

BEYOND BREAKING THE SILENCE: RACE, GENDER, AND SURVIVOR
SUBJECTIVITIES IN FEMINIST RAPE NARRATIVES BY CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN WOMEN OF COLOR

by

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Beyond Breaking the Silence: Race, Gender, and Survivor Subjectivities in Feminist
Rape Narratives by Contemporary American Women of Color

. . . . And so, when the time comes, you have to turn to him,
the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs,
your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess
to him, you are guilty of the crime
of having been forced.

And you see his blue eyes, the blue eyes of all the family
whom you used to know, grow narrow and glisten,
his hand types out the details
and he wants them all
but the hysteria in your voice pleases him best.

You hardly know him but now he thinks he knows you:
he has taken down your worst moment
on a machine and filed it in a file.
He knows, or thinks he knows, how much you imagined;
he knows, or thinks he knows, what you secretly wanted.

He has access to machinery that could get you put away;
and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
and if, in the sickening light of the precinct,
your details sound like a portrait of your confessor,
will you swallow, will you deny them, will you lie your way home?

- Excerpt from "Rape" by Adrienne Rich

A study entitled "The Sexual Victimization of College Women," conducted in
2000 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics revealed that "*only* about 1 in 36 college women

(2.8 percent) experience a completed rape or attempted rape in an academic year” (10; my emphasis). By 2006, my senior year of college, I personally knew six such women. Not a single one successfully reported her violation. This year demarcates one of the most memorable events in my life: the rape of a close friend happening, unbeknownst to me, while I was waiting for her in a parking lot. Almost as traumatic as the rape itself was the ordeal she underwent attempting to report it, a process I witnessed first-hand. Though the police were immediately called to the scene, they refused to take action because she was intoxicated. They were again called to the hospital when she requested a rape kit and was told that, in order to procure one, an official police report needed to be filed first. A second time, she was denied. Medical attention, at a different facility, was attained only after communicating with a contact at the local YWCA, but the next six months of interrogation, testifying, and waiting came to naught. My friend’s story of rape, like that of so many other women, was treated with incredulity, indifference, and hostility and in the end, effectively silenced.

Inspired by these experiences, this project began as an investigation of the ways in which the voices – and silences – of contemporary rape victims are being represented in literature. If, as Patricia Beer claims, “the novel, without benefit of anyone’s argument, can show quite precisely how things are or were,” what do recent rape narratives expose about sexual violence in America? (qtd. by Moi 51). If we choose *not* to exclude critical arguments from this inquiry, what can be gleaned about attitudes towards this violence? Can feminist criticism of rape narratives offer means of resisting the rape myths that keep victims silent? Believing that literary discourse plays a significant part in defining and shaping the issues with which society is concerned, I hoped to find a collection of

realistic, survivor-centered rape portrayals offering insights to overcoming this trauma, or ways to prevent it, and a corresponding body of criticism pointing out this wisdom. As I reviewed the rather extensive body of scholarship concerned with contemporary rape fictions, the small number of critics linking literary depictions with reality disappointed me. In many cases, rape and its influence on identity were eclipsed by rape as a trope or treated as just one of many conflicts in the overall development of the characters. Of those critics who do focus on how victims experience and negotiate rape, they can typically be divided into two categories: those who look at victims as gendered subjects (white women) and those who look at them as racialized subjects (minority women, interracial rape victims). Many white feminist critics have followed in the footsteps of Susan Brownmiller, author of the seminal work *Against Our Will*, in “all too frequently present[ing] the fight against rape and the fight against racism as an either/or choice—either gender or race,” ignoring the fact that rape victims cannot segregate bodily markers (Horeck 30). For these reasons I have chosen to do a close analytical reading of rape literature in which the victims/survivors occupy dual marginalized identities, and both race and gender are at the forefront of their narratives. While the novels I’ve selected are not revolutionary in the sense of presenting a comprehensive plan to eradicate rape, they are some of the most discerning and critical accounts of “how things are.”

Beginning with second-wave feminism and the consciousness-raising movements of the 1960s and 1970s, American women have been fighting to “end the blanket silence shrouding rape and bring it to public attention” (Horeck i). Because of these organizations, legal definitions and protective policies regarding sexual violence were set, child and wife abuse were given a name, crisis centers were established, and the first

cries of “take back the night” were heard. There can be no doubt that much progress has been made towards social *awareness* of sexual violence. While these were important first steps towards the end of violence against women, it does not appear that we have progressed much since then. According to the most current statistics maintained by the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, a staggering “one out of every six American women have been the victims of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime (14.8% completed rape; 2.8% attempted rape).” Women have not only *not* taken back the night, but also continue to find themselves constrained by a social mandate of constant vigilance and self-censorship. A strange kind of moralizing Darwinian code determines that those females who let their guard down, travel alone, or draw attention to themselves through appearance or behavior should expect to be raped. Within this culture of terrorism, awareness of an unremitting threat constitutes more of a burden than an asset. Sabine Sielke, author of *Reading Rape*, defines the revised consciousness of women as potential rape victims as a hindrance to, even a reversal of, the recent progress of the women’s movement: “women’s increasing awareness of sexual aggression has partly canceled out their ‘liberation,’ effecting an unprecedented sense of helplessness, vulnerability and anxieties” which in turn “has hampered rather than helped the evolution of new bodies and selves” (Sielke 166). Even worse, the increasing visibility of sexual violence in such pop culture texts as *The Accused* (1988), *Raw Deal: A Question of Consent* (2001), *Law & Order:SVU* (1999-present), and numerous romance novels and news broadcasts help to normalize and sensationalize its occurrence, resulting in the phenomenon of “public rape” (Horeck).

In the introduction to their critical anthology, *Rape and Representation*, editors Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver significantly posit that when it comes to telling the story of rape, “who is speaking may be *all* that matters” (1). Contemporary media do not enable the voice of the victims, but rather exploit and dramatize their suffering for profit. Those who want preventative action to be taken are drowned out by the cultural message that rape is the inevitable consequence of gender relations or “these things happen.” Because America is a patriarchy, women (literally meaning “other than man”) are automatically marked by sexual difference and, with regards to sexual violence, defined as inherently passive and violable in juxtaposition to ostensible natural male aggression. Under the guise of normative heterosexuality, current depictions of rape often romanticize the act of violation, transforming the violator into a hero through a bizarre transition from fear to arousal on the part of the heroine. These sadistic love plots reflect the persistent notion that women who reject intercourse are only playing the coquette and in actuality want to be violently “seduced.” Whether conceptualized or enjoyed by men or women, many feminists decry all such rape fantasies as the product of patriarchal oppression. In doing so, they appropriate essentialist discourse, either omitting or directly refuting the possibility of female ownership of violent fictions. Another commonly articulated assumption, that behind the current cautionary existence of women, is that rape victims somehow invite their violation. Victim blame is the most common means by which both men and women dissociate themselves from the reality of violation. In some cases women are even more unsympathetic to victims of sexual violence because they “will not identify with the woman survivor, as a psychological means of reassuring themselves that nothing so horrendous could ever happen to them” (Chesler).

Survivor accounts of victimization are further invalidated by interrogations of consent and the unparalleled resistance with which reports are met. The existence of such web communities as falserape.net and Don'tMakeHerMad.com and their widespread efforts to overwrite statistical data on false allegations with much higher estimates exemplify the ongoing opposition between those rape narratives told by victims and those told by the dominant culture. In her article on "Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse" psychoanalytic clinician Janice Haaken notes that societal resistance to victim narratives is becoming a rising trend:

After decades of feminist gains in achieving public recognition of the widespread incidence of sexual abuse, the woman's movement confronts a new wave of coordinated opposition [begun] in the 1990s. The False Memory Syndrome (FMS) Foundation is a group of parents who organized to defend themselves against what they claim to be false accusations of sexual abuse. (1069)

If a rape victim is able to get beyond the suspicion and hostility of the police, she must face the rape trial, a process often described as a "second rape" due to the infamously degrading experience of cross-examination whereby everything from a woman's dreams to what she was wearing will be scrutinized. Here a victim will only receive justice, in whatever penalties or compensations can be doled out by a judge, if she is deemed a "worthy victim," or one "who cannot be construed as contributing to her assault or provoking the rapist in any way, whose memory of the event is fully detailed and flawless, and whose agency was demonstrably impaired during and after the assault" (Hengehold 198). For any victim finding these standards impossible to conform to, it is

easy to regress to feelings of guilt and self-blame, resulting in further motivation for remaining silent.

Historically, American literature has served to exacerbate these dynamics, by perpetuating rape myths, constructing unsympathetic or passive victims, or offering reductive accounts of survival. As with many literary genres dominated by white, heterosexual males, early representations of rape were problematic. In an effort to establish a “civilized” national identity, post-revolutionary America and its first authors adopted the rhetoric of “true womanhood,” and female sexuality, with few exceptions, was depicted as victimization (Sielke 15). Male-authored or “serious” novels depicting rape were told from the perspective of a male narrator or protagonist, eliding the experiences and voice of women and reducing their violation to a trope for men’s struggles over land, property, and power. Seduction novels such as Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (1791) and Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797) functioned as cautionary tales for women, warning that the loss of female virtue was irreparable and could only result in ostracization and death. The gender focus of rape literature shifted to race during the antebellum period, when tensions over slavery threatened to divide the nation. Thus, the myth of the black rapist, seen in print as early as the late eighteenth century, was popularized by American novelists during the Reconstruction. The racialization of sexual violence most often manifested as a dichotomous relationship between black male beast and white female victim, a trope which continued on “[a]fter Reconstruction [because] the idea of the black rapist proved particularly useful for white Americans seeking to come to terms with post-Civil War anxieties” (Gunning 6). Well-known modern literary texts like William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1931) and Richard

Wright's *Native Son* (1940) evoked and revised this image, but, like their predecessors, figured rape victims symbolically and employed highly voyeuristic scenes of violation. The traditional reader-victim relationship in representations of sexual violence have been marked by a rhetorical difference that empowers the readers in violent ways, forcing them to take on the gaze of the perpetrator and thus participate in objectifying and violating the victim. Until recently, these dynamics remained unchallenged. However, following the Civil Rights movements, many women took on a fight against paralyzing rape mythologies: they rejected the definition of rape as a rare psychotic aberration and re-inscribed it as the product of the social and material subjugation of women in patriarchies. Along with the consciousness-raising groups a new genre of female-authored rape narratives emerged: women-centered texts that not only restored the victim's subjectivity, but further indicted those forces that negatively influence it. However, even these autobiographies and "coming out" narratives have their problems. Those authored by white women, unless depicting an interracial rape, typically ignore the issue of race altogether. Even worse, many of these books suggest that simply voicing the trauma of rape is enough of a healing step for victims and do not risk asking for more from their readership. It appears that one must look to a much smaller body of rape literature to find stories where breaking the silence is a first, and not a final, step.

Of the feminist rape literature that accomplishes this, I will examine the novels *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison (1992), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (1969), *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina García (1992) and *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee (1989). Collectively these books represent a contemporary challenge to current ignorance about rape. What is perhaps most important about these works is that

they show rape to be a complex phenomenon, an act that cannot be felt or perceived in any singular way. The experience of rape is neither solely political nor solely personal, but a combination of both: each woman negotiates the impact of sexual violence on her subjectivity in unique ways, but cannot permanently remove herself from the gendered and racialized body being violated. For minority heroines the “possibilities of resistance” to cultural inscriptions are defined and limited by “their entrapment in the [white] patriarchal story” (Higgins 4). In order to fully comprehend the complex subjectivities of women of color, one must recognize that, as asserted in *The Aftermath*, “no woman exists in the single dimension of sex” (Meintjes 5). Gender and race are the most visible and influential markers of otherness shaping a minority woman’s sense of self. As with most feminist revisions, these narratives take a close look at societal censorship of female sexuality, appearance, actions and other “forms of subjection that engender the feminine body” (Bartky 27). However, unlike feminist authors who are content to define womanhood as an undifferentiated category of oppression, these women also highlight the racialized nuances of survivor subjectivity. Race, as defined by such texts, constitutes a fluid category with shifting, socially determined meanings. While the scope of this project covers both intraracial rape (*Bastard Out of Carolina* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) and interracial rape (*Dreaming in Cuban* and *Jasmine*), they are equally racialized acts. As noted above, master narratives concerning race and rape suggest that the two only intersect when a black man rapes a white woman. In depicting a much more complex dynamic between race and sexual violence, these four novels take up the much-needed “quarrel with History” (Herrera 71).

Because the actual occurrence of rape takes place near the middle of the lifespan being encompassed in each novel or as the culmination of abuse over a lengthier time-span, readers can get an excellent sense of what the protagonist was like before, during, and after her rape and also witness the transitions between these stages. In her own way, each female protagonist is presented as a kind of survivor even prior to having been raped. While not all native to America, the settings in which these characters are introduced are male-dominated, white-privileged, violent landscapes. The grim patriarchal contexts of their early lives cause these dually marginalized women to exist under continuous subjugation, degradation, and constraint. Though many of the protagonists' thoughts and behaviors are self-destructive in favor of the hostile ideologies upheld by their society, several pre-rape conflicts function to illustrate that, whatever their capacity for resistance, the will exists. Early forms of defiance consist of questioning the power structure of their environment and their place within it, staking a claim or declaring a right, and rejecting outside definitions of self.

In most of these narratives, the rape itself is the most direct threat to well-being encountered by the protagonist, but also the act they are least able to defend themselves against. It is at these moments that fantasy, both violent and escapist, is employed by the victim against her attacker. As noted above, traditional feminists tend to perceive "fantasy," when contextualized in a discussion of rape, as a troubling concept detrimental to the progress of the women's movement. However, fantasy in these fictions refers not to "lurid male fantasies of violating helpless women" or to "women fantasiz[ing] about being sexually violated by men," but to a rape victim's decision to transcend reality, utilizing her powers of imagination to rewrite what is happening to her and reclaim

control over self (Horeck 4). Haaken asserts that “in the rush to defend the authority of women’s voices, [feminists] have lost an important area of feminine struggle: the right of women to recognize the role of fantasy and desire in mental life, capacities that are fundamental to resisting patriarchal control and imagining a world beyond it” (1071). The four texts encompassed here recover this function of the woman’s imagination, and those by Allison and Angelou in particular intersect such imaginings with physical and emotional desire without invalidating the trauma of the experience. Thereby subverting the notion that desire and abuse are mutually exclusive, these writers also offer to their audiences the idea “that violence is not only the perpetrator’s domain” (Horeck 39). In fact, all four texts explore an alternative violence chosen by the victim, albeit either imagined or masochistic, ““through which the self . . . is constituted and maintained” (Horeck 39). For the length of this empowered interim in their development I switch from referencing the characters as “victims” to deeming them “survivors, because, in the tradition of survivor discourse, “the term *survivor* is typically reserved for those who have self-consciously redefined their relationship to the experience from one of ‘victim’” (Naples 1151). The victims in these feminist novels at least *temporarily* transition to survivorhood by appropriating the culture of violence for their own gains; physical and mental violence become a means of seeing and shaping self. While the authors discussed here certainly mean to invest their characters with agency in such moments, there is never any doubt that these strategies arise out of necessity. Thus, the writers simultaneously reveal the strengths of their protagonists and the limitations imposed by patriarchy.

The bulk of the novels selected for this study are concerned with their protagonists’ difficult negotiation of post-rape subjectivity and look at the event as

having both positive and negative consequences, thus calculating “the cost of rape for its victims in terms more complex than the extinction of female selfhood in death or silence” (Rajan 77). Unlike traditional rape narratives, the suffering of these rape victims is not figured as a loss of virtue or female worth, but as “the psychological or physical reality of the victim or the impact of rape on her life” (Stockton 12). The act of rape in these stories is articulated as the rapist’s attempt to strip a sexually and racially differentiated woman of her agency and reinscribe her as an inferior and impotent being. The initial fantasized or actualized resistance to this encroachment is followed by an even more chaotic vacillation between acceptance and rejection of various identities. This confusion is evidence that, despite occasional empowerment and fulfillment, survivors of rape do not have the resources or networks necessary to a full recovery. While most critics will attempt to define whether or not the protagonist’s story is one of triumph or failure, I think it is more important to examine the missed opportunities that lead up to the conclusion. Each of these feminist fictions look at the possibility of female solidarity and empowerment only to have it fall apart in the face of cultural differences and the mentality of self-preservation. Ultimately, these are not happy narratives. None of the authors comes up with a definite solution, and none of the characters absolutely escape the trauma of their pasts. Those characters that find their voices again do so only momentarily or ineffectually in face of hostile patriarchal definitions of victimhood.

By identifying herself as a victim of a crime that provokes intense and often defensive reactions in community members, whether they support or mistrust her, a woman puts herself in the midst of confused and conflicting discourses that can overshadow or undermine her own

understanding of the sexual events that she tries to master through the evaluation of rape. (Hengehold 190)

At the close of their stories, even those women who find “the courage to think and to speak in one’s own language” are thwarted by the impossibility of “mak[ing] that language heard in the larger world” (qtd. by Naples 1156).

The first two pieces discussed in this project are autobiographical rape novels based on the author’s experiences but incorporating fictive elements, while the latter two constitute works of fiction with some autobiographical elements. In both cases, the narratives have a dual focus on singular and collective experiences, illustrating how the individual self necessarily develops within a community. The female protagonist, or “I” in all but *Dreaming in Cuban*, is the figure with which the audience most identifies, and while she is often mistreated by her community, she is still an interactive member. Through her lens, the readership learns that the voices of the marginalized collective “share common preoccupations about their changing world” and a common language to articulate these views, thus “humaniz[ing] and intensif[ying] native space and affirm[ing] its underlying unity in a national-historical context” (Paquet 126; 125). Unlike the traditional autobiography, a potentially narcissistic and self-serving genre, these texts are “autobiograph[ies] in the service of something other than the story of a life and deeds done” (Paquet 152). In placing a rape victim at both the center and periphery of the text, making her both story subject and storyteller, these narratives do not make visible only one woman’s trials, but construct and create awareness of the violated “everywoman” whose tale of abuse is too familiar to dismiss: “For while autobiography personalizes history and politics, autobiography is depersonalized when individual experience is

identified as part of a cultural pattern. The individual predicament merges with the collective, and self-definition is achieved in representative terms” (Paquet 153).

In representing minority women and their struggles, these rape narratives are part and parcel with a trend in contemporary women’s autobiographies that Connie D. Griffin describes as preoccupied with “the painful position of having no ‘place’ to call one’s own” and the subsequent necessity of “having to construct a space [for themselves] within alienating narrative and cultural forms” (321). Because the marginalized subjectivities of these authors are neither represented nor accepted by the culture wherein they exist, their search for self-fulfillment is marked by a fluid “shuttling” between identities. All four novels not only demonstrate a fluctuating relationship between autobiography and fiction, but also show the protagonists engaged in the transitional processes of challenging existing subjectivities and creating new ones in the face of unaccommodating social constructs. What really sets aside the autobiographical novels, Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, from the narratives with more fictional elements is that the author’s greater proximity to the events produces protagonists who demonstrate a greater self-consciousness during these negotiations. Because the silences being broken and the violations brought to light are their own, Allison and Angelou are more defensive of the protagonist’s account and more explicit in their indictments of exclusive centricities.

It is also significant that the attacks in these first two novels take place during the protagonist’s childhood and are perpetrated by a father figure. The conscious-raising feminist movements that first voiced rape also “challenged the hegemonic myth of the nurturing nuclear family form and the long-held denial of childhood sexual abuse”

(Naples 1154). Thus, the same backlash against feminism that spurred an increasing resistance to rape reporting also instigated widespread social doubt of the feminized incest recovery industry. Feminist literature preoccupied with survivors of incest lends renewed credibility to these experiences. According to Janice Haaken, abuse narratives composed by women of color are especially “apt to place private enactments of violence within a broader dehumanizing context,” placing the blame for its perpetration partially on the violator, but more so on the racist and sexist institutions enabling such actions. The family unit, dysfunctional in both Allison’s and Angelou’s narratives, is the location of all action for the protagonists and thus serves as a microcosmic representation of this larger hostile society. Furthermore, because the rape victims know their perpetrator intimately and consider him a family member, the degree to which they blame themselves for the encounter is intensified. These youthful victims live with their violators and are not possessed of the physical or economic means of leaving, forcing them to endure abuse that occurs and escalates over an extended period of time.

In chapter one I will take a close look at Dorothy Allison’s autobiographical novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, published in 1992. My inclusion of this novel in the category of minority texts derives from my subscription to recent theories that “white trash” actually constitutes a separate ethnicity from privileged whiteness. *Bastard Out of Carolina* is narrated by Ruth Anne Boatwright, called Bone, a young girl who, having been labeled as “illegitimate” from birth, is thrust into a battle against the stigma of deviant whiteness. The first few chapters, because they encompass Bone’s infancy and early childhood, focus on her mother and her determined fight to annul this social branding and the legacy of shame meant to accompany it. Bone’s childhood perspective functions as an

indictment of such roles in that her narratorial intrusions are ones of consistent questioning of race and gender differentiation and the ways they dictate social interaction in her town. Bone seems to adopt this defiant attitude from her mother, whom in her ambition to escape poverty and legitimize her daughters, courts and eventually marries “Daddy” Glen, the man who would come to abuse and rape Bone. Because Bone experiences sexual violence as a perpetual cycle over the duration of many years, her negotiation of identity is unique among survivors.

Chapter two focuses on *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) by Maya Angelou, another popular segment of an autobiographical series. Angelou narrates her coming-of-age story, beginning with the time she is three years old and ending with her young motherhood at sixteen. Set during the 1930s and 1940s, young Maya is confronted with the trauma of being black at the height of racial segregation and prejudice. In addition to dealing with her parents’ abandonment, Maya’s earliest years bear witness to a barrage of insults and violence from the invisible yet ubiquitous white community and a series of sadomasochistic rituals inflicted by the self-hating black community. When given the chance to reunite with her parents and travel to the Northern “promised land” of St. Louis, Missouri, eight-year-old Maya finds herself vulnerable to molestation and rape at the hands of her mother’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. Her family accidentally discovers this violation, and Maya is subsequently forced to undergo a public rape trial, making her the only one of the four protagonists to directly experience the justice system’s treatment of victims. Rather than derive any kind of empowerment from her articulation of rape, Maya’s confusion over her sexual and racial positionality lead her to condemn herself as a traitor to her family and the black community.

The second two rape narratives examined in this study differentiate from the first two in a number of ways. *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina García and *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee are books about the experiences of American immigrants. As non-natives enduring literal and figurative cross-cultural emigrations, the heroines Lourdes and Jasmine must deal with the unique consequences facing persons of multicultural identities. Even before emigrating to the U.S., during the earliest-depicted years of their existence, Lourdes and Jasmine find themselves faced with a relentless onslaught of stigmatization and violence, yet do little to challenge these dynamics. Whereas the fictive counterparts to Allison and Angelou are likely to have their early passivity justified both by their extreme youth and ignorance and their obligation to record real events, feminist readers are likely to be more critical of cultural compliance on the part of these older, more socially-aware characters. However, as delineated by Linda McDowell, the protagonists of García and Mukherjee are members of non-European societies in which “it [is] in women’s self-interest to support a system that was essential for their long-term survival and living standards even while it [is] also oppressing them and their daughters” (McDowell 20). Thus, while sexual violation is a persistent and recognized danger, until it is actualized upon their persons these characters regard it as a normative part of the culture of violence in which they are immured. What emerges from the simultaneity of a defeated attitude and determination to survive is a form of muted agency: these women “may be subordinate but they are not necessarily subservient. They are able to work within and to some extent subvert patriarchal relations” (McDowell 20). Most significantly, while relocating to America provides a few new liberties and protections in

other areas of their lives, both Lourdes and Jasmine find themselves equally, if not more, susceptible to sexual violence.

Dreaming in Cuban, published the same year as *Bastard Out of Carolina*, is the focus of my third chapter. Unlike the other novels, which all have a single narrator and protagonist, *Dreaming* is a polyvocal text, a literary pastiche of the voices of four Cuban-American women. Though Lourdes Puentes is neither the most prominent of these characters, nor the woman with whom García most identifies, her story of sexual violence and its aftermath are nonetheless vital and inextricable from the other women's tales. Chronologically she begins her narrative as a young twenty-something newlywed in Cuba at the start of the Cuban Revolution. A member of the wealthy land-owning class, Lourdes finds her property being appropriated by Castro's soldiers. In her defense of it, Lourdes herself becomes targeted, and she is brutally raped. Lourdes' painful and masochistic negotiation of this violation coincides with her exile and dogged determination to imbibe an American identity. The only text to employ magical realism, *Dreaming* is a literal ghost story in which a specter of Lourdes' violent past is her only aid through a recovery process that never comes to fruition.

The fourth and final rape narrative encompassed in this investigation is Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989). Of all these narratives, *Jasmine* is the most explicit in its documentation of shifting subjectivities. As the titular heroine pursues alternate positionalities, her transitions are marked by such radical changes as new names, new families and new personalities. Beginning in the small conservative village of Hasnapur, India, a series of tragic events lead this initially complacent woman to seek more fulfilling prospects in America. Her destination proves a vastly different landscape from

the utopia described in college brochures and her first American experiences involve exposure to death, decay, and rape. Undeterred, and even increasingly motivated to shirk her previously passive existence, Jasmine continues her quest for self with new fervor. Like the other protagonists, she flees the victimization of her past by rewriting the present, encountering a multitude of obstacles along the journey. In the aftermath of her attack, Jasmine attracts a wide cast of characters who influence and are influenced by her personal mission. Though she explores the possibilities of solidarity with these persons, in the end her Otherness, both as woman and immigrant, prevent her from voicing or moving beyond her violation.

Ultimately what these narratives attempt individually, and accomplish more comprehensively when read intertextually, is to restore the voices of survivors and give credence to their stories. Current patriarchal discourse is antagonistic to survivors, either highlighting their culpability or sensationalizing their victimhood and never truly delving into their emotional and psychological struggles. In her dissertation, “See Jane Cry” Jennifer Hritz applies Foucault’s theory of knowledge and power to rape and the current need for such feminist revisions: “Viewed through the perspective of sexual violence, it is easy to see that if the patriarchal order controls discursive practices about the topic, then it also controls knowledge about the subject and thus maintains power- and perpetuates the problem” (19). If realistic, myth-debunking, self-reflexive rape narratives like these replace the current pop culture representations of rape it would certainly be a step towards transforming this discourse and subsequently transforming social attitudes towards rape. Dorothy Allison, Maya Angelou, Cristina García, and Bharati Mukherjee are calling out to Americans that, as a nation, we may not be as progressive as we’d like

to think. In fact, the chorus of these rape narratives echoes J. Brooks Bouson's assertion that contemporary America is a "shame-phobic society in which those who are stigmatized as different or those who fail to meet social standards of success are made to feel inferior, deficient, or both" (101). Until the oppressive ideologies and institutions behind such interactions are dismantled, women and minorities will continue to receive second-class treatment. And until real rape victims and survivors can articulate their experiences without fear of pity, hatred, or retribution, they will continue to suffer in silence.

