

**Politics, Aesthetics and Diverse Sexualities**  
**in the work of**  
**James Baldwin, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison**

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I, Kathryn Judith Sussman, declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. All material quoted from other sources has been accurately acknowledged and cited according to the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*, Third edition.

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis investigates the ways in which James Baldwin, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison's fictional portrayals of forms of love, eroticism and sexuality that are excluded or prohibited by social norms, destabilise heteronormativity as the only legitimate option for non-harmful and pleasurable sensual and sexual expression. It aims to situate Baldwin, Walker and Morrison in a continuum of African American authors, beginning with Harlem Renaissance writer Bruce Nugent – the first African American writer to openly explore the relationship between homosexuality and Blackness – that have examined the intertwining issues of transgressive sexuality and race in increasingly explicit ways. By highlighting the ways in which Baldwin, Walker and Morrison decentre heteronormativity, the project aims to uncover how their novels expose the systems of power and knowledge by which racial forms of oppression are maintained, thereby debunking both the notion of Black “authenticity” and Black sexual stereotypes. Finally, the project hopes to show how the process of “queering” heteronormativity in these ways effectively serves to legitimise all forms of love, eroticism and sexuality that are non-harmful, opening up a new trajectory for contemporary twentieth-century authors who delve into these themes.

**Theoretical Approach:** The thesis will argue for a queer reading of Baldwin, Walker and Morrison's novels that underscores the writers' treatment of sexuality as a discursive construct. Specifically, this theoretical perspective looks to their legitimisation of alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality that are non-harmful – a process that, in each case, serves to counteract and denaturalise White heteronormativity as the only rightful option for sexual desire and practice. Through this approach, the thesis strives to reveal how by working to legitimise such taboo expressions, these writers deconstruct the idea of the “other” as aberrant, thus calling attention to the specific political and moral systems by which love, eroticism and sexuality are judged in the modern Western world.

**Chapter Break Down:** Chapters one and two of the project situate my argument in the context of critical earlier American writing encompassing canonical fiction, including political protest and African American folklorist novels, political polemics, Puritan captivity narratives, slave narratives, political essays, and experimentalist fiction. Together, these chapters provide a detailed overview of discourses surrounding sexuality, considering what is socially determined to be sexually “perverse” as a shifting concept, the meaning of which changes in tandem with changes in social and historical context. They also extensively analyse Black cultural specificity, examining both the sociological genesis of Black sexual stereotypes that led in part to the justification of the modern slave trade and the subsequent impact of slavery on African American sexual practices. In chapter three, the literary

analysis begins with a consideration of the broadened possibilities of sexual acceptability Baldwin puts forth in his anti-protest style of fiction, by examining relationships between characters that do not fit conventional racial or sexual stereotypes, their social contexts, and the narrative perspectives employed by the author. Chapter four examines how Walker's work carries forward Baldwin's ideas, by further opening up the spectrum of socially acceptable forms of love, eroticism and sexuality through her presentation of an even wider array of erotically transgressive characters, and her effort to write about them during sustained periods of American conservatism. In chapter five, I examine how Morrison complicates the traditional understanding of what constitutes legitimate sexuality by infusing positive elements into sensual and sexual acts that appear to be nothing other than violent, illegal or psychologically regressive, thereby exposing the impact of social and historical context on the individual, further emphasising the changing and discursive nature of sexuality. The thesis finally argues that Baldwin, Walker and Morrison's particular depictions of alternative sexuality roll back into a bigger idea of human experience that claims as necessary a re-thinking of social norms based on ethical considerations, rather than arbitrary social codes of morality that lead to both racial and sexual discrimination. Their novels thus ultimately involve us in human issues of justice and responsibility beyond the boundaries of race and sexuality.

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We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know that we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain")

## **Pernicious Black Stereotypes:**

### **The Impact of Slavery on African American Sexuality**

Race has become metaphorical – a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was. (Morrison, *Playing* 63)

Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are there not to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretense. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound when there is distance. They are an invention, a pretense that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken or are not allowed. (hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* 170)

In the work of James Baldwin, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, portrayals of love, eroticism and sexuality that are excluded or prohibited by social norms destabilise heteronormativity as the only legitimate social option for sexual desire and expression. These depictions effectively work to combat two forms of social oppression: racial and sexual.<sup>1</sup> The authors, each in their own unique ways, achieve this outcome in no small part by dispelling pernicious Black sexual stereotypes. In order to understand how their novels work in this capacity, it is first necessary to explicitly identify these destructive typecasts and to consider both their origins and their continuing propagation and development over time up until the present day.<sup>2</sup> To do so, it is of paramount importance to consider both the historical account of Blackness

as an evil and inferior oppositional force to Whiteness, and the subsequent effect this Black/White bifurcation had on the justification and legitimisation of the modern slave trade: the cataclysmic phenomenon that had a profound effect, among other things, on Black sexual practices – the social and economic after-effects of which continue to the present day. This chapter will be able to do no more than scratch the surface of the socio-political context in which Black sexual stereotypes have historically flourished. In doing so, however, it will demonstrate why the work of modern and contemporary African American writers such as Baldwin, Walker and Morrison, with their particular social histories, has so effectively been able to challenge the social and political systems that have determined what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices.

