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Adding a Dimension: Illustrating Triple Consciousness Theory in the African American Literary Tradition

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Adding a Dimension: Illustrating Triple Consciousness Theory in the
African American Literary Tradition

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the way gender expands and nuances W.E.B. DuBois's double consciousness theory, which depicts the African American identity as a doubleness that is both American and Negro. Black feminist criticism's nuanced formulation of DuBois's formulation of Black identity allows the African American literary tradition to be seen through three lenses: an American, a Negro, and an African American's gender identity. In order to further contemporize the pre-existing Black feminist criticism, I examine Hurston, Brooks, and Morrison in the three time periods that followed DuBois's coining of double consciousness theory: (1) the Harlem Renaissance, (2) the Civil Rights Movement and (3) the Black Women's Renaissance. TCT not only contemporizes the African American literary tradition so that more voices are elevated through close readings on race *and* gender, but also informs how we should read the African American literature that is to come, especially after the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois published *The Souls of Black Folk* and introduced the famous line that stated that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (687). Just three short years into the twentieth century, DuBois already could pinpoint one of the biggest problems of an entire century: racism. As a Negro¹ man living in the United States during the post-emancipation era, he always looked at himself through the eyes of others. He carried a sense of two-ness with him and navigated the world with two souls, an American one and a Negro one, in a period that should have celebrated the freedom of African Americans.² Instead, new challenges like racial discrimination, Black voter suppression, and police brutality arose, even though the 14th amendment had been passed, granting citizenship to every African American. As

¹ After emancipation, Black Americans tended to reject both *negro* and *black* as part of the vocabulary of slavery, with *colored* becoming the preferred name instead. But neither of the earlier terms disappeared, and many Black writers, such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois, used *negro* and *black* as readily as *colored*.

² DuBois’s double consciousness theory was fully published in the chapter “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” in his 1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, as “a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, —this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging, he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face” (689-90).

groundbreaking as DuBois's double consciousness theory was, however, it was mostly informed by a masculinist perspective. This missing dimension in DuBois's theory is apparent to the 21st-century reader when DuBois only includes the pronoun "he," stating that the "Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness" (689). The pronoun "he" was an inclusive pronoun used in the late-19th and early-20th centuries meant to include all genders. The use of masculine pronouns had the intention of encompassing "all mankind," but in the 21st century, I argue that it overlooks the African American feminine gender identity, which was crucial in understanding the *whole* African American experience.

Although this masculinist perspective was rendered as universal at the time, it unwittingly excluded the Black feminine experience because it was created by a Black man, which meant that his experience (as well as the experiences of other Black men) was centered. This unwitting exclusion had dire consequences for Black women, as their experiences and voices were excluded from important literary traditions and movements. The criticism that followed DuBois's double consciousness theory gave Black male writers more room to publish and have their voices heard because they had the criticism to support their literature. For Black female writers, it took over 70 years for the official coining of Black women's studies and Black feminist criticism, but this did not mean that they were not contributing to the same literary traditions and movements as Black men. In this thesis, I argue that Black women writers used their literature as a form of remedy for the exclusion that they were facing before the 1970s. This thesis also examines the

way that people turn to literature to make sense of racism, oppression, and sexism, especially against African American women. With the support of contemporary critics of the literary traditions and movements that excluded Black women, I analyze autobiographies, poems, and excerpts from novels from Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Toni Morrison. The feeling of two-ness was not unfamiliar to a Black woman because she, too, was looking at herself through the eyes of others. Black women showed that African Americans navigated the world not with two souls, but with three: an American, a Negro, and their gender identity.

EXPANDING DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

Seventeen years after publishing *Souls*, DuBois published *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* to acknowledge Black women's experiences. He writes that "the uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause. When now, two of these movements—women and color—combine in one, the combination has deep meaning" (140). Though the phrase "deep meaning" was intended to expand DuBois's double consciousness theory, it only made the Black women experience even more shallow. Instead of recognizing Black women's experiences as an additional "problem" of the color line, their experiences became buried within the movement.

By continuing to use his own voice to push the "women and color" movements and attribute them to "deep meaning," DuBois actually provided a shallow perspective to the challenges of these movements with his masculinist perspective. Feminist critics like Celena Simpson and Joy James critique this statement and explain how DuBois never

truly follows through with an analysis of the “deep meaning” of Black women’s lives and experiences. Together they state:

More than a lack of analysis, DuBois’s failure to lend specificity to Black women’s lives in his writing, and failure to grant credit to political and intellectual Black female contemporaries when it was due, have the effect of erasing and silencing Black women’s existence as real, uniquely situated, political agents...James makes the claim that ultimately a “masculinist worldview influences his writing to diminish his gender progressivism.” She further states that DuBois “holds onto a masculinist framework that presents the male as normative.” (51)

DuBois’s attempt at including women in his theories came two decades too late and did not speak to all women. Rather than calling in Black women to speak about their experiences in order to expand his double consciousness to triple consciousness, DuBois speaks for them and denies them an opportunity to speak for themselves. Because of DuBois’s inevitable masculinist perspective, it is crucial that Black women are given the opportunity to speak about themselves and their experiences rather than having their texts boxed into the widely accepted double consciousness theory when interpreted by today’s literary scholars.

Even though DuBois’s recognition of “women and color” in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* was not officially spelled out until 1920, Black women writers were writing at the intersection of race and gender long before. Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech, “Ain’t I A Woman,” can be considered as an early effort of theorizing Black feminism.

Truth asserts:

I could work as much and eat as much as a man— when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain’t I a woman?

In this assertion, Truth points to how Black women were not heard compared to Black men, even though they were going through similar hardships. This lack of recognition was also not unfamiliar to ex-slave Harriet Jacobs.

Jacobs³ was writing at the intersection of gender, or triple consciousness theory, before she was even given the language that DuBois had in the 20th century. Jacobs also saw herself “through the relation of the [white] world,” *and* also through the relation of the Black male world. She reminds us that slavery was not only about Black men in shackles; it was also about Black women who were raped by their enslavers. Throughout Jacobs’s slave narrative, she not only becomes a voice for African Americans but also a champion for African American women. Jacobs’s narrative is one of the earliest examples of triple consciousness in African American literature. Long after Jacobs, Black women writers continued writing at the intersection of nationality, race, and gender and contributed significantly to these social progressions. Since the inception of African American literature, Black women writers fiercely took on the task of writing about nationality, race, and gender. This task proves to be incredibly difficult, especially when Black women writers were doing it before the support of Black feminist criticism in 1970s and 1980s. Many other Black women writers followed Jacobs in the tradition of writing with a sense of three-ness and the world started to see this after DuBois’s coining of double consciousness theory.

³ Through intentionally savvy language and clever word play, African Americans proved how slave narratives functioned as autobiography, and one of the most well-known narratives is Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is another well-known slave narrative, but it came almost 20 years after Douglass’s slave narrative.

By challenging DuBois's masculinist perspective, I do not intend to discredit his advocacy for Black women during the 20th century. In fact, I agree with feminist scholars like Bettina Aptheker who writes:

DuBois's contribution to the struggle for woman's emancipation was threefold. He originated theoretical ideas on the nature of women's oppression and liberation...gave practical assistance and support to the women's suffrage movement...and focused special attention on the particular suffering of Black women, as well as to their unique contributions to both racial and sexual liberation. (79)

DuBois's support for women's liberation, otherwise known as feminism in the 21st century, was clear, and he has texts like "The Damnation of Women" to show for it. Instead of brushing over DuBois's advocacy for Black feminism, I demonstrate that it was impossible for DuBois to write about the Black woman experience as someone who identified as a Negro man during the time. Rather than criticize DuBois's double consciousness theory for how it lacks the lens of gender, I will prove how contemporary Black feminist criticism can instruct 21st century readers on how to read for gender in the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights movement—two periods that did not yet have a critical audience for Black feminist criticism. Black feminist criticism from the 1970s and 1980s—a criticism that should be familiar to the 21st century reader—complicates DuBois's earlier on in the African American literary tradition. One crucial term that came out of the 1970s and 1980s was Alice Walker's term of "womanism."

Walker first introduced the term "womanism" in 1979 in her short story "Coming Apart." The short story "Coming Apart" is part of Walker's collection of essays in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. "Coming Apart" describes a couple distant over pornography and the treatment of Black women. Through the wife character, Walker uses

texts by Audre Lorde, Luisah Teish, and Tracey A. Gardner to teach the husband about the struggles of Black women in both the context of pornography and in society at large. “The Black man who finds himself ‘enjoying’ pornography of this sort faces a split in himself that allows a solidarity of gender but promotes a rejection of race” (Walker 186). While many Black women may have considered pornography progressive and a way to get on an equal playing field with white women because both women, regardless of race, are “working in a house of ill-repute,” the Black woman still ends up on the bottom as the “white woman’s maid” (Walker 186). Instead of depending on the illusion of Black women being equal to white women in pornography, Walker invents the term womanism to give Black women a term made for and by them. She claims that “a ‘womanist’ is a feminist, only more common” (Walker 187) and the “more common” part of the definition includes Black women.

The part of the definition that I will use as a specific mode of triple consciousness theory comes from Walker’s elaborated definition of womanism:

instinctively pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in Black women’s culture. It comes (to me) from the word ‘womanish’ a word our mothers used to describe and attempt to inhibit, strong outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: “You acting *womanish!*” An advantage of using “womanist,” is that because it is from my own culture, I needn’t preface it with the word ‘Black’... since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface ‘feminist’ with white, since the word ‘feminist’ is seen as coming out of white women’s culture. (346)

Walker’s “Coming Apart” uses the framing device of a struggling married couple to show how the womanist ideas expressed in Lorde’s, Teish’s, and Gardner’s texts illuminate the struggles of Black women specifically. Moreover, womanism provided

heterosexual and Black lesbians with a feminist term that was racialized and encompassing of all their intersecting racial and gendered identities. Introducing womanism was critical for the inclusion of all identities, including queer and transgender, in the feminist movements, especially when these movements primarily centered white women's voices. Almost 100 years later, DuBois's color line quote transformed from "the uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line" into Walker's "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender," which comes from Walker's notes section of her *Collected Essays, Prose, and Stories* (346). Unlike double consciousness and feminism, Walker sets up Black women with a term that was written by and for them during the Black women's literary renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s.

In order to become part of this literary discourse, Black women and people of other Black gendered identities sought out new ways in which they could input their voices into the African American literary tradition. This thesis will illustrate the different strategies that Black women used to mold their literary traditions and movements and make sure they were not excluded. I show this through the creative structures in which Black women from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black women's literary renaissance wrote. The end of the 20th century proved to be a fruitful period for bringing the "gender problem" to light. Although it seemed like there was a bigger focus on gender with the coining of womanism and even Crenshaw's intersectionality,⁴ Black women writers were attending to the issues of womanism and intersectionality long before the official coining

⁴ Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw first wrote about intersectionality in her essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracists Politics" (1989).

of these terms. In each chapter/time period, I will show how Black women were trying to offer representations of their experiences at the intersection of nationality, race, and gender. By highlighting Black writers who noted the issues of both race *and* gender before the coining of these terms in the 1970s and 1980s, I illuminate their ability to construct narratives about their own experiences, even when they were up against the limits of language that were available during their time. While the first chapter of this thesis will focus on femininity, I want to clarify that gender can operate as “feminine,” “masculine,” “non-binary,” and “genderqueer.” I start with Black women, though, and the heavy triple-edged sword that they carried at the start of the Harlem Renaissance. The following chapters explore how the support of other Black women advocates, the invention of new modes of writing, and, most importantly, the illustration of how their sense of three-ness culminates into triple consciousness theory.