Chapter One: Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*

In describing her relationship to her autobiographical writings, Dorothy Allison has strongly asserted that “breaking the silence” was necessary to attaining self-knowledge: “Without [writing], I have no way to know who I am” (qtd. by Griffin 327). The secrecy in which she veiled her story of childhood abuse, hiding it into her adulthood, prevented her from accessing a deeper undistorted view of her subjectivity. While Allison eventually chose to write her self-representational novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, because of a notable absence of persons like herself in literature, she did so knowing the hazards of an autobiographical rape narrative. Her hesitation to “come out” about her sexually volatile white trash background was not merely the product of shame, but also awareness that telling such a story successfully means maintaining a precarious balance between a narrative that “does not either discount her abuse or allow it to destroy her” and thus overwrite her efforts towards developing an autonomous subjectivity. Unfortunately, the publication of *Bastard* and its tremendous popularity did incite the production of a large number of critical and readerly texts that make Allison’s victimhood, and not her survival, the focus of their attention. In a later memoir, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Allison discusses her more recent struggles against the public image of her as an individual wearing a “metaphorical coat” of childhood incest (Griffin 328). Resistance to external inscriptions and interpretations of subjectivity is likewise the central burden of her child narrator Bone Boatwright. Bone is raised in 1950s and 1960s Greenville, South Carolina, a time and locale in which deviance of any sort, sexual, racial, and otherwise, must be clearly labeled and then set apart so it could not infect the “pure” white, middle-class American Dream. Reflecting upon and exposing

the many transgressions of her poor rural family in a contemporary piece is still a tremendous risk for Allison because of the possibility of reinforcing the still-pervasive stereotypes linked to “white trash” persons. Despite such problematic readings of her rape narrative, *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a memorable and powerful indictment of her culture’s complicity in the victimization and silencing of her youthful counterpart.

When reading *Bastard*, it is essential to keep in mind that “Allison, in accord with her feminist politics, contends that we are defined by our social relations” (King 125). Rather than look at Bone’s complicity or agency alone, Allison defines the world around her as a pivotal driving force behind her protagonist’s personal development. As Bone seeks ways of constructing positive subjectivities, she must continuously reference the ones established by society and choose whether or not to accept them. In her position as a white trash woman, race and gender become the most immediate and important identity markers to negotiate. The American myth of meritocracy has long sustained the sense of moral and racial superiority on the part of privileged, meaning middle and upper class, whites. When skin color alone has not served to distinguish this group from less-deserving populations, or the poor, the term “white trash” has become a helpful means of re-establishing their position in the upper echelon of society. As noted by Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz, authors of *White Trash*, this label is “not just a classist slur- it’s also a racial epithet that marks out certain whites as a breed apart, a dysgenic race unto themselves” (2). The Boatwright family of *Bastard* has been placed in this category, and as such, appear to exhibit most or all of the stereotypical attributes expected of their “kind”: “incestuous . . . sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid” (Wray 2). Nowhere is this dynamic more evident than with the events surrounding Bone’s birth.

Her delivery comes about because of a car accident in which her mother “was asleep and everyone else just drunk” (Allison 2). When neither Granny nor Aunt Ruth can come to an agreement about the name of Bone’s father--a mental omission that signifies their desire to forget the origins of her mother’s shameful out-of-wedlock pregnancy--the courthouse clerk gets “mad” and vengefully stamps Bone’s certificate with “ILLEGITIMATE” in scarlet lettering. Most of the Boatwright family seem undisturbed by this marking as they have come to anticipate poor treatment from authorities: Uncle Earle encapsulates this perspective in his cynical observation, “The law never done us no good. Might as well get on without it” (Allison 5). However, Bone’s mother Anney, the only Boatwright not to have become reconciled to a position of inferiority, commences a lengthy battle for cultural recognition. Her fight to remove this label is far less about concern for her daughter’s wellbeing than it is about self-redemption:

Mama hated to be called trash, hated the memory of every day she’d ever spent bent over other people’s peanuts and strawberry plants while they stood tall and looked at her like she was a rock on the ground. The stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they’d tried to put on her. *No-good, lazy, shiftless.* (Allison 3)

Though Anney verbally refutes experiencing shame, she is in fact consumed by her own Othering and, under the watchful, judging eye of her community, begins to mentally and physically deteriorate: “Watch her eyes and how they sink into her face, the lines that grow out from that tight stubborn mouth, the easy banter that rises from the deepest place inside her” (Allison 14). It is not long before Bone also finds herself being designated in pejorative terms and must similarly seek ways to challenge her detractors.

As she begins the deconstruction of existing subjectivities and construction of more fulfilling, yet still legitimate, possibilities, Bone demonstrates acute social and self-awareness. According to Connie D. Griffin, “Marginal identities are quite aware of the boundaries upon which they live and the frames of reference that must shift for their inclusion” (329). Bone’s identification with white trash racialization places her between two other racial categories: privileged whites and blacks. Aside from the clerks who annually shame and mock her mother, the other predominant group of official whites in Bone’s life are the Waddells, the family of her abusive stepfather. These successful middle-class persons are the epitome of white prejudice and quickly reject anyone who does not live up to their standards, including Daddy Glen, and more especially the white trash family he married into. For Bone, the Waddells are the only immediate source of comparative living style, and it is upon glimpsing their many possessions that she first experiences her own existence as a lack: “I stared in at the spines of those books, wanting it all, wanting the furniture, the garden, the big open kitchen . . . I couldn’t speak around the hunger in my throat” (Allison 102). When visiting the Waddell houses, bedecked with glittering reminders of luxury and excess, Bone comes to doubt her self-worth, and the treatment of the family, who either ignores or ridicules her presence, leads her to appropriate their stigmatization. After hearing her cousins designate her and her family “nigger trash,” she retaliates by plucking the rosebushes, thinking to herself “trash steals” (Allison 102-3). At this point in the novel, Bone is clearly confused about how she should best react to discrimination, having both the model of the Boatwright’s ostensible shameless enactments of social expectations and that of her mother’s obsessive yet futile laboring against these labels to choose from. Thus she vengefully takes from her enemies,

but is careful to note that she is only stealing “roses” and that “No hunger would make me take anything else of theirs” (Allison 103). She deliberately dissociates herself from those who thieve out of need by selecting objects of no inherent monetary value.

In her efforts to shape a positive racial identity, Bone alternates between subversive reclamation and complete denial of her white trash status. Her destruction of the Waddell rose garden is actually an emulation of the central survival strategy practiced by her aunts and uncles. These relatives have adapted a superficially successful technique of dealing with their social devaluation; they play the part of “shamelessly defiant and angry white trash poor” through excessive drinking, violence, crude language and mannerisms, and tales of incest and miscegenation (Bouson 107). However, to “flaunt” one’s “socially scripted and stereotypical role” is a defense mechanism that ultimately serves only to reinforce the oppressive dynamics dictating these behaviors and, worse, leads the actors to internalize the hatred of the oppressor (Bouson 107). Bone’s initial act of theft, the comparatively harmless destruction of her tormentors’ flowers, is just the first sign that her learned self-hatred could lead to a career of crime worthy of her family’s unsavory reputation. Under the influence of her cousins, she pilfers candy, is caught by her mother, and unnecessarily shamed by the Woolworth store’s owner when forced to confess. In the aftermath of this disgrace, Bone experiments with less risky misdeeds, only to later enact revenge via a prison-worthy act of vandalism: the complete destruction of the Woolworth’s building from which she was banned. In the dramatization of her crime, it is once again made apparent that her actions stem from her imprisonment in a “shame-rage feeling trap” (Bouson 107). Like with the roses, she does not actually take anything that could be of value or use, but instead derives self-

satisfaction by imagining the impact she has had, a reprieve from her usual state of helplessness. The aftermath of her rage not only explicitly connects her transgressions, but hints that without intercession she will continue on the same destructive path: “My anger beat inside me. Maybe . . . I would take off one night. Maybe I would go all the way over to Uncle James’s house and pull up my mama a rosebush or two” (Allison 226).

Ultimately these rebellious acts do not empower Bone, but secure her position as a second-class citizen. Unfortunately, the same rhetoric that the dominant culture employs to convince white trash persons of their inferiority also establishes that they are one level above other marginalized races, making solidarity among minority races much less likely. The appellation “nigger trash” is especially significant because it delineates the precarious racial hierarchy framing white trash subjectivity. Bone quickly discovers that “blackness,” like “illegitimacy,” is an even less desirable state of being and that persons accusing her of black heritage mean to insult her. The tactics of questioning racial composition or employing the myth of tainted blood have long been at the center of maintaining bigotry towards white trash. In late nineteenth century Eugenic Family Studies it was common for “researchers [to conduct] their studies by locating relatives who were either incarcerated or institutionalized and [trace] their genealogies back to a ‘defective’ source (often, but not always, a person of mixed blood)” (Wray 2). Since racial “purity” can neither be proved nor disproved, suspicion becomes a potent means of reinforcing the self-hatred of an already marginalized group. Bone observes: “People were crazy on the subject of color, I knew, and it was true that one or two of the cousins had kinky hair and took some teasing for it, enough that everyone was a little tender about it” (Allison 54). Like the other facets of white trash identity under which they are

supposed to operate, the issue of racial hybridity is transformed into a family joke and false source of pride by the Boatwrights. It takes Bone's discerning perspective to locate the very real tensions underlying their discourse: "The shaping and shaming power of internalized corrosive constructions of white trash identity as stigmatized—as uncultured, uncivilized and unclean—becomes evident in the family stories Bone learns about her own origins" (Bouson 106). Of all the Boatwrights, she is the most susceptible to racism, even from within her family.

Bone's status as a bastard, and her relatives' consequent inability or refusal to divulge information about her father, makes her a curiosity among Boatwrights. When her seemingly innocent inquiry as to whether she resembles her father is met by a dogged silence from her mother, Bone implicitly understands and internalizes that there is something shameful about her heritage. Quite literally the "black sheep" of the family because of her uniquely dark features, she is faced with queries and suppositions about her background for which she will never have a definitive answer. For a while it appears that her grandmother's alternative racial narrative, that in which her "great-great-granddaddy . . . was a Cherokee," may provide Bone with a positive sense of self, but this is quickly dismantled when she discovers that most people consider Indian roots to be just as taboo and objectionable as blackness (Allison 26). As argued by Griffin, the multicultural possibilities of her unknown racial background ultimately function as a source of shame, and she comes to conflate her "putative . . . heritage" with derogatory notions of white trash identity.

As limiting and detrimental as Bone's early identification as white trash is to her self-image, her subjugated sexual position within this racial group further impairs her

chances for personal fulfillment. Though her extreme youth at the beginning of *Bastard* appears to make her momentarily exempt from gender inscriptions, she learns from the lives and stories of her female relatives that Boatwright womanhood is not enviable. Like their counterparts in reality, Allison's female Boatwrights are "bearers of babies, burdens, and contempt" (qtd. by Bouson 101). A group that frequently promises but fails to provide a strong, woman-centered network, most of these women shape their lives around Boatwright men, catering to their wishes at the expense of their own. Much of Bone's internal dialogue is spent in contemplation of the sexual division of her family, and in the comparisons the men always come out more favorably: Bone's uncles

looked young . . . while the aunts . . . seemed old, worn-down, and slow, born to mother, nurse, and clean up after the men. Men could do anything, and everything they did, no matter how violent or mistaken, was viewed with humor and understanding What men did was just what men did. Some days I would grind my teeth, wishing I had been born a boy.

(Allison 23).

Immediately following this realization, Bone actively pursues a gender transformation, taking on the attire, behavior, and interests of her male relatives. For a while she is allowed these transgressions and happily given entry to the "boy's club." However, as she matures, she is made increasingly aware that this inclusion will not last. In what initially seems a strange turn of dialogue, one of her queries into her racial makeup incites her favorite cousin into relating a gender mythology defining Boatwright women as physical mutants: 'Boatwright women got caustic pussy. Kills off or messes up everything goes in or out their legs, except purebred Boatwright babies and rock-hard

Boatwright men’,” (Allison 54). This boastful tale of fantastical racial purification simultaneously attributes procreative success solely to the males of the family. In parallel fashion, children who figure as a burden for the family are the exclusive fault of Boatwright women. Uncle Earle, in his diatribe against a mother of seven, extends blame for excessive fertility to all females: “Women make babies the way you make biscuits. All the time pregnant with some little whey-faced empty-eyed child of God” (Allison 128). It is male-authored narratives such as these that establish and maintain the gender paradigm whereby Boatwright women become servants and Boatwright men never need grow up or face consequences.

Undoubtedly the most influential model of female subjectivity in Bone’s life is her mother, Anney. The “ILLEGITIMATE” stamp on Bone’s birth certificate is initially only a symbol of shame for Anney. Though directly appended to Bone’s name, this word actually functions as a reminder of Anney’s deviant sexuality, further conjuring unwarranted notions of promiscuity. Powerless to change this inscription, Anney is forced to perform a balancing act between two necessary subjectivities. In watching her mother’s routine, Bone learns that a woman’s survival – Anney’s sole motivation – is contingent on simultaneous desirability and chaste unavailability. Because she is a waitress, she is fiscally dependent upon her capacity to satisfy customers, in this case the workingmen of Greeneville. At the same time, in order to protect her reputation and her liberties, Anney must keep a guarded exterior and relegate all flirtations within the bounds of what her ever-vigilant neighbors deem appropriate. Thus her job at the diner becomes the enactment of daily gender rituals: “When the men at the counter weren’t slipping quarters in her pocket they were bringing her things, souvenirs or friendship

cards, once or twice a ring. Mama smiled, joked, slapped ass, and firmly passed back anything that looked like a down payment on something she didn't want to sell" (Allison 9). The economic rhetoric of this passage reveals that Anney is both conscious of, and however hesitantly, tolerant of her own commodification. Glen, whose obsessive attention to Anney is mistakenly interpreted as devotion, is perhaps the worst of the offenders in his reduction of her to a symbolic possession. For Glen, Anney represents her white trash family and he "initially determines to marry Anney because he wants to marry the 'whole Boatwright legend' and thus 'shame his daddy and shock his brothers'" (Bouson 7). His courtship amounts to stalking, and the pervasive surveillance under which Anney works begins to extend into her personal life as well. For the first part of the novel, Bone warily watches this relationship progress, and with it the transformation of the only strong, self-sufficient female figure in her life "into a giggling, hopeful girl" (Allison 35). Glen's entrance into Bone's life teaches her that even the most independent of women is destined to be sexual property.

Because of her diminutive size and dependence on adult figures, Bone discovers early on that her greatest asset in resisting detrimental racial and sexual classifications is her imagination. As a feminist author writing about survivor subjectivities, it is unsurprising that Allison has created a character who "instinctively understands that her identity, far from being stable or fixed, is transactional--the result of the ongoing conflict between the names and stories thrust upon her by others and those she creates for herself" (King 124). Given that there are few outlets for autonomous self-development and landscape in reality, Bone--like the other three heroines discussed in this project--turns to the accommodating landscape of the mind. In her treatise on feminist autobiographies,

Connie Griffin perceives that “[w]hether relegated to ‘minor,’ ‘regional,’ ‘ethnic,’ or ‘women’s,’ such ‘other’ representations of subjectivity are obliged to be revisionist; writers from such positionalities are required to move forward in a two-fold process, deconstructing dominant paradigms in the very act of reconstructing and representing the self” (325). That Bone undertakes such a formidable task in her childhood makes her critical rewritings of self all the more remarkable.

Creating fictions about oneself is another protective measure adopted from her white trash relatives. Bone notes with pride, “All the Boatwrights told stories, it was one of the things we were known for, and what one cousin swore was gospel, another swore just as fiercely was an unqualified lie” (Allison 53). Lying, from this perspective, does not have a negative connotation, but is simply a means of taking back representational power. Bone quickly becomes a master of weaving narratives, escaping to worlds more pleasant and more painful than her own. As she grows older, she also grows increasingly dissatisfied with the negligible victories her white trash identity can provide. She sees a change in schools as an opportunity to shed the poverty and shame of this epithet by presenting herself under the guise of privileged whiteness. Bone assumes the name “Roseanne Carter” and “enjoy[s] a brief popularity as someone from a big city who could tell big-city stories” (Allison 67). Though she states afterward that she “didn’t know” the reasons behind this performance, the audience is by now well aware of her desire for transformation. In a similar way, her racialized self-loathing motivates her temporarily to embrace the rumored Cherokee part of her makeup. For a while Bone adopts and feels empowered by Granny’s tales of Native American ancestry, telling herself that the “warrior” in her blood makes her a “dangerous” opponent to those wishing to harm her

(Allison 207). When her extended family tries to downplay this lineage, Bone imagines herself staring them down with her “Cherokee eyes” or committing terrible acts out of “magical” anger. Unfortunately, the stereotypes upon which this racial subjectivity is premised are hardly more affirmative or effective than the white trash construct, and even the false sense of empowerment derived from these imagined roles is annihilated by Daddy Glen’s abuse.

The perpetual cycle of verbal, physical and sexual cruelty preceding Bone’s rape encompasses virtually the entire length of the novel. This narrative is unique in two ways. First, the focus of these scenes directs the reader’s attention away from the act being committed and onto Bone’s psychological and emotional experience. Second, among the four feminist texts of this analysis, *Bastard* is the only one to closely examine the mindset and motivations of the attacker. Nancy Naples applauds the former “shift” in “standpoint of telling” as Allison’s clever way of “foreground[ing] the ways race and class inequalities limit the opportunities for some women to come to voice about their experiences of childhood sexual abuse and to be heard when they do speak about it” (1156). Allison has herself cited an aversion to voyeurism as the incentive for her restrained representations of violence. Disseminating an interview with her regarding the potential for sensationalized victimization, Vincent King states that Allison is both conscious and appropriately loathsome of the “‘pseudo-porn’ of most books on incest, which trade on the reader’s held breath and sweaty shame” (123). Thus, in *Bastard*, Bone’s youthful body is never described during her violations in aesthetic language, but in terms of the pain being inflicted on it. Instead, it is Glen, the perpetrator, who becomes

objectified by Bone's outward gaze. The first time Glen abuses Bone, it is described as follows:

He was holding himself in his fingers. I knew what it was under his hand. I'd seen my cousins naked, laughing, shaking their things and joking, but this was a mystery, scary and hard. His sweat running down his arms to my skin smelled strong and nasty. He grunted, squeezed my thighs between his arm and his legs. (Allison 47)

In this passage and others, Glen is transformed into a grotesque caricature. Allison additionally prepares against potential victim voyeurism by limiting her descriptions of abuse to a repetitive succession of actions and consequences: "I heard the sound of the belt swinging up, a song in the air, a high-pitched terrible sound. It hit me and I screamed. Daddy Glen swung his belt again. I screamed at its passage through the air, screamed before it hit me" (Allison 106). Unromanticized, nightmarish depictions like these have caused *Bastard* to receive wide acclaim for its lack of sentimentality.

Glen is not a simplistic character by any means, and Allison's story allows glimpses of his humanity from time to time. However, in Bone's perspective, the one readers most identify with, Glen is always reduced to a creature of nightmares, to a pair of frightening hands and steely eyes: "My dreams were full of long fingers, hands that reached around doorframes and crept over the edge of mattresses, fear in me like a river, like the ice-dark blue of his eyes" (Allison 70). Though he is a predominant figure in the novel from page ten, "for the most part the Glen we see is much the same as the image of the man in the photograph Bone ponders over, an image 'as flat and empty as a sheet of

tin in the sun, throwing back heat and light, but no details – not one clear line of who he really was behind those eyes” (Miller 142). Ultimately a character shrouded in mystery, Glen is also unequivocally a villain. Rather than detract the focus from her experience of victimization, Bone’s contemplation of the perpetrator helps both her and the reader to distinguish, although not necessarily realize, the possibility of subjectivities beyond her rapist’s making.

Bone’s stepfather begins abusing her at such an early age that her own sexual development becomes inextricable from a context of violence and self-loathing. Early on Glen establishes himself as an absolute power in the family, asserting to both Bone and her younger sister Reese, “I’ll tell you who you are . . . You’re mine now, an’t just Boatwrights” (Allison 52). True to his words, Glen not only subjects Bone to a constant barrage of insults, among them derogatory racial and sexual epithets, he also engenders a family divide, dictating that Bone stay away from the supportive network of “lying,” “stubborn” Boatwright women. His obsession with producing a male heir further convinces Bone that femaleness is an undesirable state of being; she and Reese are only adopted, or rather, claimed by Glen once the prospect of having a son is made impossible. Psychoanalyses of Glen, prompted by the text’s detailed inspection of his character, can easily demarcate a link between impotence and sexual violation. The first time Glen molests Bone occurs while waiting in the hospital parking lot in anticipation of his male infant’s birth. For Bone, the short time-span in which her abuse and the loss of her brother happen, cause her to conflate the two and the simultaneous pity and self-blame she feels in the aftermath become incitement to improve her performance as a daughter. Though illogical, Bone buys into the “contagion” of shame, accepting Daddy Glen’s

blame for his failures: “Our unbelief was what made him fail. Our lack of faith made him the man he was” (Allison 109). As his self-hatred is ever more directed at Bone specifically, she is increasingly convinced that she alone is responsible for the harm done. Her mother Anney only exacerbates this dynamic in that she “revictimizes her daughter by excusing Glen’s brutality. Just as Glen shifts the blame for his abusive behavior onto Bone . . . so Anney asks her daughter what she did to provoke the beating[s]” (Bouson 109).

Self-blame also plays a vital role in Bone’s reactions when Glen’s punishments escalate into corporeal violations. Already made fragile by her despised social positionality, Bone’s youth and subsequent lack of sexual knowledge cause her to fear that her molestations would signal a moral failure on her part: “I could not tell Mama. I would not have known how to explain why I stood there and let him touch me. It wasn’t sex . . . but then it was something like sex, something powerful and frightening that he wanted badly and I did not understand at all” (Allison 109). Bone is rendered literally powerless to “speak” of her violation because she does not have the vocabulary or understanding to process it. Both Anney and Glen contribute to this confusion by repeatedly telling Bone that her abuser “loves” her. At her youngest, Bone wonders if the unfamiliar but physically painless touching could be a demonstration of affection; in comparison with her brutal lashings, Glen’s gentleness seems like evidence that “he did love me. He told me so over and over again, holding my body tight to his, his hands shaking as they moved restlessly, endlessly, over my belly, ass, and thighs” (Allison 108). As the abuse escalates, Bone becomes afraid of Glen and distrusting of herself. Like many victims of sexual violence, she begins to perceive her body as traitorous to her

wellbeing and her desire for a sexual transformation is renewed: “My own hands were so small, my fingers thin and weak. I wished they were bigger, wider, stronger. I wished I was a boy so I could run faster, stay away more, or even hit him back” (Allison 109).

Without a definitive end to the violence enacted against her, Bone must negotiate her survivor subjectivity while still enduring victimization. Momentary cessations in Glen’s abuse provide her with no relief because she understands and anticipates that they will resume. This cyclical trap culminates in her rape towards the very end of the novel, leaving very little “aftermath” to assess. Thus, unlike the other protagonists who enjoy, however briefly, an autonomous remaking of self, Bone’s identity as a survivor is continuously shaped by her attacker. Though her early imaginings signal her attempts to “positively and constructively . . . [fashion] alternative identities,” the influence of ongoing violation cause her fantasy life to spiral out of control (King 125). Following the first assault, Bone wills herself into believing that it all occurred in a “dream,” a defense tactic that is both fruitless and perpetuates distrust in self. When she can no longer deny what is happening to her, a realization that comes with sexual maturation, she begins to masturbate to visions of brutality against her person, constructing herself into a kind of martyr. Bone temporarily derives empowerment in her imagination; she explains, “it was only in my fantasies with people watching me that I was able to defy Daddy Glen” (Allison 113). Bone’s expressed need for an audience illustrates that despite her silence, she desperately wants for someone else to acknowledge her victimization.

At first, even these violent fantasies seem to have positive potential as revisions of past, and likely future, helplessness; Bouson suggests that not only does “Bone attemp[t] to gain active mastery over passive suffering, she also defies her stepfather through her

autoerotic pleasures and thus achieves a secret sense of ‘pride’” (110). However, despite her claim to “heroism,” Bone seems unable to imagine herself as anything other than a victim. Furthermore, with the rising severity of attacks against her, she increasingly begins to conjure up “images of a purifying fire that promises retribution, and retribution increasingly crowds out every other desire Bone has ever had” (Miller 147). The anger spurring her vengeful desires begins to manifest in her storytelling, “full of boys and girls gruesomely raped and murdered,” and her preoccupation with “the sexy parts” of adult novels (Allison 119). Discouraged by the apparent inevitability of her abuse, she resignedly adopts both her stepfather’s perverse sexuality and his designation of her as a girl who is “cold as death, mean as a snake, and twice as twisty” (Allison 111). It is at this crisis, when her self-contempt is made visible in her interactions with others, that she is finally removed from the situation of abuse.

Vincent King notes that this sudden break in the progression of cruelty against Bone marks Allison’s attempt to examine Bone as a survivor; he argues “by temporarily halting the story of Bone’s abuse at the end of chapter eight, Allison refocuses the novel . . . on Bone’s awkward efforts to survive, and even transmute, these horrors” (124). It is during these chapters that the extent of the damage done to Bone’s psyche is revealed. When her extended family begins to comment on Bone’s “mean-hearted” transformation, Anney feels pressured to send Bone to live with her aunts. This small and excessively belated gesture of physical and familial protection does little to convince Bone that she is safe, but does give her a chance to explore her feelings about the abuse. As she contemplates her failure--and the failure of her loved ones--to stop Glen’s brutality, Bone’s fantastical existence moves from wishing and pretending alternative identities to

enacting violence against herself and others. The scenarios to which Bone masturbates have become even more gruesome and graphic in detail: “Someone had beaten me with dry sticks and put their hands in my clothes . . . Someone had tied me high up in the tree, gagged me and left me to starve to death while the blackbirds pecked at my ears. I rocked and rocked, pushing my thighs into the rough bark” (Allison 176).

Not only is Bone’s sexual pleasure more dependent on carnage, but also, in the absence of imposed pain, she begins to substitute her own. Whereas Bone originally used the pressure of her hand to masturbate, she now requires the aid of injurious props, in this case a tree, and later on a trawling hook. The hook, in part because of its inaccessibility (Aunt Raylene locks it away) and in part because of the danger it represents with its “razor points” and “steel edges,” becomes the object of Bone’s obsession until she acquires it (Allison 222). Having obtained this phallic object, Bone derives an unprecedented sense of safety; though she masturbates with it, the hook is not only a source of pleasure, but also an object that she sleeps with for comfort, thinking, “What I really was could not be touched. What I really wanted was not yet imagined. Somewhere far away a child was screaming, but right then, it was not me” (Allison 193). Though not yet explicit, her new need to introduce something tangible into her fantasy life suggests that the hook is a weapon that she might use against someone else. According to Shawn Miller, Bone accomplishes just this when she employs the hook in breaking into and destroying the Woolworth’s store: “Bone’s act is clearly a figurative rape, born of feelings of inadequacy and the desire to compensate for them” (148). For Bone, the hook is not just an equalizer for protection, but an empowering tool that would enable her to become the victimizer. With the hook in her possession, her fantasies make the transition

from masochistic to sadistic, and she finds herself gleefully dreaming of “cutting [Glen’s] heart out” and “sticking [a] knife in Daddy Glen” (Allison 209; 213).