The most powerful and enduring Black stereotypes are chronicled throughout canonical American novels, from the first early literary successes in the form to the most recent contemporary fiction – a reflection of how deeply the deadly Black/White bifurcation is embedded into American culture itself. I will argue that as they span the literature, these stereotypes that present Blacks as racially inferior beings can ultimately be reduced to one of two constructions: Black subservience and Black beastliness. This thesis will concern itself with those depictions that relate either directly or indirectly to the sexual branding of African Americans as they fill these destructive racial categories.

Edgar Allan Poe's 1838 sea-voyage adventure novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, – a story that Morrison refers to as being written “during the formative years of the nation's literature” – depicts the classic image of the Black Savage, the stereotype that perhaps most notoriously embodies the myth of Black racial inferiority (*Playing* 33). This foundational stereotype has been around since the first White encounters with native populations: a

construction that for literary purposes in Poe's novel serves as the necessary foil for White purity and religious superiority. These sentiments are made most apparent at the end of the story, when the protagonist Pym, his fellow traveller Dirk Peters, and one of the Black Savages held hostage by the other two men, encounter a pure White angelic figure representative of the narrator's providential protection (Kennedy xii). Poe's depiction of the Black cook on board the ship *The Grampus* is that of the most evil of the murderous mutineers. He describes the cook as "a perfect demon" whose limbs are "of Herculean mould" (38). Pym details: "His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain a human shape. His arms, as well as legs were *bowed* in the most singular manner, and appeared to possess no flexibility whatever. His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown (like the head of most negroes) . . ." (38). Such a non-human description, however, seems mild in comparison to Pym's later animalistic descriptions of the Black Savages who inhabit the island of Tsalal, a population discovered by the sea voyagers while travelling on board the ship *The Jane Guy*. Pym describes these Savages as having "a jet black" complexion "with thick and long woolly hair" (131). The majority of them are "entirely naked" while the rest are "clothed in skins of an unknown black animal, shaggy and silky" (139, 131). The Savages live in conditions that Pym relates as "of the most miserable description imaginable, and unlike those of even the lowest savage races with which mankind are acquainted" (137). They are described as having "a degree of ignorance" for which the sea voyagers are unprepared (133). They also have "a deeply-laid plan for [the voyagers'] destruction" and prove themselves to be "among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe" (145). Not only do they attempt to murder all of the voyagers, but in addition they "[make] no efforts at assisting one another" when the White men begin killing them in retaliation for their attacks (157). In

*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison argues that such representations of Blacks historically functioned as “a dark and abiding presence” in American literature through which “the imagination could play, through which historical, moral, metaphysical, and social fears, problems, and dichotomies could be articulated” (33, 37). In this instance, Poe’s descriptions of Blacks not only illuminate the founding White colonial beliefs responsible for the development of subsequent Black sexual stereotypes that presume their evil, non-human, violent and dirty nature – in other words, Black beastliness – but they also highlight the beliefs responsible for the development of subsequent Black sexual stereotypes that presume their simple or ignorant nature – in other words, their Black subservience. Thus, Poe’s novel works to cement both myths into the fabric of American literature. In the process, his work solidifies what Morrison describes as “the image of reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness,” what she also refers to as the “Africanist persona”: a presentation that is at hand in much subsequent American literature and has helped to distinguish what she terms “a proto-American literature” (*Playing* 38-39).

Four pivotal Black stereotypes which are grounded in this classic image of the Black Savage are the Black Beast Rapist, the Jezebel, the Uncle Tom, and the Mammy. Richard Wright’s novel *Native Son*, although written as a form of political resistance (in distinct contrast to Poe who appears to endorse the Black mythology he writes about), provides the quintessential example of the Black Beast Rapist stereotype: a characterisation that Baldwin famously denounced in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” for being disconcertingly similar to the unrealistic and over-simplified portraits of Blacks found in White social protest fiction (*Notes* 17).<sup>3</sup> This Black Beast Rapist branding first emerged during the post-emancipation Jim Crow segregation era in order to keep intact the fear of Black male sexuality, considered during slavery to be a

great risk to White womanhood. While Wright's novel is by no means the first literary work to present it, the text most effectively encapsulates the image of the "hypersexual" Black man.<sup>4</sup>

Wright portrays the protagonist Bigger Thomas as an angry, violent and depraved product of his racist society. In the author's epilogue to the novel, entitled "How 'Bigger' Was Born," he describes his protagonist as "a hot and whirling vortex of undisciplined and unchannelized impulses"; "a dispossessed and disinherited man" (445, 446). In the opening scene of the novel, the narrator describes Bigger's satisfaction at squashing and killing a rat in his family's apartment:

Bigger aimed and let the skillet fly with a heavy grunt. There was a shattering of wood as the box caved in. The woman screamed and hid her face in her hands. Bigger tiptoed forward and peered.