CHAPTER TWO: HARLEM RENAISSANCE

As the United States moved further into the 20th century, it became apparent that one's location could determine one's circumstance, and this was particularly life-changing for African Americans after slavery. I begin this thesis with the Harlem Renaissance because it was a period of convergence in modernizing the African American identity. This period of convergence resulted in an explosion of African American art and literature, but the majority of contributors were Black men. The unintentional exclusion of Black women's voices from about 1910 to 1930 was due to the Black literary criticism being grounded in masculinist perspectives. In order to show the unintentional consequences of centering Black male voices, I start by contextualizing the Harlem Renaissance as a period that stemmed from the Great Migration. Then, I introduce the main artists and writers during the time like Langston Hughes and Alain Locke. In order to show the unintentional exclusion of Black women writers during the Harlem Renaissance, I bring in contemporary critical voices. These critical voices include Melissa Prunty Kemp, Houston Baker Jr., and Stephanie Knadler who unveil how the New Negro—the transformed modern African American identity during the time—could have centered stories about the New Negress—a reality of domestic abuse that many Black women faced. The unintentional consequences of excluding Black women from the

Black perspective set up an American audience that was readily available for African American art and literature, but it was through two lenses: an American and a Negro rather than three. All in all, this period showed just how the Black identity became even more nuanced along the lines of location, nationality, race, and gender.

The North promised better jobs, an escape from segregation, and an opportunity for more civil liberties, especially for the Black soldiers who fought in the war themselves.⁵ The rise in lynching, segregation, and blatant racism drove African Americans out of the South and towards the North and Midwest. This massive relocation of one million Southern African Americans, also known as the Great Migration, was set off by World War I in 1910. *One-Way Ticket: Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series* gives an all-encompassing view of this movement in 60 dynamic paintings, providing a visual representation of the story of the Great Migration from the 1910s to the 1930s. This virtual gallery depicts African Americans at the railroad stations buying tickets to the North and includes important snippets of history that invigorate the paintings.⁶ Most notably, however, Lawrence highlights women in his series, showcasing that the United States was moving into an era more conscious of gender identities beyond normative masculinity.

⁵ Black soldiers were amongst those returning home from World War I.

⁶ Lawrence's paintings in his "Migration Series" Collection are referred to as panels because he narrates the Great Migration both in images and words. Each painting comes with captions and additional pieces of history relevant to the images. The written history of these paintings could not have been done without the help of Lawrence's wife, Gwendolyn Knight.

Panel 57 from the *One-Way Ticket* exhibition sheds light on the women who were one of the last groups to leave the South during the Great Migration. In this painting, we can visualize the Black female worker who “had to cobble together odd jobs to make ends meet” (see Figure 1). Lawrence clearly proves his dedication to highlighting the Black women’s experience in Panel 57 and further shows that their experience was different than their male counterparts. While most migrant men sought out industrial cities like Pittsburgh and Detroit, single young Black women looked for cities that offered employment possibilities besides domestic service. New York City, for example, offered a variety of employment prospects—opportunities that had an imbalance of the sexes. Beyond Lawrence’s 60 dynamic paintings, the *One-Way Ticket* exhibition also includes a Perspectives section, which collects poems and readings by ten contemporary poets who contributed to the Migration Series Poetry Suite. One poem, “Migration Portraiture” (2011) by Nikky Finney reads:

North

“...*is the only way to treat it.*” *Jacob Lawrence*

Mama hammers hot steel pretending she is a man in a heavy heat suit. Her baldhead and sexless hands pay for coal and bread and new books. On the new fire escape she whispers and smokes, *I didn’t come all this way to clean and polish another white house*, then asks me to memorize her new northern words, *Flying & Dutchman*. (60)

The last stanza of Finney’s poem paints a different experience for Black women and the struggles they endured when migrating away from the South. It is clear that Mama knew that the only way for her to avoid domestic work was by taking on the role of a man or doing what would have been considered the work of a man. All in all, the *One-Way Ticket* exhibition was one of many examples of how

African Americans were publicly recognized for their creative productions. This stanza, in particular, provides only a quick glimpse of the Black woman experience during the Great Migration and there were many statistics that continue affirming the imbalance of the sexes.

In Jacqueline Jones's book, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, she affirms that "between 1935 and 1941...only 3 percent of all WPA [Work Progress Association] workers were Black women, although a higher—and in the South, much higher—proportion of all female family heads on relief were Black" (183). Jones also points out that there were few well-educated Black women who received job assignments that were related to their talent and professional experience. African American writers, poets, and artists were finally acknowledged for their creative experience, but this perception was dangerous, according to Melissa Prunty Kemp's 2013 "African American Women Poets, the Harlem Renaissance, and Modernism: An Apology." Kemp states that the danger lies in "the smothering, if often unspoken, requirement that all African American literature, art, music, and theatrical production of the period espouse racial uplift" (789). This danger was unveiled by African American women writers during the Harlem Renaissance because the topics they focused on were not only concerned with racial uplift. They were also concerned with the specific issues pertinent to Black women, as we learned in Mama hammers desire to work outside of domesticity. Many Black women writers highlighted their unique experiences of moving through the world with their sense of three-ness, which was unsurprising because they were still not being uplifted due to their gender.

Despite Lawrence's best efforts to highlight the African American experience, their voices were still overshadowed by the masculinist perspective.

Kemp further states that many texts written during the Harlem Renaissance centered on African American male figures, and only occasionally mentioned women in passing. The focus on African American male figures was due to the vast majority of publications coming from male writers. Although there was an explosion of Negro artistry in Harlem,⁷ better captured as the New Negro Renaissance, it was apparent that this was an explosion of a specific gendered experience. The names of Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and Claude McKay became synonymous with the movement. Locke's *The New Negro*, in particular, was a pivotal text that clearly outlined African Americans' transition from an identity based on slavery to one found in creative freedom. *The New Negro*, which was published in 1925, is an anthology full of essays, poems, and works of fiction that presented African Americans with a modern identity and a flowering of art, music, and writing rather than enslavement, servility, and chains. It

⁷ While the broad literary and artistic period is called the "Harlem Renaissance," the period took place in several cities like New York, Chicago, Washington DC, Detroit, Boston, and even Paris. According to Locke, Harlem had a huge role in this transformation. It was an urban center that had the capacity to change the public opinion because it was filled with a diversity of people like "peasants, students, businessmen, professional men, artists, poets, musicians, adventurers, and workers" (Locke 975-76). Diversity spanned class, ethnicity and nationality, occupation, and education. It was inevitable that the diversity of people in Harlem would produce an atmosphere crowded with creativity; however, the name "Harlem Renaissance" is misleading. Many scholars saw the city of Harlem as the epicenter for powerful historical narratives and the city where the artistic talent of African Americans flourished. In addition to recognizing the danger of equating Negro artistry with racial uplift, feminist scholars also identified the misconception of the name "The Harlem Renaissance" because it assumes that this explosion of art took place in *one* neighborhood. In fact, feminist scholars have argued in favor of Locke's broader term of the "New Negro Renaissance" because this would allow the inclusion of other important centers of African American artistic activity. Cities like Washington, Philadelphia, and Boston were also fertile spaces that displayed other types of negro artistry like music. New Orleans, above all, is to thank for the invention of jazz.

humanized African Americans in an artistic light, such as when Locke highlighted

McKay's poem, "To the Intrenched Classes," written in 1922:

Mine is the future grinding down to-day
Like a great landslip moving to the sea,
Bearing its freight of debris far away
Where the green hungry waters restlessly
Heave mammoth pyramids, and break and roar
Their eerie challenge to the crumbling shore. (979)

McKay's artistic talent is shown not only in his ability to write poems, but also in his natural ability to paint a vivid picture of what he wrote. The style of McKay's writing also exemplified how Negro writers were taking modernist approaches to writing and making it their own. Houston Baker Jr. attests that modernism was "exclusively Western, preeminently bourgeois, and optically white" (66) in his 1987 preface to *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. African American writers did not merely create art for an existing movement but in fact took that pre-existing literary trend that was not originally intended for them and made it their own.

Black intellectuals like DuBois were now wondering what it meant to move through the world with an identity that was both free and modern. They were grappling with their "newfound" freedoms within the post-emancipation era—a fertile period for the continuation, and even up-leveling of African American art, culture, and literature. Showcasing talent and creativity was key to the reconstruction of African American identities. As Locke articulates in his essay, Negroes needed to be defined as prosperous beings without an association to their past. The "most creditable record of fifty years of freedom, requires that the Negro of today be seen through other than the dusty spectacles of past controversy" (Locke 975). Locke strongly believed that these tools transformed

the old identity of being a slave to a new, liberated person. Literature was an essential tool that showcased African Americans' talent so that they could revive their identity during the Harlem Renaissance.

Nonetheless, the focus on the Negro artistry tended to have mainly male authors, which meant that the masculinist perspective was unwitting. While the African American identity was recognized as more artistic in nature, African American women were facing a different reality. African American male writers may have been applauded for writing at the intersections of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, but they still unintentionally left out the Black women experience. Furthermore, the broader term of "New Negro Renaissance" would have captured additional Black women writers all over the country who would have located Black women in these communities. Kemp's "African American Women Poets, the Harlem Renaissance, and Modernism: An Apology" once again reminds us how Black female poets that "show[ed] various areas and levels of discontent with womanhood, Blackness, and love" (796) were missing from the texts that were popular during this time.

THE NEW NEGRESS

During the Harlem Renaissance, the African American literary tradition was well aware of the Langston Hugheses, the Alain Lockes, the James Weldon Johnsons, and Charles Chesnutts, especially because they were crucial writers in imagining the "New Negro." In 1987, Gloria T. Hull's wrote *Color, Sex & Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* to explain how the Harlem Renaissance as a literary period discriminated against women's literature in favor of male writing giants like Hughes,

Locke, Johnson, and Chesnutt. Hull further emphasizes how often these women wrote in all genres in order to expand their publishing possibilities. While the emergence of the “New Negro,” was moving toward a sense of three-ness through the brief mention of gender and sexuality, it was still functioning as double consciousness. African American male voices still dominated the literary marketplace and stories came from their point of view, and this was most obvious in their unintentional exclusion of Black women’s experiences in literature. Although Black women were also questioning what it meant to claim an identity that was both free and modern, their lives were faced with a different reality.

The “private” lived experiences of Black women were different from the public image of the “New Negro,” and, in fact, these women were known as the “New Negresses,” or the “women with knives” (99) according to Stephanie Knadler. Instead of focusing the transition from the “Old Negro” to the New Negro—a transition that centers the Black male experience—the New Negress tells the stories of domestic violence and the “women with knives” who defended themselves. Though this image sounds “dangerous,” the “women with knives” were actually the victims of domestic violence and were a reoccurring figure in the headlines and press during the Harlem Renaissance.

In addition to excluding the stories about the New Negress, the majority of the stories of the Great Migration did not include the “hidden history surrounding the specific conditions, problems, dislocations, and dreams of Black women during the Migration” (Knadler 100). This lifestyle is highlighted by Harlem Renaissance authors like Nella Larsen, whose novels illustrated that the Harlem Renaissance was very different for

women. Furthermore, Larsen shed light on those who not only were straddling the line between two intersections of identity but were also straddling the line between two racial identities themselves—between being both Black and white. Larsen’s *Passing* reflects the ways in which biracial identities operate along the lines of gender, and the urban Great Migration period is explored through the eyes of a biracial Black and white identity.

Knadler claims that:

The problem for Larsen in *Passing* was how to code a transgressive, undocile Black female body without re-inscribing it within, without its partaking of, the equally tyrannical subjectivity of the tabloid’s jealous “woman with knives.” To claim a space for the Black woman to speak through the “monstrous” images of the tabloids would finally only reinforce a false misogynistic consciousness circulated within the Harlem Renaissance. (109)

The trope of passing on top of the “woman with knives” image shows the complexities of creating a female African American identity in post-emancipation.