In reality, neither positive nor sadomasochistic fantasies impact the circumstances under which Bone is victimized. King rightly credits Allison with a “feminist ethic which declares that story alone cannot remake Bone’s life” (124). Through a multitude of failed attempts at communicating her violation, Allison makes it clear that Bone reverts to her imagination out of necessity. Both her impotence and her desire to break the silence are directly translated into her dreams. Though Bone does not directly vocalize her experiences to those close to her, Allison refuses to hold her victim responsible, instead placing the greater degree of blame on the institutions and people whom Bone is unable to trust. To voice rape or sexual violence of any kind is no small task. Writing about survivor discourses, author Debi Brock asserts, “women who reveal themselves to have been sexually abused when young risk having this become constructed as the crux of their identity--considered the formative experience of who they are” (Naples 1175). While all victims of sexual violence, regardless of age, are likely to face the possibility of being defined by their experiences, it is certainly true that Bone’s extreme youth seems to contribute to her sense of culpability. She feels that she cannot confide what is happening to her because she would be met with harsh or pitying judgment. As the abuse continues, she becomes more convinced it is her fault, and to confess would expose *her* evil, rather than Glen’s. She knows enough of the cultural taboos on female sexuality to understand that revelation of such activities would necessarily be accompanied by shame. Bone additionally worries that to “say anything would mean trying to tell . . . everything,” including the intimate details of which she is

so ashamed. Her expressed fear of divulgence accurately encapsulates the dynamic behind so many victim's silences; the humiliating process of reliving the rape before an audience, whether familiar or not, is often a source of additional trauma.

Similarly, her mother's consistent failure to intercede or safeguard Bone from such abuse makes the immediate threat of retaliation a much more powerful incentive than any vague possibility of justice. Though Anney Boatwright is not aware of the molestations, she is an immediate witness to Bone's beatings and the very visible bodily damage they cause. Anney's strategy for dealing with the "bruises," "lumps," and "broken" pieces of her daughter is one of deep denial. Bone is both cynical of her mother's claims to ignorance and angry at her mother's repeated forgiveness of Glen for the violence she does acknowledge. Allison admits that *Bastard* is in part the "complicated, painful story of how my mama had, and had not, saved me as a girl" (qtd. by Bouson 114). Ultimately, Anney forgoes both female and familial solidarity for the reward of male attention. As her mother, and one who early on proved a formidable fighter, Anney initially seems like Bone's best chance for survival and support; however, her willing blindness and insistent reintegration of Glen into the family unit actually serve to push Bone further into silence and self-hatred.

In lieu of her mother's aid, Bone looks to the other Boatwright women for possible support. Bone periodically considers reaching out to her sister Reese, but unfortunately cannot seem to connect with her on an emotional level. At the start of the violence, she is victimized while her sister is left alone, a dynamic which segregates the girls into categories of privilege and abuse. This division makes it nearly impossible for either sister to understand the perspective of the other, and while Reese easily accepts

Glen as her “Daddy,” Bone chokes on the word. Later in the novel it becomes clear that Reese too has begun to experience abuse, as she goes through the same gender-bending, cross-dressing, and violent masturbation rituals as Bone. Even upon discovering this common ground, Bone cannot bring herself to discuss with Reese what is happening and doesn’t even consider that something might change if she did.

At the peak of her abuse, Bone discovers unlikely assistance in the form of her dying Aunt Ruth. Unlike her mother, who witnesses the abuse but makes excuses for it, Bone’s aunts do not see the abuse but express wariness of Glen’s obsessive and controlling behaviors. Despite this lack of evidence, Bone’s Aunt Ruth has the wherewithal to directly ask Bone if Daddy Glen has “ever hurt [her], messed with her” (Allison 124). At this point in time it is Bone’s fear of legitimacy that prevents her from answering honestly. Though she has endured years of sexual violence, Glen has not yet raped her, or done “the thing men did to women” (Allison 124). Bone hesitates to disclose what is happening to her, because she feels that, comparatively, her own suffering is less severe than what making a report necessitates. Again, Bone articulates a common dilemma for contemporary rape victims; the trend towards victim blame and legal need for hard evidence too frequently mean that less violent cases will not be taken seriously. Bone echoes this notion when, following her rape, she finally feels justified in taking action against her violator: “Look how hurt I was. There would be a story we could tell. It would be self-defense. It would be justifiable” (Allison 289). In spite of her initial denial, readers continue to sympathize with Bone and regret her Aunt Ruth’s inability or unwillingness to read in the “dropped” head, “whisper[s],” and “shudder[ing]” body of Bone the story she cannot vocalize.

The third and most successful opportunity for female solidarity arises when, following another bout of abuse, Bone is exiled to her Aunt Raylene's home. In the context of Allison's own lesbianism, critics often analyze Raylene as the only positive gay role model in Bone's early life. However, it is Raylene's empowering gender transgressions and not her sexuality that signal to Bone her potential as a confidant. A completely independent and self-satisfied woman, Raylene's stories of cross-dressing, taking on men's work, and traveling inspire Bone to contemplate these possibilities for herself. Further, Raylene is the only one of the Boatwrights to see and speak of social mobility and success as options for white trash persons; looking out at a river junkyard, Raylene uses it as a metaphor for Bone's edification, telling her "Trash rises . . . out here where no one can mess with it, trash rises all the time" (Allison 180). Additionally, she is the only person to push Bone to "get out there and do things" (Allison 182). Even more encouraging is Raylene's narrative of her own victimization and survival; after learning that her aunt "cut up a man for trying to mess with her," Bone begins to think of her own defense and to that end pursue acquisition of the trawling hook. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of Raylene's affirmative influence is that "during her stay with Raylene, Bone decides never to live again in the same house with Daddy Glen" (King 134). At this point in their relationship, several obstacles to intimacy become apparent. Raylene is the authority figure who locks away the hooks from Bone, showing that she does not quite look at Bone as an adult or trust her with dangerous objects. This is problematic because Bone is going through puberty and very much wants her maturity to be recognized. In this mindset, she has begun to despise her strong but unfeminine "Boatwright woman" body and is angered by Raylene's "jokes that we were all peasant

stock” (Allison 206). What eventually destroys the trust built between these two is actually Raylene’s fierce reaction to discovering signs of her niece’s physical abuse.

Before she can choose to relate her story of abuse, Bone’s silence is broken for her. Upon discovering stripes of blood on Bone’s backside, Raylene marches her around to the other family members, ass exposed, panties around her feet. Given this rather mortifying display of her body, it is not that surprising that Bone refuses to then tell of her sexual violation. Immediately upon being identified as a victim, Bone seems to lose her status as a person, and is subjected to inspection like an animal. The announcement of Glen’s actions spurs Bone’s notoriously violent uncles to beat him to the point of needing hospitalization, and Bone is forced to listen to her mother’s weeping and the “thuds [of] Daddy Glen hitting the wall” (Allison 247). For a child, this is not only an embarrassing, but a “terrifying” experience. The aftermath of this revelation is even worse for Bone. Though she has been dreaming of enacting similarly vicious retribution on Glen for some time, its realization only furthers her feelings of guilt and self-contempt. Bouson notes that “despite the family’s defense of Bone and her uncle’s enactment of Bone’s own deep-seated rage and wish for revenge, she does not find release from her chronic shame. Instead, when Anney leaves Glen and moves into a two-room apartment, Bone feels that everything—her mother’s silence and her sister’s anger—is somehow her fault” (114). Bone feels no relief because she knows that, like always, Glen’s absence is only temporary. She feels no self-satisfaction because the vengeance she dreamed of was performed by others. Worst of all, she feels isolated, an outcast, now unable to escape or deny her victimized subjectivity. Having been identified as a victim, Bone becomes invisible among her own family. Those who are closest to her will neither look at her nor

speaking to her because of their own sense of shame over their passive complicity in her abuse. Despite their intentions or motivations, the cold, “unfeeling” treatment of her relatives operates as punishment for “coming out” about the abuse, and consequently Bone “[falls] into shame like a suicide throws herself into a river” (Allison 253).

Ultimately, public acknowledgement of her abuse proves as ineffectual and detrimental as her silence. Realizing this, Bone once again becomes caught in the shame-rage cycle, alternately hating herself and everyone else and waiting for her next violation.

Of the four rape narratives explored in this thesis, *Bastard Out of Carolina* presents the most potentially problematic rape scene. Like Bone, readers have simply been “waiting” for its occurrence. King notes that, despite Allison’s claims to the contrary, the unusual structure of this novel makes “Allison appea[r] to be sensationalizing her already shocking subject matter, simultaneously promising and delaying the inevitable rape scene” (123). Indeed, the unusually violent nature of this rape seems, on the surface, to fall under the category of embellished and exploitative representations becoming so pervasive in American media. One of the rape myths perpetuated by such works is that a rape victim must violently resist her attacker in order for the act to be considered nonconsensual. However, as we have already seen, Allison directly confronts this fiction, both by pointing out Bone’s perverse glee at having been visibly injured and by showing that sexual abuse can coincide with gentleness. Allison further emphasizes that there is no direct correlation between the victim’s willingness to live and the degree of resistance they offer. Bone, who has for so long survived in passive silence, takes a stand because she no longer fears mortality: “I had always been afraid to scream, afraid to fight. I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn’t matter. I

didn't care anymore what might happen. I wouldn't hold still anymore" (Allison 282). This passage reveals that it is a lack of self-concern that motivates Bone's struggle. Additionally, because the graphic descriptions of violence leave nothing to the reader's imagination, Allison places Bone in complete control of what is seen and omitted, defying any voyeuristic impulses. Thus, the details exposed are not titillating, but grotesque: the sensory descriptions entailed are not of body parts, but of "retching bile," "burning and tearing and bruising," "blood and juice," and "sticky stink" (Allison 284-6).

Devoid of any degree of eroticism, there can be no doubt that this rape is a struggle for power. Glen's dialogue before and during the rape reveals that he is fighting for domination over a white trash female from his position as privileged white male. Though her own agency at this time is questionable, to some extent, the long-anticipated rape scene of *Bastard* serves as Bone's first and final stand against Glen. Whereas she has only imaginatively resisted Glen's violence in the past, her absence of fear incites her to verbally and physically refuse his advances. Bone's repeated and increasingly fervent "no's" superficially provoke the attack, but in the context of the mounting pattern of abuse against her, this idea of provocation is clearly just an excuse to perpetrate what Glen believes he "should have done . . . a long time ago" (Allison 284). Bone, because of her instinctual unease and distrust of Glen from the start, has always represented to him a loss of control. In his disturbingly possessive viewpoint, Bone is a competitor for Anney's attention, an adversary who aggravates his attacks by seeking to subvert his power; in arguing with Bone just before the assault, Glen's rhetoric is defensive: "You can't destroy me so easy . . . Just die and leave us alone" (Allison 283-4).

As with his past violence, this final violation is spurred by his increasing sense of impotence. In his desperation to inscribe Bone with an inferior and stigmatized identity, Glen begins to confusedly hurl illogical and contradictory sexual and racial insults at her. When Bone asserts her decision to not be a part of the same family unit as him, Glen becomes both enraged and fearful at the prospect of permanently losing Anney. In response, he vocalizes the “law of the father” or his perceived right to “ownership of daughters”: “I’m your daddy. I say what you do” (Sielke 154; Allison 282). As usually happens when father and rapist are embodied in one figure, Glen mentally expands his parental authority “into an ownership of all females”; while raping her he repeatedly calls her a “cunt,” reducing Bone to the body part he is violating (Sielke 154). However, Glen immediately contradicts his own claim by intermittently labeling Bone a “bastard,” a term which, if taken at face value, revokes his ostensible proprietorship over her. Nevertheless, applying this epithet enables Glen to call upon the dual sexual and racialized shaming power inherent to its use. The mental confusion caused by his hatred manifests a second time during the rape when he alternately tries to ascribe and deprive Bone of sexual agency. At first, he mocks Bone’s rejection as a pretense at womanhood, expressing his belief that violating her will “teach” her for transgressing the boundaries of childhood: “You think you’re so grown-up. You think you’re so big and bad, saying no to me. Let’s see how big you are, how grown!” (Allison 284). In the next moment though, Glen invokes the myth of female heterosexual desire, insisting “You’ve always wanted it. Don’t tell me you don’t . . . I’ll give you what you really want” (Allison 285). Not only does Glen switch from infantilizing Bone to projecting his adult mentality and desires on her, but also he completely negates her resistance under the assumption of

womanly coquetry. In doing so, he stamps Bone with the same stereotypes of “promiscuity” and “stubbornness” so frequently attributed to “Boatwright women.” Through these discrepancies Allison constructs Glen and his hatred as the disastrous product of having appropriated multiple oppressive ideologies. As his climactic attempt to reposition Bone under his control, the rape is a merging of physical and mental violations.

Like the many other scenes of abuse in this novel, Bone’s narration of the rape keeps the reader focused on her experience of violation, with an especial emphasis on the psychological consequences. Thus, at the point in the rape when Bone has become physically incapacitated and silenced, the focus of the narrative once again transitions to the landscape of Bone’s mind. During her rape she is once again forced to turn to fantasies for protection. Weakened by the violent struggle preceding her violation and disbelieving that any human will come to her rescue, Bone mentally calls out for divine vengeance while being raped. Her invocation is problematic because she offers her own life as payment for this reckoning. Shawn Miller criticizes:

Bone’s desire for retribution begins to overwhelm any other directive, including her own survival. Bone continues to pray for Glen’s death, but ends her prayer with a troubling willingness to sacrifice herself in exchange: ‘Oh God, help me, let me kill him. Please, God. Please, God. Let me kill him. Let me die, but let me kill him’ (286). Bone’s proffered transaction indicates that her resistance has little to do with self-defense; ultimately, self-extinction is not too high a price to pay if thereby she

might hurt Glen back, an objective Allison continues to emphasize. (149-50)

Indeed, when her mother's entrance interrupts the rape and Anney begins to hit and throw things at Glen, Bone's focus is not on the unexpected salvation, but on the new possibilities for vengeance. In her final fantasy of the novel, Bone imagines murdering Glen: "I would have to be careful, not to let anyone stop me until I could blow his head off, blow his neck open, his blood everywhere like a whirlwind. I had to do it. I had to, or he would kill me, me and her, someday, I knew, both of us. If I had to die, then that was the way it would be" (Allison 288). At this point, Bone truly believes Glen's death to be necessary, but even then more for her mother's welfare than her own. Because she has never really had time or opportunity to distance herself from Glen's violence, Bone has internalized a sense of worthlessness so powerful that it pervades even the locations and selves of her own construction. Though there are certainly elements of self-preservation factoring into her creation of and frequent escapes to an alternate landscape, the seemingly endless duration of real abuse eventually so corrupts Bone's mind that, by the time of her rape, she is unable to imagine a conclusion more positive than her own annihilation.

In the aftermath of her rape, Bone's mother once again surfaces as the pivotal figure in her life and thus influences the shaping of her survivor subjectivity. Having witnessed the rape first-hand, Anney can no longer deny the threat that Glen poses to her daughter and for the first time appears to have the motivation to ignore Glen's apologies and pleading, and to leave him with "not a pause, not a hesitation" (Allison 289). For the duration of time in which Anney appears, reacts, and retrieves her daughter, both Bone

and the audience have had their faith restored in her protective abilities. Before Bone has fully regained her faculties, and while still partially under the influence of fantasy, she expresses complete certainty of her mother's devotion and willingness to assist in her homicidal plans. However, as she recovers consciousness, she becomes aware that it is Glen's piteous performance and not her own broken and desecrated body that is the focus of her mother's attention: "Mama was so close I could have touched her, but her head was turned away, turned to Glen. I could not reach her" (Allison 290). Even before she has left the scene of her daughter's rape, Anney has returned to Glen, holding and "crying over" the rapist while Bone "lie[s] bleeding" (Allison 291). Anney then abandons Bone at the hospital, going, the reader and characters presume, to be with Glen somewhere. Though her chance to say goodbye does not come until the very end of the novel, Bone is already aware that she has "lost [her] mama" (Allison 306). It is this bereavement, and not her rape, that ultimately signals to Bone the end of her childhood.

Left by the person whose aid she most desires, Bone's last thoughts prove that she is now permanently entrapped by the shame-rage cycle. In the care of hospital and legal authorities, Bone soon loses the sense of safety and empowerment she had experienced at her mother's arrival. Under the scrutiny of strangers, who "[watch her] like some fragile piece of glass," she reverts to feeling "more and more like a child, a girl, hurt and alone" (Allison 301; 295). Like before, public acknowledgment of Bone's abuse leads people to treat her differently, and that in turn only reinforces her feelings of humiliation and exposure. When interrogated by the police officer, Bone thinks to herself, "He was Daddy Glen in a uniform. The world was full of Daddy Glens, and I didn't want to be in the world anymore" (Allison 296). This statement reveals that post-rape Bone has

adapted a revised victim consciousness, through which she sees in her surroundings a ubiquitous threat of violence. Additionally, Bone has become so disillusioned by her sexual violation that she now equates even the “calm, careful, friendly” treatment of others with their complicity in her rape; in their failed promises to protect her, everyone is as guilty as her rapist. Having been forced into silence by Glen’s inflicted wounds, Bone now chooses silence as a means of reclaiming the rape and its consequences as her own: “I didn’t want anyone to know anything . . . No one cared about me. I didn’t even care about myself anymore” (Allison 297). Aunt Raylene comes to Bone’s rescue, but, in her mother’s absence, Bone can only conceive of her aunt as a poor substitute. Raylene’s efforts at comforting Bone ring “hollow” and “meaningless” to her depressed mind, and in disclosing intimate details of her past Raylene only succeeds in reminding Bone of her own loss. While among family, anger replaces shame as Bone’s primary emotion, and she maintains her silence in defiance of their too-late efforts to help her.

Some critics have read Bone’s post-rape change in identity as a positive transformation. Regarding the final exchange between Bone and her mother, when Anney hands her a birth certificate with a blank spot in place of the “ILLEGITIMATE” stamp, Shawn Miller asserts “most readers understand that here Allison ‘wants to suggest the potential healing of Bone’” (151). More cynical critics, like Bouson, interpret Anney’s gesture as a reminder of “just how deeply Bone has been marked by her mother’s shame and by Glen, who has contemptuously beaten into Bone a sense of herself as a worthless and bad individual” (Allison 116). Allison’s omission of Bone’s reaction to this unmarked “bottom third” suggests that this ambiguity is purposeful. If one is to continue to trust Bone’s reliability as narrator, a dynamic which Allison has worked hard to

construct, then the reader might well accept that Bone “knew nothing, understood nothing” of the future by the end of her story. Though the very existence of *Bastard* indicates that Bone, as Allison’s representative, does in fact survive and undergo some healing processes, at the point of the novel’s conclusion her post-rape subjectivity is still damaged. Bone herself interprets her loss of childhood innocence as the marker of a fixed identity; not yet thirteen, she feels “so old [her] insides had turned to dust and stone” (Allison 306). Her understandably maturing experiences have been characterized by an unremitting cycle of abuse, shame and rage. Even knowing that she will no longer be abused cannot stop the return of “the grief. The anger. The guilt and the shame. It would come back later. It would come back forever” (Allison 307). Bone understands that the achievement of survival will always be inextricable from the pain of what she has survived. Having already spent most of her life fighting for a more fulfilling subjectivity than the ones her society and attacker have imposed on her and each time coming back to her victimization, she is convinced “I was who I was going to be, someone like [Raylene], like Mama, a Boatwright woman” (Allison 309). This reclamation of family is not optimistic; given everything the reader has learned about the stigma and hardships accompanying white trash womanhood, her final assertion of identification is more a concession of what she has been through than an outlook towards the future.

Allison’s decision to end Bone’s story on a defeatist note is a cry for help. Though she has survived countless acts of brutality and sexual violence, it is clear that, at the conclusion of her long struggle to remake her subjectivity, “Bone is finally unable to understand herself as anything more than [a] victim” (Miller 150). According to Allison’s novel, the source of this failure lies not with a lack of strength or effort on Bone’s part,

but because of the oppressive structures of racism and sexism shaping her social relationships. By immersing the reader in Bone's perspective, Allison forces us to acknowledge that "breaking the silence" is a complex and problematical process for already invisible and debased individuals. *Bastard* is as much a narrative about the impact of social discourse as it is about the experience of other forms of violence. However, in Bone's case, merely giving voice to her violation does not engender healing, but rather serves to reinforce her stigmatized status in the public eye. In the face of such hostile patriarchal discourse, even the direct outcomes of being removed from the site of abuse and realizing vengeance on the perpetrator lose their recuperative potential. Thus, while Allison is among the "many feminist writers" who "recognize the importance of language for giving 'voice – meaning – to our experiences' and shaping our subjectivity," her book stands out as proof that the language of rape victims has yet to realize its empowering possibilities in America (Naples 1157).

Chapter Two: Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Maya Angelou is likely the most well known and celebrated of the feminist authors discussed in this study. The first of these women to be published, Angelou is one of the seminal figures of the consciousness-raising literary movement. Her narrative, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), shares many commonalities with Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*; it too is the first and most popular piece of a multivolume autobiographical series on her personal experiences as a marginalized woman. Likewise, Angelou also hazarded a great deal in exposing the intraracial violence and hatred of her community. Though now widely recognized among academics as an indelible fixture in the African-American canon of literature, Angelou's depiction of her early childhood molestation and rape has also been the target of serious criticism, as evidence of her having been "seduced . . . into denouncing black men, [and] for airing 'dirty laundry' in front of a white audience eager to use [such] texts as evidence to support its own race politics" (Sielke 151). Thus, in breaking the silence in which the violence and degradation particular to black women's experiences have been shrouded, Angelou directly challenges the long-standing double bind that has sought to construct the fight against racism and the fight against sexism as an either/or choice. Through her tale of semi-incestuous violation, Angelou explores tense gender relations, but does so in the context of enslavement, lynching, and other brutalities historically and currently launched against the black community. In doing so, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is of unique import to

deconstructing the consciousness of rape [and] revealing the linkages
between the social [and cultural] mechanisms that empower violence

against both racial groups and women and insure the fragmentation of marginalized and oppressed groups to consolidate the power of patriarchy.

(McKay 248)

Her childhood counterpart Maya, assisted by Angelou's retrospective narration, provides a critical look at these structures and the isolated path requisite for black women wishing to exist outside of them. Maya experiences both her black skin and her femaleness as disadvantageous markers that cause her displacement within both the dominant white society and the smaller masochistic black community that constitutes her immediate surroundings. As with Bone, she is even ostracized from her family unit because of her failure to perform desirable race and gender roles. Thus already suffering a tenuous relationship to self, rape and its aftermath become the processes that confirm Maya's increasing sense of worthlessness. Initially silenced by the threats of her rapist, the accidental disclosure of her violation and the alienating reactions of her loved ones drive her into an almost permanent silence, broken only by the autobiographical novel itself.

Set in the two decades preceding Bone's story, Maya's narrative encompasses her coming of age in the highly segregated location of Stamps, Arkansas. Though she is shuttled across the South between the divided parts of her family, in every place she visits Maya is consistently confronted by oppressive and devalued constructions of self. At an early age she learns that blackness is the source of poverty, hardship, discrimination, and violence. By showing the lives of her family and neighbors, Angelou gives her audience a peek at a world in which "the entire social development of Afro-Americans has been conditioned by their struggle to liberate themselves from the crippling social and psychological effects of the dominant ideology and culture" (Cudjoe 272). As a member

of this society, Maya's beginning subjectivity is defined by and in direct relation to privileged whiteness. "Whitefolks," as Maya calls them, are paradoxically absent and ubiquitous in her life; Angelou explains, "In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most Black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like" (24). Maya counts among these children at her youngest because she is not yet directly under their employment. In fact, she has so little contact with whites that, in her mind, they have become creatures of mythology whom she cannot quite reconcile with her experience of reality: "I remember never believing whites were really real" (Angelou 25). When Maya does encounter white people, they only relate to her as a morally and intellectually inferior being subject to their control. The first appearance of a white person into Maya's narrow social network denotes both danger and disruption for her loved ones; the "nonchalan[t]" and "authorit[ative]" sheriff, convinced he is doing them a service, stops by the Johnson residence to warn them of an approaching lynch squad. Unlike her grandmother, "Momma," Maya feels no impulse of thankfulness for the gesture, but is instead ashamed and enraged by the terrorism under which they are forced to operate and the sheriff's tacit complicity in its maintenance. Another equally humiliating circumstance, one which Maya designates "the most painful and confusing experience I ever had with my grandmother" arises out of her grandmother's interactions with the less advantaged, yet still better-off "powhitetrash" persons (Angelou 28). Likely out of their own frustrations at being marginalized, a group of white trash children who regularly disregard the established social codes and hierarchies of the black community subject Momma to a lengthy show of the little racialized power granted their skin color, mocking her, insulting her, and displaying their genitalia. Though Maya recognizes her

grandmother's immobility as a victory of sorts, she cries in rage at her own helplessness to stop the performance or the dynamics that underpin it: ". . . I knew I was as clearly imprisoned behind the scene as the actors outside were consigned to their roles" (Angelou 30). It is because of experiences like these that Maya finds herself "most familiar" with the state of being "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes" described by Shakespeare, and still worse, ashamed at being able to identify with an idea articulated by a white man (Angelou 14).

Because of their conspicuous absence from her daily interactions, Maya attains most of her knowledge regarding white people from her immediate circle of friends and family. The discursive practices of the black community serve to reinforce the boundaries between blacks and whites, clearly delineating an adversarial dichotomy of "the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against the worked for and the ragged against the well dressed" (Angelou 25). As we can see from these juxtapositions, the latter racialized categories are characterized by ownership and liberties while the former are distinguished by a lack thereof. In her relative positionality of deficiency, Maya is taught to both envy and fear all things connected with the white population. Items that are entirely beyond the purchasing power of blacks are labeled as "white" possessions, and this economic gap incites in the black community a "fear-admiration-contempt for all white "things"—white folks' cars and white glistening houses and their children and their women" (Angelou 47-8). Maya is herself so desirous of the advantages of whiteness that the prospect of wearing an elegant dress conjures up one of several self-denying fantasies. In a kind of microcosmic (and coincidental) parallel to Toni Morrison's novel *Blue Eyes*, Maya invests her silk gown with the magical capacity

to transport her “out of [her] black ugly dream” and into the “real” self she desires to be, “one of those sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right with the world” (Angelou 4). From simply observing the differentiation in treatment between herself and her white counterparts, Maya has intuited the societal value placed on white skin and, unable to shed this physical marker outside of her imagination, she attempts to appropriate white behaviors and culture. Because she mentally links this race with success, Maya’s perception and treatment of other characters is partially determined by their proximity to whiteness. For instance, the fact that Momma was once addressed as “Mrs.,” the title reserved for white women, is a great source of pride for Maya. Likewise, the admiration she expresses for her estranged parents is largely tied to the whiteness of their language and appearance. Upon visiting her maternal relatives, Maya discovers that Grandmother Baxter’s “white skin and pince-nez . . . were factors that brought her a great deal of respect” (Angelou 60). As with any hegemonic social order, those who emulate the dominant group are sometimes afforded the rewards of assimilation on the condition that they continue to present themselves in a distorted and self-deprecating manner.