'I got 'im,' he muttered, his clenched teeth bared in a smile. (6)

This moment of animalistic pleasure taken from an act of murderous violence serves to foreshadow the much more horrific episode that is to follow throughout the course of the narrative: Bigger's accidental murder of his White employer's daughter, Mary Dalton. Bigger is a man who as a result of his fear of the White power that surrounds him, accidentally ends up smothering the White Mary to death after sneaking her into her bedroom and taking sexual advantage of her; Bigger kisses Mary's lips and fondles her breasts while she is in a drunken stupor (84-86). Although Mary's murder is entirely accidental, it leads to a downward spiral of heinous criminal activity. In an attempt to destroy any evidence against him, Bigger hacks Mary's body up into pieces and incinerates them in the family furnace. Wright describes the horrendous crime in vivid detail: "Gently, he sawed the blade into the flesh and struck a bone. He gritted his teeth and cut harder. . . . He whacked at the bone with the knife. The head hung limply on the newspapers, the curly black hair dragging about in blood. He whacked harder, but the head would not come off" (92). Bigger's actions thus fix him into the role he has already

been pre-destined by his racist society to fulfil: hypersexual, violent animal, the literal embodiment of Black beastliness. Later, when Bigger is finally captured by the authorities, he is not only accused and convicted of Mary's murder, but also unjustly accused of her rape. The Black Beast Rapist stereotype, as exemplified by Bigger, is a tool that has historically been used to justify racism directed at Black men. Its function, as Patricia Collins puts it, has historically been to reify the belief that "the public needed protection from African American men . . . whose excessive booty calls placed society at risk" (166). The stereotype serves to further enhance the widespread fear of Black men by portraying them as unregulated and uncontrollable sexual criminals.

Playing off a less obvious aspect of the Black savage construct is Willa Cather's depiction of the simple girl Nancy in her novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, published the same year as *Native Son*. Cather's depiction of Nancy introduces the reader to what Morrison describes as "the sexual availability of Black females" (*Playing* 23). As Diane Roberts points out, it is one version of the Jezebel stereotype; that is the image of the Black female as one that "entices" and "is to be used, penetrated, had, impregnated" (2). This stereotype originally formed as a result of the nude "display" of female African slaves on the auction block (Collins 128). Nancy is described by Cather's narrator as a "yellow girl" with "slender, nimble hands, so flexible that one would say there were no hard bones in them at all," and "a pretty face" (17, 18). Not only is Nancy more physically desirable than the other women to all of the men in the novel, and in particular to her slave master Mr. Henry and his nephew Martin, as Morrison points out, due to her lighter skin tone privilege, she is also characterised as powerless, childishly naïve and unwaveringly devoted to the Whites that surround her (*Playing* 23). Mr. Henry notes, "Even when she was scarcely more than a child, he had felt her eagerness to please him" (Cather 67).

He thinks to himself: “Never before had anyone divined all his little whims and preferences, and been eager to gratify them. And it was for love, from dutiful affection. She had nothing to gain beyond the pleasure of seeing him pleased” (193). Nancy’s submissiveness, ignorance and sexual desirability culminate in Cather’s climatic cherry tree scene in which an oblivious Nancy fails to recognise the threat of her attempted rape when her slave master’s nephew Martin approaches her while she happily plays amongst the cherry tree tops, picking and eating ripe cherries. Despite Martin’s earlier sexual advances, Nancy is incapable of recognising that he poses a risk to her. As Martin tries to “coax” her down from the tree, the narrator explains Nancy’s thoughts, “She somehow didn’t feel scared of him as he stood down there, with his head thrown back. His eyes were clear . . . and jolly. He didn’t look wicked. Maybe he only meant to tease her anyhow . . .” (179). Morrison surmises that Nancy is “a cipher, a perfect victim,” because even if she is captured and harmed, her lowly Black status prevents any threat of persecution for the perpetrator of crimes against her (*Playing* 24). In this way, Cather has succeeded in pigeonholing her character into the trite stereotype of the sexually-available and subservient Black female through a combination of Nancy’s own ignorant choices and the distorted perceptions of her by those around her. Morrison refers to such Black characterisations as “bizarre and disturbing deformations of reality” (*Playing* 23). Although Cather does avoid depicting Nancy as “hypersexual” and promiscuous, as many other canonical works choose to do in their misrepresentations of young, attractive Black women, her construction nonetheless propagates racism directed at Black women by its objectification of the female Black body. Furthermore, the stereotype of the obtuse, and therefore accidental, sexually-available Black woman perpetuates the perception of Black female mental inferiority and justifies their status as inferior social subjects.

Two remaining classic Black labels, also less obvious in their linkage to the image of the Black Savage construct insofar as they deliberately struggle to sanitise or obliterate Black sexuality rather than exploit it, include the iconic stereotypes of Uncle Tom and Mammy, first and most famously established in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These stereotypes do not invoke the violent, dirty, and barbaric aspects of the Savage prototype, but instead rely on the ignorant aspect of the Savage construct to convey the story's political message. The protagonist, Uncle Tom, must be "unearthly" in his "humility" to make up for his physical deficiency, which has led to the coinage of the Uncle Tom idiom to refer to a desexualised Black man who is entirely subservient to White authority and who is willing to betray other Blacks for personal advancement (Turner 405). In Stowe's novel, Tom is described as the slave master's "best hand" and "the hero" of the story (26). The narrator asserts: "He was a large, broad-chested, powerfully made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindness and benevolence. There was something about his whole air self-respecting and dignified, yet united with a confiding and humble simplicity" (26). Tom is a man who in proper deference to White authority "[looks] with a respectful, admiring air" at his "young teacher," his master's very young son, who is teaching Tom how to write (26). Tom is also described as "a patriarch in religious matters" with a "simple, hearty, sincere style" of evocation (35). His deference highlights his submissive nature, the effects of which feminise him, cancelling out his claim to conventional nineteenth century American White heteronormative masculine character traits. This lack of what is perceived to be "masculine" characteristics calls into question his male identity as he appears to be "inappropriately weak" (Collins 179). Tom is consequently viewed by the reader more as a pet or child than as a man.