Some African Americans passed ⁸ during the Harlem Renaissance to overtake the limits of their own social identities and adhere to another identity. Racial passing was very much in play during the period of slavery, as many children of Black women slaves had biological white slave owners as fathers. The ability to pass illuminated the additional intersections of people’s lived experience in relation to their racial identities as the African American identity pushed to modernize itself in post-emancipation. The New Negro Renaissance finally provided a space for African Americans to depict these experiences in their writings. Identities were not just made in isolation; they were created

⁸ The term “passing” comes from the Latin verb *passare*, “to move on,” but in this context, it can be defined as an overtaking of the limits of one’s own social identity and dissolving of some of its important features with the purpose of adhering to another identity. Passing can be seen through facets other than race like gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, or age.

in tandem with other systems of belief that were outside of isolation, and, in this case, they include the monstrous images of the New Negress attached to them.

Because of various racial codes, society assumed that skin color determined race. Questions during this time period now shifted to, how does looking like one race and being another complicate the idea of triple consciousness? How does “looking at oneself through the eyes of others” hold with race being ambiguous, such as the instance of passing? The trope of passing had specific implications for all African Americans during this time period. James Weldon Johnson is one Harlem Renaissance writer who sought to question his own identity as a modern African American and put DuBois’s double consciousness to work. The narrator in his 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* floats between being Black and white, until eventually he leaves his Black roots altogether. Due to the narrator’s light skin color, he is able to continually straddle the line of double consciousness and is given the choice of where he wants to stand. In his ability to do so, he not only distances himself from the biased operation of white society, but also escapes the intense oppression of the African American race. In other words, he gets to pick which race he wants to claim. I bring in Johnson’s text as an example of one of the many Black men writers during the time whose voice was prioritized. Once again, DuBois’s inevitable masculinist perspective overshadows the Black female’s experience in being biracial, which is why Larsen’s voice was critical in the Harlem Renaissance.

The literary trope of passing becomes even more complicated through Larsen’s narrator, who performs racial passing in tandem with her feminine identity. Irene

Redfield is the narrator of *Passing* and is an olive-skinned woman who often passes as a white. She uses her ability to defy the margins of a Black woman. She is successful when adopting the characteristics, manners, and performances of a white woman. Even though Irene has successfully passed as a white woman many times, she still experiences the internal conflict as described by DuBois's double consciousness theory. There is one instance where Irene passes as a white woman in the Drayton hotel, but she realizes that another set of eyes is watching her: another white-appearing woman. As she is self-conscious about her passing abilities in the eyes of a white-appearing woman, Irene:

laughed softly, but her eyes flashed. Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that there before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro? Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they asserted that they were able to tell; and by most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot...Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. (1085)

Her internal thoughts are akin to the thought process of double consciousness, but there is an added dimension of gender. Irene views herself through three lenses as she performs a specific type of racial and gendered identity. The introspection of Irene comes out, as she is constantly looking at herself through the eyes of white society, white women, and her own eyes to determine how she is perceived by the world. Larsen's construction of Irene's character pushes readers to even think about how passing makes one hyper-vigilant about how they move through the world. However, race becomes obscure, and femininity is the determining factor in the way that she can pass.

Irene's thoughts show that biracial women experienced triple consciousness. She was not only bound by her race, but also had her gender to take into consideration.

Though this narrative continues putting the concept of passing and triple consciousness side by side, it also brings out gender as an important facet of identity. Irene's character works to create a new identity for women who can pass and does not constrain this ability to a male character. The Negro woman had a similar yet different understanding of double consciousness because of the extra layers of her identity. As Irene claims, "it was enough to suffer as a woman, as an individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was brutality and undeserved" (1089). All in all, Larsen foregrounds an identity to biracial people. This biracial identity, as seen in Larsen's imaginative writings, can get messy, confusing, and be easily misconstrued. In the case of Irene, however, her gender is fixed, but her race is fluid. In this sense, gender is not just accounted for, it's anchoring and visible while her biracial identity fluctuates. African American women characters in imaginative writings experience triple consciousness. Black women typically are not only bound by their race, but also by their gender. But for Irene, what happens when one's race is not Black or white, but both? Larsen was joined in expressing this layered identity by many other Harlem Renaissance writers during this time.

Marita Bonner is another author who revealed the experiences that Black women faced, and her 1925 essay, "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored," reflects ways in which Black women operate along the lines of both gender and race. She expresses the "negative conditions that we [colored women] face in America" in short, chopped-up paragraphs. The start of one paragraph reads, "Why unless you talk in staccato squawks—brittle as seashells—unless you 'champ' gum..." (Bonner 1267). This excerpt

displays the stereotypes of the Black feminine gender constructed as animalistic, stupid, and impolite, which were attributes that were not bound to only one gender. Most notably, Bonner's use of "staccato squawks" mimics the way society was making fun of Black American's speech. This speech was also known as the "Black idiom," which was mastered by another underrepresented Black woman writer during the time, Zora Neale Hurston.

In spite of her book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, being well-known in the 21st century, Hurston remained "one of the most significant unread authors in America" says Robert Hemenway in Alice Walker's introduction. As an author of two minor classics and four major books, Hurston could have been discovered earlier, but it took a "niece"⁹ like Walker to revive the interest in the life and work of Hurston. In fact, Walker dedicated an essay, "Looking for Zora,"¹⁰ to describe Zora's hometown. The essay begins with the astonishing fact that Hurston's grave was not marked with her name. This realization pushed Walker to learn more about Hurston's childhood and how she would stop anyone on the street to "measure [their] head with a strange-looking, anthropological device..." (13). Although Hurston was mentioned in Locke's *The New Negro*, her voice was heard through Locke's writing, which shows that even when Black women's voices are present, they are often mediated by Black men.

⁹ Walker went to the hometown of Hurston to get to know Hurston from people that possibly knew her growing up. She "didn't inspire foot-dragging in people who might know something about Zora they're not sure they should tell..." so she decided to "profoundly lie" and claim she was Hurston's niece in "Looking for Zora" (10).

¹⁰ "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" was first published in *Ms.* magazine in 1975, which then was later titled, "Looking for Zora."

While Locke works to explain the grounding of Negro artistry, Hurston demonstrates the writing inventions of the African Americans in the work itself. For example, Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" is a drama that coins her term "Angularity," which is "a dancing art form that causes everything the African American touches to "become angular" (1053). Hurston goes into detail about angularity by stating:

After adornment, the next most striking manifestation of the Negro is Angularity. Everything that he touches becomes angular. In all African sculpture and doctrine of any sort we sort of find the same thing.

Anyone watching Negro dancers will be struck by the same phenomenon. Every posture is another angle. Pleasing, yes. But an effect achieved by the very means which a European strives to avoid. (1053)

The notion of angularity creates room for culture to be shown in a fluid way. This is an accomplishment that is essential to acknowledge as part of African American history because it displays an act of power. Hurston continued looking for ways the African American woman could display acts of power through creative modes of expression.

Hurston created new modes of expression that specifically empowered the African American woman, and this was especially true in her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. *Their Eyes* tells the story of Janie Crawford, who is described through words of her grandmother in the beginning of the novel. The story of Janie begins in Black idiom, for some of the first lines of the novel read, "Ah ain't never seen mah papa. And Ah didn't know 'im if Ah did. Mah mama neither" (Hurston 18). Later, Janie's grandmother reveals that she had to raise Janie because her mother was raped by a white man and died later. Hurston preferred the term Black idiom to Black dialect because it emphasizes the common culture Black people shared with their mainly white

readers. Cheryl Wall was another contemporary Black feminist critic who elevated the voices of Black women writers, especially Hurston. According to Wall's *Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook* that was published in 2000, Hurston's project was to "demonstrate that Black Americans created a culture of their own, one that might not have been appreciated if judged by the standards of dominant society" (9). Today, many Black women writers are repeating, imitating, or revising their narrative strategies as seen in Bonner's "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored." This new set of writings would have been impossible without Walker reviving Hurston's work.

Most of all, Hurston's *Their Eyes* is a novel that represents women's exclusion from power, particularly from the power of oral speech. Mary Helen Washington in Wall's casebook states that "when the voice of the Black oral tradition is summoned in *Their Eyes*, it is not used to represent the collective Black community but to invoke and valorize the voice of the Black *male* community" (28). Janie is one example of how Black women are barred from participation in the culture's oral tradition. By the end of the novel, Janie goes through three husbands and faces different types of domestic abuse with each of them. The narrative of the New Negress rings loud and clear through Janie's relationships.

Janie suffers from emotional abuse with her first husband, Logan Killicks, who is chosen by her grandmother because she hopes they will inherit his 60 acres. Logan constantly reminds Janie that "[her] Grandma and me myself [Logan] done spoilt yuh now..." (Hurston 33), even though he forces her to do labor with him on the 60 acres of

land. Eventually, Janie is tired of her marriage with Logan because it lacks true love and runs away. After leaving Logan, Janie finds her second husband, Jody Starks, a Black man who hopes to become a “big voice” as the mayor and store owner of an all-black town. The only real reason why Logan’s voice becomes big is from cutting off Janie’s voice and never allowing her to speak in public. “No matter what Jody did, she [Janie] said nothing. She had learned how to talk some and leave some. She was a rut in the road” (Hurstun 92). The removal of Janie’s voice was telling of how Black women’s experiences were not highlighted during the Harlem Renaissance. Not only were Black women’s voices unheard in the Harlem Renaissance, but they also were being cut off in their lived experiences. Hurston’s novel was important because it portrayed the private but very real experiences that Black women faced in their relationships at home. Because this was an issue mainly affecting Black women, it was impossible for Black men to write about it.

In addition to taking away Janie’s speech, Jody also verbally abused her, making her a victim of emotional abuse. While Janie’s second marriage does not result in the need to protect herself physically from Jody, Hurston alludes to the image of the woman with knives and comments on the perceived danger of Black women doing “manly things.” In one passage from Hurston’s *Their Eyes*, Janie is teased about how she does not know how to use a knife:

“Looka heah, Brother Mayor, whut yo’ wife [Janie] done took and done.” It was cut comical, so everybody laughed at it. “Uh woman and uh knife—no kind of uh knife, don’t b’long tuhgether.” There was some more good-natured laughter at th expense of women. (95)

The scene confirms the belief that knives should only be handled by men, and if they are handled by women, the women are ridiculed. I argue that this scene also shows the fear that men will face if a woman is “tuhgether” with a tool that is meant to stay in a man’s hand. If women handle “men’s tools,” or if a woman “acts” like a man, then they are just as powerful as them and Janie proves this with her last marriage. For Jody, however, Janie hardly shows any remorse when Logan dies, and eventually tries to find her voice again with her third husband.

In Janie’s last marriage, she finds herself in a relationship with a man that seemed as sweet as his name, at least in the beginning, named Tea Cake. Eventually, Janie becomes a victim of domestic abuse once again. “Being able to whip her [Janie] reassured him [Tea Cake] in possession...he just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss” (Hurstons 176). This passage is then followed with a disturbing conversation between Tea Cake and Sop-de-Bottom, who is a sugar cane worker:

Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man. Uh person can see every place you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, neither. Take some uh dese ol’ rusty Black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn’t tell you hit ’em. Dat’s de reason Ah done quit beatin’ mah woman. You can’t make no mark on ’em at all. Lawd! wouldn’t Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don’t even holler. She jus’ cries, eh Tea Cake? (176)

The scene of Janie getting whipped because she was a Black woman ties back to slavery. In this case, Black women were especially prone to domestic abuse because their dark skin color hid the marks left on them by their abusers, justifying the violence against Black women. This abuse eventually drives Janie to desperate measures to stop the

domestic violence, but instead of being a “woman with knives,” who cuts her abuser, she shoots Tea Cake with a gun.