However, while such rituals of exclusivity help to construct white subjectivities as desirable to others, they are most often rigidly guarded by those who enjoy them. Accompanying the physical barriers between races are the psychological barriers imposed by white objectification; for Maya and her peers, crossing the border into “whitefolksville” is marked by the departure of pleasure and initiation of danger. In the same way that the patriarchal gaze serves to regulate the behaviors of women, blacks in a racist society are subject to control by general white surveillance. Nowhere is this more evident than in the segregated balcony of the Stamps movie theater, where, when

confronted by the odious black stereotypes performed on the screen, Maya and the other “Negroes” must perform mindless complacency, anticipating and emulating the reactions of the white crowd below them. Those minorities who aspire to decent treatment, or more unlikely still, the positions and benefits reserved for whites, are forced to repress their own desires or risk the penalties. Though subtly introduced, this dynamic manifests numerous times in the beginning chapters of *Caged Bird* through the pervasive threat of lynching and castration. In overhearing the conversations of adults and witnessing the harassment faced by her brother and uncle, Maya learns of her culture’s hostility to black male sexuality, the very possession of which can constitute a capital crime. Communal stories of the lynch mob’s executions reveal that interracial relations are never a question of consent; any act of miscegenation is considered “assaulting white womanhood” and thus an infringement on white man’s property (Angelou 46). The vague rhetoric surrounding the ostensible offenses of men who “messed with” or “did ‘it’ to” white women and paid with their life suggests that innocent as well as guilty men are casualties of hypersensitive racial tensions. Thus, when Momma tries to pass on to her grandchildren her disbelief in “the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one’s life,” she is not exhibiting paranoia, but relating a survival strategy that has kept generations “safe” (Angelou 46). In her hometown of Stamps, Arkansas, the black community’s fear of white power, while well-founded, is so strong that they continue to engage in self-policing behaviors when just among themselves: “even in their absence [white people] could not be spoken of too harshly unless we used the sobriquet “They” (Angelou 46). The possibility of retributive justice, buttressed by frequent and random

acts of racial violence, effectively silences the collective black voice, and in doing so, reduces general discontent to a sense of helplessness.

Unable to speak out against the social and political forces that perpetuate their subjugation, the black community of Stamps develops its own alternative culture, creating a space in which black subjectivity can be expressed without fear of reprisal. In order to preserve a valued sense of self, a rigid system of rules and codes has been established. The hierarchy of this social order is structured according to age, with the elderly being the most venerated and powerful members. For black children, acceptance or “salvation” depends upon their obedience of two commandments: “thou shall not be dirty and thou shall not be impudent” (Angelou 26). At the time of Maya’s childhood experiences, and to a large extent still today, American blackness is inextricable from poverty and, as Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz astutely declare, “Americans love to hate the poor” (1). Most often this hatred translates into stigmas about inadequate hygiene and conduct, the two areas of concern at the center of black communal stability. What this reveals is that the modes of resistance so carefully adapted by Maya’s paternal family, the Johnsons, and their neighbors revolve around the experience of cultural displacement and thus reflect both the influence of white hatred and their subsequent internalization of depreciatory self-worth. The images of Maya and her peers scrubbing their bodies “each night in the bitterest winter” are not ones of cultural affirmation but of racial purification rituals (Angelou 26). The alternative titles applied to the mature black population, ones intended to “indicat[e] familial relationship and the lowliness of the addressor,” while successful in maintaining the adult-child dynamics of their privatized existence, are easily dismantled by the indifference of empowered outsiders (Angelou 27). Furthermore, the

appellations themselves, “Mister, Missus, Miss, Auntie, Cousin, Unk, Uncle, Buhbah, Sister [and] Brother” are problematic in that they signify not only family but also familiarity and are employed by whitefolks as terms of disrespect. Conversely, Maya’s maternal uncles live outside the bound of these standards of propriety and choose instead to exhibit the intimidating but socially scripted myth of black male violence.

Doppelgangers to the Boatwright men, Uncles Tutti, Tom, and Ira gain respect in both black and white communities by performing “explosive tempers” and “fearsome characters” (Angelou 64). Unlike the Boatwrights, the Baxters appear to be exempt from the legal repercussions of their actions and manage to take back some degree of autonomy in a racist society. Still, Angelou clearly attributes these privileges to the hypermasculinity of the Baxter men, a subjectivity only achievable for black *males*, and then at the high cost of perpetuating pejorative notions of race and gender.

As with the other marginalized populations investigated in these novels, the best chance for the blacks of *Caged Bird* to construct positive subjectivities is within the liberating realm of the imagination. Storytelling in *Stamps* serves the dual purpose of communicating group identification and celebrating black achievements. Though they dare not articulate their dissatisfaction in an obvious manner, humor functions as a useful tool for sharing complaints while still deflecting the latent wrath of the white population. In renaming their physical location such derogatory idioms as “Chitlin’ Switch, Georgia; Hang ‘Em High, Alabama; Don’t Let the Sun Set on You Here Nigger, Mississippi” and rewriting the very real discriminatory practices they face into semi-comical, partially exaggerated anecdotes, Maya’s neighborhood discursively belittles some of the hardships to which they are subjected (Angelou 47). Additionally, in having a shared and exclusive

language of their own, these persons can fulfill the universal need for belonging. While Maya understands that such tales do not at all change the circumstances of white oppression, she also recognizes that they have the capacity to assuage some of the resulting pain and feels a special fondness for persons who can provide this relief. Regardless of their financial burdens, Maya feels “supported . . . efficiently with [the] humor and imagination” demonstrated by her mother (Angelou 201). Likewise, through the amusing tales imparted to her by Daddy Clidell’s friends, Maya learns the “Principle of Reverse” in which “anything that works against you can also work for you” (Angelou 215). What differentiates these narratives from customary joking, and even from the subversive identity appropriation displayed by the Boatwrights, is that they enable actualized vengeance against the white community. Clidell’s con artist companions are conquerors in Maya’s eyes because they simultaneously capitalize on and subvert the racist expectation that “Black Skin means Damn Fool,” dispelling its legitimacy by “us[ing] their intelligence to pry open the door of rejection and not only be[come] wealthy but [get] some revenge in the bargain” (Angelou 218). In reflecting on these triumphs, Maya defines black heroism as the acquisition of what dominant society attempts to withhold from their reach. Regrettably, even such minor victories are more often than not inaccessible to the black citizens of Stamps, and this reality necessitates a reliance on increasingly transcendent fictions.

The narrative that seems to permeate every facet of black communal existence in Angelou’s work is one of black salvation and white punishment derived from the Gospel. Angelou spends a significant length of *Caged Bird* critically examining the intersections of race and religion; her novel begins in church, all of chapter eighteen depicts a revival,

and the rest is replete with religious rhetoric and allusions. According to Angelou, the importance of the church lies in its utility as a site for mourning oppression and celebrating an undoubtedly superior afterlife. Though the religious black community is never entirely honest about the motives for their piety, these become rather apparent in the consistent return to biblical stories with a common theme of retribution. Maya understands that the true source of churchgoer's elation is the idea that, come Judgment Day, "the mean whitefolks was going to get their comeuppance" (Angelou 123). In this respect, the collective hope of Maya's black community is really no different from the revenge fantasies conceived by Allison's protagonist. The visualization of white persons "frying in the fires of hell . . . turning forever on the Devil's spit over the flames of fire and brimstone," while not as graphic as Bone's bloody martyrdom and executions, is still an invocation of brutal and vengeful violence. Angelou herself does not appear to subscribe to these fantasies, and in her portrayals of religious figures the critically distant tone of the narrator sometimes verges on mockery. In fact, some of the most amusing events of the novel result from the sudden disruption of some self-righteous person's performance of piety. Like Bone, Maya experiences religious narratives as false and passive promises and religious expectations as constraining and shame inducing. As pronounced by Yolanda Manora, Maya's time in church prove it to be just one more location of displaced subjectivity: "From the moment in the opening scene when the child Maya breaks free of the social performative space . . . the text turns upon the girl's ongoing resistance of these interpellations and her negotiation of her own subjectivity" (360). At her youngest and fully possessed of a powerful imagination, she is still disbelieving of the ostensible racial healing power of Christian institutions and rituals.

Furthermore, the possibility of finding release in literary outlets is hampered in these early stages of her personal development by her grandmother's prohibition against anything tied to white culture. While fantasy will eventually take on a more potent role in her subjective experimentations, Maya's preliminary experiences of blackness teach her that the most effective means of attaining self-worth is to wish it away.

At the time of its publication, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* stood out among other Afro-American autobiographical statements for its specific examination of "the violence and degradation of the Afro-American woman [which had] remained largely ignored and seldom discussed publicly" (Cudjoe 274). In the face of the long-standing mythology that black women could somehow and should somehow separate their experiences of race and gender, and always in the favor of the former, Angelou "writes her life story with an acute awareness of her own historical situatedness in the cultural imagination as a person who is both Black *and* female" (Manora 363; emphasis mine). Maya's beginning self, defined in relation to white-dominated America, the close-knit black community of Stamps, and her microcosmic family unit, is as much dependent upon her perceived and performed femininity as the color of her skin. The opening imaginary of the novel is once again key to the reader's understanding of Maya's subjective location. Though she has not yet reached the juncture of puberty, her fantastical comparison of her self-image, "a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number two pencil," with the "blond . . . light-blue eye[d]" dream girl is strong evidence that she has internalized the societal definition of "true womanhood" whereby valued femininity necessitates whiteness (Angelou 4-5). The stark contrast between these figures invokes the historical

female representations underpinning slavery; justification of the bodily strength exhibited by and difficult labors and violence enacted upon black women relied upon denying them femininity and categorization as women. Maya's mental juxtaposition proves "that black women's sexuality continues to be constructed in binary opposition to white womanhood . . . render[ing it] simultaneously invisible, visible (exposed), hypervisible, and pathologized in dominant discourses" (Moorti 79). These discourses, disseminated through the movies, product advertisements, and personal observation, incite in Maya a self-hatred that is then exacerbated over the course of the novel.

Maya's gender status is likewise devalued among the black citizens of Stamps. Lacking the delicate features of whiteness, she is consistently and unmercifully labeled as "ugly" by other members of her race. Like the gendered discourses in Allison's novel, these regular shaming speeches serve to convince Maya that female worth depends upon outward attractiveness. Teased by peers and elders alike for her "shit color," "steel wool" hair, and larger features, the unremitting barrage of insults to which Maya is subjected leads her to feel an inflated sense of gratitude towards anyone who will demonstrate affection for her (Angelou 21). Her most frequent rescuer and avenger is her brother Bailey, and under his protection the intense fondness Maya feels for him verges on the point of worship: "a lonely child has . . . the unshaking need for an unshakable God. My pretty Black brother was my Kingdom Come" (Angelou 23). While her brother does not take advantage of Maya's devotion in any overtly exploitative ways, her eager subservience to the few requests he does make of her implicate just how easily manipulated she might be in light of her low self-esteem. However, until Maya's favorite Uncle Tommy tells her that possessing a "good mind" is superior to having a "cute

behind,” Maya continues to experience her appearance as a burden and obstacle to social acceptance (Angelou 66). The consequential inferiority complex she develops leads her to passively acknowledge and even appropriate the favoritism towards her male sibling. Maya is constantly being berated for her looks and “tender-hearted” displays of emotion; conversely, Bailey enjoys a much greater range of liberties under the pretext that “boys will be boys”: “Bailey could count on very few punishments for his consistently outrageous behavior, for he was the pride of the Henderson/Johnson family” (Angelou 22). In the same way that Bone’s darker complexion makes her the “black sheep” of the Boatwrights, Maya’s comparative ugliness cause her to be displaced from her own family unit. As a result, she emotionally and physically distances herself from the persons who might otherwise assist her in facing hardships, preferring invisibility to distinction as a deviant. In fact, it is the critical and crippling spectatorship of her closest relatives that proves the greatest obstacle to her happiness.

In response to a group of critics who have either underestimated or ignored the influence of Maya’s familial relationships, Yolanda Manora asks Angelou’s readers to take a second look at “the dialogic nature of black female subjectivity” and more especially “young Maya’s relationship with adult women in her life” (366).

Unfortunately, the assessment following this much-needed demand espouses a far too idealistic conception of this impact. As we have seen in Maya’s interactions with non-familial women, female solidarity within the black community is often undermined by the internalization of a judgmental patriarchal gaze. A close look at the ideologies communicated to Maya via her female relatives reveals that they too project harsh standards of gendered behavior on her. The primary family unit with whom she lives is

matriarchal in structure, with her grandmother Henderson (Momma) as the central authority, but Maya's observations expose that even the most empowered women of her community are defined by their relationships to men. Maya's deferential treatment of her brother is likely modeled after Momma's "mother-bird" willingness to cater to the whims of her two sons. As a woman whose "world was bordered on all sides with work, duty, religion and 'her place'," Momma appears to be the kind of self-sacrificial character for whom fulfillment is paradoxically dependent upon erasure of self. Though the child Maya sees "only her power and strength," Angelou's retrospective narration sometimes indicts Momma for her proximity to the stereotyped black matriarch, who functioned as "mere appendages of black male life . . . always lived for others, be it for black men or white, black children or aged parents, bereft always, it would seem, of an autonomous self" (Angelou 45; Cudjoe 283). Maya fears and respects her grandmother, but does not desire to be like her.

The other crucial female figure in Maya's life is her mother, Vivian Baxter. The exact opposite of the maternal, self-denying Momma, "Mother" is the embodiment of black female sexuality and sensuality, most closely resembling the Jezebel image in appearance and behavior. Vivian's experience of successful femininity mirrors what the equally erotic character of Anney Boatwright underwent; both women are subjected to an unusually fervent male gaze and forced into choosing between the subsequent commodification of self or poverty. Through the vigilant eyes of her daughter, the readership watches Vivian and watches men watching her. Of these men, Mr. Freeman, Maya's future rapist, is the most attentive. Descriptions of Mr. Freeman's gaze illustrate a sense of entitlement and possessiveness; Maya understands that this surveillance is a

means of control and thus accurately places Mr. Freeman as the empowered subject when she relates, “he watched her every move and when she left the room, his eyes allowed her reluctantly to go” (Angelou 68). Divested of her autonomy by constant scrutiny, Maya’s mother cannot constitute a reliable source of safety for Maya and thus leaves her more vulnerable to Mr. Freeman’s abuse. Outside the scope of this actualized gaze, the one Maya has internalized also prevents her mother from becoming a positive role model in her life. In her words and actions Mother does nothing to further the damage Maya’s ego has incurred; however, as a woman of striking physical attractiveness, her “beauty literally assail[s]” her daughter (Angelou 58). Because Maya’s awareness of her own failed womanhood is intensified in proximity to accomplished femininity, she experiences her mother’s appearance as an assault on her person. Furthermore, she considers her comparative unattractiveness to be justification for her childhood abandonment; upon seeing her mother for the first time Maya declares, “I knew immediately why she had sent me away” (Angelou 58). As with her brother, and perhaps even more so, she is unable to conceive of herself as worthy or equal to her mother and therefore remains in a state of self-hatred. The relational gendered subjectivities made available to Maya focus on an unchangeable facet of her deficient femininity, and her subsequent helplessness in the face of such inflexible realities forces her to “withdraw into herself” (Cudjoe 289).

When considering Maya’s early possibilities for resisting such inhospitable social inscriptions, her strong resemblance to Allison’s autobiographical protagonist resurfaces: Maya’s extreme youth, weakened physicality, and incapacity to escape locations of displacement all make her a poor candidate for heroic rebellion outside of the

imagination. In all other ways, though, she seems a comparatively subdued child. Not once does Maya ever willingly act out a role that might displease her grandmother or community. Nor does she mentally enact violent retribution upon the persons who torment her for being different. At this juncture in her narrative, her subjective mutinies do not largely manifest as fantastical rewritings, but as rather surprisingly pragmatic cultural criticisms for a prepubescent adolescent. As asserted by Manora, the first sign that Maya will struggle against cultural paradigms to ensure a positive subjectivity is her sudden flight from church. On the surface, her self-imposed imperative that she leave the church lest her “head would burst” seems nothing more than the product of a child’s overactive imagination (Angelou 5). However, Maya, whose age typically equates an unquestioning faith in whatever grownups tell her to believe, not only labels this ostensibly sacred institution as “silly,” but also, albeit in juvenile terms, links the religious rhetoric found there to her mental corruption. In point of fact, the placement of the next lines and conclusion to the first section of the novel only makes sense when this opening scene is read as subversive action. Angelou the narrator follows Maya’s escape with the quite poignant observation: “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an unnecessary insult” (6). Through this organization Angelou obviously intends to construct Maya as a precociously self-conscious character, the kind of child who can see through attempts to disguise the displaced condition and wants for more. This knowledge, the end goal of the feminist conscious-raising movement of which Angelou was a part, does not satisfy her and is in fact pinpointed as a part of the problem. Angelou recognizes that “this awareness of her status comes at a price: her subjection to the tripartite forces of

the masculine prejudice, the white illogical hate, and the black powerlessness that shapes her existence in America” (Cudjoe 290). Awareness without hope makes it impossible for Maya to accept the fictions of black survival. For her, church, new dresses, new mornings, and new hopes are always countered by the cyclical unchanging structure of the lives she observes.

Change for Maya manifests as a disruption of the little childhood innocence she retained in spite of her black femaleness. The one illusion that did bring Maya comfort in her loneliness, pretending her remiss parents were dead, is shattered by the sudden appearance of her estranged father, who then uproots her from the gloomy but familiar way of life in Stamps to deposit her in Missouri with another “stranger,” her mother. It is during this first stay that Maya undergoes multiple molestations and eventual rape at the hands of Vivian’s boyfriend, Mr. Freeman. Like in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the sexual violence in *Caged Bird* remains consistent with the rest of the novel in its female-centered and psychological focus. Also similar to Allison’s narrative, *Caged Bird* has been deemed particularly controversial by critical audiences because the protagonist’s victimization is tied to pleasure. In Angelou’s depiction, the coming together of Maya and Mr. Freeman is more about the merging of two damaged psyches than their bodies. From their introduction, Maya senses that Mr. Freeman is another personality constructed from the pain of nonbelonging, and, as a social pariah of sorts herself, she sympathizes with and even pities him. In the same way that Maya contrasts her own ugliness with her mother’s beauty, she examines Mr. Freeman, and upon considering his “flabby . . . breasts,” “sluggish inferiority,” and incapacity to dance, concludes him to be equally undeserving of her perfect mother’s affection and thereby someone for whom she can

“[feel] very sorry for” (Angelou 67-70). However, contrary to what Sielke suggests in *Reading Rape*, the expression of “sympathy with the disempowered perpetrator” is not mutually exclusive from an indictment of “patriarchal oppression” (152). Maya’s misplaced compassion for Mr. Freeman is not shared by her elder narratorial counterpart or by the readership that witnesses her abuse. Though again psychoanalyses of the victimizer are possible, Angelou does not appear to feel the need or desire to uncover the mindset and motivations of her violator. Instead, she looks beyond Mr. Freeman the individual to find something blameworthy of an otherwise incomprehensible cruelty: “On the larger canvas from which this life is drawn, the villain is a society that reduces men to impotence and women to lives of whoredom, and makes children the victims of their father’s lust and impotence” (Cudjoe 289).

Likewise, Maya’s initial desire for Mr. Freeman’s attentions does not invalidate her victimization but serves to contextualize it within the broader scope of societal oppression. The first act of molestation appears to be a crime of convenience, coming about because of Maya’s innocent and natural assumption that the adults in her life will protect her from the nightmares she has been experiencing. Thus having formed the habit of sleeping in her mother’s bed, Maya is “startled” awake one morning by Mr. Freeman’s erection. At the age of eight, she does not have the sexual knowledge to fully comprehend what Mr. Freeman does to her, and it is through her vague and confused perspective that the readership witnesses her violation. Through this lens, the act of masturbation is reduced to a fast hand movement, quick heartbeat, and Maya’s fear “that he would die” (Angelou 71). Completely devoid of any erotic elements, the narrative shows Maya’s gratification to be entirely emotional in nature. Because she has been

labeled as undesirable, Mr. Freeman's inappropriate touching becomes the first seemingly affectionate human contact Maya has experienced. She explains:

Finally he was quiet, and then came the nice part. He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last. (Angelou 71)

For a child who has no clear conception that anything bad happened, and for whom being held is a wholly new experience, Mr. Freeman's actions fill her loneliness and signal that she is worthy of positive attention. Not possessed of a sexual vocabulary, Maya interprets the act as familial. Her enjoyment is as short lived as her belief that Mr. Freeman loves her. Immediately following his embrace, Mr. Freeman threatens Maya with a violence she can recognize: "If you ever tell anybody what we did, I'll have to kill Bailey" (Angelou 72). With this warning Maya is first made aware that something taboo has been perpetrated, but as the one charged with keeping it secret she believes she alone is to blame. In her child's mind, Maya does not connect Mr. Freeman's shame with holding her, but with something she must have done in the aftermath. Thus effectively silenced by his warning but still wanting to appease him and be held again, she tries to once again attract Mr. Freeman's attention. When she succeeds and Mr. Freeman uses her body as a masturbatory tool a second time, she feels disappointed that he did "not [hold her] or anything" (Angelou 73). This time the pleasure was not reciprocal because Mr. Freeman withheld the affectionate gesture she had been longing for and then continued to penalize her by ignoring her existence once more.

Though Angelou's experience of abuse is of much shorter duration than Allison's, the manner in which they organize their telling of it is strikingly similar. The nine chapter break in Bone's cycle of violence through which Allison first showed her survivor subjectivity is paralleled in *Caged Bird* by a few months of mutual silence and distancing passing between Maya and Mr. Freeman. In this brief respite, she claims to have forgotten Mr. Freeman and his embraces completely to "the general darkness just beyond the great blinkers of childhood" (Angelou 74). While the reader has no reason to doubt Maya's failed memory, the few passages in between her last molestation and her rape reveal quite a bit about her (unconscious) negotiation of abuse. Though she is still unclear as to what kind of harm is being committed, she is aware that Mr. Freeman's actions "hurt" her and cause her to feel "lonelier than ever" (Angelou 73). In the absence of his affection and any alternative companionship, Maya turns once more to literature, this time fully immersing herself in "the world[s] of penniless shoeshine boys" and "little princesses" and "long-lost children" (Angelou 74). Given that it is light-hearted genres of juvenile fiction and comics Maya is engrossed in at this time, the severity of her reactions, "we[eping] with relief" at the "elu[sion of] evil men" tells the readership that she continues to be in a vulnerable state of mind. Each of these rags-to-riches, good-conquers-evil narratives revolves around the triumphant transformation of a child; in her newly obsessive consumption of such stories, Maya's desire for a similar alteration is all too painfully apparent, and the reader is once more reminded of the desperation with which she first imagined herself as a little white girl. That this longing for transformation is tied to her recent molestations becomes apparent when her gendered body is made the target of change:

I read more than ever, and wished my soul that I had been born a boy. Horatio Alger was the greatest writer in the world. His heroes were always good, always won, and were always boys. I could have developed the first two virtues, but becoming a boy was sure to be difficult, if not impossible. (Angelou 74)

In comparing her own life to the ones represented in fiction, Maya comes to recognize a stark contrast between their quality and attributes this difference to her sex. The formulaic plot of Algerian stories, beyond what is here disseminated by Maya, typically involves the intercession of an older paternal man on behalf of the young hero by way of affection and financial compensation. Conversely, in Maya's experiences as a young girl, the father figures whom she has so badly yearned for have extended affection only briefly before abandoning her entirely. Thus, Maya's literary fixation is in actuality a continuation of her search for familial intimacy; she has not so much forgotten Mr. Freeman, as found a means of imaginatively attaining the love he once seemed to promise. However, she also wants a more permanent and real solution to the void in her life. By "wish[ing] her soul" Maya is actually bartering for the not absolutely impossible sex change she believes would accomplish this (Angelou 74). Since even those boys who, like her, are targeted by "evil men," always manage to escape and triumph, Maya's youthful mind pinpoints her lack of maleness as the source of her failure. Though she never consciously acknowledges the impact of sexual abuse in these passages, her revised actions and greater identification with fantasy reveal that the internalized inferiority complex that stemmed from her black femaleness has been exacerbated by her additional marginalization as a victim.

Following this short-lived break from Mr. Freeman's attentions, Maya find herself once more to be the object of his desire. In the moments and dialogue leading up to Maya's rape, Angelou reveals a great deal more about the identities of both her rapist and child self. What was already suspected with regards to Mr. Freeman's perversion and his sense of impotence is confirmed by the circumstances immediately preceding his most aggressive pursuit of Maya. The pretext Mr. Freeman uses to lure Maya is to complete a task that is typically undertaken by her mother but was left undone because her mother "hadn't come home the night before" (Angelou 75). Vivian's absence clearly signifies Mr. Freeman's cuckoldry, and thus emasculated he is once again motivated to exert sexual power over Maya. That she is conscious of this dynamic just prior to her rape is also significant because the act itself then reinforces these feelings of isolation and abandonment. As happened with Glen in Allison's narrative, any pity or sympathy that might have been extended to Mr. Freeman via an examination of his own hardships is completely eradicated by the rape scene. Unlike with the previous abuse, this act is unequivocally premeditated and relies on a degree of deception, denigration, and violence not previously demonstrated. Angelou also reverses the traditional dynamics of spectatorship and, seen through Maya's view, Mr. Freeman is objectified and dehumanized to the point where he himself seems possessed, mindless, with "nothing" behind his eyes.

At the same time, his equally mechanical words echo the shaming discourse heard in *Bastard*. The dialogue immediately preceding the rape proves not only that Mr. Freeman is fully conscious of the damage he is inflicting on Maya, but also that he desires to inscribe her as a socially inferior being for his own pleasure. In spite of her age,

inexperience, voiced rejection, and obvious terror, Mr. Freeman charges her with compulsory female heterosexuality, asking rhetorically “You liked it before, didn’t you?” (Angelou 76). With this question, Maya is once again “reduce[d] to confusion because her memory of her own pleasure in being held by [Mr. Freeman] seems to her to implicate her in his crime”: “I didn’t want to admit that I had in fact liked his holding me or that I had liked his smell or the hard heart-beating, so I said nothing” (Froula 635; Angelou 76). Mr. Freeman’s accusations give Maya pause because she recognizes the cultural script whereby past pleasure in an activity invalidates her present aversion. Though she no longer wants to be touched, she is forced to consider the possibility of her complicity in and encouragement of Mr. Freeman’s actions, a thought that further disorients and silences her. Mr. Freeman then additionally justifies the rape he is about to enact by redefining the molestations as a kind of courtship or foreplay, saying, “We was just playing before” (Angelou 76).