Stowe's infamous Mammy stereotype is a product of her construction of Tom's wife in the novel, Aunt Chloe. Chloe is in every way Tom's female equivalent. As Roberts describes, this Mammy image "typifies the mythic Old South of benign slavery, grace and abundance" (1). She is "'pure African,' with none of the ambivalence that mixed blood would carry" (Roberts 176). The narrator describes how "A round, black, shining face is hers, so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with white of eggs, like one of her own tea rusks. Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under her well-starched checked turban" (24). Stowe's sanitised portrait of her is as a hygienic and well-polished house servant, known to "shake her fat sides with honest pride and merriment" (25). She is also a woman in control of her domain, always giving orders to the people that surround her in an effort to organise their lives. The reader gets a taste for this controlling aspect of her personality as she prepares supper one night. She orders: "Here you, Mose and Pete! Get out de way, you niggers! Get away, Mericky, honey, - mammy'll give her baby somefin, by and by. Now, Mas'r George, you jest take off dem books, and set down now with my old man, and I'll take up de sausages, and have de first griddle full of cakes on your plates in less dan no time" (27). Chloe's chubby, clean appearance and no-nonsense, jolly disposition underscore her asexual, nurturing nature – she is polite, unsophisticated, and as devoted to her White masters as is her husband, with the added quality of having the necessary deference to her husband. While Stowe does not entirely desexualise Aunt Chloe, as the author presents her as a married woman and mother, she is most certainly not described in sexually appealing terms. Her sexuality, rather, is "safely contained to domestic space," and plays a non-existent role throughout the course of the novel (Collins 140). The novel's deliberate avoidance of addressing Chloe's sexual nature or potential appeal coupled with her "inappropriately strong" personality as determined by these

conventional nineteenth century American White heteronormative measures, in terms no more uncertain than it feminises Black men, propagates the pejorative stereotype of the desexualised, even “masculinised” Black woman (Collins 179). Ultimately, Stowe’s depiction of Chloe as a Black Mammy results not only in the denial of her femininity, but in her overall disempowerment. She is a “safe” and unthreatening Black woman, content to remain within the status quo as Tom’s wife and her slave master’s head cook (Collins 142). Desexualisation is the price that both Tom and Chloe must pay for the benefits that accompany subservience. While Chloe and Tom’s ignorance functions as a replacement for the “hypersexual,” violent and dirty aspects of the Black Savage, this quality ultimately proves to be equally, if not more, harmful and derogatory inasmuch as it serves as an even more effective tool used to justify racism, by implying Black mental inferiority. Tom and Chloe are ignorant and have no pride, but they are too simple to recognise their collusion in their own oppression.

There is no quantifiable way in which to measure the impact that these racist and enduring depictions of Blacks have had on Blacks themselves, yet understanding the historical and sociological genesis and development of these forms of discrimination can help to explain why the current social condition of Black Americans differs so drastically from other cultural groups, and speaks to African American writers’ incentive to undercut these very stereotypes in their work. To understand their power and pervasiveness in American representations of race and how scholars such as Morrison have come to interpret them, it is necessary to keep in mind the historical black/white bifurcation which extends far beyond American race relations.<sup>5</sup> Winthrop A. Jordan points out that before the sixteenth century, definitions of blackness as put forth by *The Oxford English Dictionary* included the following explanations: “Deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul. . . . Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving

death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister. . . . Foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked. . . . Indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment, etc” (7). He summarises: “White and black connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil, God and the devil” (7). Sander Gilman’s research draws attention to how these associations carried forth well into the nineteenth-century and that during this pathologising era of sexuality and race, there was furthermore a “commonplace . . . association of blackness and madness” (*Difference and Pathology* 140). He explains how it was at this time that the “ugly” face perceived to be a kind of deformity as determined by facial lines and angles that more closely resembled other higher anthropoids, came to be synonymous with the African face, with the “unerotic,” and that such perceived physiological “deformities” were “virtually always associated with notions of moral difference” (*Picturing Health and Illness* 83-84, 90, 81). Gilman emphasises: “The equation of beauty with health and ugliness with illness is fundamental in the Western understanding of the body. Its powerful racist potential has permeated the works of even the most ‘liberal’ writers and thinkers. Racial differences were understood as differences in character . . .” (93). Thus, such polarisations of whiteness and blackness granted White Western cultures the justification necessary to “other” Black people themselves in much the same way that Edward Saïd has discussed the Western “othering” of the East. As Roberts points out, “America’s racial representations were built on reinventions of European racial representations where *blackness* was a sign of lasciviousness and excess. When Europeans enslaved Africans, blackness came to mean not only easy sexuality but laziness, bestiality, savagery and violence . . .,” and these representations were significantly exacerbated in the United States by the onslaught of the modern slave trade (4). For this reason, it is of paramount importance to consider the historical and continuing impact of slavery on African American culture, and specifically its

impact on Black sexuality in order to gain an understanding of why the current social condition of Black Americans differs so drastically from other cultural groups, and how this phenomenon speaks to African American writers' incentive to employ sexuality as a means to undercut these very stereotypes in their work.