This concept of gendering the “New Negro” was picked up by authors well after the Harlem Renaissance because ongoing violence seemed to be tied to the construction of Black gender identity. Nina Maria Roşcan’s 2018 article, “The Struggle of the Black Intellectual with Race and Gender Representation” compares theories of racial and gender representation in African American literature from theorists like W.E.B. DuBois, Audre Lord, and Maya Angelou. In the process of comparing these theorists, Roşcan perceives differences in lines of thoughts and contemporary views. Additionally, Roşcan’s article takes time periods into consideration because they were crucial to understanding the cultural movements that were inspired by these Black intellectuals. One important period that Roşcan examines is the Harlem Renaissance. Roşcan begins her article by defining the Black intellectual as a “special type of scholar” who “completes the missing parts of history with his/her insights” (4). This complexity formed by the intersection of this emerging modern context and the “New Negro” made the African American identity more dimensional after the Great Migration.

All in all, *Their Eyes* was published almost ten years after the stock market crash of 1929. According to Wall, this is also the date most often given as the end of the Harlem Renaissance (19). The Harlem Renaissance was a rebirth of literature that provided a space for African Americans to express themselves, and also made more room for all voices. Art gives the opportunity to move from passive identities to active identities. Rather than be seen as victims of an oppressed history, African Americans

needed to be participants who create art. Negro artistry does not pity their identity like the period of slavery might have; instead, it empowers it and humanizes them as creative people. Larsen and Hurston each add dimension to the African American consciousness, but together they show the unique characterizations of triple consciousness in their imaginative writings. These authors prove that this renaissance was more than a literary movement; it was a crucial time for African Americans to reimagine their racial and gendered identity. Thanks to Walker's work in reviving Hurston's writing, we are able to read appreciate Black women writers like Bonner. If Hurston's grave had remained unmarked and nameless, how many other Black women writers would have also vanished? Or rather, if Hurston's novel *Their Eyes* had been discovered during its time and place, how would it have received the same recognition as Richard Wright's *Native Son* from the Civil Rights Movement? The importance of triple consciousness theory becomes even more apparent and critical for the African American literary tradition as we move into the 1940s.

CHAPTER THREE: CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The Civil Rights period should have been a turning point for Black women writers, as the rights of African Americans and the rights of women in the women's movement had the country's instead. Instead, the Civil Rights Movement and the women's movement unintentionally excluded Black women's voices. The momentum from these two movements however started to pave the way for Black feminist criticism, as Black women writers pulled strategies for how to raise their voices. In this chapter, I set up a similar structure as the Harlem Renaissance by first providing context for the Civil Rights Movement. Then, as I build context, I reveal the focus on Black men civil rights leaders, and most of all, writers. This focus on Black men created the image that Black women were not doing the same work, so in order to prove that wrong, I pull in critics and writers like Hazel Carby to showcase their stories. It was critical that the Black women "behind the scenes" were given the microphone, otherwise their stories and histories would have been lost.

The creative work done in the Harlem Renaissance nuanced the African American identity and guided its transformation from one that was developed under the adverse circumstances of slavery to one that was set free. Furthermore, it was not only a period of artistic expression for African Americans; it was also a period for social consciousness

and need for political activism. There was a new sense of political empowerment gained from the Harlem Renaissance, especially for Black women. Black feminist critic Hazel Carby pushes readers to reconsider how to interpret the African American cultural and literary history that developed during the Harlem Renaissance in her 1989 “Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist.” Most of all, Carby urges that the United States must view Black women not only as writers but also as intellectuals, activists, and members of the working class from slavery through the Harlem Renaissance. Carby argues that the issues of race and gender go hand-in-hand, and that when fighting for the rights of one, there has to be a fight for the other. This mode of thinking sets the stage for the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) during the 1950s and 1960s, especially as African Americans fought for equal treatment in the United States. While the Harlem Renaissance was sandwiched between two World Wars,¹¹ its cultural impression on the world cannot be overlooked because of the influence it has on African Americans’ political identity. African American triple consciousness now included one that was more political on their journey to freedom—one that should have been resolved almost a century prior after the abolition of slavery.

Although African Americans seemed freer in their artistic nature, they still faced harsh discrimination, segregation, and racism in the years following the Harlem Renaissance. This discrimination only added to the stereotypes of African Americans as criminals, which set them up for failure within the United States. The tragedy of Emmett

¹¹ World War I ended around 1918. The Harlem Renaissance then lasted until the mid 1930s, right before World War II lasted between 1939 to 1945.

Till's death¹² is one of the best well-known examples of the violence that was inflicted upon African Americans, but most notably, it reiterated the expectations of how Black masculinity was viewed in the eyes of white America. Now, more than ever, African American leaders and activists were needed in the United States to continue making space for their belonging and to also debunk negative stereotypes. The CRM was a time of civil unrest and an accumulation of several response strategies as African Americans fought for equal rights. While there was not one civil rights leader who declared the start of the CRM, many believe that the moment Rosa Parks¹³ refused to give up her seat in a bus triggered the movement.

THE WOMEN BEHIND THE SCENES

Beyond Rosa Parks, though, it is difficult to name Black women who were civil rights leaders. Instead, the CRM is often associated with Black men like Martin Luther King Jr. By only focusing on Black male leaders, the CRM cannot—and will not—become more multidimensional. Other pieces of civil rights history become lost, including voices from Black women, which is ironic because they were the foundation for the CRM. Many advances towards civil rights would not have been possible without Black women. Janet Bell's *Lighting the Fires of Freedom* spells out the names of some

¹² Emmett Till was an African American teenager who was beaten and shot to death for committing the “Crime” of whistling at a white woman in 1955. The violence against Till also sparked the need for the CRM.

¹³ Rosa Parks, otherwise known as the “mother of the Civil Rights Movement” is known for her refusal to give up her seat in the assigned section for Blacks in the bus to a white person. She was immediately arrested afterwards.

Black women who played significant roles at all levels of the CRM so that their voices and experiences could be heard. In nine interviews, Bell tells the stories of Leah Chase, June Jackson Christmas, Aileen Hernandez, Diane Nash, Judy Richardson, Kathleen Cleaver, Gay McDougall, Gloria Richardson, and Myrlie Evers to make them visible to the larger public. These nine women fought and pushed for social change in a variety of ways. They were key figures in major CRM issues like the desegregation of public accommodations and the procurement of voting rights for African Americans. Women had a special role in combating civil rights while facing not only racism, but also sexism. These women risked their lives and safety by putting themselves on the front line of the CRM, and Myrlie Evers is one woman who increased consciousness about the Black women's role in this movement.

While there were many names tied to the foundation of the movement, women were instrumental in actualizing the energy of the CRM, and Evers, as well as many other Black women, demonstrates this while supporting her husband. The inclusion of Evers's story illustrates how male figures get the spotlight in the CRM because the very measure of "leadership" is itself masculinist. Being a leader means being out front, speaking on behalf of others, having a microphone to literally be heard, and even being on a headline. By including Evers's story, I show that the notions of "leader" and "leadership" were themselves more expansive in terms of gender. The women "behind the scenes" who watched and raised the children, organized the fundraiser dinners, or even held prayer circles are also considered leaders, and this is shown in Evers's story.

Evers's story begins at the age when she met her husband, the renowned civil rights activist Medgar Evers. They met when Evers was seventeen and were married within a year. Medgar was a veteran of World War II, and when he returned to Mississippi, he felt called to confront racism, like many other Black soldiers returning home from war.¹⁴ Medgar was appointed the first NAACP field secretary in Mississippi in 1954 and that was Evers's initiation into the Civil Rights Movement (Bell 197). Shortly after her husband was appointed, Evers began to do work behind the scenes, which simultaneously elevated the woman's role in society at the time. She became a "jack-of-all-trades," reading, writing, and researching alongside her husband. Not only was she researching for his speeches, but she also even wrote some of them. Evers also organized events, celebrations, and even the "sad things" in order to acknowledge the people who had been hurt and killed doing this work for African American freedom (Bell 198-199). Little did Evers know that she would soon be planning a sad event for her own husband. Their home, in Jackson, Mississippi, was firebombed, and her husband was assassinated in 1963 in their driveway. The assassination of Evers's husband left her a widow and victim of the reality of being an African American in the United States.

Despite the horror that Evers went through with her children after her husband was killed, she remained committed to civil rights and public service. She "was a fundraising instrument for the NAACP" (Bell 198) even though this work often went

¹⁴ Often, Black soldiers would receive better treatment from other countries than their own. For example, in World War I, the 92nd Division fought in the French Army where "they earned the accolades and awards from the French even as the American Expeditionary Force high command constantly denigrated their feats and delayed their medals."

unpaid. Evers's energy was fueled by the tragic losses of her husband and Emmett Till. She empathized with Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till. Eventually, Evers was given credit for her efforts in the CRM and won the election as the chair of the NAACP from 1995 to 1998. It took over three decades for Evers to claim the title of secretary rather than hostess, after years of supporting her husband in his role. Evers recalls "the struggle that women had, and how hard they fought to be part of that program...to be recognized." Black women were pushed back by society and their own male counterparts no matter how many speeches they wrote, how much research they did, or how much money they made for fundraisers. Evers was not the only woman eager to claim the title of secretary. This task was difficult because "the men did not want to give up one ounce of the control they had" (Bell 206).

Black women continued fighting for their place in the movement, and they did this through literature. Genre was particularly important in the work to create room for Black women's voices and experiences so that they could be heard. Many of the women of the CRM turned to autobiography to raise their voice, including Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Elaine Brown, and Kathleen Cleaver. Evers followed the structure of autobiography to tell her story of the work behind the scenes she was doing with her husband, Medger. In her autobiography, Evers exclaims that Black women should

"Sit. Read. Listen. Learn. You didn't do it by yourselves. There were others who paved the way with blood, sweat, and tears." The grammar might not have been correct, no. They might have sung out of tune. They may have not dressed well. They might have been overweight. They might not have known the latest dances. But they had that good old common sense and joy in the heart to move us forward. (206)

Before Evers, there was Leah Chase who literally hosted Martin Luther King Jr., Thurgood Marshall, and many others at her family restaurant; before Chase, there was Gloria Richardson who even as an older adult during the CRM, led street protests and questioned nonviolence as a tactic; and before Richardson, there were countless others who paved the path for Black women to have a place to walk in the CRM.

Evers fought hard for her husband's justice and ensured the conviction of the white supremacist that murdered him. The questions that she was asking herself before — “What about me? Where am I in all of this?”—were finally answered for herself and many other women. Evers's story is one of hundreds that unpacks the range of efforts to fight for justice and push for social change led by African American women. It is important for the story of Evers and many other women to be part of the CRM narrative. Evelyn Simien and Danielle McGuire's 2014 chapter, “A Tribute to the Women: Rewriting History, Retelling Herstory in Civil Rights,” in *Politics & Gender*, explains the dangers of only associating the CRM with well-known heroes like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcom X. The CRM can become a monolithic movement that becomes static and stuck in time, and therefore associated with the same leaders, especially those who are men, for the rest of history. Similar to the way Bell highlights the story of Evers, Simien and McGuire offer a more comprehensive account of the power dynamics of the CRM by highlighting lesser-known Black female activists like Ella Baker (arguably one of the most important political and social forces in the African American freedom struggle) and Septima Clark (a woman who dedicated her life to

education and citizenship and welcomed ordinary people's participation in the movement). By including the work of Black female activists, Simien and McGuire add to the "master" narrative to reveal the missing feminine perspectives and "herstories." These women worked *outside* of the CRM spotlight—one that was dominated by men—and made the CRM more multidimensional in nature. All in all, "Black women brought unique focus and perspectives to their work as leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. With double consciousness—awareness of gender and race—and triple consciousness, these women did work that was a pragmatic and necessary response to societal conditions" (Bell 4-5). Black women were especially attuned to the societal conditions during this century because they constantly worked at the intersections of gender and race.