Finally, Mr. Freeman imposes yet a third silencing on Maya, and for the second time does so through use of intimidation. Here, Mr. Freeman threatens the lives of both Maya and her brother *before* perpetrating his crime, eliciting insurance in face of the dual greater risks of hurting Maya and getting caught. The actual rape in *Caged Bird* is not so much described as didactically summarized. The older, more dissociated narrating Angelou replaces Maya at this moment to inform the audience: “Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot” (Angelou76). Sielke reads this alteration in perspective as an obedient response to Mr. Freeman’s silencing

directive: “The narrative enacts his command by shifting from first – to third – person point of view, from a limited, naïve, and personal perspective to a detached ethical one. Presented by way of proverbial biblical wisdom, the latter perspective monitor’s Maya’s violation through a worldview informed by a principle of retributive justice” (153). What Sielke fails to consider here is that Angelou’s entire narrative, including the passage under scrutiny, functions as an exposition of Mr. Freeman’s offenses. Angelou’s decision not to divulge the intimate details of the violation is a necessary deterrent against voyeurism and not proof of Angelou’s continued subjugation to the will of her rapist. Rather than join the ranks of pseudo-porn incest narratives, and faced with the impossibility of relating an incomprehensible experience, Angelou presents her audience with analogies they have a chance of identifying with; her religious metaphor “capitalizes on the physically improbable to foreground that rape . . . is an act beyond human understanding” (Sielke). Despite the comparative absence of information on the act itself, Maya’s negotiation of the rape is a prominent part of the before and after scenes.

Because of the emotional and physical distancing Maya underwent in the months prior to rape, her reaction to Mr. Freeman’s advancement is quite different. Rather than embrace the renewed possibility of affection, Maya is repelled by the idea of once again having to “touch that mushy-hard thing again” (Angelou 75). The comfort she has derived from reading, while minimal, is enough to convince her that she doesn’t “need him to hold [her] anymore” (Angelou 75). In fact, during the violence, Maya’s mind continuously references the literary characters and scenarios with which she has become familiar. Through her imagination, Mr. Freeman’s blank visage “bec[omes] like the face of those mean natives the Phantom was always having to beat up” (Angelou 76). Maya,

who earlier found herself unable to fully connect with white Shakespearean literature, has similarly been thwarted in finding positive group representations in pop culture narratives. The Phantom comics to which Maya refers are set in the African jungle and typically depict persons of her skin color as violent, exotic, and savage; in fantastically rendering Mr. Freeman as one of the “native” villains, Maya actually racializes her victimizer using the same dominant discourses that limit her own subjective possibilities. Furthermore, envisioning him from this perspective only serves to increase her fear. Paralyzed into submission, Maya vaguely hopes for the sudden intercession of her “mother or Bailey or the Green Hornet” (Angelou 76). Like the other heroines discussed in this project, Maya’s experience of rape is one of an increasing inability, and more importantly, an unwillingness to decipher between fiction and reality. Maya’s storytelling is not only a means of negotiating the abuse but also a way of denying the victimized subjectivity accompanying it. By pretending that the sphere in which she is raped is the same as the narrative spaces in which the underdog always triumphs, Maya positions herself as the Algerian boy hero she dreams of becoming. When no rescue, real or imagined, does come to pass, Maya’s mind shuts down and she falls unconscious.

Unfortunately, Maya’s prospects for a satisfactory and empowering subjectivity are no greater upon waking up. Understandably reluctant to face the reality of what has happened to her, she experiences the immediate aftermath of her trauma in a half dream-state, mistaking the bathroom for “heaven” and watching Mr. Freeman clean her body from a detached position “somewhere above everything” (Angelou 76; 77). When fully sentient, her mind becomes reconnected with her body, and she is brought back to the pain that has been inflicted on her. Though she now has physical proof of violation,

which would help to legitimize her experience before an audience, she is still devoid of a vocabulary to express it; when considering what she might tell her mother, she thinks hopelessly “I wasn’t sick, but the pit of my stomach was on fire— how could I tell her that?” (Angelou 77). With her first words, Maya reveals both an instinct and will to avoid further pain and an understanding that this depends upon her silence: “I whispered to him. I thought if I spoke out loud, he might become frightened and hurt me again” (Angelou 77). Maya continues to operate out of this fear under Mr. Freeman’s surveillance and harassment. His own fear of being caught drives him to unnecessarily reiterate his threats in her presence and to attempt to separate her from her most likely confidant, her brother. Maya begins to worry for the safety of her family as well, hoping that her mother “wouldn’t make Mr. Freeman so mad that he’d hurt her too” (a sentiment revealing her belief that she provoked the attack), but, after a long night of fighting, Maya’s mother exiles Mr. Freeman from the house (Angelou 78).

The reader is never made aware of the exact reason for his departure, but one can reasonably deduce from the context that their fighting is linked to Mr. Freeman’s strong, outwardly irrational desire to keep Maya in isolation. The revelation of his leaving not only does nothing to assuage her terror of retribution, but also introduces her to the equally terrifying possibility of voicing her rape and being met with rejection. Her internal dialogue upon learning of Mr. Freeman’s absence shows that, beyond the rapist lies a full range of equally intimidating forces preventing the victim’s speech:

Could I tell her now? The terrible pain assured me that I couldn’t.
 What he did to me, and what I allowed, must have been very bad if
 already God let me hurt so much. If Mr. Freeman was gone, did that mean

Bailey was out of danger? And if so, if I told him, would he still love me?

(Angelou 79)

Here the most immediate deterrent to breaking the silence is the conviction that the physical absence of the rapist may be temporary, especially since the physical effects of his abuse have proven so durable. Maya interprets the seeming permanence of her injuries as evidence that Mr. Freeman is himself a force not easily eradicated. She further equates the degree of pain she experiences, not only with the immorality of Mr. Freeman's actions, but also with the immorality of her own. Her inclination towards self-blame, typical of most rape victims, is complicated by her belief in "retributive justice," in this case God's against herself. Thus, while religion cannot offer her any hope of assistance, her depressed and self-contemptuous mindset will allow her to consider the possibility of spiritual punishment. At this point it appears that Maya has also accepted Mr. Freeman's inscriptions of adult sexuality and culpability; in retreating to her once-favorite sanctuary, the library, she encapsulates both her lost sense of belonging and lost childhood when she mourns the newfound discomfort of sitting in seats "constructed for children" (Angelou 77). A similar forced maturation is evident in her thinking that she "allowed" the rape and thus deserves not only the divinely sanctioned injuries, but also the loss of her family's love. Burdened by these thoughts, physical pain, and a sense of self so horrendous she must keep it secret, she loses her will to live: "I longed for death, but I didn't want to die anywhere near Mr. Freeman. I knew that even now he wouldn't have allowed death to have me unless he wished it to" (Angelou 80). Maya's sense of rape as a loss of self-control is also quite common, but as asserted in Laura E. Tanner's *Intimate Violence*, "the destructive power of such an assault is heightened when its victim

already experiences her claim to her body and subjectivity as tenuous” (116). For Maya, Mr. Freeman’s attack is proof of the absoluteness of his power over her, and her survival is proof that he can utilize that power to keep her from the then desirable release that death would provide. That Maya may have psychosomatically induced her own death is not an option ruled out by the text; however, like Bone, her internal and self-destructive negotiations are interrupted by the accidental publication of her rape.

Of the rape victims in this study, Maya is the only one subjected to a rape trial. As one might by now anticipate, her public voicing of rape is ultimately a tremendously harmful incident and one which results in an even lengthier silence than the one imposed by her rapist. After her brother’s discovery of her soiled panties, Maya persists in suppressing her speech, only reluctantly divulging what occurred when Bailey promises that he is outside the bounds of Mr. Freeman’s capacity for vengeance. The brief safety and appreciation Maya enjoys during her hospital visit instantly dissipates with Angelou’s transition to the trial. The author foreshadows the dynamics of the hearing with the uninviting message, “excitement is a drug, and people whose lives are filled with violence are always wondering where the next ‘fix’ is coming from” (Angelou 81). Maya’s court case has little to do with justice because the people of her neighborhood appropriate her rape as a spectacle, or what Carole Boyce Davies would accurately label a “carnival of cooptation” (Stevenson 144). The respectable citizens find relief from their own sense of oppression in distancing themselves from and either judging or pitying the victimization of one whose commonalities they choose not to recognize. Perhaps worse are the members of the social underground, “gamblers in pin-striped suits and their makeup-deep women” who tell Maya that her sexual knowledge makes her one of them.

In both cases, the rhetoric suggests the same conclusion: Maya “was eight and grown” (Angelou 81). Maya’s actual age does not seem to factor into her trial at all and thus she faces the same humiliating “process of cross-examination” that many adult women characterize as a “second rape” (Hengehold 198). Even her family, in forbidding her older brother from attending and witnessing what they are forcing Maya to directly undergo, seem to be tacitly acknowledging her unwilling transition to adulthood.

Worst of all is Mr. Freeman’s lawyer, who treats her with so much hostility and incredulity as to give the impression that Maya “had raped Mr. Freeman” (Angelou 81). He begins his interrogation by asking her to recall irrelevant details, and evidently anticipating her failure to do so, uses this opportunity to question her memory and truthfulness. Maya does in fact lie during the course of her trial, but only because her attacker will not allow for the complexity of the truth. Laura Hengehold points out “a ‘lie’ would have been unnecessary if certain questions had been posed differently; for example, if the court and family members did not assume that consent is either granted or withheld once and for all” (193). Asking Maya “Was that the first time the accused touched you?” causes her to stop, “retreat” to silence,” and eventually, under duress, commit perjury, because her memory of the earlier molestations is inextricable from the pleasure she experienced during them (Angelou 82). Again Maya exhibits an understanding of the cultural script for women whereby “female pleasure is aligned with whoring (‘they would stone me,’ she projects, ‘as they had stoned the harlot in the Bible’)” and thus “any such confession of her own transgression would invalidate her testimony on the rape itself” (Sielke 153). In this moment, assisted by the condemnatory rhetoric of religion, Maya imaginatively writes herself as a criminal (not surprising

considering her treatment as such) confronted with the disappointment, hatred and even violence of her spectators. Thus her lie is not an attempt to incriminate Mr. Freeman, but the product of her renewed desire for self-preservation. Indeed, whereas she directs a great deal of anger and loathing towards the cross-examiner, hurling a significant string of insults (“Old, black, nasty thing”) at him repeatedly, she continues to feel sorry for Mr. Freeman, even as he “look[s] empty threats” in her direction (Angelou 82; 81).

Over the course of the rape trial Angelou reveals that Maya’s self-hatred and persistent sympathy with her victimizer are linked to the historically racialized context of sexual violence. As “the subject of autobiographical writing[, Maya] is the self becoming conscious of [her position] in history” (Manora 361). Angelou, who in writing *Caged Bird* was met with accusations of having betrayed her race, recognizes and incorporates this divided consciousness in her younger representative. Though never explicit, Maya is presented with the choice of seemingly conflicting loyalties: to maintain her silence is a betrayal to her gender and setback in the fight for women’s rights, but to voice her rape by a black man is to betray her race and the fight against violent hypersexualized stereotypes. According to Michelle Wallace, this catch-22 is universal to black female subjectivity; she states,

The American black woman is haunted by the mythology that surrounds the American black man. It is a mythology based upon the real persecution of black men: castrated black men hanging by their necks from trees Every time she starts to wonder about her own misery, to think about reconstructing her life, to shake off her devotion and feeling of responsibility to everyone but herself, the ghosts pounce. She is stopped

cold. The ghosts talk to her. ‘You crippled the black man. *You* worked against him.’ (30) (Sielke 150-1)

Because black men have so long been the subjects of castrations and lynching justified by false and uninvestigated accusations of both forced and consensual sexual relations with white women, the expectation of the black community is that all its members will work to dispel these myths. Unfortunately, this backlash results in another equally harmful falsehood: that black men *don't* rape. By the time Maya is raped by Mr. Freeman, she is already well aware of and intimately connected with these dangers of the black male experience. To be placed in the position of accuser, a privilege usually reserved for white women, automatically transforms her into an adversary of black survival and the focal point of social condemnation. She is by no means mistaken in her sense that it is she on trial for having perpetrated some evil against Mr. Freeman. Perfectly encapsulated by Wallace’s description, at the moment when Maya is meant to take control of her subjectivity, receive justice, and move on with her life, she is confronted with the “ghosts” of racial tensions.

Mr. Freeman is convicted and given a short sentencing, which is then overturned that same day. Upon being released, he is mobbed and kicked to death, presumably by Maya’s “pistol-whipping uncles” (Angelou 81). Rather than interpret his murder as fair punishment or compensation for the failure of the justice system, Maya recognizes Mr. Freeman’s death as a product *of* the failed justice system, one that failed to detect her lie. Completely disregarding the reality that Mr. Freeman did in fact rape her, she quite illogically links her refusal to disclose his earlier molestations with his fate; she conflates her own untruth with those of her lying, white, lynch-mob predecessors, coming to the

overly simplistic conclusion, “a man was dead because I lied” (Angelou 84). In breaking the silence (unwillingly), Maya has instigated another black man’s symbolic lynching; guilty of such a crime herself, the guilt of her victim becomes irrelevant. Maya immediately takes full responsibility for Mr. Freeman’s homicide, and a subsequent and alarming shift in subjectivity occurs whereby she internally penalizes herself; in a kind of ongoing self-hating diatribe, she reconstructs her identity as “gutless,” worse than Satan, the embodiment of evil, and a soulless agent of the Devil (Angelou 84-5). Looking at her brother, she projects this gaze on him, and believes that he too sees and fears the awful accusatory powers that lie within her speech: “he sat all to himself, looking at a man’s death– kitten looking at a wolf” (Angelou 84). Convinced “that her words have the power to kill,” Maya self-imposes a renewed silencing for the duration of over a year (Angelou 635).

In this stage of the aftermath, Maya embraces a subjectivity of total displacement, cutting herself off from previously positive parts of her identity and from her sense of self in relation to others. Her final retreat into silence does not just entail suppressing her own communications, but relocating her mind in a kind of psychological and emotional vacuum. Though she “beg[ins] to listen to everything,” she does so not in the hopes of understanding but so that she might become desensitized and impervious to sound and its meanings:

I probably hoped that after I had heard all the sounds, really heard them and packed them down, deep in my ears, the world would be quiet around me. I walked into rooms where people were laughing, their voices hitting the walls like stones, and I simply stood still – in the midst of the

riot of sound. After a minute or two, silence would rush into the room from its hiding place because I had eaten up all the sounds. (Angelou 85)

Given the strong influence Shakespearean literature has already had on Maya, it is likely that she is intentionally evoking Macbeth's "sound and fury" soliloquy for the purpose of communicating her personal experience of life after rape as "signifying nothing" (Shakespeare 5.5). Attempts to communicate her rape have not only failed to engender healing, but have actually exacerbated her sense of isolation and dislocation. In this mindset, Maya has appropriated the silencing imposed on her by rape as a means of both dissociating herself from a victimized subjectivity and reconstructing her subjectivity as a victimizer. Having accepted that she is an evil being capable of murderous discourse, she wields silence like a weapon, deriving satisfaction from the disruptive impact it has on those around her. The above passage exposes Maya's sense of pejorative empowerment; through her own silence she can consume the speaking abilities of her companions. In actuality, Maya's family plays a large role in her initial silence, instituting their own taboo on "the term" (rape) and "the experience" (Angelou 85). Themselves wary of the topic, her family temporarily allows her silent protest under the sanctioning label of "post-rape, post-hospital affliction," but once this period of clemency expires, they resort to punishments, thrashings, and shipping her back to Stamps (Angelou 85). Maya embraces this change in location as a chance to further distance herself from reality and the people who comprise it:

The barrenness of Stamps was exactly what I wanted, without will or consciousness Entering Stamps, I had the feeling that I was stepping over the border lines of the map and would fall, without fear,

right off the end of the world. Nothing more could happen, for in Stamps nothing happened. Into this cocoon I crept. (Angelou 86)

Maya has been so traumatized by her victimization that she is now eager to return to the social limitations she once sought to escape. Like the other rape victims in this project, Maya wants to be reborn and leave behind her tragic past, and, because her rape took place elsewhere, she sees her homecoming as that chance. Unfortunately, Maya also resembles the other victims in that, post-rape, her identification as a victim continues to resurface and damage her personal development through the end of her story.

As with Allison's heroine Bone, the most powerful shaping factor of Maya's post-rape subjectivity is "chronic shame" (Bouson 114). Considering the consequences Maya was faced with when her Missouri associates discovered her rape, it is not surprising that she chooses to withhold it from the Stamps community. However, once again burdened by a terrible secret about her identity, she is continuously haunted by the prospect of its revelation. Maya progressively internalizes the patriarchal gaze whereby victims of sexual violence are defined as ignominious persons. For instance, in contemplating the extent of her Uncle Willie's knowledge on the subject, she feels ashamed of the possibility that a man, whose physical impairments she had often pitied, might extend a similar sympathy towards her, or worse, "think of [her] as being sinful and dirty" (Angelou 89). Similarly, in the presence of Momma, who definitely knows of her rape, she must carefully censor her behavior so as to avoid the appearance of "trying to be 'womanish'," an offense punishable by beatings and additional shame (Angelou 94). As a *child* rape survivor, Maya experiences her post-rape gendered subjectivity from a uniquely liminal position. While she desperately resists the stigma of deviant sexuality

that accompanies her having been raped, she also desires, but doesn't dare to openly pursue, acknowledgment of her womanhood, a role she never once doubts in the aftermath of her violation. Angelou perfectly captures this internal struggle in a single scene where Maya, a few years after her rape, attends a community picnic: "Feeling ages old and very wise at ten, I couldn't allow myself to be found by small children squatting behind a tree. Neither did I have the nerve to follow the arrow pointing the way for WOMEN. If any grownup had caught me there, it was possible that she'd think I was being 'womanish'" (Angelou 135). Two years later, when Maya is shuttled back to California, her fear of being deemed sexually immoral reemerges as potent as ever.

It is the idealized image of her mother, the woman who, for Maya, epitomizes successful femininity, that brings back her "old guilt" and causes her to feel "as unprepared to meet [her] mother as a sinner is reluctant to meet his Maker" (Angelou 196). Because her relationship to her mother is so precarious, Maya feels an intense need to perform satisfactory gender roles for her mother, even more so than before the moral compass that is her grandmother. In fact, rather than remind her mother of her rape by Mr. Freeman by appearing before her wounded, Maya chooses to live homeless. Preceding and producing this decision is the only actualized violence we ever witness Maya commit, incited by a questioning of her mother's sexuality. When her father's girlfriend, Dolores, brands Vivian Baxter a "whore," Maya retaliates by calling Dolores a "bitch" and slapping her. As she does so, the older narrating Angelou interjects with an attempted explanation of the violence behind her response: "I know that the awful accusation struck not so much at my filial love as at the foundation of my new existence. If there was a chance of truth in the charge, I would not be able to live, to continue to live

with Mother, and I so wanted to” (239). Having so frequently been indicted for her own ostensible sexual deviance, the shattering of her mother’s perfection would confirm Maya’s own whorishness and thus make close proximity an unbearable reminder of their mutual degradation. Though she eventually appears to relinquish her identification with her mother’s sexuality, claiming that it “ceased, or nearly ceased, being of interest to [her],” she does not fully transition into a survivor until the very end of her narrative (Angelou 249).

Angelou frequently implicates the failed or incomplete bonds between women as the source of Maya’s delayed, and quite possibly never realized, triumph over sexual victimization. Vivian’s pattern of abandoning her daughter at the most vulnerable stages of her life, and otherwise consistent emotional distancing, cause her to function more like a paradigm of feminine grace and beauty than an actual person in the shaping of Maya’s subjectivity. Similarly, Momma’s insistent obedience to societal regulations and expectations transform her into an archetypal figure whose “true” self is never revealed: “Knowing Momma, I knew I never knew Momma” (Angelou 189). Because neither one of these figures has successfully realized nor even pursued a more positive sense of self than the ones scripted for them, neither can they help Maya accomplish this. Presented with only their seamless facades, Maya can hardly confess her imperfections without just anticipation of condemnation. Among her peers, Maya finds only one prospect for friendship in the simpatico figure of Louise Kendricks, another young black girl who, to Maya’s romantic imagination, resembles Jane Eyre. While Angelou clearly delineates that Maya is superficially attracted to Louise because of her “white” gentility, hair, and facial features, the two girls securely bond through their mutual outsider status and

loneliness. Soon Maya is forced to recognize that, while the same age, her violent sexual experience is beyond the understanding of her friend. The first misunderstanding that transpires between them is engendered by a boy's valentine, a harmless symbol of "love," which Maya radically interprets as a repeat of Mr. Freeman's unwelcome advances.

Maya then realizes the limitations of her youthful alliance:

My friendship with Louise was solidified over jacks, hopscotch and confessions, deep and dark, exchanged often after many a 'Cross your heart you won't tell?' I never talked about St. Louis to her, and had generally come to believe that the nightmare with its attendant guilt and fear hadn't really happened to me. It happened to a nasty little girl, years and years before, who had no chain on me at all. (Angelou 154)

Her sense of shame over the rape is so strong that she not only feels incapacitated to share the event with her closest companion, but can further only achieve self-satisfaction by denying its occurrence altogether. In imaginatively rewriting her victimized self as a separate person, Maya demonstrates just how strong her reliance on the fantastical, intensified by her now constant reading, has become.

This particular method of escape, while shallowly beneficial, ultimately results in an incomplete and relationally impaired subjectivity. Maya's reclamation of voice and subsequent reconnection with the world comes about through her most fruitful female relationship, that with her neighbor Mrs. Bertha Flowers. Mrs. Flowers is not only the "lady who threw [Maya her] first life line" after the rape, but the person who "remain[s] throughout [her] life the measure of what a human being can be" (Angelou 90; 91). Mrs.

Flowers has an invaluable impact on Maya's subjective development through the lessons she imparts. It is through Mrs. Flowers that Maya first learns her words can be empowering in a *positive* way. Mrs. Flowers points out that reading, or the single-direction absorption of information, is meaningless unless the effects of that reading are communicated. Likewise, Maya, in choosing not to participate in society, is rendering herself inconsequential. In both cases, Mrs. Flowers convinces Maya that she "ha[s] to speak" in order to accomplish things in reality (Angelou 97). However, because this education is imparted to her through reading, Maya learns to think of speaking and voice as textual accomplishments; the transformation that takes place is not so immediate and obvious as her protesting in the streets or preaching from soapboxes, but a gradual and progressive identification with novels as a source of empowerment that leads her to write *Caged Bird*. Partially due to this affiliation, Mrs. Flowers "is not quite real to Maya; she reminds the child more of the women in the English novels she reads than of anybody in her material world" (Manora 370). Furthermore, as with Louise, Maya's attraction to Mrs. Flowers is racially problematic because it exposes the protagonist's prejudice against blackness and infatuation with whiteness. Mrs. Flowers impresses Maya because of her aristocratic dress and etiquette, her reserved emotions, her wealth, and her formal education, all of which place her as the black "side's answer to the richest white woman in town" (Angelou 90). Disturbingly, Mrs. Flowers' existence causes Maya to feel "proud to be Negro," in a perverse paradox whereby what she is actually taking pride in is the ability to emulate whiteness (Angelou 92). This "superior" quality in Mrs. Flowers exacerbates Maya's shame complex and, in her presence, Maya more adamantly censors herself and her relatives. Her internalized racism blinds her to the commonalities between

herself, Mrs. Flowers, and Momma, and it is only years later that she sees the missed opportunity for sisterhood. While a child, Maya “positions Mrs. Flowers outside of and somehow above the black community,” and thus experiences her mentorship as one positive to her gendered identity but severely detrimental to her racial subjectivity (Manora 371). This relationship thus epitomizes the struggle most endemic to Maya’s subjective journey: to find a positive construction of a black, female, rape survivor when all three identities are culturally despised is an impossibility.

Of the four rape narratives, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* ends on the most optimistic note. Having given birth to a baby boy at the age of sixteen, an intimate cross-generational moment between Maya, her mother, and her child helps the protagonist to “break the bonds of terror” and fully embrace her new self-affirming role as mother. This major triumph follows a series of minor post-rape successes such as defying a white woman’s attempt to rename her, graduating from high school, and getting “hired as the first Negro on the San Francisco streetcars” (Angelou 262). Unfortunately, every one of these victories is tainted by racist and sexist underpinnings. Maya’s early pregnancy is the unanticipated and undesired consequence of her need to prove heterosexual normativity in the face of “the troubling question of what constitutes femininity and the beautiful” (Cudjoe 289). Her vengeful destruction of her employer’s dishes is a passive-aggressive stance against racial oppression that no one but her later readership will recognize as such. Her advanced education is the product of an obsessive imbibing of white cultural texts and the discriminatory practices and dangers she meets with as a conductorette greatly exacerbate her sense of disconnection from the world. As is the case with Allison’s text, the very existence of Angelou’s autobiographical novel is proof

that she survives. Even better, it is proof that, at some point in her personal development, she was able to rebuild a positive relational identity, both to the black community and the women in her life. However, such healing is not accomplished within the scope of the work itself. Maya's achievements are always countered by the knowledge that they "[do] not and cannot reverse a situation that makes the violation and denigration of the black woman possible in this society" (Cudjoe 291). Through Maya, Angelou asserts that simply continuing to exist does not equate recovery from rape, and that, in face of the rigid opposition posed by a racist American patriarchy, voicing the experience is as futile as remaining silent.

Chapter Three: Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban*

Interviews with Cristina García illuminate a two-fold purpose in her writing: to revise the historically androcentric focus of literature and to deal head-on with “issues of compounded identities” (“Cristina” 17). She accomplishes both in her first novel *Dreaming in Cuban*, which was nominated for the National Book Award the same year it was published – 1992. An instant best seller, this book marked not only García’s personal entry into the American literary canon, but also “the first time a Cuban American woman published a work of fiction in English” (“Reading” 8). While the details of the book are fictional, García identifies *Dreaming* as “emotionally . . . very autobiographical,” having constructed her characters from personal relationships (López 107). What most differentiates *Dreaming* from the other novels of this project is its polyvocality; not one but four women alternate between storytelling and having their stories told. While each of these protagonists wrestle with problematic gender and racial roles, it is Lourdes Puente for whom the experience of rape compounds these identities, changing the course of her life. At first glance, Lourdes appears to be one of the strongest figures in the novel. In reality she is simply the most misunderstood. A forceful and intimidating presence despite her diminutive stature, she is a fighter, a “tyrant” and “bitch-goddess”--or so she is described by other characters (García 71; 137). In face of incredible odds she builds and expands a successful business and then parades around in red, white, and blue, a seemingly authentic albeit ostentatious representative of the achieved American Dream. However, through both third-person omniscient narration and the first-person insights of her daughter Pilar, the readers learn that behind these immoderate performances is a deep

desire to escape a shallowly buried past. Unlike either Bone or Maya, Lourdes actually achieves a level of racial and feminine propriety that results in social approval and other rewards in her native Cuba. By enacting various self-denying behaviors, she manages to pass for some time as a respectable white woman, only revealing her unhappiness in small familial rebellions. Finding some success in getting her way, Lourdes' increased self-esteem lead her to take a stand against two revolutionary soldiers who, infuriated by her defiance, proceed to rape her. She is so traumatized by this event that she uproots her family, emigrates to America, and obsessively redefines herself in accordance to the standards of her new nation. Rather than divulge this horror to anyone, Lourdes becomes a radical opponent to all things Cuban without explanation, inciting a physical and emotional rift in the family. Unable to comprehend her repulsion, the other protagonists in the novel repeatedly fail in their attempts to reach and appease her. In turn, she becomes more and more detached from reality until her only relationship is with her father's ghost. As her narrative progresses, and her chosen strategies for recuperation continue to disappoint, she comes to realize that her need for healing goes beyond what even an idealized patriarchy can offer. Alone and disillusioned, Lourdes' once-powerful voice dies with her hope for a listener.