John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss explain that "It is not possible to give an accurate figure of the number of slaves imported into the New World from Africa" (41). They do, however, put forth estimates ranging from R. R. Kuczynski's 1936 total of 14,650,000, to Philip D. Curtin's more conservative 1969 estimate of 9,566,100 (41). Franklin and Moss are careful to point out that these figures do not include "the great numbers that must have been killed while resisting capture, the additional numbers that died during the middle passage" or the measured effects "of such an activity on African life" (41). Needless to say, the devastating effects of the modern slave trade – what Franklin and Moss refer to as "one of the most far-reaching and drastic social revolutions in the annals of history" – continue to have a crucial social and economic impact on every country affected by the phenomenon (41).

This race-based form of slavery, the primary purpose of which was to secure manual labour for the development of the New World, was "monolithic, invariant, servile, chattel-like, focused on compulsory labor, maintained by violence, and suffused with brute sexuality" (214). This vital difference in slave status for the New World slave – a difference that underscores a distinction between the slave as human and the slave as non-human – is the principal factor responsible for the continuing racial and economic inequality between Black and White Americans from slavery to the present day. As Beth Day points out, "In . . . other societies throughout human history, slaves have come and gone, appearing as captured people and then happily disappearing into the mainstream of society later, by virtue of manumission, buying their

freedom, or serving the required term of bondage. Once out of slavery the ex-slave was a free man” (21). The non-human status of American slaves, in contrast, prevented the possibility of losing the stigma of prior servitude. Black skin, therefore, continues to be an immediate indicator of a specific social history and, as a result, has meant that the ability to live life free from racial discrimination, with an equal status to Whites, has not been possible for Black Americans even after emancipation. As Roberts puts it, “The black body in white America bears the marks both of desire and disgust” (9). She argues that it has become “invested with so many anxieties: pollution, violence, sexuality, primitivism” (9).

The fact that Black Africans were specifically targeted by White slave-traders for servitude prompts us to reflect on a number of issues, among them, to what extent the White/Black bifurcation contributed to the creation of the first racist perceptions of the African Black as non-human, and therefore inferior, and the subsequent use of this perception as a justification for the consolidation and legitimisation of the modern slave trade. Collins suggests, “Through colonial eyes, the stigma of biological Blackness and the seeming primitiveness of African cultures marked the borders of extreme abnormality” (120). She argues that it was a combination of these two factors that caused the White colonial association of West African people with apes (12). At the heart of these prejudicial associations of Black people with animals was a generalised fear of the unknown coupled with a widespread ignorance of foreign cultural customs. Jordan argues that this White perception of Black people as animalistic developed over time, beginning with what he describes as the “powerful metaphor” used by Englishmen in the early seventeenth century to assert their own difference from Black people: describing Africans as “bestial” or “beastly,” despite their “[knowing] perfectly well” that Africans were in fact men

(28). He contends that this White metaphor was the consequence of slave traders' concurrent introduction to what they viewed as the "savage" behaviour, in terms of the diet, sexual practices, and warfare practices of Africans, and their first encounter with anthropoid apes who appeared to them to be physically strikingly similar to humans, were viewed as highly sexual in nature, and were connected with blackness and the devil by scholars such as Edward Topsell (29-30).<sup>6</sup> Day believes that this "beast mythology was a rationale developed by the apologists for the slave system, for religious and political reasons," but that it is possible that later, once slave owners "became seduced by their own oratory" they literally began to believe the powerful myth (36). She highlights that the perceived differences between Whites and Africans, namely differences in skin tone, physical features, and language, all served to justify this perception of Africans as animals (35). The inability of many Africans to understand each other, as they were kidnapped and sold from numerous different tribes, furthermore contributed to this myth, as they were thought to be incapable of higher language skills (Day 35). It was differences such as these that led to the White justification of slaves as creatures more akin to working animals, such as cows or horses, than other human beings (35).

The powerful myth of the sexual links between Blacks and animals, both the idea that Blacks were "hypersexual" like apes and the idea that Blacks and apes had sexual unions with each other, according to Jordan, provided a White rationalisation for the racist sentiment that Blacks "were a lewd, lascivious, and wanton people" (32). Consequently, a series of racist associations began to form identifying Blacks with anti-Christian, and therefore immoral, "savage" conduct.<sup>7</sup> Roberts explains that "blackness equalled sexuality and sexuality was, in all senses, *black*. Black bodies inhabited the 'low,' socially, economically and, in white society, spiritually. In the hierarchy of purity to pollution, blackness was dirt. The black body was

signified, like Bakhtin's grotesque, by its protuberances and orifices: mouths, breasts (for Mammy), belly, genitals" (156). These connotations of Blackness as indicative of immorality and filth served to assuage White male guilt over their inhumane and abusive treatment of Black slaves. As Robert Staples and Leonor Boulin Johnson argue, "The attitudes of most slave owners toward the slaves was that they were property, a commodity to be bought and sold" (74). This viewpoint provided the justification for the slave owners' sexual appropriation of their slaves as studs, breeders, concubines and prostitutes.<sup>8</sup>