The constant struggle for women's voices to be heard was also how the second-wave feminist movement became so important, but it also excluded the Black woman. The second-wave feminist movement created awareness for women, but it was a specific type of awareness—one that was reserved for white women. The feminist movement, also referred to as the "women's movement" happened in tandem with the CRM in the 1960s. It was a movement that was influenced by the strategies and tactics of the CRM as women fought for the right to abortion and equal pay for equal work. These rights were political, just like the right to vote, equal employment, and integration in public spaces like schools were for the African Americans. Soon, the phrase "the personal is the political" reverberated in the streets, but it became clear that the voices chanting this phrase belonged only to white women. It was revealed that "the personal" was political

and white. There were some exceptions, however, of white women who recognized the difference between white women's and Black women's concerns and needs.

Still, the second-wave feminist movement was primarily focused on white women's rights to advance work outside of the home and to expand reproductive rights. Many of these advances, however, were not accessible to Black women because they came from lower socioeconomic classes. There were many critiques of second-wave feminism as a white, middle-class movement that inadequately addressed the needs and interests of women of color. Similar to the ways in which the Civil Rights Movement needed to be multidimensional to include the voices and experiences of all Black Americans, regardless of their gender, the feminist movements should have included the voices of all American women, regardless of their race. More than ever, Black women's voices were vital in fighting for both civil rights and women's rights, as well as making sure they were heard in literature.

Despite Black women constantly working behind the scenes during the CRM, the narrative that Black men overpowered women's voices followed the same pattern in the African American literary tradition. As more and more people turned to literature to make sense of these horrific acts of racism and oppression against African Americans, it was clear that there was a triad of Black men in which the world was interested. Richard Wright, Ralph Waldo Ellison, and James Baldwin were three Black male writers who were applauded for their efforts in writing about the Black experience in the United States. Even though there were many Black women writers who were writing at the time, this trio of men received the majority of airtime in the United States. Jerry Bryant's 1972

article “Wright, Ellison, Baldwin—Exorcising the Demon” states that these three Black male writers demonstrated how literature could be used as a “political weapon in the war against white racism” (174) and this weapon was crucial for Black liberation. These writers were experts at capturing the notion of double consciousness in their male characters, which further built the case for the importance of their work because it aligned perfectly with DuBois. Bryant’s claim that Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin were known for writing “political weapons” to fight white racism was well received in the CRM—a time of civil unrest. The timing of their novels was the perfect opportunity for their voices to be heard and overshadow those who were not associated with the well-known criticism like DuBois. It was clear that African American manhood and its relation to double consciousness were popular subjects. The hunger for this type of literature from those who wanted to fight in the war against white racism resulted in novels like Wright’s *Native Son* in 1940.

The main character in *Native Son* is Bigger Thomas, a young African American man who constantly “feels his sense of two-ness as an American and a Negro” and is always thinking about what he looks like in the eyes of white people. Bryant’s article elaborates on his point about how Wright’s novel is a tool for the war against white racism and claims that “Bigger is tortured by his fear of whites and the guilt he has internalized by means of which whites keep Blacks under control” (178). This torture can further be explained by DuBois’s “The Study of the Negro Problems,” which states that

a social problem is the failure of an organized social group to realize its group ideals, through the inability to adapt a certain desired line of action to given conditions of life. If, for instance, a government founded on universal manhood suffrage has a portion of its population so ignorant as

to be unable to vote intelligently, such ignorance becomes a menacing social problem. The impossibility of economic and social development in a community where a large percent of the population refuse to abide by the social rules of order, makes a problem of crime and lawlessness. (2)

The Negro problem is a social concept that has had a longer development than others because of its historical ties to slavery, so it is constantly presented with an entangled system of problems. This development has had a history of poverty, ignorance, and social degradation, according to DuBois, which sets up the Negro as a second-class citizen. Furthermore, it sets them up to be associated with the characteristics of lawlessness, laziness, and injustice and furthers the stereotype of Black men as criminals. Bigger sees himself as a “Negro criminal,” and worst of all, a “Negro rapist.” This stereotype is what ultimately sets Bigger up for failure in Wright’s *Native Son*.

Wright’s depiction of Blackness in the United States (and many other Black male writers) was dependent on very specific ideas and representations of Black masculinity. More notably, his depictions exclude the other half of the Black American’s real-life experiences: the Black women’s experiences. However, there is particular attention to the construction of Black masculinity in Wright’s *Native Son*, especially in the eyes of white people, which was the missing gendered piece of DuBois’s double consciousness theory. Through the character of Bigger, Wright offers a complex depiction of Black masculinity and this depiction must be included in DuBois’s double consciousness theory.

Nonetheless, Wright did not offer the same nuanced depiction of Black women or Black femininity. Instead, Black women’s voices were mediated not only by Wright’s authorial voice but also by Bigger’s character. The main Black female character is Bigger’s girlfriend, who is treated poorly in the novel. Bigger sees his girlfriend as a

“dangerous burden” because he fears that she will expose him after killing a white woman. In the end, Bigger falls into the stereotype that he fears and rapes Bessie. Wright’s most well-known novel *Native Son* not only reinforces the stereotypes of Black men being criminals and murderers, but also gives little to no true character presence for Black women other than making her someone to blame. This is just one example of how Black women’s presence in African American literature written by men was problematic. Black women characters remain subservient and at the mercy of Black men characters. The inability to include a full triple consciousness of Black women characters in Wright’s novel could have to do with the fact that DuBois’s original double consciousness theory did not consider the Black women’s experience. Black women need to voice their own experiences to be represented. Since Wright’s novel was highly influenced by DuBois, it is no surprise that the third dimension of gender was missing.

Contemporary feminist critic Barbara Johnson defends the novels written by Black women that do highlight Black women experiences in a nuanced way. In *Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook*, Johnson writes:

full range of questions and experiences of Janie’s life [the main character of *Their Eyes*] are as invisible to a mind steeped in maleness as Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is to minds steeped in whiteness. If the Black *man’s* soul is divided in two, what can be said of the Black woman’s? Here again, what is constantly seen as exclusively in terms of a binary opposition—Black versus white, man versus woman—must be redrawn at least as a tetrapolar structure. (See Figure 2)

Johnson uses a visual show that universalizing maleness and masculine perspectives inevitably and invariably leads to a literal inability to see experiences that are anything but male. Just as patriarchy universalizes and normalizes white

male perspectives in the United States, this universalizing and normalizing happens within the Black community too. Black feminists have argued that Black men experience discriminatory treatment on the basis of their race, but still hold some semblance of power by virtue of their male identity, as seen in their voices and experiences being prioritized in literary traditions and movements.

As more Black male writers received the majority of the attention in the African American tradition, the American people began to associate their understanding of Blackness to these novels. As mentioned before, the constructions of Blackness written by Wright and even Baldwin were limiting because they inherently only considered the Black male perspective. It is important to note that these perspectives were also given to the American public in the form of prose, which was common during the CRM. As seen in Evers's autobiography, Black women were also writing in this form, but were still not heard because they did not have the criticism that would have supported their audience understanding their experiences. In order to be heard and differentiated from their Black male counterparts who were writing in prose during this time period, Black women were playing with the idea of a traditional prose, and we see this in Hurston's *Their Eyes*. Hurston introduced new forms of the English language and wrote specifically for a Black audience. Black women writers were now finding out that they were not only up against the limitations of language in writing about their nuanced experiences; they also realized that they were up against the limitations of genre.

Black women writers were pushed to break open the masculine-centric logic found in the African American prose. In order to create space for their experiences in the

CRM, Black women writers continued writing in forms of poetry and plays,¹⁵ so new knowledge could emerge. Poetry was one place that allowed Black women writers to express themselves, which came as no surprise considering that the first Black poet to be published was a woman. Even though she lived much of her life enslaved, Phillis Wheatley was the first Black writer to publish a book of poems in 1773. Wheatley's story is inspiring, especially for writers like Harriet Jacobs who came to prominence long after their death. Wheatley learned English only a decade prior, shortly after she was kidnapped from West Africa and brought to Boston and produced a book of poems. Most of all, Wheatley's story is a reminder that Black female writing did not start with the Harlem Renaissance. While the tradition of Black female writing may have started after Wheatley's time, Wheatley is an example of writing before her time. Nonetheless, her work was important for those who came after her like Gwendolyn Brooks.

Brooks was one voice that looked for other ways to tell the experience of Black women and she did so through poetry. In 1950, Brooks was one of the first Black authors to win the Pulitzer Prize¹⁶ for her collection of poems, *Annie Allen*. This collection of

¹⁵ According to Jeanne-Marie A. Miller's chapter "Black Women Playwrights from Grimké to Shange: Selected Synopses of Their Works," white playwrights used misshapen Black images to help justify slavery, and in the post-Civil War period, they used them to rationalize the nation's unfair treatment of Black people. Furthermore, playwriting was regarded as a profession for white men. Miller states that "with all the barriers of racism and sexism arrayed against them, some Black women writers, nevertheless, have chosen drama as the form in which to express their creative talents...and have offered a unique insight into the Black experience" (281).

¹⁶ The Pulitzer Prize is an annual prize awarded by Columbia University for outstanding public service and achievement in American journalism, letters, and music. It is decided by a board of judges who are appointed by the university and the prize has been awarded to many African Americans in various categories, the first of which was Gwendolyn Brooks, who won a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950 for her collection of poems titled *Annie Allen*.

poems tells the story of a young Black girl in Chicago and her journey to womanhood. “The Anniad” is one of her most famous poems, which is known for its story about Annie and how she moves through the world with a sense of three-ness. Brooks’s art of poetry shows that Black women needed to rely on other forms of literary structures in order to portray their experiences because of the lack of literary criticism at the time to support their prose writing. The genre of poetry opened up space for Black women to imagine their stories in a free-flowing space. Poetry, in comparison to prose, can be more expressive because it is not constrained to logic and form. Instead, poetry allows for rhyme, sound, and feeling.

In order to prove the effectiveness of poetry in elevating Black women’s voices, I will pull excerpts from Brooks’s “The Anniad.” The most notable scene that exhibits the way Annie sees herself in relation to the white world is when she is describing her ideal romance:

Watching for the paladin
Which no woman ever had,
Paradisical and sad
With a dimple in his chin
And the mountains in the mind;
Ruralist and rather bad,
Cosmopolitan and kind.

Think of thaumaturgic lass
Looking in her looking-glass
At the unembroidered brown;
Printing bastard roses there;
Then emotionally aware
Of the black and boisterous hair,
Taming all that anger down. (19-20)

This awareness of herself as an African American woman is apparent in the way she expects a white romance story. The poem begins with Annie imagining the fantasy that she will marry a “prosperous and ocean-eyed” paladin (Brooks 19). This paladin is juxtaposed by a “man of tan” that she must “tame.” In this fantasy, she sees herself in a stereotypical white romance story, but when she looks in the mirror, she sees her reality of being a Black woman who marries a “man of tan.” She knows her hair is different from white people when it is juxtaposed with the “ocean-eyed paladin” and is constantly conscious of it every time she looks in the mirror. Brooks spotlights Annie, a Black woman who experiences DuBois’s triple consciousness. By moving at the level of content, Brooks’s uses content to make statements about Black women’s place in larger society.

