has been closed to Black Americans due to redlining and housing discrimination. My privilege of having free, secure, unpoliced housing as opposed to Breonna's rented policed apartment is part and parcel of the issues of that shape this dissertation. It is from this position of privilege that I have experienced the aftermath surrounding Breonna Taylor's death and the subsequent Grand Jury findings.

When I drove downtown in early June 2020, what my immediate neighbors are so insulated from was impossible to ignore. There was an armored vehicle two lanes over from me. I knew the National Guard was in town, but it was disconcerting driving side by side a vehicle of war in my hometown. As I drove down 3rd Street, my mobility aided by my whiteness, my access to a car, and the lack of police barricades on that side of downtown, I saw Breonna Taylor's name graffitied on buildings. There were boarded up windows from when the previous night's protests resulted in property damage. When I returned downtown several days later to march from Waterfront Park to the steps of the courthouse for Breonna's birthday vigil, I noticed "No Justice. No Peace." graffitied across underpasses. Here was a message literally written on architecture rather than metaphorically contained within it. There had been continuous nonviolent protest downtown for almost 200 days, but that was hardly national news. Instead, there had been national coverage of the "looting" and "violence" in Louisville. It is obvious that,

for many, the protection of property was, and is, more important than people. In addition to over-policing and excessive force on protestors in my city there has been widespread online vitriol about the harms of looting. And yet others have noted that the looters and rioters of the Boston Tea Party were called patriots; those white men destroyed plenty of property and history counts them heroes. Indeed, the hypocrisy of the call to protect property rings even more loudly when the same people are silent in the wake of the loss of Black life.

The white public's focus on the riots and protests themselves rather than the cause behind them recalls Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "The Other America" speech delivered months before his assassination, in which he said:

> America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear?…It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay.

In other words, while King didn't necessarily condone rioting, he understood it as outlet for the oppressed. While his words were spoken over fifty years ago, they could just as easily have been said about 2020's summer of riots and protests for Black lives. And again, the first order of condemnation should be for the conditions that sparked said riots: in this case, the unjust murder of a young Black woman. A riot disrupts "tranquility" (a peace that King calls a "stagnant complicity") in the pursuit of "positive peace" which

requires the presence of justice.[80] Indeed, perhaps the author of the underpass graffiti distilled King's message to its essence: "No justice. No peace."

In late September 2020, as we awaited the decision of the Grand Jury, Louisville was slowly shuttered. Boards were put up across businesses downtown. The police set up barricades to prohibit vehicular traffic around the epicenter of protest activity at Jefferson Square Park, which protestors had renamed Injustice Square Park. Management at the Target store in St. Matthews – a 5-minute drive from my home – chose to board up the building's windows and doors. All of this occurred days before the verdict was delivered. The boards and barricades began going up on Monday in the middle of the night. Then, we, the people of the city, waited, on edge, until Wednesday afternoon for a verdict from the Grand Jury. You could feel the tension in the city. My husband and I watched the coverage live in our living room that Wednesday afternoon. I was both angry and unsurprised when we heard that only one officer would be indicted and only on charges of wanton endangerment. The charges were not for the endangerment of Breonna Taylor's life, but for the lives of her white neighbors. Brett Hankison, one of the three officers delivering the warrant to Taylor's home, was indicted for the wanton endangerment of three white people. The upstairs neighbors also had bullets shot into their home. They were Black. No charges (Clark). Breonna Taylor was killed by the bullets shot into her home. No charges. The *threat* of white death afforded criminal

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[80] For more, read King's sermon "When Peace Becomes Obnoxious" delivered in 1956, in which he says, "Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tensions, confusion but it is the presence of some positive force—justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God." Fittingly, this sermon was first published in the *Louisville Defender*, the city's Black newspaper, by editor Frank Stanley on March 29, 1956. See Martin Luther King, Jr. "When Peace Becomes Obnoxious." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 11 Feb. 2015, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/when-peace-becomes-obnoxious.

charges, but actual Black death did not. The damage to white property warranted charges. The death of a Black woman did not.

As I watched the very architectural structures of my city shift in the aftermath of Breonna's death, as I joined in the protests, as I observed the jury findings that valued property above Black life, the process of writing my dissertation became something different from what I expected. I was not simply intellectually invested, but personally and emotionally engaged as well. What I had been studying in literature manifested in reality. I knew I wanted to write the kind of dissertation that mattered outside of the academy, but never did I expect that the landscape of my own community would be so affected in ways that entwined deeply with what I was writing about. The community response in Louisville, to occupy Thomas Jefferson Park and rename it Injustice Square Park, demonstrated how possessing a space when one cannot own it is still radically meaningful. The choice of private and government entities to board up their buildings showed how America's use of built environments and architectural structures is still predicated on race. It displayed how the nation, and my community, still values white property over Black people. Watching the jury treat threats to white property as a greater concern than the death of a young Black woman illustrated the ways in which our justice system is dismissive of Black life and how the futures of Black youth are continually under threat. In other words, as I analyzed and wrote about Black youth encountering challenges to adulthood in various architectural structures, I was struck by how the policing of a young Black woman's space resulted in her death, cut short her youth, and eliminated her future. The distance between literature and reality thinned, as my dissertation research revealed how the connections among property, possession, and

coming of age had implications far beyond the confines of the academy. As I transitioned from research to writing, the horror of Breonna's murder never quite left the city, and it never left me.