The use of Black males as "studs" undoubtedly contributed to the continuing sexual commoditisation of Black men's bodies still prevalent in the United States today. However, it was the lynchings that took place throughout Reconstruction that most profoundly served to solidify the myths of Black male promiscuity, violence and "hypersexuality" in the eyes of its White audience. As Day points out, hatred and fear of Black men "flowered into sexual paranoia" during this period as a means to keep White racial and economic supremacy intact (67). It was this paranoia that repeatedly led to the lynchings which were spectacles carried out under the guise of protecting White womanhood, but which in reality were voyeuristic and sadistic acts on the part of the White men who undertook them. As Day explains, "Voyeurism was... part and parcel of lynchings and floggings. The victim, as often had been true on the slave auction block, was frequently obliged to strip naked so that the lynchers or floggers could obtain the visual stimulation (or envy?) of the sight of black genitals" (70). Although lynching was a reflection of the violent sexual desires of White men, and was, of course, in no way indicative of Black sexual desires, its existence nonetheless served to magnify and propagate these sexual myths about Black men. Similarly, the propensity of Black females to be used as breeders, concubines and prostitutes both during and after slavery fuelled the continuing sexual stereotypes

that assume their inherent promiscuity and “hypersexuality.”<sup>9</sup> These myths were magnified during Reconstruction when the wholesale prostitution of Black females turned into a generalised system of commercial prostitution, a transformation that served to continue Black female exploitation after slavery, right up until the present, and lies at the core of the myth that assumes Black women to be “whores” (Day 139, 121-23). The exploitive and abusive historical uses of Black females, coupled with the Victorian racialist physiognomy which made the case that Black women had “more highly developed sexual organs than whites,” are together responsible for the prevalence of the sexual myths about Black women that have endured from slavery to the present day, and lay the foundation for the creation and continued propagation of the widespread and prolific Black sexual stereotypes under discussion in this thesis that formed as a result of this mistreatment (Roberts 5, Staples and Johnson 82). The constructions, with which Baldwin, Walker and Morrison engage, therefore, span more than four centuries of development and perseverance.

The consequences of such racial stereotyping have been profoundly far-reaching. After emancipation, treatment as social equals was impossible for Blacks due to racial branding, while discrimination prevented them from making significant economic gains (Day 30, 83). The fact of this continuing economic discrimination was compounded by the lack of job opportunities for middle-class workers, shop-keepers, and artisans – positions that were already taken up at the end of the Civil War by White European immigrants (Day 83). Franklin and Moss explain, “Because the federal government failed to give blacks much land, they slowly returned to the farms and resumed work under circumstances scarcely more favourable than those prevailing before the war” (232). In the United States, skin tone had symbolically become the indicator of social status, with black skin marking the bottom rung of the social hierarchy. This injustice

contributed to the proliferation of existing pejorative stereotypes about Blacks and to the formation of a plethora of newer constructions that were offshoots of the subservient and bestial stereotypes of chattel slavery that arose at the close of the Civil War.

It is one of the purposes of this thesis to explore, through Baldwin, Walker and Morrison's fiction, the character and function of these enduring stereotypes as they have evolved over the centuries, most specifically those images rooted in the branding of Blacks as "hypersexual," sexually violent, and promiscuous, and the impact these stereotypes had and continue to have on African Americans. These post-Civil Rights era Black writers are in the unique position of being able to challenge such enduring derogatory myths by freely articulating the destructive consequences such sexual stereotypes have had on African Americans. The primary reason for this is that the image of the "hypersexual" Black subject has been used to underscore the perception of the Black American as an atavistic and animalistic form of life: a myth that serves to continue the justification of social and economic inequality. Despite the multiple difficulties involved in discussing the Black Diaspora as a singular and unified phenomenon, a practice that can potentially result in the continued propagation of such labels, it remains necessary to examine the links between the iconography of the Black American slave and Black sexual stereotypes. This study is critical to an informed understanding of African American writers' depictions of diverse erotic and sexual practices and norms within African American communities. It is only through an analysis of the genealogy of these insidious myths that we can begin to understand the prevalence of practices such as bisexuality, incest, group sex, erotic familial desire and voyeurism in African American literature. It is my contention that many of the forms of love, eroticism and sexuality discussed by these authors not only serve to

disabuse the reader of forms of racial and sexual discrimination, but are also crucial to an informed understanding of modern African American culture. For Baldwin, Morrison and Walker, alternative sexual desires and practices have arisen in large part as a result of alternate customs or necessary survival strategies that have come about for their characters as a result of both segregation and oppression. They are acts not to be ashamed of or apologised for, and are not a result of biological difference to Whites, or an “authentically Black” subjectivity (Collins 152).

The concept of “authentic Blackness” – the idea that Blackness is a natural, pre-ordained and fixed category – circulates among both Black and non-Black populations and is used as a measure by which to judge an individual’s membership in this particular racial group. It is an essentialist concept that is, ironically, derived from constructed, stereotypical images of Blackness. These images, bell hooks argues, were originally put in place by White supremacists in order “to uphold and affirm their notions of racial superiority, their political imperialism, their will to dominate and enslave” (*Black Looks* 2).<sup>10</sup> Today, ideas about what constitutes Black “authenticity” are used by both Blacks and non-Blacks, to propagate pejorative images of Black people and, in other cases, to claim or appropriate positive aspects of Black identity. The concept was first extensively critiqued by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in 1983 in “The ‘Blackness of Blackness’: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey” in which he controversially debunks the idea of Blackness as a natural and fixed way of being, understanding it instead as “a function of its signifiers” (722). “In literature,” he notes, “blackness is *produced* in the text only through a complex process of signification. There can be no transcendent blackness, for it cannot and does not exist beyond manifestations of it in specific figures” (721-22). Paul Gilroy, in his