Furthermore, “The Anniad” is creative in its appearance, as Brooks plays with the rhyme, meter, and structure of the poem. Brooks proves just how rhyme and meter can work at the intersections of race and gender and that prose was not the only way to convey gendered experiences. Several pages later in “The Anniad,” Brooks’s poem expresses the double standard that women face in society through the poetic form of iambic pentameter:

Not that woman! (Not that room!
Not that dusted demi-gloom!)
Nothing limpid, nothing meek.
But a gorgeous and gold shriek
With her tongue tucked in her cheek,
Hissing gauzes in her gaze,
Coiling oil upon her ways. (24)

When reading Brooks's poem aloud, there is a natural flow to the text that mimics a heartbeat. This feeling is particularly important for the content of the poem, which describes the desire of a man who wants a woman who is unlike the one he has. His woman is too "limpid" and too "meek," so he wants one that is "gorgeous...with a tongue in her cheek." This desire is unrealistic because women are typically expected to be docile. This poem describes a man who wants a clouded and aggressive woman, even though women in society are not allowed to operate that way. Most notably, though, is Brooks's ability to write from the male perspective—a tactic that had been used by Black men writing from the perspective of a different gender. Brooks's use of poetry shows how Black women writers looked to other genres to elevate their voices.

Sixty years after the CRM, Black women are still raising important questions in the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and time can only tell what answers will be made in a movement that was started by Black women themselves. Before fast forwarding to today, however, we must outline the explosion of Black women's literature that occurred during the Black women's literary renaissance. Thanks to the foundation laid out by Harriet Jacobs, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Myrlie Evers, and Gwendolyn Brooks, voices like Toni Morrison could rise to the top.

Even though the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) should have been a time of civil unrest from the 1940s to the 1960s for *all* Black Americans to gain equal rights, the rights of Black men often gained more attention. While this was not intentional, many Black women experiences and voices were left out of the movement. Altogether, the CRM must

highlight a variety of voices so that it moves away from being tied to one central figure, or just men. Many of these voices came from civil rights activists who were inspired by African American thinkers, like DuBois. Although works inspired by DuBois's double consciousness theory overlooked femininity, several African American writers had novels that were centered on Black masculinity because they were writing from the perspective of a Black man. The focus on the triad of the Black male writers during the CRM contributed significantly to the exclusion of Black women experiences and this was because of the criticism and theories that supported their writing. Baldwin, while part of this triad, should be given credit for the way he tried to depict Black women characters in his novels. Black feminist criticism appreciates Baldwin and his willingness to break open gender, especially in his novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. This novel follows the life of Fonny, a young Black man from Harlem who is falsely accused of rape while his pregnant fiancée works to prove his innocence. The novel is also narrated by Tish. Julie C. Suk's 2014 article "Fatherhood and Crime in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*," which states that

female characters embrace[d] new opportunities to participate in legal strategies to liberate their male family members [and] these new dynamics illustrated how gender roles within the African American family were creatively improvised and reordered after the civil rights gains of the 1960s. (1)

Baldwin is one of few exceptions who elevates the Black female experience, which was crucial as we move into the 1970s. The time period after the CRM became important for Black women writers to depict their own experiences, rather than leaving their

experiences to be rendered through the Black male's voice, even if well-intentioned like Baldwin's.

Literature written in the aftermath of the CRM was especially aware of this, which was largely due to Black women writer's influences. As we move into the 1970s and 1980s, we see an explosion of Black women voices speaking for those who did not get the attention they deserved in the CRM.

CHAPTER FOUR: BLACK WOMEN'S LITERARY RENAISSANCE

The last chapter of my thesis focuses on the Black women's literary renaissance for one obvious reason: to show just how the momentum of Black women pushing to be heard manifested into an explosion of Black feminism and criticism. The 1970s and 1980s were decades that were referenced before because it was a period that put Black women voices, stories, and histories at the forefront of the American landscape. I begin this last chapter by pulling in the voices behind the Black feminist critics and allowing them to speak to the origins of this movement. Then, instead of showcasing various Black women writers, I focus on one: Toni Morrison. The inclusion of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* in this chapter may have seemed like an odd choice considering that Morrison narrates a story through a character who does not share her gender. This was a deliberate choice because it showed how Black women writers were finally able to put themselves in place of Black men after Black men had been writing from their perspectives for so long. Toni Morrison wrote from the male perspective. Furthermore, *Song of Solomon* eloquently touches on the vast time periods of this thesis even though it was written in 1977. She, too, was constantly re-imagining the Black identity on the American landscape.

Black feminist scholars continued to question the CRM's focus on Black masculinity and the Women's Movement's focus on white women in the decade that followed the end of the CRM. The end of the CRM is often associated with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. As this era ended, Black women were not satisfied with where they stood in either one of the movements, especially after the death of a critical leader. Black women voices were still not adequately represented, and many were willing to explore new avenues so that they could be heard. One of these avenues included making a name for themselves, or rather, creating a criticism for themselves that captures their unique experiences as Black women. Black women's studies was a term coined to house the work they were doing while writing at the intersection of nationality, gender, and race. Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith's *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* explains the importance for Black women's studies after the CRM. Hull and Smith state that "Black women's studies" is an act charged with political significance. Furthermore, Hull and Smith say that "at the very least, the combining of these words to name a discipline means taking the stance that Black women exist...To use the term and to act on it in a white-male world is an act of political courage" (xvii). Black women were constantly living in the United States with political courage as they published literature, but they lacked a movement and criticism for the work they were doing.

Barbara Smith then provides a reflection in her book, *But Some of Us Are Brave*. Smith reflects on the first time she even heard of the term Black consciousness herself in the chapter "Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood." It was the year 1968 and Smith

was at the ripe age of sixteen when she thought the term “Blackness” finally meant that she could be herself. Smith later says that it took her three years to realize that her position in the Civil Rights Movement was “prone...three years to understand that the countless speeches that all began ‘the Black man...’ did not include [her]” (6). In other words, Smith (as well as many other Black women at the end of the CRM) was used to the universalization and normalization of Black masculinity. It took three years for Smith to realize that she could not operate in a world that was prioritizing Black men. Smith wanted to be taken seriously and be seen as scholarly for the first time; she wanted to write, and this was the same ambition of many other Black women at the time.

We must remember, however, that when there was an attempt to strengthen Black womanhood, Black women were ridiculed. Smith’s chapter “Black Feminist’s Search for Sisterhood” further explains how Black women were constantly being “watched” in the Black arts movement. Smith says that “any signs of aggressiveness, intelligence, or independence would mean [Black women] would be denied even one role and still left open...as ‘my man’s woman,’ keeper of house, children, and incense burners” (7). It was no surprise that carrying the characteristics of aggression, intelligence, or independence made the Black women seem “dangerous” because it meant that she was no longer silent. These characteristics were also a sign of Black women showing political courage, which was “male” domain. Echoes of Janie *Their Eyes* rings loud and clear when she was ridiculed for playing with a “man’s tools,” which were knives. Despite their strides in representation and empowerment through literature, Black women writers had to walk a

fine line. They had to continue to navigate the social expectations of being a woman, while pursuing the need to make a name for themselves through literature.

In “The Same Old Danger/But a Brand New Pleasure’: The Black Arts Movement in the 21st Century,” Ajuan Mance notes that:

the primary contribution that the African American woman poet could make toward the deliverance of her people was to depict the defiant, empowered Black male subject...Representations of the African American female were limited primarily to those that buttressed the image and idea of intrepid and powerful Black masculinity. (6)

In Mance’s critique, there are references to Myrlie Evers, who was the backbone of her husband’s success in his contribution to the CRM. There are cries of Richard Wright’s Bessie from *Native Son* and the construction of her problematic character through the Black masculinist voice. Mance further states that even though the Black female voice has always been present, it was still dictated by a masculinist vision. Due to constantly being put on the back burner, Black women called for a stronger presence in the Black arts movement after the CRM. This push to center Black women voices finally broke through in the year 1970.

The year 1970 marked a significant tipping point in the history of African American women’s literary critical and creative work. Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*, Maya Angelou’s memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Alice Walker’s novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Toni Cade’s anthology *The Black Woman* were all published in this year. Each of these texts brings to life the barriers to freedom that Black women endured, like the struggle against the pain of both racism and sexism. Most of all, these novels gave Black women the guide they needed because they

were full of strategies of self-formation, self-recovery, and self-expression. It was no coincidence, though, that Black women writers began publishing at the turn of the year of 1970. The following years gave Black women writers the vocabulary and language that was needed to conceptualize their unique experiences of being a Black woman. One of the earliest frameworks that described the Black women's experience was Frances Beale's concept of "double jeopardy," in 1970. As the conjoined effects of racial and gender discrimination. Beale's concept of double jeopardy set up Black feminist critics like Barbara Smith, Alice Walker, and Kimberlé Crenshaw with their terms of womanism and intersectionality. We should remember, though, that Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Pauli Murray were unpacking the layered effects of racism and sexism long before the coining of the official terms during the Black women's literary renaissance. Their efforts are not to be brushed over because of the way they set up Black feminist critics like Walker and Crenshaw.

As a result of transforming the African American literary tradition through new modes of writing and advocating for Black women voices and experiences, the United States was finally rewarded with an explosion of critical texts by Black women writers. The time that followed the CRM in the 1970s and 1980s is otherwise known as the black women's literary renaissance. During this period, the official coining of the terms like womanism and intersectionality were provided for the Black women writers that came long after the ones who were already making social progressions in race and gender. After 67 years of masculinist perspectives being tied to DuBois's double consciousness

theory, Black women were finally given a platform to be recognized, even after decades of making social progress.

A crucial element of this explosion of literature was the expanded vocabulary of terms like womanism and intersectionality that provided a framework for those who were not Black men. Previously, the explorative writings on gender and race by Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth were seen as rare simply because the tools with which they constructed and conveyed these complex and often overshadowed perspectives were disregarded without the language to support them. Although these Black women writers were writing about intersectionality and womanism long before the Black women's literary renaissance, they were always up against the limits of the language that was available during their time. These terms, among other new explorative ideations, allowed for the expression of the unique experiences of Black women. By illustrating their nuanced identity, as well decoupling whiteness from topics like women's rights in their writing, Black women authors constructed their own space in the literary tradition to ensure that their voices would be heard.

Smith's chapter "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" connected the general concerns of Black feminism with the work of literary criticism in 1977. She writes:

I do not know where to begin. Long before I tried to write this I realized that I was attempting something unprecedented, something dangerous merely by writing about Black women writers from a feminist perspective and about Black lesbian writers from any perspective at all. These things have not been done. Not by white male critics, expectedly. Not by Black male critics. Not by white women critics who think of themselves as feminists. And most crucially not by Black women critics who, although they pay the most attention to Black women writers as a group, seldom use a consistent feminist analysis or write about Black lesbian literature. (157)

In this passage, Smith shows the fear that Black women writers *still* faced even toward the end of the 1970s. The long-term effects of Black women writers being excluded not only from the American literary tradition but also from the African American tradition was this constant sense of fear that they would be punished for writing about their experiences. The idea of punishment is also tied to Black women not being “allowed” to be in the same roles as men, and in this case, it would mean writing about their experiences. Being punished for their writing was one risk that Black women took when writing themselves into literature. Their amplified voices resulted in an explosion of literature focused on triple consciousness. The sexism and racism debate, as expressed by Susan Farrell, “raged fiercely throughout the seventies, eventually leading to the creation of Third World Feminism, which by the eighties, established ties with oppressed women of other ethnic backgrounds in the U.S. and around the world” (140). All in all, Smith and Farrell bring our attention to just how messy and complex it was to expand and challenge pre-existing literary traditions. The more that the African American literary tradition can expand and be challenged, the more space there is for all intersecting identities.

As Black women continued to be excluded by both their race and gender, they had to reimagine the spaces that did not previously welcome their voices. They learned that to be part of the literary conversation, they had to put their own creative spin on both the American and African American literary traditions. Toni Morrison is one of the most recognized authors of the English language known

for her ability to infuse the African American experience into the American literary tradition through folklore, gender issues, and the human condition (Harris). She won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1987 and was the first African American to win a Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. Morrison claims that “canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense” in her lecture “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (132). This claim shows Morrison’s persistence in placing her writing and voice into established literary traditions because they did not exist before. Morrison further explains the need to place her writing and voice into well-known literary traditions in her interview. Morrison is often compared to William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, which was no surprise since she wrote her master’s thesis, “Virginia Woolf’s and William Faulkner’s Treatment of the Alienated” in 1955, on both of their texts. Faulkner and Woolf were known for their influence on American and British literature and Morrison looked up to their canon building, which fueled her passion for canon building and to make African American literature part of American literature. Morrison brought together DuBois’s intersecting identities of nationality and race to prove that race was as much part of the American nationality as the American nationality was part of the African American race.