Because of the nonlinear structure of *Dreaming*, the early events of Lourdes' life are revealed in pieces. Also, because she is never empowered with first-person narration, much of her life is revealed through the perspectives of other characters, namely her mother and daughter. It is through the reflections of her mother, Celia, on her daughter's birth that the audience is first made aware of the negative impact femaleness will have in shaping Lourdes' life. Disillusioned by her own experiences of gender discrimination and

constraint, Celia strongly desires to give birth to a son, recognizing that in Cuba, “a son can thrive and be successful, even without his mother,” whereas girls need maternal protection (Johnson 73). Thus, in Celia’s view, “the birth of a daughter [ends her] dreams of escaping the suffocating patriarchal oppression of Cuba” (Johnson 73). Not only does Lourdes’ entrance to the world define her as sexually vulnerable, but also instigates a life-long resentment between her and her mother, leaving her devoid of a positive female role model. Additionally, her designation as a less valued child is passed down as a family legacy whereby male offspring are privileged:

Rocio Davis suggests that Garcia chooses to include the male family members to emphasize the devalued role of women in Cuban society Both Celia and Felicia seem to love and nurture their sons more than their daughters. Even Lourdes mourns for her son who ‘would have helped her in the bakery without complaint’ (Johnson 70)

Having been raised to see her gender as a burden, Lourdes will inadvertently project her inculcated self-hatred on her own daughter, imaginatively comparing her to an idealized male child.

Lourdes’ own flashbacks and retrospection demonstrate to readers that much of her pre-rape subjectivity as a young Cuban woman revolves around bodily control, and more specifically, order and purity. According to Eva Figes in her book *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society*, “a patriarchal society depends on sexual taboos, and . . . psychological taboos have to be enforced with the decline of direct physical control” (135). Thus, while Lourdes appears to enjoy a certain degree of spatial freedom (her

memories are not relegated to the domestic sphere), she has adopted notions of female propriety that paradoxically dictate the scope of her behavior. For instance, undoubtedly a product of her insistent Catholicism (the religion of her father), she embraces the premium placed on female chastity, accepting physical sacrifice, both in restraint and pain, as the natural consequence of “true” womanhood: “Lourdes was a virgin when she married, and very proud of it. The hip-splitting pain, the blood on the conjugal bed were proof of her virtue. She would gladly have hung out her sheets for everyone to see” (García 168). Lourdes’ desire to display her fulfillment of the understood socio-sexual contract is evidence of her having internalized the male gaze, expecting and even hoping for witnesses to her self-policing. Her gender performance is not only for the benefit of the men who’ve established what is sexually acceptable, but, as we see through her relationship with her daughter later in the text, also fostered by her aspiration to be an example for other women--to be compared with them and “win.” Within this specific patriarchal context, the female bodies seen here are defined as non-libidinous sexual gatekeepers. By submitting to prescribed body discipline, she reaps what Sandra Bartky terms “repressive satisfactions,” or the “rewards of compliance” many women are reluctant to part with (39). For Lourdes such incentives are not only psychological self-satisfaction, but also the assurance of livelihood through male patronage, the required state of dependence for “Cuban women of a certain age and a certain class” (García 130).

A similar obsession with purification and discipline manifests in the racial stratifications negotiated by Lourdes and her family. Though race relations are a prominent theme in *Dreaming in Cuban*, it is difficult to pinpoint the race of the del Pinos. In this respect, García’s text quite realistically reflects the largely subjective and

nuanced “nature and contours of race relations in Cuba . . . complicated by the problem of identifying exactly who belongs in what racial category” (Lusane 86). Through the reflections and letters of those characters who stay in Cuba, the reader accesses anecdotal glimpses into this diverse range of racial identities and the disparate treatment they receive. While placement of characters appears somewhat ambiguous, there exists a clear racial hierarchy in which “the whiter you [are], the better off you [are]” (García 185). According to Nadia Johnson, tensions between whiter “upper- and middle- class Spanish descendants” and the lower-class “African descendants” in Cuba, still high in the aftermath of the War of 1912, were further exacerbated by Castro’s regime since he strategically aimed at gaining the loyalties of the latter group by exiling the former (70). Lourdes’ father, Jorge del Pino, is at least partially mulatto, but prior to the Revolution enjoys the wealth and privileges that come with lighter complexions; his children (Lourdes included) and wife are alternately described as “dark” and “pallid” according to the amount of sun exposure they get, yet seem to be whitening over the generations.

Because the del Pino family is on the whiter end of the racial continuum, the focus of their racialized experiences is less about the prejudice they face and more on their conscious and unconscious engagement in various passing rituals. When Lourdes marries “up” into the Puente family, she discovers that her mother-in-law, Dona Zaida, keeps her Indian mother “a prisoner” because “she refuses to wear shoes and used to carry her children and grandchildren in slings on her back” (García 207). Though less extreme, the emphasis on purification that determines Lourdes’ daily transactions and interactions also stems from racial-consciousness. Again introduced to the practice by her father, the patriarch of the family, Lourdes engages in rigid cleansing rituals such as

excessive hand washing, bathing, and food preparation, thus regulating what comes into contact with her body. Lourdes does not appear to be outwardly aware of the source of her father's "fastidiousness," but in the first few pages of the novel her mother Celia reveals that his seeming vanity arises from a conscious comparison with his "gringo boss" and subsequent need to prove his racial equality (García 6). What initiated as a struggle for recognition transforms into an obsession over time, a form of racial and cultural self-loathing witnessed and appropriated by Lourdes. García's protagonist washes with bleach, an echo of the skin-whitening ritual of Celia's in-laws, and eagerly accepts her father's complaints linking Cuba to germs and immorality, notions which post-rape are exacerbated into an extreme aversion to all things Cuban. Like the Boatwrights and the Johnsons, Lourdes' shame-phobic family pass on to her aspirations of privileged whiteness and a series of self-denying behaviors intended for this purpose.

Within her Cuban sphere, the combination of limited resources, rewards for compliance, and sanctions for transgressions are a compelling means of keeping Lourdes' defiant impulses in check. Though Lourdes may not meet traditional Westernized standards of feminism, the small subversive actions she attempts in the face of these consequences reveal a strength of character that later proves indispensable to surviving rape. When asked to interpret her own characters, García identifies Lourdes' redeeming quality as "her unerring instinct to protect what is hers" (Brown 251). The most likely source of this trait is her mother's pessimistic view of femaleness. Distressed by the responsibility of safeguarding a daughter, Celia determines early on to "train [Lourdes] to read the columns of blood and numbers in men's eyes, to understand the morphology of survival . . . to train as if for war" (García 42; 222). Thus, not only is Lourdes defined as

a survivor from birth, but also, the first lesson of defense she is presented with constructs men as sexual adversaries. While it is not clear whether she immediately accepts the gendered caveats of her mother, she exhibits a great deal of caution when it comes to her social relations, especially with those in authoritative positions. As seen above, there is consistent evidence of Lourdes' willingness to endure social constrictions under threat of penalty. Still, some of Lourdes' youthful history exposes that she is just as willing to transgress such boundaries when the stakes are not as high.

Lourdes' executes several small rebellions against the gendered and racial expectations of Cuban women. These have a positive impact on her sense of self, but are also largely detrimental to her relations with other women. The ideological system of rewards and consequences established by patriarchies typically encourages women to compete with each other rather than identify and resist as a group. When Lourdes' need for control extends to her activities in the marital household, a battle for domestic turf ensues between her and the other dominant woman of the family: "When a disgruntled servant informed Dona Zaida about the changes in her country house, she descended on the ranch in a fury and restored the villa to its former state. Lourdes, who defiantly rebuilt the aviary and restocked it with birds, never spoke to her mother-in-law again" (130). Her act of reconstructing the Puente ranch, while domestic in nature, is evidence that "Lourdes never accepted the life designated for [Puente] women," one of excess and indolence, and instead chooses to remain actively employed. Dona Zaida interprets this zealotry of occupation as an attack on her near-incestuous relationship with her son and she retaliates, but Lourdes' true motivations emerge when she restores the aviary, a source of personal, and not marital, pleasure. Such a self-interested decision poses a

striking contrast with her other activities, through which her satisfaction appears to exist only on a superficial level, in direct relation to the success or failure of her gendered performances. Other moments in the text where Lourdes relinquishes her routine of bodily censorship occur while she is dancing. Through her mother's letters we learn that youthful Lourdes was a skilled dancer, and through the ritual of courtship was allowed to participate in this sanctioned form of sexual expression. Upon returning once more to her native Cuba, Lourdes dances with her nephew, an activity that brings to life her repressed memories and body: "Her body remembered what her mind had forgotten. Suddenly, she wanted to show her daughter the artistry of *true* dancing. Lourdes exaggerated her steps, flawless and lilting, teasing the rhythm seductively" (García 224). The contrast between the "powerful longing" Lourdes experiences in this scene and her otherwise consistent numbness confirm that it is the efforts at self-censorship, her central strategy for survival, that have paralyzed her, both physically and emotionally. Her "happiest" memories are of attending sporting events with her father and being "darkened . . . to the shade of the villagers," behavior that defies both gender and ethnic standards without inviting much danger (García 68). Unfortunately, Lourdes' bravest act of rebellion comes at a high price. By taking a stance against the intrusion of military presence on her land, Lourdes' directly opposes both patriarchy and imperialism; in order to divest her of this momentary empowerment, the soldiers she confronts rape her.

As we've seen in the previous two narratives, deciding how to show the rape scene itself is a delicate and primary concern for contemporary feminist authors. In *Dreaming in Cuban*, García utilizes the tropes of vision and revision to illustrate one such empowering method of dealing with sexual violence. Like her predecessors, García

forces readers to experience Lourdes' rape through the "victim's" perspective, denying a voyeuristic glimpse of her violation and instead redirecting focus on the perpetrator. At the moments leading up to her rape, usually when the account of female experience becomes passive and abstract, her senses are intensified, and she sees, smells, and feels her attacker in the kind of detail often denied a "victim." In fact, through her description, Lourdes *becomes* the violator, fragmenting and objectifying her rapist into "hair, tamed with brilliantine," a "calloused palm," eyes "tinged with the filmy blue of the blind," and finally a pair of "lips . . . too full for a man" and gums "a soft pink, delicate as the petals of a rose" (García 71). Not only is her portrayal dehumanizing and grotesque, it also feminizes her attacker, Lourdes' strategy of employing gendered rhetoric to "weaken" her violator.

Even more curious is the actual rape, during which Lourdes wills temporary blindness upon herself. Thus removing herself from an undesirable reality, she creates her own, once again appropriating the role of violator and using smell and imagination to rewrite *his* subjectivity. As articulated by Suzanne Ruta, "when Lourdes is raped in Cuba she takes revenge during the act by imagining an awful future for her rapist . . . 'She smelled . . . his tears when his son drowned at the park. She smelled his rotting leg in Africa, where it *would be* blown off his body on a moonless savanna night. She smelled him when he was old and unbathed and the flies blackened his eyes'" (11; emphasis mine). Given the context of magical realism in which Lourdes' god-like prophecy takes place, her revenge fantasy assumes the potency of truth. Early in this novel, she attributes her capacity for altering actuality to her wandering eye: "It doesn't diminish her 20/20 vision, only skews it a bit. Lourdes is convinced it enables her to see things that others

don't" (García 17). Later in the narrative, as part of her own attempt to understand and articulate her mother's editorial actions, her daughter Pilar discloses a begrudging admiration of her adaptability: "Mom filters other people's lives through her distorting lens. Maybe it's that wandering eye of hers. It makes her see only what she wants to see instead of what's really there" (García 176). Though she is indeed immersed in the materiality of her body, Lourdes' consciousness becomes a "force" of pain, not against herself, but against her rapist.

Though this is not explicitly an interracial rape, the highly charged political and ethnic tensions between Lourdes and her rapist resonate of the dynamics between foreign oppressor and native Other. It is certainly ironic, and perhaps an intended political indictment on García's part, that the agents of the socialist regime that would ostensibly eliminate sexual and racial discrimination in fact exploit the inequalities that give them power over Lourdes. Her rape becomes the embodiment of her relationship to the Cuban Revolution. Whereas Lourdes' mother whole-heartedly adopts the official paternal discourse of the Revolution, and thus experiences an unprecedented sense of authority and purpose, Lourdes' recent membership in the landowning upper class automatically places her in an adverse relationship to the movement that would divest her of her property. She also shares the ethnicity most common to the first wave of Cuban exiles: white, Catholic, and wealthy. Initially, Lourdes only indirectly renounces her Cuban loyalties through her devotion to her American-goods peddling father and marriage into one of the few elite families benefiting from pre-revolution U.S.-Cuban relations. However, when she opposes Castro's soldiers, thereby becoming an obstacle to their attempt to reclaim power from the U.S., Lourdes becomes a "*gusano* traitor" (García 3).

Her subsequent rape is obviously a result of the dissociation and hostility between these two groups of Cubans. Additionally, because Lourdes identifies her rapist's accent as that of the Oriente, García quite probably intends her audience to read a dynamic of racial differentiation in this act:

Gomez-Vega informs us, 'Oriente is populated among the lowest of the low-class Cubans. Oriente is populated by descendants of slaves, of Taino Indians who survived the Spaniards, and of Haitian blacks who come into the country illegally and mix in with the rest of the mulatto population in that province' (92). Considering the history of Oriente, it is safe to assume, a man of African descent rapes Lourdes, a man who subsequently is reclaiming land from the Spanish landowner to restore it to the African and Indigenous populations of Cuba. (Johnson 73)

This relationship is bolstered by the narrative link between Lourdes' memory of her violation and a tale in which "brown snakes were introduced by Americans. The snakes strangled the native birds one by one. They ate the eggs from the nests until the jungle *had no voice*" (García 227; emphasis mine). That Lourdes appropriates this destructive invasion as an allegorical articulation of her own loss is highlighted by the next sentence, where she mourns both "her rape [and] her baby's death," the two separate tragedies having become conflated in her mind in the aftermath (García 227). From this fable we can glean two significant understandings of the power dynamics of Lourdes' rape. First, the color differentiation between species seems to confirm that the dissimilarities between Lourdes and her rapist (and on a larger scale between exiles and revolutionaries) extend to racial nuances as well as ethnicity. Second, the lost voice of the

jungle significantly calls the reader's attention to the experience of her attack as a form of silencing. The rape scene is itself figured as a failed communication between conflicting discourses. Lourdes is apparently surprised into looking at her soon-to-be assailant for the first time when she "hear[s] the accent of the Oriente province" (García 70). She responds to his unfamiliar voice by *yelling*, "'Get out of my house!'" vocalizing her proprietorship over the land and attempting to counteract the claim made by his "official sheet of paper" (García 70-1). Before raping her, the soldier literally silences Lourdes by tying her pants over her mouth. Finally, he negates her seditious destruction of the deed (she tears it in half) and counters her oral assertions with a second written message, this time carved with a knife in "crimson hieroglyphics" on her stomach (García 72). This battle culminates in Lourdes' failed attempt to read the inscription; after undergoing a painful purification process of bleach and detergents, the scars remain, but are rendered "illegible" (72). While Lourdes is able to use her imagination to rewrite her experience of rape, García reminds the readership that even empowering fantasies cannot overwrite the real and enduring consequences of such violence.

The silence and inward retreat instigated by her rapist are continued into Lourdes' negotiation of the aftermath. Not only does she refuse to share her experience with potential supporters, but also she vehemently silences the genuine facets of her racial and gender identity that she had just begun to explore. She does so by launching a full-on crusade against everyone and everything that could remind her of the attack. Because she was raped for her perceived roles as violable female and Cuban traitor, she does her best to deny her sexual position and erase her cultural history. Lourdes is a raped woman "who becomes a subject *through* rape rather than merely one subjected to its violation"

(Rajan 77). Her entire character is encapsulated by her determination to rewrite and live outside the bounds of an unsatisfactory reality. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera observes that her emancipated existence is foretold at her birth: "García cleverly prefigures Lourdes' expatriation and her deliberate attempt to forget or efface her past . . . in the episode in which Celia proclaims, in her madness, that her daughter has no shadow—a metaphor for the past" (80). She consistently interprets history and its "truths" as having little or no value, choosing instead to construct and believe in her own version of events. In her search for a sustaining sense of self, Lourdes becomes increasingly detached from reality, instead relying more heavily on her imagination and the illusory control it facilitates.

The most obvious manifestation of her psychological struggles is the appearance of and conversations with her father's ghost. Because ghosts are themselves embodiments of liminality, "modern ghost stories offer a way for minority writers to come to terms with their lost cultural identities" (Brogan). For Lourdes, communications with the ghost of Jorge del Pino are the sole means by which she can acknowledge and articulate the impact that rape has had on her subjectivity. His presence engenders a second awakening for Lourdes, as his first appearance signals to her that 'things are wrong . . . very wrong' (García 65). Despite her conscious refusal to "acknowledge the trauma of her rape," she is haunted by its memory: "She tossed and turned all night, as if she were wrestling ghosts in her dreams. Sometimes she'd wake up crying, clutching her stomach and moaning from deep inside" (Payant 168; García 221). Her denial of the past does nothing to relieve the post-traumatic stress disorder she is suffering and instead enables a subconscious battle to recover from the "literal and psychological destruction of [her] form, threat to personal coherence [and] sacrifice of self-control" inherent to rape

(Tanner 4). Jorge's ghost, an apparent witness to this destructive cycle, periodically expresses "concern" for his daughter, and in their final dialogue requests that she make peace with her troubled past by returning to Cuba. Unfortunately, this appeal comes too late and the damage caused by her mental detachment proves irreparable.

Prior to this homecoming, the narrative explores the revised American identity Lourdes has constructed--one that largely depends on a rewriting of her sex. Post-rape, her new self-perception as a disempowered woman leaves her uncomfortable with and distrusting of her own body, and she begins a series of destructive actions aimed at altering the form that betrayed her to violation. In her dual occupations of baker and auxiliary policewoman, Lourdes is equipped with the tools to "dephysicalize" her body and thereby control how others see and interact with her. She concedes that her motivation for purchasing the bakery was her perception of it as an emotionally neutral zone: "What sorrow could there be in [working with bread]?" (García 18). Both this job and her volunteer position enable her to wear engulfing and androgynous uniforms, facilitating an effective dissociation from her femaleness. And if these guises were not enough, the layers of fat she puts on through her zealous consumption of sticky buns are another means of warding off any unfamiliar or unwelcome sensations. Lourdes sees her consumption not as a loss of control, but as a purposeful relinquishment of it, and therefore just a different form of self-control. While it is not entirely implausible that her post-trauma indulgences have the contrary aim of resurrecting "the female body as desiring body" and directly countering the rapist's inflicted pain with "escapist pleasures," García makes it clear that they result in a numbing, rather than a heightening, of sensations (Sielke 156; Mujcinovic 178). In fact the only true satisfaction Lourdes

derives from her new body is that it repels the male gaze she fears without weakening her powers of self-defense: “Now the extra weight did not alter her rhythmical gait, but men’s eyes no longer pursued her curves” (García 21).

With her hair pinned up, swathed in nondescript garments, and marching the streets, “her elbows jutting behind her like pistons,” Lourdes successfully deludes herself into a sense of security. However, when this same image is retold through an outsider perspective such as her daughter’s, her actions are ineffectual and even comical. For the reader, fully aware of the terror perpetuating these performances, Lourdes’ efforts to escape the inscriptions of her rape are an unequivocal failure; as noted by Mujcinovic, “the haunting traumatic experience always returns to destabilize Lourdes’ enunciative present” (178). Because the appearance of Jorge’s ghost incites Lourdes into an attempted reversal of the harm done to her body, there exists a brief period of hope that her destructive pattern of behavior can be disrupted. However, the rigid starvation and exercise Lourdes puts herself through proves another extreme version of the order and purification she sought prior to being raped; she returns to the idea that her body and self might be cleansed, embracing the “purity [of] the hollowness of her stomach” (García 167). Once she has completed the cycle of discipline, losing the exact amount of weight she had originally gained, the momentary relief from fixation leads her to revisit her tragic past, and so she once again takes up anesthetizing consumption: “Each calamity makes Lourdes feel her own sorrow, keeps her own pain fresh . . . Lourdes eats, eats, eats, like a Hindu goddess with eight arms, eats, eats, eats, as if famine were imminent” (García 174). When not immediately focused on some exertion of self-control over her body, she finds herself faced with emotional vulnerability for which she has no solution.

In addition to her cycle of purging and consumption, Lourdes distracts herself from the pain of her rape by focusing on its prevention. In defining other women as equally sexually fragile, Lourdes seeks to extend her protective strategies of self-censorship to them. One of the tools that she derives a sense of security from in the aftermath of her rape is a pair of “thick-soled black shoes” that in her mind are a sexual “equalizer”: “If women wore shoes like these, she thinks, they wouldn’t worry so much about more abstract equalities. They would join the army reserve or the auxiliary police like her, and protect what was theirs” (García 128). Having already accepted the role of sexual gatekeeper, she now figures rape prevention as the collective responsibility of women; if they wore heavy shoes and carried guns they wouldn’t need to worry about being raped. As the closest woman to her, Pilar receives the brunt of this campaign for the unsexing of women: all activities that could possibly be construed as sexual, such as masturbating, dating, dancing, or wandering out of the range of Lourdes’ watchful gaze, are met with verbal diatribes and violence from her mother. When Pilar is late coming home one evening, Lourdes instinctively imagines that she has met a gruesome fate and is in “pieces, broken and bruised in unspeakable places, on piers and in alleyways, drifting down the river to the sea” (García 23). Fear of attack and the constant vigilance and armor necessary for preventing its occurrence have become such a normative part of her existence that she can only interpret Pilar’s more liberated existence as apathy to life: “Even now, Pilar is not afraid of pain or of losing anything. It’s this indifference that is most maddening” (García 128). While her attempts to control her daughter are really motivated by her desire to keep her safe, Pilar is unaware of her mother’s past and so resists and is driven away by her mother’s inclusion of her in the category of potential

rape victims. That Lourdes never consciously articulates her experience of rape to the other characters is evidence that her violator has ultimately succeeded in silencing her. All of the energies that she puts into reversing and erasing her victimization prove futile because no one understands the root cause of her actions. Though rape momentarily causes Lourdes to sympathize and identify with other women, it does not prompt her to trust or place her hope in that connection.

The execution of Lourdes' plan for personal transformation also relies on complete dissociation from everything Cuban. She and her family emigrate to the U.S. as a part of the thousands of exiles fleeing the revolution, but it is clear that Lourdes is dictating this relocation in the face of tremendous familial pressure to stay. According to Fatima Mujcinovic, "the space of home represents a betrayal that she cannot forgive" driving Lourdes to "alienate herself completely from the space of the home(land) and embrace exile as a space where she can recuperate her obliterated self" (175). However, fleeing the site of her rape is not enough, as the Cuban subculture forming in Miami is too intricately linked to her past self: "Lourdes couldn't stand Rufino's family, the endless brooding over their lost wealth, the competition for dishwasher jobs" (García 69). Having already rejected the part of properly submissive Cuban housewife, Lourdes seems just as repulsed by the devalued roles prescribed for Cuban exiles. Additionally, she is never again able to encounter an object, person, sight, smell or other medium linked to Cuba without having a volatile reaction to the drudged-up memories. For these reasons, she forces her family further and further North until finally choosing New York as her home because the cold "symbolically acts as an anesthetic that helps deaden the past" and

because she can don “layers of thick, winter clothes as an armor for her vulnerable body” (Mujcinovic 177).

Lourdes attempts to complete her cultural transformation through an excessive appropriation of patriotic Americanism: she opens a number of “Yankee Doodle” bakeries, dresses in red, white, and blue and even emulates the exploitation of U.S. immigrants by overworking and underpaying her first-generation immigrant staff, all the while believing “she’s doing them a favor by giving them a job and breaking them in to American life” (García 32). Lourdes seems to believe that the success of her American identity depends upon bigotry; for this reason she not only refuses to empathize with fellow immigrants, but even dehumanizes these persons, referencing them by their race rather than by name. To some degree, her racist actions are the remnants of former pride in her Cuban culture. When opening her second bakery, she eagerly obeys the directive of her ghost father to post signs with her name on them, ““ . . . so they know what we Cubans are up to, that we’re not all Puerto Ricans”” (García 170). As much as Lourdes hates and seeks to erase her Cuban identity, she continues to subscribe to a highly nuanced notion of racial hierarchy, this time one in which she and her native countrymen are superior to other immigrant populations. Still, she is no more sympathetic to those left behind in Cuba. Her choice of a bakery as the means to economic success is significant because she is both “catering to or selling out to American interests or appetites” and profiting off the sale of sugar despite knowing that “her own people [Cubans] are suffering from severe food shortages, due, in part, to the United State’s embargo on Cuba’s largest export crop” (Herrera 84). The popularity of Lourdes’ businesses serves as ironic commentary on the American Dream and its dependence on the exploitation of and

detriment to immigrants. Lourdes refuses to recognize this dynamic and instead interprets her prosperity as proof that she has become a fully assimilated white American citizen. She compares her own expanding baked goods empire with the achievements of American mogul Irénée du Pont and several rags-to-riches heroes. However, once again relying on the insights of her daughter Pilar, readers discover that this too is a product of her skewed and deluded viewpoint. Pilar, who is consistently more in tune with reality, sees that her mother's cultural passing is not entirely successful, and more often than not a source of amusement for outsiders. Despite her best efforts, Lourdes is betrayed by "her immigrant English, [which] has a touch of otherness that makes it unintentionally precise" (García 177). In fact, it is largely because she tries so hard to perform Americanness, usually through comically ostentatious demonstrations, that she reveals herself to be a foreigner. Thus, both unable to attain peer status with her customers and unwilling to associate with her employees, Lourdes finds herself in an uncomfortable and culturally liminal position of nonbelonging.

She has similarly little hope of finding a supportive network and potential confidant among her relatives. As critics are quick to point out, the del Pino men are for the most part one-dimensional background characters who fail to contribute to the family unit and instead incite familial strife through philandering and desertion. Lourdes' bond with her father is one of two consistently positive relationships with men represented in the novel. However, even the intimacy fostered by their affection is marred by a persistent silence between them; "their inability to communicate is signified by the fact that only after his death can Jorge and Lourdes speak candidly to one another" (Herrera 82). Safely a ghost, Jorge confesses without apology to knowing about her rape "all these

years,” but at the same time defends his wife, Celia, by saying “your mother never knew, I swear it” (García 196). While apparently justified in keeping silent, Jorge recognizes that Celia’s devotion to the Revolution would be an unforgiveable betrayal were she conscious of her daughter’s violation. He requests that Lourdes return to Cuba and reconcile with her past, including her mother, and in doing so discloses *his* role in Celia’s ill-treatment; Jorge’s “admission of his attempt to destroy his wife reinforces the notion that the malaise of Cuba’s past is deeply rooted in the Cuban man’s treatment of women, in the Cuban society’s silent acceptance of male dominance” (qtd. by Johnson 73). Evidently attempting to atone for this damage, Jorge’s ghost offers her the chance for communicating her story in reality. His appeal gives Lourdes an excuse to “tell [her] mother *everything*” (García 197; emphasis mine). Compelled by his disappearance, or second death, to find connection with some living being, she agrees to go with Pilar back to Cuba.