And so, as I come to close of this work, I am mindful of where we are in the pursuit of justice for Breonna Taylor. We are in a cultural moment that honors the work of Black women artists by placing them in prominent New York City spaces and yet still cannot mete out justice for a Black woman shot to death in her own home. Breonna Taylor's death in her own apartment demonstrates that subjectivity and home are inextricably tied together. It illustrates the ways in which white supremacist government structures continually find new methods to undermine and challenge the right of Black youth to grow old.

However, there have been movements toward justice since I began this dissertation in those early days of protest. The Louisville Police Department has been under investigation by the Justice Department for the last year. As of August 2022, four officers have had charges brought against them: "Federal prosecutors accused three officers of knowingly including false information in an affidavit used to justify the raid and a fourth officer of firing blindly into Ms. Taylor's apartment from outside…" (Bogel-Burroughs). That fourth officer is Brett Hankison, who was previously tried and acquitted by the state for wanton endangerment. Of the other three officers, Kelly Goodlett has already pled guilty for conspiracy. She helped another police officer falsify the warrant and then lied to cover it up. Officers Joshua Jaynes and Kyle Meany are also indicted for falsifying information to obtain the search warrant (Johnson). As of September 2022, we learned that Det. Sgt. Kyle Meany knew Breonna's boyfriend, Kenneth Walker, had a

concealed carry permit. Meany surveilled her apartment two days before Breonna was killed. Walker's presence lowered the justification for the warrant as Breonna's relationship with Walker, another man, lessened the chance that her ex-boyfriend would be in residence. Meany's knowledge Walker's presence and his permit would have changed how LMPD executed the warrant since the presence of a weapon would elevate the overall risk (Wolfson). The trials of all three officers were set for October 2022 but have since been indefinitely postponed to review new evidence (Elahi and Jumaa). Without the mass protests, without the occupation of Injustice Square Park, without the surge of the Black Lives Matter movement across the nation, these charges likely would not have been brought. I am grateful for this progress.

And yet, I am reminded that true justice would be Breonna Taylor, safe in her home with the right to grow old. As I carry this research into the future, I am newly determined of its relevance and importance. And I will continue to ask: how can Black youth achieve equal adulthood in 2022? And what architectural structures can we build – like *Brick House* – or refashion – like Thomas Jefferson Park to Injustice Square Park – to propel the nation toward justice and equality for its Black youth?

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Wright, Nazera Sadiq. *Black Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century*. University of Illinois Press, 2016.

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Instructor of Record, English & Writing Rhetoric and Digital Studies, 2015-22
Teaching Assistant, English, Fall 2018
Graduate Committee Representative, English Dept., 2017-18
English Graduate Student Organization, MA Vice President, 2015-16
Writing Center Consultant, Writing Center, University of Kentucky, 2014-15
Over the Mountain Journal, Birmingham, AL
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PRESENTATIONS

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"Gothic Girlhood: Intersecting Identities Across Gothic Traditions," Panel Organizer & Chair, Northeast Modern Language Association, Boston, MA, March 2020

"Liminal Subjectivities in the Gothic Landscapes of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*" Northeast Modern Language Association, Washington, D.C., March 2019

"Making the Ordinary, Extraordinary: Black Female Agency and the Common Object in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha"* South Central Modern Language Association, Dallas, November 2016

"Poetry as a Mode of Survival: The Role of Art and the Poet in W.H. Auden's *Another Time*" Midwestern Conference on British Studies, Detroit, Sept. 2015

PUBLICATIONS

Frymire, Margaret (contributing author). "Chapter 7: Argument." *Town Branch Writing Collection*, edited by Jim Ridolfo, Van-Griner, 2017, pp. 138-158.

HONORS & AWARDS

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Outstanding Literature TA, University of Kentucky, English Dept., 2018-19
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College of Arts & Sciences Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, Nominee, University of Kentucky, 2018-19
Conference Travel Award, University of Kentucky English Dept., 2018-19
Inclusive Teaching Pedagogies Community, University of Kentucky English Dept. Nominee, 2018
Excellence in Consulting, University of Kentucky Hemenway Writing Center, 2015