Now more than ever, it was critical for Black women to be seen and heard. Morrison was first inspired to write because she did not exist in the literature that she read. Just like Smith’s eagerness to write, Morrison also wanted to write about

the experiences that were not represented in the literary tradition before. Morrison went on to write *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, which was actually a rewriting of a classic American school-child text. The novels that followed *The Bluest Eye* continued to reimagine African American stories and histories. Most notably, her novel *Song of Solomon* highlighted how problematic it was to have Black male writers write from the perspective of Black women or not accurately depict the Black female experience in their novels. Morrison puts a twist on this expectation by writing this novel from a masculinist point of view that does include and highlight the Black women's experience. Morrison explains her choice to narrate the story through a character who does not share her gender in the forward. She states that she wrote this novel after her father died and wanted to understand the nuances of Black masculinity. Furthermore, in an interview conducted by Rosemarie K. Lester in Frankfurt, West Germany, Morrison claims:

I write without gender focus...It happens that what provokes my imagination as a writer has to do with the culture of Black people...I write out...of what I find provocative *and* the sensibility of being a woman. But I don't write women's literature as such. I think it would confine me. I am valuable as a writer because I am a woman, because women, it seems to me, have some special knowledge about certain things. [It comes from] the ways in which they view the world, and from women's imagination.

Morrison's claim in this interview illustrates the need to highlight Black women experiences because if their voices would have been left out of the conversation, the Black women's imagination would have also been lost. Black women share a perspective that is important for African American literature and all encompassing.

Many Black feminists claim that Morrison's *Song of Solomon* can be read as a Black woman's response to the African American political situation in the U.S. of the mid-seventies, especially after the CRM. Most of all, Morrison recreates narrative structures to fit the Black female experience. While *Song of Solomon* was published in the height of the Black women's movement and literary renaissance in 1977, Morrison takes readers back in time four generations. She starts the novel with the character, Milkman Dead, and later reveals that he is on a quest to learn more about his family history. This yearning to know about his family history is something he shares with his great grandfather, Solomon/Sugarman, who was a slave. As Milkman is on his quest to learn about his family history, Morrison moves the reader through different time periods. The novel moves to the Great Migration, and then ends the novel in the 1960s. Now that Morrison is writing in 1977, she has a clear picture of Black women's experiences and gives power to their voices in narratives.

Additionally, extending the narrative across four generations allows Morrison to examine Black experiences throughout history. This context was foundational to both the text and Morrison as an author. In Farrell's "Who'd He Leave Behind?: Gender and History in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," she states:

We must remember; however, the political commitments of these women writers are various, complex, and historically contingent. If it is true that these works constate a movement in contemporary American literature largely because of their identification with historically marginalized groups, the particulars of history are absolutely essential to any understanding of individual texts. Certainly, this is the case with *Song of Solomon*, a novel about both the equal sexual and political education of a young man equally concerned with his formative relationships with several women—mother, aunt, lovers—and his intersection with the Seven Days. The black power movement of the sixties and the story of women's

place in it, along with the assumptions about black women present throughout American culture... (136)

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison analyzes the CRM indirectly through the lens of Milkman and other characters. This analysis further exposes Farrell's point that "focusing primarily on racial oppression, many male leaders in the movement failed to recognize the specificity faced by women of color" (137). This criticism of the CRM is the very reason that Morrison and her contemporaries found the need to express their experiences. The movement failed to account for all aspects of the African American struggle and, in effect, intentionally sidelined the Black woman perspective in order to further the overall movement's goals.

More than ever, it was critical that Black women's perspectives were centered, and like many other Black women authors, Morrison had to be strategic on how she made her voice heard. Instead of conforming to Euro-centric narratives that pushed Black experiences out, she pulled from the traditional Afro-American folktales in *Song of Solomon*. Like Hurston wrote in Black dialect to appeal to a Black audience, Morrison made references to African American mythology. Unfortunately, these references from African American mythology were often confused with Greek mythology. Morrison critiques critics who resort to western mythology to explain any "supernatural" feat like flying. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is an important piece of African American literature because it lets a westernized audience know that African American culture has their own mythology. One obvious example of Morrison's use of African American mythology is in an excerpt that is sung throughout the novel:

O Sugarman don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me. . . .

Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. (49)

Morrison uses the structure of myth and mythology in order to fulfill the tradition of African American folklore. The reference to Africans “flying home” and away from slavery is one example. Thomas LeClair’s “The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison” quotes Morrison saying if the flying myth in her novel means “Icarus to some readers, fine; I want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific; it is about Black people who could fly” (122). The trope of Black people flying stems from a well-known Gullah Folktale about a group of African-born slaves who are known for rising up from the field where they were working and flying back to Africa (Blake 77). The white audience who reads these Black traditions miss this connection and instead translate it into something in which they are familiar: Greek mythology.

Most of all, Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* illustrates triple consciousness theory through the novel’s female characters and the double-edged sword they face with their race and gender. Even though the women characters in Morrison’s novel are the caretakers, they are still treated poorly. Pilate Dead, the reason for Milkman’s safe birth, protects him and also cares for Reba and her granddaughter Hagar. Hagar becomes Milkman’s lover but is also dismissed by him. Trudier Harris’s chapter *Song of Solomon Milkman Dead: An Anti-Classical Hero* in Bloom’s *Modern Critical Interpretations*

speaks to Milkman's disobedience to Black women. Harris describes Milkman as someone who treats his sisters like "dead replicas of his mother" and "dismisses his mother as a mere shadow of a woman" (8). However, it is Milkman's "maleness," or what he views as his difference from the women to ultimately justify his poor treatment of the women in his life, especially Hagar. Harris states:

Milkman's underdeveloped moral sense also accounts in part for his unkind treatment of Hagar...[for she is] just another thrilling convenience, can be dismissed with impunity when Milkman tires of her. Yet it is Milkman's rather than Hagar's perspective that Morrison follows through most of the relationship. She forces us to wait and wait through it, to consider Hagar expendable even if we do not consider Milkman innocent. She urges us to accept the possibility that something great is in the making and to tolerate Milkman's destructiveness until he...discovers his mission on earth. (8)

Harris's chapter on *Song of Solomon* portrays Milkman's dismissal of Hagar as a person and a woman. It was crucial to highlight these narratives, and they could only be done from the Black female perspective like Morrison. Women carry the responsibility of caring for themselves, their family, and their community, even when they are treated unfairly. Milkman's name itself reflects the women in his life. Harris further states that his name "suggests nurturing by the women in his life, and it anticipates the time he will move beyond the need for that nurturing" (10). Milkman is first nurtured by his biological mother, Ruth. After Ruth passes away, Milkman is then nurtured by his aunt, Pilate.

Pilate's character reflects someone who is self-made and independent. She is an advocate for her daughter Reba. Through Pilate, Morrison reminds us of the narrative of the New Negress when a man beats her daughter, Reba. Pilate's character completely

steps into this role and pushes a knife within an inch of his heart. We are reminded of Knadler's *New Negress*, which tells the stories of domestic violence and the "women with knives" who defended themselves. Lastly, Circe is a maid and midwife who delivered Macon Jr. and Pilate and her name is based on Greek mythology. Circe's mythological namesake was known for her vast knowledge of herbs and potion making. She also can be seen as the first example of a witch as a female archetype in literature. This allusion to a powerful female figure in literature is intentional as she plays such an important role in Milkman's story. She is the reason that Milkman can connect with his family history—past and future.

Farrell claims that "Morrison not only criticizes racist structures that have emotionally crippled an urban Black family in the 1960s, but she also condemns Black sexism of the same era, describing the novel as her "giggle" at the "proto-myth of the journey to manhood." The journey to manhood, or rather toxic masculinity, can be best seen in Milkman's character. Farrell then uses Milkman's sister as an example of how Black women were doubly silenced in terms of race and gender.

If Milkman desires to become the black patriarch in this historicized reading of Morrison's novel, the position of Milkman's sister Magdalene (Lena) Dead, a minor character who has only marginally entered the story up until the very end of part one, parallels that of many African American women in the early seventies. She is the quintessential "other," doubly silenced, in terms of both race and gender, finally making her voice heard to her more vocal brother. (132)

Furthermore, Morrison uses the characters of Lena, Guitar, and Milkman to emphasize how gender and ethnicity are intertwined. Their voices are juxtaposed, but through this conjoining of voices, Morrison shows how a unified community is necessary for the

advancement of Black women. “One should not be pursued to the exclusion of the other; the two must always exist in a dialectical relationship” (Farrell 144). Black women writers already knew that their gender and ethnicity (race) needed to constantly be in conversation with each other, but Morrison’s ability to show it in her novel paints this image more vividly.

Song of Solomon is just one of many texts that speak to Black women’s liberation by Morrison. She wrote many other novels that were at the intersection of gender and race, but most importantly, she made sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in her books. Morrison has the ability to blend genres out of the modernist novel, like fiction and pulled from African American mythology.

Instead of working under a master narrative that is often told by men, the Black woman writer revises the way language has been used by the oppressive culture, both from her own race and gender. Black women illustrate the way their unique writing traditions have survived an oppressive history. Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” states that it is no coincidence that writers like Jacobs, Hurston, and eventually Morrison:

incorporate the traditional Black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery into the fabric of their stories...nor is their use of specifically Black female language to express their own and their characters’ thoughts accidental. The use of Black women’s language and cultural experience in books by Black women about Black women results in miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white male/literary structures.
(137)

Additionally, Black women writers found ways to surpass the boundaries of operating within the established literary structures, and we are reminded of this with Morrison’s

Circe. Through their use of specific cultural experiences that were distinctly feminine, their content could be understood in a new framework. This gave Black women writers the space to find a more authentic voice. It is now more open to narratives which include the lens of gender.

Like Hurston and Brooks, Morrison has the ability to create new modes of writing in order to have her voice heard. She plays with genre and makes them fit the triple consciousness experience like with Circe. She takes us back in time four generations. Genevive Fabre argued that, by moving “away from sociology” into the realm of “mystery, poetry and prophecy” (Farrell 131). Morrison’s voice was amplified by the work done by previous women authors. This cumulative effort was a major component of the Black women’s literary renaissance as a whole.

“What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib” is an essay by Morrison that further highlights how messy liberation can be at the intersections of gender and race. She makes the claim that Black women do not trust Women’s Liberation because of the fact that it is white and therefore “suspect.” She reminds us that the liberating movements in the Black world have been catalysts for white feminism and says that Black women are tired of helping others gain power. Then, Morrison writes that in distinctions between “White Ladies” and “Colored Women,” that the difference is obvious. Morrison claims that:

White females were ladies, said the sign maker, worthy of respect. And the quality that made ladyhood worthy? Softness, helplessness, and modesty—which I interpreted as a willingness to let others do their labor and their thinking. Colored females, on the other hand, were women—unworthy of respect because they were tough, capable, independent and immodest.

These stereotypes about Black women had real ramifications on Black women's lives and we see them come to life in the novels written by Black women writers.