Unfortunately, while in Cuba, the limited efforts Lourdes puts forth towards reconnecting with her origins are counteracted by the extreme fear and hostility she feels being in close proximity to actors and artifacts of the Revolution. Everything she once enjoyed is now tainted by the memories of her abandonment by her mother, miscarriage, and brutal rape. Rather than dwell on these painful aspects of her past, she launches into a “louder and louder” campaign of indicting her surroundings while comparing them to the vastly superior American landscape she left behind: the sugar cane is not as sweet, the clothes are garish, the cars are falling apart, and the income isn’t even comparable. In a scene where Pilar watches her mother shout her complaints at a gathering crowd, García reveals the reason for the name of this final section, “The Languages Lost”:

Then she turns to me, her face indignant. ‘Look how they laugh Pilar! Like idiots! They can’t understand a word I’m saying! Their heads are filled with too much *compañero* this and *compañero* that! They’re brainwashed, that’s what they are!’

I pull my mother from the growing crowd. The language she speaks is lost to them. It’s another idiom entirely. (221)

Here Lourdes is convinced that the source of her failed communication is the stupidity and susceptibility of the community she was once a part of, but Pilar more accurately identifies it as the changes her mother has undergone. Lourdes has become so detached from her Cubanism that she is no longer in possession of her first language, whereby she might finally express her pain. Though she is by no means taciturn, the words she does verbalize are angry and meaningless and thereby find no receptive audience. Even among Cuban defectors who, like herself, oppose the Revolution and its leader, her speech has no impact. Upon finding herself face to face with El Líder, Castro’s fictional counterpart, and thus being presented with the long dreamed-of opportunity to enact a revenge killing on the figure she holds responsible for her rape, she is suddenly struck dumb. The single charge she manages to utter, “*Asesino,*” or murderer, is simply ignored. This failure causes Lourdes to transition to complete silence: back at her mother’s home, she walks among her family “without saying anything,” lies down on her childhood bed with “old sentences lurk[ing] beneath the mattress” and decides that it is just as futile to tell the story of her rape.

The entire experience of being back among the painfully familiar yet nightmarishly transformed setting of her youth only exacerbates Lourdes' familial estrangement. Pilar considers their trip mainly as an opportunity to bond with her grandmother and only thinks of her mother with detachment and disgust when forced to witness her explosive behavior. Even when Lourdes calmly shares stories of her childhood, Pilar begins to daydream about her grandmother, only "half-listening" to her mother's words. Deterred by her near constant grumbling, Pilar misses the few occasions where her mother does reach out to her. Celia, a figure who, in Lourdes' mind, is just as representative of the past and betrayal as El Líder, is likewise ignorant of her daughter's ameliorative intentions. Reunited after decades apart, neither Celia nor Lourdes ever speaks directly to the other. Celia joins Pilar in her singular focus on their relationship, whispering things to her granddaughter in the presence of Lourdes and leaving the room when she begins her political diatribes. In turn, Lourdes finds nothing familiar or welcoming in the aged figure of her mother and thus concludes that she cannot fulfill her promise and break through the barriers of silence between them: "She is a complete stranger to me, Lourdes thinks. Papi was wrong. Some things can never change" (García 223).

Unable to form an attachment with the women in her family, she redirects her attention and hopes to her nephew Ivanito, a boy whom she obviously intends as a replacement child for both her indifferent daughter and dead son. Once again, the dancing scene between her and Ivanito surfaces as a significant moment of reunification for Lourdes, not only with her body, but also with her cultural past. This is the only place in *Dreaming* where she inverts her patriotism, speaking disparagingly of an American ritual

while praising the contrasting practice of her homeland; she observes: “The band was playing a cha-cha-chá, and Pilar moved jerkily, off the beat, sloppy and distracted. She dances like an American. Ivanito, though, is a wonderful dancer. His hips shift evenly, and his feet keep precise time to the music” (García 224). Lourdes takes her daughter’s place on the dance floor and, after sharing this rhythmical and magical moment with her nephew, becomes determined to save him from the decay of Cuba. Ivanito, who is either too young, complacent, or ambivalent to resist his aunt’s imposed patronage, is still confused by her actions: “Tía Lourdes has taken a special liking to me since we danced that first night at the hotel. She watches me when she thinks I’m not looking and hugs me tightly for no reason. Tía seems concerned that I spend so much time with Pilar, and finds excuses to pull me away” (García 229). Lourdes final act in the novel is to put her nephew on a flight to America, believing she is giving him a chance for a better life. Despite having found her most likely pupil in American culture, it is improbable that Lourdes will ever share her experience of rape with him.

In one of her final reflections, Lourdes reveals her belief that it will take a force beyond human potency to give voice and meaning to her tragic past: “What she fears most is this: that her rape, her baby’s death were absorbed quietly by the earth, that they are ultimately no more meaningful than falling leaves on an autumn day. She hungers for a violence of nature, terrible and permanent, to record the evil. Nothing less would satisfy her” (226). Scenes like this reveal that beneath her busy efforts at erasing her personal history lies an equally desperate desire to share her burdens with another living person. Like Bone and Maya, Lourdes perceives her silence as a necessity because experience tells her that her story will not be well received and perhaps ignored altogether. As noted

by Mary S. Vasquez, “language functions in *Dreaming in Cuban* as a measuring device gauging both affinity and distance” between characters; by the end of the novel Lourdes’ language is “lost” because she was unable to find a willing and comprehending listener (23). While readers easily recognize her emigration, weight changes, defensive occupations, and cultural appropriation as the product of her rape, the other characters in the book never successfully translate these actions and misjudge her for them. Lourdes’ relationship to her family, especially her daughter and mother, is ruptured by their oppositional connections with Cuba; her rejection of this homeland and all associated with it as reminders of her violation exacerbates her emotional distancing from those who regard it with nostalgia and affection. Persons outside of her family also fail to become a support system for her because of the prevalence of racist and culturally Othering discourses. Lourdes uses these stereotypes to label other marginalized groups as inferior, unaware that the dominant culture is doing the same to her. Lourdes’ sad prediction that her story will be “absorbed quietly” is brought to fruition by the end of the novel because, in the aftermath of her rape, she is unable to place her trust in any living being.

Chapter Four: Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*

Bharati Mukherjee, whose literary reputation is linked to stories of woman-centered diasporic experiences, also brings the intersecting dynamics of gender and race to the forefront of her reader's attention in her novel *Jasmine*. This book is only one piece of a substantial literary oeuvre responsible for earning her widespread recognition as a seminal writer of immigrant consciousness. Rejecting the notion of fixed identities, attempts to redefine, or at least challenge, existing definitions of cultural categories are thematically central to her narratives. Though not strictly autobiographical, the plot of *Jasmine* has many parallels to events in Mukherjee's life. Like her protagonist, Mukherjee continues to struggle for access to more inclusive subjectivities. In some critical circles her audible resistance to being ethnically differentiated from the "North American" canon of writers is still a source of controversy. For these reasons it is fair to say that this story of an Indian woman's negotiations of cultural liminality is one of the works revealing Mukherjee's "autobiographical impulse" (132). Though she is never alone, Jasmine is arguably the most independent of the four rape survivors in this study, shedding her social and familial ties as she progresses through a series of subjectivities. Her journey of self-definition begins in her home village of Hasnapur, a conservative purdah society. Under her birth name Jyoti, she negotiates her status as a public spectacle whose worth is determined by appearance and marriageability. Successfully married at the age of fourteen, her new identity under the appellation Jasmine is marked by her struggle for equilibrium while caught between the oppositional ideologies of her traditional society and "progressive" husband. A plethora of personal tragedies, including the murder of her husband, lead her then to emigrate to America with the intention of

committing suicide. Strangely enough, it is her rape by a villainous trade merchant that disrupts this plan and supplies her with the will to survive. Previously characterized by a relative stability of identity and direction, Jasmine undergoes immediate and violent transformation, and for the rest of the narrative is continuously searching for ways to remake herself in a manner that she finds fulfilling. Unfortunately, the debilitating social constructs attached to her race and gender prove powerful obstacles to this goal and none of the roles she tries on acquire social acceptance. Unable to conceal or dispel her perceived Otherness in an American context, and thereby unable to find a sympathetic audience, Jasmine chooses not to exacerbate her already precarious position by divulging her sexual victimization.

The strictly controlled and ritualistic Hindu community in which the protagonist of Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is raised ensures the impossibility of distinguishing between her early experiences as an *Indian* woman and as an Indian *woman*. Within her homeland, femaleness is defined as a "curse": "A daughter had to be married off before she could enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generations. Gods with infinite memories visited girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations" (Mukherjee 39). As is the case with Lourdes in *Dreaming in Cuban*, Jasmine's birth is culturally defined as problematic because she is a fiscal and religious burden to her family. Also, her mother is so distraught by the knowledge that she cannot possibly defend her against a lifetime of hardship that she attempts to "snipe" her in her infancy. Following this failed attempt on her life, Jasmine is forced to endure a childhood development with a singular focus on marriage. Because their fate is entirely dependent upon their marketability to men, the behaviors of Indian women are even more

pervasively regulated than those of American and Cuban women. Jasmine, too, must undergo rigorous bodily and sexual discipline to maintain her status as a virtuous and desirable woman. Because she is spatially regulated to the domestic sphere and under the immediate supervision of her male family members, her self-policing correlates to an external gaze as much as an internalized one. This surveillance transforms her into a public spectacle, and her early life becomes a continuous performance. That Jasmine's livelihood is reliant upon these gendered performances is made explicit in her everyday dialogue and interactions. At the age of seven, she learns from her sisters to value and protect her physical beauty as insurance against the poverty of remaining unmarried. Upon discovering that she has wounded her face, her sisters shriek, "Now your face is scarred for life! How will the family ever find you a husband?" (Mukherjee 5). However, beauty alone is not enough to secure a marriage, and once married, Indian women must continue to perform their delicate funambulism at the risk of far more than criticism: Jasmine observes sardonically, "All over our district, bad luck dogged dowryless wives, rebellious wives, barren wives. They fell into wells, they got run over by trains, they burned to death heating milk on kerosene stoves" (Mukherjee 41). Though her marriage to a "progressive" Americanized Indian man safeguards her against such "guiltless" murders, she, like the other heroines, intensely desires social acceptance and so pursues authorized femininity.

Within her early life in the Indian village of Hasnapur, the three devalued and mistreated positions Jasmine occupies, first as unwanted and impoverished daughter, second as childless child bride, and third as widow, make her desperate to find approval in some form. When her story begins, Jasmine is named and identifies as "Jyoti Vijn," a

young girl fully linked to and unquestioning of her Indian traditions. As a young wife, she accepts that reproduction is integral to Indian womanhood and attempts to follow the path designated for her. Her unproductive status is a source of ongoing shame and isolation. During her marriage she receives censure from the female community for nonconformity (“I was past fifteen, and girls in the village, and my mother, were beginning to talk), and in her widowhood Jasmine’s failure “to create new life,” only reinforces her perceived worthlessness (Mukherjee 77; 97). When she meets resistance from her husband Prakash, who either cannot or does not recognize the sanctions she faces, she is reduced to begging him to impregnate her. While Prakash is quick to condemn Jasmine’s request as “feudal compliance,” he also abdicates all personal responsibility for their sexual relationship, excusing men as “generally too greedy and too stupid to recognize their own best interests” and designating Jasmine the gatekeeper responsible for subverting this dynamic (Mukherjee 77; 78). Prakash’s stance on womanhood provokes an internal strife for Jasmine, though her struggle does not arise from independent volition, but out of a desire to fulfill the conflicting standards set by her husband and community. With less access to education and the public sphere, she strives to appropriate what she must accept as her husband’s superior alternatives, represented in all things American.

Like Lourdes of *Dreaming in Cuban*, Jasmine’s early racial subjectivity develops in a setting marked by intense intraracial conflicts. Situated “in the seventies and eighties when the violent separatist demands of the militant Sikhs forced many Hindus to migrate from Punjab,” she finds herself the object of male-centered discursive and physical battles for power (Leard). The conversations Jasmine overhears while in purdah reflect

the historical pattern of men revisiting the “woman question” as a means of asserting their cultural superiority. Sukhwinder, a Sikh nationalist, in his debates with Jasmine’s brothers, consistently focuses on the status of women, relying on a rhetorical dichotomy of purity and prostitution. In one such conversation he declares, “The Khalsa, the Pure-Bodied and the Pure-Hearted, must have their sovereign state. Khalistan, the Land of the Pure. The Impure must be eliminated . . . Keep your whorish women off the streets The sari is the sign of the prostitute” (Mukherjee 66). Initially, Jasmine does not give credence to these definitions because her brothers and future husband, whose presence and mocking dismissals of Sukhwinder’s words offer her some protection, surround her. However, when Sukhwinder’s charges are supplemented by the bomb that takes Prakash’s life, Jasmine’s guilt as the surviving target drives her to accept the insult. In the aftermath of the bombing Jasmine thinks to her dead husband, “I failed you. I didn’t get there soon enough. The bomb was meant for me, prostitute, whore” (Mukherjee 93).

Prior to his death, Prakash functioned as another culturally controversial figure in Jasmine’s life. She identifies her hometown of Hasnapur as a kind of third world anachronism at the beginning stages of India’s postcolonialism: “I was born into India’s near-middle age. British things were gone, and in our village they’d never even arrived” (Mukherjee 106). For this reason she is witness to another ethnic struggle, this time between Indian traditionalists and Indians who have appropriated imperial culture. That Westernization has begun to infiltrate Hasnapur is first evident when, early in her schooling, Jasmine watches “stern how-to videos about the efficacies of small families and clean hands” (Mukherjee 45). For Jasmine, hand-washing and other rites of hygiene have the same racially purifying significance as they do for Lourdes, and she too rigidly

adopts this ritual as a means of differentiating herself from cultural stigmas. Prakash is the narrative's predominant proponent of Westernization, and he simultaneously idealizes American culture whilst disparaging his own. Through him, Jasmine is partially awakened to the possibility of alternative standards of living. Upon entering this relationship, she is first confronted with and able to articulate a cultural liminality, saying "I felt suspended between worlds" (Mukherjee 76). Prakash's renaming of Jyoti as "Jasmine" and the reinscription of her subjectivity mark the start of her search for self-definition, negotiated as a "shuttl[ing] between identities" (Mukherjee 77). Still, Prakash's ostensibly well-intentioned harping on Jasmine to shirk the "feudalistic" ways of India serves to reinforce his position as a patronizing and dominating presence in her life. Since Jasmine first experiences "America" as a confirmation of her disadvantaged status, her own desires for relocation are detached from any hope of empowerment. When envisioning her life with Prakash in the U.S., she impulsively imagines a transfer of Indian traditions to a new location: "When you're at work in America, I'll stay inside" (Mukherjee 81).

Jasmine's pre-rape experiences mirror those of the other feminist protagonists in that she too is characterized by a determination to survive. Out of a desire to spare her daughter the imminent suffering attached to life as a dowryless, and thereby worthless, Indian woman, Jasmine's mother attempts to strangle her at birth. It is in this scene that Mukherjee announces to her audience that "her heroine [is] a 'fighter and adapter,' who is perpetually in the process of remaking her self and her destiny" (Leard). Her defiant strength likewise manifests at the beginning of the novel when, at seven years old, an astrologer "[foretells her] widowhood and exile" (3). Jasmine not only denounces her

interpreter as “a crazy old man,” but reclaims the injury he causes to her face as an empowering “third eye” (Mukherjee 3, 5). Jasmine thus demonstrates the same capacity for erasing and rewriting reality that we see in the other rape victims. Jasmine’s “third eye,” similar to Lourdes’ “wandering” eye, becomes a recurrent trope for this form of editorial resistance. Often her imaginings include invoking or conceiving of herself as a supernaturally empowered Indian figure, a strategy that foreshadows her reaction to rape.

The most foretelling moment of this tragedy occurs in a scene of her youth when what Jasmine fears to be a rapist turns out to be a rabid dog. Within her village of Hasnapur, rape is constructed as a normative occurrence, and like consensual sex deemed the responsibility of women: “The men in our village weren’t saints. We had our incidents. Rape, ruin, shame. The women’s strategy was to stick together. Stragglers, beware” (Mukherjee 55). Though she expresses a passive expectation, even a justification, of sexual violence here, the next sentence reveals her intention to defend herself: “That morning I thought, Let it come. Let him pounce. I had the staff” (Mukherjee 55). These statements are rhetorically provocative, issued like a challenge and thereby resonant of the deluded indestructibility experienced by Lourdes in her police uniform. In both cases, anticipation and a large phallic weapon give these women an unparalleled sense of security. The language Mukherjee employs to portray the rabid dog’s attack is highly sexualized, providing an analogous description of rape in place of the missing scene of violation that takes place later on: “First I saw only the head. A pink-skinned, nearly hairless, twitching head. The head thrust itself through the bush, brambles stuck deep in its bleeding jowls” (Mukherjee 56). And if the reader needed to be further convinced, Mukherjee makes the connection between Jasmine’s view of her

rapist's "monstrously erect" penis explicit by additionally characterizing the dog head as "bloodied and monstrous" (Mukherjee 115; 56). Jasmine's self-defense immediately controverts her professed fatalism and her defeat of the dog is construed as a simultaneous defeat of Dida, a woman who embodies and loudly voices traditional Indian ideology, making this event a dual victory over oppressive Hindu patriarchy.

Jasmine's apparent exertion of a greater degree of pre-rape agency than her younger and Cuban counterparts may be due to the more explicit penalties for social transgression in Indian societies. Her bildungsroman begins in a village demarcated by unrelenting and often fatal hostility towards Indian women. In addition to being socially defined as a "curse" and "burden," she and her peers are labeled and treated as intellectually inferior: "we are brought up to be caring and have no minds of our own. Village girls are like cattle; whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go" (Mukherjee 46). Jasmine never accepts this branding, but instead puts her energies into her studies, the results of which are so impressive as to earn her three extra years of schooling. When presented with the opportunity for marriage to a wealthy "once-in-a-lifetime bridegroom," no minor prospect as it would secure her from the threat of poverty that has loomed over her life, she rejects it without hesitation. In spite of constant derision by family and neighbors, Jasmine grasps on to the educational opportunities procured for her by the sacrifices of her mother and mentor, and dares to voice her dream of becoming something more than a stenographer to the patriarch of her family: "I didn't pull my hands out of Pitaji's palms as I said, 'I want to be a doctor and set up my own clinic in a big town'," (Mukherjee 51). Though the deaths of her teacher and father become obstacles to her continued education, she persists in learning as much English as

she can by borrowing books and listening to snippets of radio programs. It is during this temporary lull of intellectual activity that Jasmine first pays serious attention to the possibility of marriage. Her independent nature continues to manifest even when preoccupied with courtship; contrary to social expectations of female passivity in the marital process, she interprets marriage as a choice and both selects and pursues the man of her liking. Jasmine's decision to marry at all serves as rebellious optimism in the face of the astrologer's prediction that such a union is in keeping with her condemned fate. While choosing a somewhat traditional lifestyle, Jasmine nevertheless is daring to make a choice: "Within a cultural context that privileges arranged marriages, Jyoti's romance, that she has engineered, can indeed be seen not only as nontraditional but also as a subversive tactic against the established cultural norm" (Leard).

Unfortunately, with her marriage to Prakash, Jasmine's dreams of independent professional pursuits come to an anticlimactic end. Once married, she appears satisfied with having a progressive, English-speaking husband, as these qualities signify "want[ing] more than you had been given at birth" (Mukherjee 68). This union appears to reconcile her to the domestic sphere, yet Mukherjee's heroine insists that she "*liked* doing chores," defending herself in anticipation of Western patriarchal trivialization of "women's work" (Mukherjee 47). One of the things she "finds to do" while her husband works and studies his way to a career brings her outside the scope of traditional feminine occupations; she accompanies a friend on her sales route, earning a commission that she then keeps secret from Prakash. Though her affection for her husband often borders on worship, she is instinctively wary of revealing her income to him, as his controlling behavior undermines his progressive ideals. Prakash "want[s] to break down the Jyoti

[she'd] been in Hasnapur and make [her] a new kind of city woman"; in thus attempting to shape Jasmine's identity, he "exerts a more subtle form of patriarchal control, disguised as benevolence and demanding her active complicity" (Mukherjee 77; Ruppel 396). For the most part, they do not enjoy an egalitarian relationship; Prakash constantly (and often unfairly) mocks her "feudal" behavior and she in turn offers no response. The "turning point" in their marriage comes when he discovers Jasmine reading his technical manuals and deems her worthy of helping him work on electronics. Possessed of a shared aspiration, joint ownership of an electronics store in America, it now appears possible for Jasmine to realize a fulfilling subjectivity within her marriage. However, shortly after this transition, Jasmine's hopes are deferred by her husband's death. In her widowhood, Jasmine finally adopts the fatalistic outlook and self-hatred put forward by Hindu patriarchy. Though she follows through with her dream of traveling to America, she does so with the intention of taking her life. Ironically, the incident that disrupts this course, prompting her to once again take up her quest for autonomy, is her brutal rape.

Perhaps the most oft-quoted lines of Mukherjee's *Jasmine* are her heroine's provocative assertion that "[t]here are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams" (29). In context, these words are spoken by a now nearly assimilated American "Jane," who has experienced a multitude of violent incidents, including several attempts on her life. However, the determining crisis in her life, and the only event that incites Jasmine to enact the destructive power encapsulated by these words, is her rape by the immigrant smuggler Half-Face: "Occurring at the exact center of the novel, Jasmine's rape signals a crucial moment in her successive transformations and in the formation of her ethics of

survival” (Ruppel 399). Up until this moment, her “awakenings” have been imposed, and her shift from Jyoti to Jasmine a mimicry of “the passive ‘transformation’ of the Indian women who trail after ambitious husbands seeking economic and educational riches . . . in the States” (Carter-Sanborn 587). Upon entering the motel where this takes place, Jasmine has not only *not* murdered the passive and “feudal” Jyoti, but, owing to Prakash’s death, has revived those gendered Indian traditions that would relieve her of agency and life: “I kept up as slowly as I dared. What was fated to happen would happen. My mission, thank God, was nearly over” (Mukherjee 111). Though she offers a series of small resistances to Half-Face’s advances, her fatalistic attitude and status as an illegal immigrant function to convince her that these actions “only [delay] the inevitable, making it worse perhaps, more forced, more violent” (Mukherjee 116).

This rape scene has not infrequently been interpreted as a postcolonial collision, a symbolic initiation of the Other to imperial America, where a white man imposes his dominance on Jasmine’s third-world identity. From this perspective, Jasmine’s rape is a personally meaningless foreshadowing of cultural inscriptions to come. However, even if one were to concede the overly simplistic argument that “Mukherjee’s text does in fact ‘allegorize’ psychological violence and the representation of male and female empirical violence,” they would still have to recognize the critical, and more importantly *subversive*, differences between this “rape as allegory” and those traditionally authored by men (Carter-Sanborn 584). Though Jasmine’s identity as an Indian woman clearly plays a fundamental role in Half-Face’s perception of her as rapable subject, his refusal to recognize her ties to another man amounts to a negation of her body as the site of male competition. Once again we see the magnitude of “who is telling the story” on the

reader's experience. Jasmine-as-narrator controls what aspects of her rape are focused on and what details are omitted. As with the other novels in this project, the focus of the rape scene is directed outward from the victim. The imperialistic, racist dialogue of Half-Face, related by Jasmine, only serves to further villainize him and highlight his ignorance of the culture the reader has already seen first-hand: "Look, just don't fuck with me. I been to Asia and it's the armpit of the universe Don't tell me you ever *seen* a television set" (Mukherjee 112). Set in the midst of Jasmine's eloquent narration, Half-Face's faulty English suggests intellectual inferiority. Also, while simply calling her attacker "Half-Face" reduces him to his physical appearance, which is consistently explained in the least favorable of terms, Jasmine goes one step further in dehumanizing him; as she, and through her the reader, looks at Half-Face's naked body, she declares, "For the first time in my life I understood what evil was about. It was about *not being human*. Half-Face was from an underworld of evil" (Mukherjee 116; emphasis mine). This revelation marks Jasmine's transition to the realm of the supernatural. The absence of her body from the rape scene signifies not only the author's denunciation of voyeurism, but also the fact that she has at this point left the human realm and her body. Here Jasmine employs her editorial imagination to rewrite what is happening in reality as mythology, an encounter between a "monster" and "hero" (Mukherjee 114). Because her actual rape takes place in a liminal space, the readers are denied their expected spectatorship and must recall her violent encounter with the rabid dog instead, instantaneously reminding us of Jasmine's strength in self-defense.

Jasmine's creative revenge fantasy has consequences in reality as well. As critic John Hoppe argues, "Jasmine's subjectivity is not 'erased' by the act of rape, but rather

[Jasmine] enters new and empowering subjective possibilities.” In her prior experiences with Indian and American cultures, her desire for belonging and the ostensible polarity of these identities caused her to shuttle back-and-forth. After being raped, these delineations become blurred, and, when confronted with her obscured countenance in the bathroom mirror (a visual blending of her “dark” image and the steam from her “Western shower”), she arrests the singular suicidal mindset of Jyoti and contemplates her individual wants: “Until [that] moment . . . I had not thought of any conclusion but the obvious one: to balance my defilement with my death . . . It was the murkiness of the mirror and a sudden sense of mission that stopped me. What if my mission was not yet over?” (117). Haunted by the vileness and cruelty of Half-Face, Jasmine is unable to attain the sense of spiritual fulfillment she expected to accompany the sacrificing of her life, causing her to look for satisfaction elsewhere. Rejecting the gendered subjectivities that both cultures offer to mortal women, she appropriates the power of Kali, goddess of death and destruction, for her own vengeful purposes: “Instead of killing herself and passively conforming to an identity politics that would define her solely as victim, she decides instead to kill her attacker” (Ruppel 399). By mocking her mission and robbing her of bodily control, Half-Face has inadvertently empowered Jasmine, awakening in her a will to survive. Abha Prakash Leard sums up:

Her brutal rape . . . signals the sudden awakening of Jasmine's ‘sense of mission’ (117). Refusing to ‘balance [her] defilement with [her] death’ (117), a traditional ending for most rape victims in orthodox Indian society, Jasmine, infused with the destructive energy of the goddess Kali,

murders the man who symbolizes the ‘underworld of evil’ (116) and begins a new ‘journey, traveling light’ (121). (116)

Jasmine’s post-rape negotiation of subjectivity is likewise demarcated by the give and take of agency in an inflexible social context. Restored with the conviction that she does not want to die, she begins to search for what she *does* want out of life. Her personal development resembles that of Lourdes in that she too feels newly empowered to accept and reject a range of possible subjectivities in her quest for a satisfying fit. Jasmine’s self-modification also relies on dissociation from the past and rewriting of the present, though her editorial agency is figured through a series of rhetorical and behavioral “rebirthings.” The use of reincarnation as a trope for her metamorphoses illuminates her desire for simultaneity; while on the surface it may seem that Jasmine “makes fleeing her past (India, her family, her fate, even her names) a virtue,” she does not, as Lourdes does, go to great lengths to renounce her femininity and ethnicity, but rather seeks a multiculturalism that will attain a favorable reception: “I can honestly say that all I wanted was to serve, to be allowed to join, but I have created confusion and destruction wherever I go” (Hoppe 139; Mukherjee 215). Her transitions from one self to another are not intended as attempted escapes, but as autonomous decisions based on “an intuitive rubric for knowing ‘what I don’t want to become,’” (Carter-Sanborn 586). Unfortunately, because she seeks to transform self and not society, her efforts to find an acceptable hybridity fail. Despite Jasmine’s interpretation of this “confusion” as a personal failure, the detached narration and anecdotal evidence of Mukherjee’s text consistently point to the patriarchal and imperialistic underpinnings of society as the true source of her unhappiness. The America that was promised to her as a place “with new fates, new stars,

[where immigrants] could say or be anything [they] wanted,” turns out to be as backwards and violent as her community in Hasnapur (Mukherjee 85). The racist and sexist mythologies that her rapist tried to impose on her continue to haunt her travels, no matter the cultural dynamic of the space she occupies. That her heroine is disappointed in her pursuit of multiculturalism is not proof of Mukherjee’s disapproval of the ideologies behind it, as some critics have claimed, but of her disbelief that an intolerant patriarchy can sustain or meet the needs of multicultural persons.