later 1993 work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, provides a similar critique with his thesis that identities are unstable and ever-shifting. He concludes, that they “are always unfinished, always being remade” (xi). Another prominent critic of the concept is Stuart Hall, who destabilises the notion of “authentic blackness” by pointing out how notions of authenticity are based on stereotypes that “[reduce] people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” in “an attempt to halt the inevitable ‘slide’ of meaning, to secure discursive or ideological ‘closure’” (*Representation* 257, 245). More recent critiques include Martin J. Favor’s 1999 work *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* in which he argues that race itself is “a performative, tractable, and malleable category . . . rather than a deterministic, essentializing one,” and Collins’ 2004 work *Black Sexual Politics*, in which she uses the term to refer to those representations of Blackness that she believes have transformed themselves into “commonsense ‘truths’” for people worldwide (Favor 138, Collins 151).

The inherent danger behind the concept of “authentic Blackness” is that it alienates African Americans as intrinsically different from the rest of the population at large, thus laying the foundation for racism. This is because any use of the concept, whether positive or negative, confuses culture with biology. All of the practices and art forms, encompassing what are perceived to be both positive and negative aspects of Black American life, are ultimately phenomena that have arisen out of the culture that first appeared in the wake of segregation, impoverishment and oppression of this particular group. To examine any characteristic that has come to be represented as “authentically Black” without considering the historical impact that slavery has had in the creation of that characteristic is to discount the significant social, economic and political catalyst behind its creation. These traits are not the result of skin colour

or physiology, but rather the social by-products of fighting specific forms of socio-economic problems and racial oppression. As Gilroy explains, however, for many people racial identity has become a source of pride rather than shame, and for this reason the category of being Black has become firmly implanted in the American ethos and won't easily be given up. Raciology is defined by Gilroy as "the lore that brings the virtual realities of 'race' to dismal and destructive life" (*Between Camps* 11). Stanley Aronowitz argues that although the concept has been "discredited in its blatant, authoritarian manifestation," it lives on in the guise of pseudo-scientific claims that "the black body has biologically rooted attributes of superior strength, beauty and endurance" (28).

The notion of "authentic Blackness," thus continues to be used by both non-Blacks and Blacks as the tool that keeps intact, often unconsciously, racist Black stereotypes that justify the position of Black inferiority. This is because any concept of "authentic Blackness" cannot be accepted without its logical counterpart: "authentic Whiteness." These two concepts function as mirror images of one another insofar as they are equally responsible for supporting the very arguments that have historically served to justify the modern slave trade. It was these same arguments for racial difference, as Morrison notes, that led to depictions of Africanism as savagery and that created "a master narrative that spoke *for* Africans and their descendants, or *of* them" and "provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity" as other than, or oppositional to this Black identity (*Playing* 50, 44). Morrison describes Africanism as "the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny" (*Playing* 52). Melville's emblematic statement in *Benito*

*Cereno* well captures this bifurcation as it has historically been represented in American literature. The narrator, in reference to the nature of mulattos, states: “For it were strange, indeed, and not very creditable to us white-skins, if a little of our blood mixed with the African’s should, far from improving the latter’s quality, have the sad effect of pouring vitriolic acid into black broth; improving the hue, perhaps, but not the wholesomeness” (73). It is possible then, according to the narrator, to physically soften Blackness, but not to improve those negative and inferior qualities that are intrinsic to the African being. With these words, Melville encapsulates the extent of the hopeless and irreparable savagery the American self has come to identify with Blackness – a phenomenon that so strongly served to highlight the contrasting purity and civility of Whiteness. Thus, Melville’s work serves to highlight how the foundational aspects of White American identity have been historically bound up in the American perception of Blacks as different from, oppositional to, and most significantly, inferior to this identity.

It should be noted that the pejorative myths, so often represented in American literature, that comprise an “authentically Black” way of being are in many cases variations of negative stereotypes of impoverished people. Staples and Johnson maintain that “many of the ideas held about Black sexuality in particular are exaggerated versions of general attitudes toward the poor” (93). Against this background, they consider how “American society was founded on the Protestant ethic, which equated poverty with sinfulness, idleness, vice, and a belief that the poor are sexually indulgent” (93). Janice Perlman articulates that “because [the poor] lack the means to defend their own actions or image, the self-image of the rest of society can thus be constantly repurified” by stigmatising this group as deviant and perverse (259). Although, as D’Emilio and Freedman point out, sexuality has over the last two hundred years consistently moved into the marketplace and now pervades every aspect of American culture, the association between

perverse sexuality, “hypersexuality” and poverty remains. This link originated in the pronounced differences between the controlled sexual practices of “civilized” groups and the less censored practices of their “uncivilized” counterparts (358).