The Black women's literary renaissance put the variants of triple consciousness theory to work. Black women thinkers like Walker created the term 'womanism' in order to encapsulate Black women's experiences and voices. Walker's 'womanism' has a strong root in Black women's culture and differs from feminist because Blackness is implicit in the term (Walker 11). Beginning with a primary commitment to exploring how gendered and racial politics, as well as Black and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writing, Black women work from the assumption that writings by Black women constitute an identifiable literary tradition. Black women's familiarity with the writers that came before Walker proves that not only is their literary tradition a verifiable historical tradition that parallels in time the tradition of Black men and white women writing in this country, but that they also contribute thematically, stylistically, and aesthetically to the American literary tradition. Most of all, Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature as a direct result of the specific political, social, and economic experience they have felt called to share.

The Black women's literary renaissance was an important movement that centered the voices of Black feminist criticism and Black women authors. Although it took Black women being ignored and silenced in movements that should have included them, like the CRM and the women's movement, they were finally given the chance to write about themselves and for themselves. As the United States moved out of the 20th

century and into the 21st century, the writing of history and literature started to come directly from Black women leaders.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Black women were restricted to DuBois's double consciousness theory even though it unwittingly excluded their gendered experiences. Throughout the periods of slavery, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Civil Rights Movement, Black women eloquently portrayed how one navigated the world not with two souls but with three. Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, and Gwendolyn Brooks proved that "the uplift of [Black] women" was not just "next to the problem of the color line," but that it was a critical piece of the line. Without the uplift of Black women, the color line is fragmented and missing important voices and experiences of those who actually keep the line filled. Even though the Black women writers of the 18th and 19th century were up against the restrictions of language and did not have the coined terms that were brought by Black feminist critics in the 20th century, they confirmed just how nuanced the African American experience can be at the intersection of race and gender.

Many Black women's voices were left out of the conversation during their particular moment in time because Black men writers received the majority of the recognition for publishing their works. While Frederick Douglass's *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* was published in 1845, it took until 1861 for Jacobs's slave narrative to be published, and this is one of many examples of Black

women's literature not being published in their moment and time. More notably, she was writing about triple consciousness before DuBois's coining of double consciousness in 1903, but the criticism did not yet exist for an audience to understand her feminine perspective. Many Black writers, the majority of them being Black women, were silenced and ignored in the literary tradition, and because gender was further overlooked, Black women writers had to search for different ways to write themselves into being. Robert Hemenway also reminds us that Hurston remained "one of the most significant unread authors in America" in 1937 even though her book *Their Eyes* is now one of her most-known works almost a century later. Nonetheless, Jacobs and Hurston were among many Black women writers who laid out a foundation for Black feminist critics like Walker and Crenshaw so that Black women could put language to the experiences they were expressing in their texts. These Black women writers became their own champions as they successfully captured their experiences, even without terms like womanism and intersectionality. Most of all, these early Black women writers affirmed that writing at the intersection of race and gender is nearly impossible to do in a neatly packaged and logical way. For instance, Brooks illustrates the power of poetry in her poem "The Anniad." She breaks out of narratives that are masculinist in nature and restrictive to her gender identity and elevates not only her voice at the level of form, but also every other Black woman writer that came before her.

Black women's voices were finally being prioritized, thanks to the work done in the Black women's literary renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s. Fifty years after this new renaissance, in an era where Black women writers now have some language to portray

their experiences more accurately, have we finally solved the problem of the color line? Just as writing at the intersection of gender cannot be neatly packaged, or really any intersection like race or citizenship, I cannot answer this rhetorical question with a simple yes or no. I can, however, anticipate questions and imagine the literature to come. How will gender continue to figure into the discourse of African American literature? How will the United States as a nation continue figuring out what is next? These questions become as relevant as ever, especially when looking at the 21st century and its Black Lives Matter Movement,¹⁷ (BLM) which was founded by three women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi.

A LOOK AT TODAY'S BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT & BEYOND

After centuries of trying to get their voices heard, Black women can no longer be ignored, especially when their voices founded a movement. The Black Lives Matter Movement is centered on the same Negro problem that DuBois spoke of in his “The Study of the Negro Problems.” The unjust police brutality against African Americans derives from the systemic violence and racism of the United States. Slavery and segregation continue to haunt African Americans, and it is showing up in police brutality across the nation. Garza, Cullors, and Tometi put the Black Lives Matter Movement into being with a simple hashtag. They used the technology of the 21st century to circulate their voices and center their experiences. The Black Lives Matter Movement provided

¹⁷ Black Lives Matter was co-founded in 2013 by three female African American community organizers: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. Garza wrote a Facebook post, “Our Lives Matter, Black Lives Matter” following the shooting of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old unarmed African American student. Cullors then tweeted the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter and this spread through retweets.

Black women a space to share information more quickly than ever before. J. Brendan Shaw's "Sandy Still Speaks: The Digital Afterlives of Sandra Bland" discusses how the BLM elevates the stories of women. Shaw's essay speaks to the ways in which information is shared in the 21st century: social media. The different photographs and videos that circulate through social media perform not unlike a novel. Shaw's reading strategy of analyzing cellphone videos, security footage, photographs, and even social media memes as "visual texts" helps us interpret meaning and easily connect the visual texts to broader social contexts (41). News is more readily available with the help of social media and people are now turning to platforms like Twitter and Instagram to learn about the unjust murders of African Americans (See Fig. 3). Moreover, their "viral presence refuses to be forgotten" (Shaw 44), and this is especially important for Black women.

Since the BLM was founded by three women, the universality of fighting for the rights of all Black Americans was included. The #SayHerName is another movement within BLM that raises awareness for Black female victims of police brutality and racism in the United States. Even within a movement founded by women, there is still a tendency to focus on men. Black trans and cis women do not get the same national recognition as Black cis men and boys. The documentary *Say Her Name* is one of the few BLM documentaries that concentrate on a Black woman's death. Brittney Cooper and Treva B. Lindsey say:

our conversations and national mobilizations almost exclusively focus on police violence against cisgender Black men and boys. Perhaps the most notable exception to this tendency to erase victimization was the collective rage expressed about the death of Sandra Bland in police custody. (733)

Cooper and Lindsey then add that “folks can’t be pro-Black and only focus on cisgender, heterosexual Black men and boys” (734).

Despite the foundations of the BLM movement being set with an innate awareness of gender, the struggle to break away from the male lens continues through contemporary events. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd became another victim of police brutality in the United States. Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis, Minnesota while being arrested on suspicion of using a counterfeit \$20 bill, but during the arrest, ex-police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd’s neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds and killed him. Almost one year later, on April 20, 2021, I felt a moment of relief when NPR stated that the defendant was “found guilty on all three accounts of second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter.” Accountability was finally held for Floyd, another Black man who was killed in the hands of the police in the United States. Justice has been denied to so many African Americans in these cases. The family of Emmett Till was with the family of George Floyd to offer support as the jury came to a decision on the trial of Derek Chauvin. It took over 65 years for Till’s family to receive justice, but one year for George Floyd to get it. Part of this has to do with the viral videos that surfaced on social media. As a result of how quickly media is shared online, the nation pointed to irrefutable evidence of injustice. However, the #SayHerName slogan remains in the background because Black women were still not getting justice.

Progress is being made as the system holds police accountable for killing us, but what progress has been made for Black women, particularly? As is so often the case,

women are instrumental in elevating these stories to national attention. Floyd's story went viral because of Darnella Frazier's literal lens, as she filmed the all-important nine minutes and 29 seconds. Capturing the heart-stopping and violent experiences of Black men is just as important for Black women, but at the intersection of race and gender, there is an additional barrier that stops Black women from getting justice. Will Sandra Bland or Breonna Taylor get the same references as Emmett Till and George Floyd in novels? These questions must be asked to continue the progress of including Black women's stories in narratives. We cannot wait another century or decade to uncover their stories, for I fear that there will not be time to save their lives. I am hopeful that it will not take as long because we have technology to rely on for sharing their voices, stories, and giving them a platform more quickly.

I cannot help but pause and imagine the African American literature that is to come. It was the year of a dual pandemic: COVID-19¹⁸ and racism. Racism is abiding, especially at pandemic levels. Communities of colors are more at risk of not receiving medical care due to the unjust systems that are carried over from slavery. The United States, a country used to moving quickly, making money, and traveling near and far, was now forced to quarantine. And happening in tandem were protests due to the killing of Black and brown bodies, as the nation was reminded about African Americans killed decades before, including Emmett Till. Americans were now faced with the new challenge of how to deal with a world all on their screens. For many, this also provided a

¹⁸ Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was caused by a new coronavirus first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. On March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization because of the speed and scale of the transmission of the disease. The world was then forced to undergo various levels of quarantine for up to nine months of the year.

time of rest, which came just in time for the fight against police brutality. It is important to ask questions about the literature that is to come out of the BLM. How are we seeing snippets of history repeat themselves today and how will history write the literature of this movement? What are the modes or ways that critics will use to read literature in order to answer these questions?

In 1903, W.E.B. DuBois published *Souls* and stated that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (687). One hundred and eighteen years later, in 2021, the problem of the color-line is just as relevant. African Americans still face the challenges of racial discrimination, Black voter suppression, and especially police brutality in the middle of the 21st century. Now that the nation is moving towards a more just system with the convictions of police officers who participate in police brutality, I hope that the problem of the color-line gets closer to being solved, but that it includes all gendered experiences. Now that the nation is allowing space for Black women voices, I hope that Black women are centered as much as Black men. This centering is only possible by elevating the voices of the Black women who are doing the work. Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, Sandra Bland, and Breonna Taylor must be prioritized in the narrative of U.S. history or else history will be forced to rescript itself again. We cannot wait for the rewriting of history at the expense of another Black woman’s or man’s life. We must write history as we see it.

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APPENDIX A



Fig. 1. "The Migration Series," by Jacob Lawrence, Panel No. 57, The Female worker was also one of the last groups to leave the South.

APPENDIX B

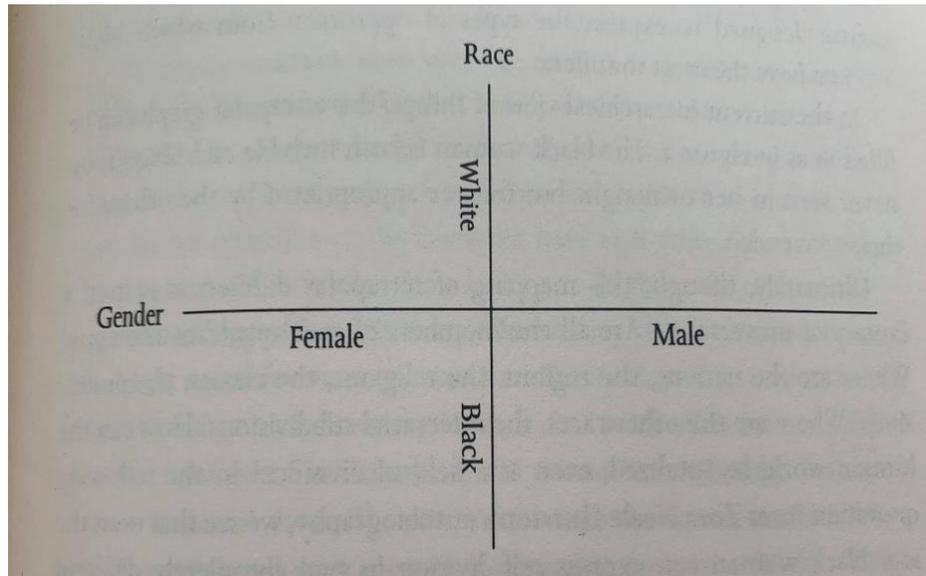


Fig. 2. “What is constantly seen exclusively in terms of a binary opposition—black versus white, man versus woman—must be redrawn at least as a tetrapolar structure”

(Wall 53).

APPENDIX C



Fig. 3. Colorofchange is an Instagram account that regularly creates posts to bring awareness of Black people that were killed by police brutality. On May 26, 2020, colorofchange posted an image stating #JusticeforFloyd to bring awareness about when

Floyd was murdered on May 25, 2020.