Though Jasmine desperately wants to believe in, and keeps revisiting, the Hindu philosophy that “the body is merely the shell for the inner being's journey toward a more enlightened and empowered subjectivity,” she is constantly confronted by the reality that “the material self exists and is the site of oppression” (Leard 114). Jasmine’s first American experiences awaken her “immigrant consciousness” and force her into a realization that her body poses an automatic indicator of Otherness that she must work to neutralize or disguise. Whereas Lourdes’ efforts at passing are the product of ambition and socialized bigotry, Jasmine first pursues Americanization as a means of hiding her unlawful standing. Jasmine acknowledges her commonalities with other immigrants, speaks of their struggles as shared, and even tries to reach out to Others like her, but also comes to see that independence and dissociation are necessary to survival. Lillian Gordon, her earliest American mentor, has created a kind of educational haven for immigrant women and gives “Jazzy” her first lessons in how to dress, “talk and walk” like an “American.” Through this performance, Jasmine experiences an empowered gendered subjectivity that she is loath to relinquish for the duration of her story. However, she is forced to do just this in her next place of residence. In the same way that

Lourdes was thrust into a devalued and impoverished Cuban subculture upon her arrival in America, Jasmine's "American" connections turn out to be a part of an Indian microcosm, complete with a hierarchy "specialized as to language, religion, caste, and profession [so that they] did not need to fraternize with anyone but other Punjabi-speaking Hindu Jats" (Mukherjee 146). Under the patronage of Professorji, Jasmine once again assumes the lowly position of Indian widow, a condition she no longer considers "good enough": ". . . I had accustomed myself to American clothes. American clothes disguised my widowhood. In a t-shirt and cords, I was taken for a student. In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like" (Mukherjee 143; 145). Within this enclosure, Indian womanhood signifies a loss of the autonomy that Jasmine has sacrificed for and, unwilling and unable to regress to her pre-rape complacency, she suffers depression. Like Lourdes, she discovers that a submersion in the past triggers an unhealthy relationship with her body in the form of self-hatred and eating disorders. Because Jasmine cannot erase or disguise her race, her relationship to clothing, or the "American" uniform, becomes vital to her assimilation and happiness. Upon escaping this confining sect, she begins to experiment with her appearance and sexuality in ways she finds personally liberating, but her experiments are met with both censure and unwanted attention from those who consider her foreign.

Unlike Lourdes, who, after being raped, determines to establish herself completely independent of men, each of Jasmine's nuanced subjectivities comes with a "husband." The greater freedom of movement and privacy allotted to her as an American is too often counterbalanced by the spectacle her Indian womanhood creates in a white

patriarchy. Jasmine still finds herself frequently subjected to the male gaze through family and strangers alike. When living as a caregiver in New York for the child of Taylor and Wylie Hayes, Jasmine acknowledges the vulnerability of her alien position and senses she is being watched in a predatory manner by “men in shops along Broadway, the doormen and the street vendors and the repairmen who knew [she] was a day mummy and fundamentally helpless, or at least available” (Mukherjee 187). She soon comes to realize that her otherwise happy, comfortable life as “Jase” facilitates this weakness; thinking about her daily activities in the park, she asserts, “I’m very exposed, I’m alone all day . . . I remembered Wylie’s Stuart having observed me for months, and suddenly I felt filthy, having been observed, tracked” (Mukherjee 189). Unwilling to once again sacrifice her sense of liberty, even for the rewards of male companionship, she immediately leaves her lover and makeshift family in pursuit of another subjectivity. That male surveillance makes her uncomfortable is even more evident when she begins to question the intentions of her own family members. She reveals that the aftermath of her rape influences the strained dynamic between her and her adoptive son when she contemplates, “Du joins the ghosts of men. He is a phantom lover, he watches me; perhaps he has been watching every night, in his secret, inventive ways” (Mukherjee 30). She considers her relationship to him to be unnatural, both because she has come to expect and receive only sexual attention from men and because she never stops identifying as “illegal alien . . . murderer . . . rape victim” (Mukherjee 224). Haunted daily by the idea “that a naked body was outside the door, waiting to rape again, perhaps to kill,” and a similar understanding that immigrant women continue to be “raped and raped and raped in boats and cars and motel rooms,” Jasmine is not possessed of the

psychological and physical liberties necessary to accomplishing more than survival (Mukherjee 175; 127).

The principal attestation to an empowered shift in Jasmine's subjectivity is the detached and often ironic narrative voice with which she relates her experiences. Because the title character occupies the dual position of protagonist and narrator, readers of *Jasmine* must rely entirely upon her construction of events. Even without the added credence afforded autobiographical figures, Mukherjee's protagonist makes for a compelling narrator due to the apparent honesty and perspicuity of her self-reflexive insights. In talking of the identities she has left behind and the ones she currently occupies, Jasmine concedes that they are performances of race and gender rather than absolutes: "Plain Jane is a role, like any other" (Mukherjee 26). Recognizing that she must pick her battles and still holding out for the rewards of compliance, her critical narration is sometimes her only means of challenging the expectations placed on her Othered body. Though her nontraditional sexual intimacies with men themselves constitute a small rebellion against Hasnapuri standards of Indian womanhood, her behavior within these relationships does little to contradict the Westernized lens with which she is regarded. Perhaps the best example of her willingness to play the part of hypersexual exotic, the stereotype most frequently projected on her, are her bedroom performances as "Jane," when she shifts from "caregiver to temptress, and [tries] to do it convincingly, walking differently, frowning, smiling . . ." (Mukherjee 36). Jasmine not only admits to knowingly taking on these roles, but also claims them as a source of personal fulfillment: "I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute,

fearful” (Mukherjee 71). Because cultural ignorance is most often expressed to her by harmless or beloved persons, she often resists the impulse to correct or yields to self-censorship: “I have to be careful about nearly everything I say” (Mukherjee 16). Such submissions are to a degree counteracted by her internal criticism, and even mockery, of racist assumptions and the persons and institutions that uphold them. When watching a show on INS raids, Jasmine mentally indicts the illogical views represented, thinking, “What kind of crazy connection are you trying to make between Mexicans and car payments? Who’s the victim here?” (Mukherjee 27). Rhetorical questions such as these are frequently posed to her assumed Western audience, along with ironic interpretations of what it means to be “American” and the disparity between that privileged position and her own. These critical challenges are effective for the intended audience, but have little consequence in the reality she faces, leaving her unfulfilled and still searching at the end of her narrative.

What Jasmine’s failed negotiations reveal is the impossibility of realizing oneself in a culture that devalues that person’s sexuality and ethnicity. As a woman of color, Mukherjee, like the other authors discussed in this study, is malcontent with the traditional feminist supposition that sexual victimization can be appropriated “as a unifying issue for feminism” (Horeck 29). Mukherjee’s examination of the potential for women’s solidarity is even more comprehensive than the previous three narratives, but comes to the same conclusion. When Jasmine looks beyond those who share her dual marginalization she finds only hostility and condescension. Many of the white women she encounters have appropriated the distancing lens that constructs her as hypersexual, maternal, and submissive. The constant male attention she receives causes potential

friends to regard her with jealousy and suspicion. For instance, Karin accuses her of purposely seducing Bud for money and forcing him to impregnate her: “And I suppose you never asked, ‘Are you a married man?’ You just batted your big black eyes and told him how wonderful he was, didn’t you?” (Mukherjee 204). In the waiting room of a fertility clinic, another American woman, jealous of Jasmine’s pregnancy, makes a disparaging generalization about her “hips,” implicitly dredging up racist biological myths about third world women as breeders. Though less offensive, Jasmine’s conversations with her white female employer, Wylie, are marked by humorous but critical cultural misunderstandings. Wylie’s conjectures about what she has been through and how she feels are depicted as attempted demonstrations of understanding and acceptance, but they make Jasmine uncomfortable and serve to emphasize the disparities between them.

Conversely, she identifies Lillian Gordon’s underground railroad for immigrants as the “best in the American experience and in the American character” (Mukherjee 137). Lillian creates a supportive welfare community free from presumptions and interrogations. She teaches her tenants the knowledge and skills they need for an independent and decent living without asking for a conversion or story. Unfortunately, the training being conducted is in preparation for adversity, leaving no room for emotional bonding or release. Lillian has become desensitized to the hardships faced by Jasmine and her peers and warns them to do the same: “She had a low tolerance for reminiscence, bitterness or nostalgia If I had said, ‘He raped me,’ she certainly would have squinted sympathetically, then said, ‘You’re not the first and you won’t be the last. Will you be needing an abortion?’” (Mukherjee 131). Even Jasmine’s best

chance for aid cannot provide the kinds of mental and emotional support necessary to deal with the trauma she has undergone. With a singular focus on survival, upward mobility or thriving are not even conceived of as possibilities by the members of this underground organization. An illegal and thereby constantly endangered establishment, Lillian's outfit can do nothing to diminish the threat of rape, the threat of violence, or alter the minds of people "scared of immigrants and positively hostile to illegals" (Mukherjee 137). Mukherjee explores these failed opportunities for solidarity for the purpose of illuminating the macrocosmic ineffectuality of a sisterhood conceived out of and existing within an oppressive patriarchal context. While rape compels the survivors to think of their commonalities with other women, it only serves to highlight their shared vulnerabilities and not their shared strengths. For Jasmine, "awakening" translates into persistent fear of attack and redefinition of self as vulnerable alien. None of the potential support networks she encounters eliminate the continued threat of violence or diminish the feelings of vulnerability under which she operates. In the absence of such a resolution, Mukherjee's novel resonates with her protagonist's charge against the world: "Cowards! . . . We know you are there! Please help us!" (Mukherjee 56).

Jasmine's personal fate ends on an ambiguous note, with "hope" and "pain" presented as inextricable and as equal likelihoods. At the end of the novel she is pregnant, with "a whole new universe float[ing] inside" her (Mukherjee 235). As in the case of Maya, the introduction of a new life is representative of a new chance for a positive subjectivity in relation to others. In the last few pages, she explicitly self-identifies as a survivor and determines to move forward with a take-on-the-world attitude. However, because her story concludes with her looking towards and questioning the future, it is

clear that neither the position she is leaving behind nor the step she is taking immediately are entirely satisfactory. Jasmine defines her final choice of the novel--by no means a finalizing of her life--as one “between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness,” dichotomous options that have already proven too constraining for her fluid multicultural sense of self (Mukherjee 240). She clearly expresses that she is not returning to her former lover Taylor, her life with him, and her role as “Jase”; rather, she is simply “going somewhere” and Taylor is the chance facilitator of that progression. Her past identities are ghosts, “dead” but still haunting and shaping her present sense of self. Thus, while Jasmine continues to rebirth herself, she does so at “the cost of self-knowledge, [and] a stable identity” (Hoppe 140). Moreover, by continuing to acknowledge Karin’s charge that she is a “tornado . . . leaving a path of destruction behind [her]” as a subjective possibility, Jasmine has clearly not overcome her propensity towards self-blame. Her roles as victim and perpetrator of violence have become inextricable in her mind and so she never feels deserving of sympathy. Constantly thwarted from intimacy with her acquaintances by her perceived differences, Jasmine never finds relief from the isolation of being a violated immigrant woman. As such, she is also the only one of these four victims to never break the silence surrounding her rape.

Conclusion

My personal experiences with rape (and yes, they are multiple) have revealed to me first-hand the destructive capacity of the act on women's sense of self. The extensive research I conducted for this project further illuminated for me that both the frequency and the silencing of rape are far more pervasive in contemporary American society than most citizens are willing to admit. As a literary scholar, I believe in the power of discourse to influence social structures and relations. My special interest in gender studies encouraged me to become familiar with the discourses surrounding sexual violence, especially those that perpetuate victim blame and other rape myths. Being aware of Higgins and Silver's assertion *Rape and Representation*, "who gets to tell the story and whose story counts as 'truth' determine the definition of what rape is," I decided to look at accounts of rape written by women of color in order to answer the questions accompanying this acknowledgment: "Do women who write of rape . . . find a way out of the representational double binds confronting those women who attempt to escape their entrapment in the patriarchal story? Do women of color within the United States or 'third world' women, who have addressed the taboo subject more often and more openly, offer subversive perspectives?" (1; 4). After examining four contemporary rape narratives, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Jasmine*, my answers are respectively "no" and "yes." Neither the authors nor their partially autobiographical protagonists delineate a permanent or public means of challenging their oppression; all subversive behavior is relegated to internalized fantasies or necessarily concealed criminal acts. However, the texts themselves offer a multitude of subversive possibilities.

Because the rape victims in these novels are also the central (or one of a few central) voice(s) through which their victimization is told, they manage to retain their subjectivities in spite of the rapist's attempt to render them inconsequential and invisible. This does not, however, mean that the victim's sense of self is not damaged by the rapist's inscription of inferiority. Conversely, the act of rape not only harms these women physically, but greatly exacerbates the "sense of powerlessness that the victim experiences daily within a hegemonic culture that defines her body as the source of her Otherness" (Tanner 115). Still, rather than afford readers the advantage of detached observation, the authors of these rape narratives force them to experience this powerlessness first-hand. All four works fall under the emerging category of rape literature that "attaches the reader to the victim's tortured body, subverting the scopophilic gaze of the reader by turning it inward to focus on the victim's pain . . . [thus] denying the reader the freedom to observe the victim of violence from behind the wall of aesthetic convention" (Stockton 13). In this disempowered state readers are compelled to identify with the victim and to consider the horrors and consequences of rape from the uncomfortable position of one undergoing them. Furthermore, the heroines are all self-aware persons who analyze the "minute and relentless surveillance" they are subjected to under patriarchal rule, thereby challenging the traditional dynamics of "femininity as spectacle" (Bartky 26; 34). Just as the authors deny the power of spectatorship to their readers, the characters turn this captive audience's attention towards the spectators in the novel--the "normative" men and women who typically enjoy the privileges of invisibility and passing judgment are suddenly themselves the subject of unfavorable scrutiny. With the readership fully sympathetic to the victim, those who dismiss, mistreat, stereotype,

and harm them, even under the sanction of common ideologies, are villainized by their own actions. Likewise, readers who have themselves participated in the kinds of behaviors and discourses that enable the violation, degradation, and silencing of rape victims are forced into a recognition of this recrimination.

These narratives are also revolutionary in their challenging of traditional feminist discourses. Immersed in the perspective of the victim, readers are exposed to another taboo but essential facet of the rape experience: the role of the imaginary. Given their cultural limitations, what resistance we did see in these characters, most vividly during the rape and in its aftermath, manifested in their fantasies. Bone, Maya, Lourdes, and Jasmine each rewrote their experience of sexual trauma, often appropriating violence as a means of taking back the control that was wrested from them by their rapists. It is important not to dismiss or conceal this internal sphere of resistance, as it provides otherwise unattainable insights to the victim's desires and limitations. Laura Di Prete identifies the exploration of such rape fantasies as necessary to realizing the objectives of women-centered rape narratives:

In complicating the relationship between the space of the mind and reality (and portraying the two realms as fluid and permeable), corporeal trauma narratives . . . use figuration simultaneously to open a window into the damaged psyche and to expose and denounce the dangers to the body of certain cultural and social contexts. (18)

In each of these narratives, the protagonist encounters such pervasive and persistent hostility that even the ostensible safe haven of her mind becomes tainted by inculcated

self-loathing. Though some of these women experience a temporary empowerment through imagination, they do so by denying or erasing the gendered and racialized facets of their identity. Thereby, none of them can rely on this defensive strategy as a means of altering the oppressive reality they face.

The novels of Allison, Angelou, García, and Mukherjee further dissociate themselves from traditional masculinist *and* feminist discourses in that they reject the notion of rape as the product of originary gender and race relations. Rather than interpret sexual “violence as a self-explanatory first cause and endo[w] it with an invulnerable and terrifying facticity which stymies our ability to challenge and demystify rape,” these writers recognize and highlight the causal link between illogical and often contradictory stereotypes and the continued prevalence of rape against women of color (Horeck 8). Because they are in dual marginalized and stigmatized positions prior to being violated, the protagonists discussed here experience their subjectivity as undesirable from the beginning. All four protagonists are raised to equate femaleness with restraint, weakness, and deficiency; in response, each heroine imaginatively rewrites herself as male. For Bone and Maya, the added pain of facing a constant barrage of racial discrimination and subjugation at the hands of elite whites leads them to both hate and painfully aspire to whiteness. Lourdes and Jasmine, non-natives to America, are racialized as foreigners and consequently try to mask their Otherness by appropriating American culture. Thus made vulnerable by social prejudice and self-hatred, the experience of sexual victimization and its aftermath are exacerbated for these figures, and the persons they can look to for help are virtually nonexistent. These feminist works reveal that “racial subordination and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing” forces, compellingly making the case that

feminism can only be effective if it “oppose[s] racism and misogyny simultaneously” (Moorti 62).

In each case, the greatest obstacle to the victim’s recovery is the absence of a true support system. Gendered discourse constructs male and female as oppositional categories, a social distancing which causes the victims to reject even familial men as potential aids. Likewise, racist discourse prevents the women of these narratives from forming interracial bonds. Even women of the same race, as we saw in *Bastard* and *Caged Bird*, or women who share an Othered subjectivity, as we saw in *Dreaming* and *Jasmine*, avoid intimacy with rape victims because of the discourse of shame accompanying it. Collectively, these novels demonstrate that, in a hostile patriarchal context, rape is not, as some feminists claim, a unifying issue. Instead, the stigmatizing language inherent to such a rigid hierarchy is so potent that members will enact self-hatred and self-denial before aligning with socially undesirable subjectivities.

Thereby the preserved and resumed silences of the rape victims in these novels are constructed as the failure of society and not of the individual. Isolated by their marginalized status, these women have no viable options for communicating their experience. Jasmine, recognizing that such a revelation would at best be met with pity or apathy, and at worst result in censure and further ostracization, never seriously considers disclosure a possibility. Divided from her living family by the political context of her rape, Lourdes’ single conversation about the violation takes place in the realm of the fantastical, when the ghost of her father, a figure representative of her own subconscious, tries, rather ineffectually, to comfort her. Denied the privacy accompanying adulthood, Bone and Maya are the only two characters to speak about their rape before a real

audience and do so only because they are forced into their confessions. Having publicized their victimization, these children find themselves further alienated from society, a source of shame for their closest family members and under threat of retaliation and additional violence. Thus experiencing speaking out as comparable to, or even worse than, the rape itself, both characters again immerse themselves in the apparent safety of silence.

The erasure of the victim's voice, a process mutually constituted by the victim and her community, has paradoxically enabled sexual violence to become highly visible in contemporary American media and thus "so ingrained and so rationalized through their representations as to appear 'natural' and inevitable, to women as to men" (Higgins 2). One has only to look at rape portrayals on television and in film, two mediums rapidly surpassing literature in popularity and pervasiveness, to see that, in the struggle for representation, rape victims are on the losing end. *The Accused*, released to theaters in 1988, contains "one of the most watched rape scenes in cinematic history" and is frequently appropriated by feminists as a positive woman-centered depiction (Horeck 93). However, the chapter-long assessment of *The Accused* in Tanya Horeck's *Public Rape* provides many disturbing insights to its cultural messages: loosely based on the widely publicized New Bedford "Big Dan's" rape case, this film Anglicizes the victim (whose real-life counterpart was Portuguese), makes the reality of the event dependent on the authority of male witnesses, and enables the audience to repeatedly witness the graphic gang rape of a woman from behind an aesthetic shield of blamelessness. In her dissertation *See Jane Cry*, Jennifer Hritz offers a similar evaluation of *The General's Daughter* (1999), which she identifies as an equally voyeuristic and sensationalized rape picture.

More recently, the films *Troy* (2004) and *A History of Violence* (2005) depict sexual violence in a manner that perpetuates the myth that women secretly want to be raped. *Troy*, a modern adaptation of *The Iliad*, stays true to its referent by portraying female characters as nothing more than male property and as the prizes of war. Perhaps it is this seeming attempt at historical authenticity that has resulted in the surprising absence of controversy or even discussion of this movie's multiple graphic rape scenes. In fact, few persons have even identified *as* rape the scene in which the beloved Achilles, played by iconic Brad Pitt, subdues the initially resistant (and even homicidal) Briseis by lying on top of her, because in relinquishing her weapon, it appears that his sexual attention was what she desired all along. Viewers are likely to be even more confused by the similar conflation of sex and rape in *A History of Violence*. Upon discovering that her husband Tom was a former hit man for the mob, Edie Stall tries to flee and violently resist his pursuit up a flight of stairs, only to suddenly change her mind and return his sexual advances, transforming what was seconds ago a brutal and frightening attack on a woman to a near pornographic sex show. This pattern of making a hero out of a rapist and transforming scenes of violence into scenes of intimacy is no longer the monopoly of romance novels; examples of "normative" sexual violence can currently be found in all forms of media entertainment.

Even when the act of rape is not being romanticized, and victims are ostensibly encouraged to "speak out" against sexual violence in "serious" public forums, the victim's perspective and objectives are elided by the continued emphasis on entertainment for profit. Fans of the popular television series *Law & Order: SVU* might extol the show for putting rape and rape victims in the spotlight. However, this show also

reproduces rape myths such as the notions that women provoke rape, or cry “rape” for vengeful purposes, and that only insane and marginal members of society will perpetrate sexual violence. Feminist Lauren Benatti additionally points out that “[b]y presenting sexual assault from a purely legal standpoint, this show silences victims as well as important truths about the motivations and consequences of sexual assault” (1). On talk shows and news broadcasts where “real” survivors voice their experiences, they are limited to two equally unfavorable representations, erotic or villainous, a distinction usually dependent upon the victim’s racial and economic status. In spite of the public outcry following the 1983 “Big Dan’s” gang rape (re-enacted in *The Accused*), the Portuguese-American victim was both wrongfully appropriated as a desirable young white female by the Anglo-American media, and, like Maya, cast by her actual racial community as the rapist herself and indicted for the indecency and provocation of her location, dress, sexuality, and pre-rape behaviors. The 1989 high-profile rape case involving “the Central Park jogger,” Trisha Meili, a white woman literally rendered silent by a crushed skull and brain damage, was discussed in almost exclusively racial terms because her attackers were black and Hispanic. Her story of violation got lost in a race war, her identity reduced to a trope in the media frenzy to restore the “white beauty . . . black beast” mythology (Sielke 2). Significantly, the story of a rape “involving the near decapitation of a black woman” a week later was largely ignored (Sielke 2). What is perhaps currently the most publicized rape case nationwide is the 2006 incident involving the Duke lacrosse team. Long before the North Carolina Attorney General dropped the charges against the Duke athletes, accuser Crystal Magnum (who continues to assert her victimization), a single, working-class black woman, was subjected to the worst kinds of

discursive interrogation and degradation imaginable. Like the documented racist and sexist epithets thrown at her by the Duke men, these media descriptions capitalized on her position as a minority sex worker, characterizing her as inferior, promiscuous, untrustworthy, and deserving of violence. In each of these instances, the media ignores what the women themselves say, concentrating instead on the derogatory statements made about the women. The publicization of rape is indeed a “second rape,” in that the victim must continue to struggle for ownership over her subjectivity in the face of powerful and hostile opposition.

As delineated by Horeck, rape and its representation are ultimately “battle[s] over the ownership of meaning and of reality” (13). Confronted with the above contemporary portrayals of sexual violence, all of which claim authenticity, women’s best hope for interrogating and critiquing the damaging myths and structures underlying them lies with women-centered counternarratives like those of Allison, Angelou, García, and Mukherjee. These novels not only challenge the racist and sexist discourses that enable violence against women, but also the ostensibly feminist discourses that see making rape public as the quick and easy solution. Certainly these authors, as women of color who have historically been denied a public voice, recognize the importance of having one; their books are testimony to this awareness. More importantly, they recognize that speaking out is futile without a receptive audience. Simply acknowledging that America is a “culture of rape” does not change the reality of it. Women today are constantly bombarded with prohibitive messages: “*don’t* walk alone at night,” “*don’t* wear provocative clothing,” “*don’t* go unescorted into disreputable places,” “*don’t* roll down your window,” “*don’t* drink, smoke, or participate in other ‘unladylike’ behaviors,” and

“*don’t* make eye contact with strangers.” The understood consequence of ignoring any one of these directives is that you are *asking* to be violated. Given the severity of these limitations, is it really so preposterous to juxtapose American women with those living under purdah? I would argue no, adding the caveat that, as we saw in *Jasmine*, there are certainly consequences unique to *physical* curtains. Otherwise, fear imposed in this patriarchy accomplishes control over females comparable to that exacted in those patriarchies we like to deem less civilized.

Less than a year ago another friend came to me with her tale of rape; I listened to her, shared with her, and sympathized with her, but sadly I did not, could not, advise her to report it. As a feminist, I understand the reasons to report rape: the possibilities of personal healing, more accurate rape statistics, greater awareness of the problem, leading by example, seeing justice done, and stopping repeat offenders--though “54% of all rape prosecutions end in either dismissal or acquittal” and convicted rapists “spend an average of less than 11 months behind bars”(Sexual Assault Statistics). However, after witnessing the psychological, emotional, and legal ordeal of my friend in 2006, and when asking myself whether I would be willing to undergo a similar process, I can come up with infinitely more reasons not to make a report. Most of these reasons are recognized and articulated by the authors of the contemporary literature examined here. Their protagonists remain mute but their stories speak volumes about the social attitudes that stifle their voices. They warn us against preemptively declaring victory over rape. Unless American society can relinquish the devastating discourses of oppression, rape victims and their stories will continue to fade into silence.

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND BREAKING THE SILENCE: RACE, GENDER, AND SURVIVOR SUBJECTIVITIES IN FEMINIST RAPE NARRATIVES BY CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WOMEN OF COLOR

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Rape in the United States is hugely problematic, with current studies estimating that “one out of every six American women have been the victims of an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime” (RAINN). Unfortunately, very few historical or contemporary rape narratives examine rape as a social phenomenon, allow the victims to voice their experiences, or see breaking the silence as a first, and not a final, step towards challenging the occurrence of sexual violence. Of the feminist rape literature that does accomplish this, I examine the novels *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison (1992), *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (1969), *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina García (1992) and *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee (1989). Collectively these books represent a contemporary challenge to current ignorance about rape.