The continuing Black stereotypes that have existed since the beginning of the modern slave trade under the guise of representing “authentically” Black ways of being, in many cases based on this perception of a lack of “civility,” were reinforced in the initial stages of the Civil Rights Movement when collective Black identity was seen as a necessary and unifying force in opposition to Whiteness.<sup>11</sup> This “social identity,” as Tommie Shelby refers to it, was a central tenet of the movement’s platform to achieve equality (4). It is ironic that one of the ways in which Black people attempted to secure parity with their White counterparts – the way to prove, as Gilroy phrases it, “the general, universal, and transcendent” nature of humanity, which was the justification for the granting of equal rights – was to offer this collective front, presenting Blacks as socially, culturally, and politically homogeneous (*Against Race* 29). It served as a strategy that simultaneously marked African Americans as separate from Whites, but together with them as they fought to be treated as equals under the law. Although this premise denied the reality of Black American cultural diversity, it did allow for the group solidarity required to fight for the attainment of civil rights and in this regard had a positive impact on subsequent groups with a collective project, in particular feminist and LGBT organisations. Nevertheless, the negative effect of this denial of social, cultural, political and philosophical differences was the propagation of notions of those intrinsic “Black” American characteristics that have led to the development of American master narratives surrounding sexuality, including what it means to be “authentically Black.” Today, the contemporary Black sexual myths that rely on the concept of “authentic Blackness” for their survival and continued propagation are most readily dispersed

through media representations of stereotypically “Black” individuals. hooks’ observation that, “From slavery on, white supremacists have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination,” is, in light of this phenomenon, particularly salient (*Black Looks 2*). Collins argues that as a result of these media images, “some representations of Blackness become commonsense ‘truths’” (151). The creation of these Black sexual stereotypes is in large part due to what Janice M. Irvine refers to as, “The invisibility of Black people in sexology as subjects or researchers” (43). It is these very narratives that Baldwin, Walker and Morrison’s work dispel through their fictional presentations of love, eroticism and sexuality that reveal the reality and necessity of individual differentiation and how this differentiation can concurrently exist within the schema of Black political unity that works to fight racial injustice.<sup>12</sup>

In her study of intersectionality theory, Shirley A. Hill presents a wealth of sociological data in order to enable us to discriminate between culturally specific aspects of Black American life, thereby challenging the notion of a universal Black American experience:

I contend that the very success of the civil rights movement has exacerbated and brought to the fore class, race, and gender divisions among African Americans, rendering the image of a monolithic black population impossible to sustain in the postmodern era. That image has been permanently fractured by the demand of black women that gender oppression be addressed, the sharpening of class polarization, the rise of a new generation of artists and writers creating and glorifying black cultural expressions once deemed unacceptable by the old guard, and a surge in the number of interracial people and black immigrant groups – all of whom challenge the very meaning of blackness. The growing diversity of black people has resulted in disenchantment with the political leaders and organizations of the civil rights era, as well as more dissension over the definition, consequences, and solutions to racism. (4)

Rather than offering a singular and homogeneous Black American population to our critical contemplation, Hill’s analysis of the diversity of Black American political attitudes emphasises

the way “Race . . . falters as a unifying category of analysis in twenty-first-century postmodern America” (12). She goes on to stress that “the social significance of race varies based on colourism, (e.g., the intraracial status hierarchy based on skin tone) and has been further complicated by the growing number of inter-racial people who insist on claiming multiple ethnic heritages and by black immigrant groups who do not share the African American experience” (12). Her research supports A. Wade Boykin and Forrest Toms’ contention that African American culture is not the product of merely one, but rather of “three intersecting cultures – the mainstream, black, and minority cultures” (Hill 15). The brutal forms of abuse and discrimination directed at all putatively Black people during the Civil Rights era, however, compelled these notions of individual and cultural diversity to be put aside in order that the movement’s primary objective of attaining equal rights might be secured. Although Baldwin was writing during this turbulent period, and was a significant voice in the movement, his work, in the tradition of many of the Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Claude McKay and most notably Bruce Nugent, challenged the dominant image of a cohesive Black population through his characters’ individual representations of alternative sexual desire and expression. His emphasis on sexuality served as an assertion of individualism and helped to develop the foundation for subsequent Black American writers, such as Walker and Morrison, from which to further explore expressions of alternative sexual desires and practices.

The attention these writers bring to the philosophical debate as to whether race can function as a homogeneous or unifying category for its members, leads us to consider current arguments about how the concept of race is itself determined. Robin O. Andreasen, while rejecting old biological arguments for the construction of race, argues that race can in fact be determined by cladism as well as by social constructivist theories. Cladism is “a school of

classification that individuates taxa by appeal to common ancestry” (Andreasen S653). She states:

Contrary to popular belief, there *is* a biologically objective way to define race. Races can be defined in the way that cladistics determines its taxa, as sets of lineages that share a common origin. Moreover . . . the cladistic concept can coexist with a certain formulation of RC [Race Constructivism]; in fact, there is a sense in which these theories are complementary. (S655)

Such a position reflects recently revived scientific arguments for racial distinction based on biological difference. Gilroy explains that these arguments are not a throw-back to old arguments for race and racism. Rather, biological arguments for race such as cladism stress biological differences that are no longer based on visual indicators. They are much more complex, occurring at the cellular and molecular levels (*Between Camps* 47). Gilroy points out that the archaic visual methods of determining race have now been replaced by more detailed scientific and technological methods such as changing optic density and molecular biology (*Between Camps* 44). For this reason, he asserts that “The boundaries of ‘race’ have moved across the threshold of the skin” (*Between Camps* 47). These new methods of determining race biologically – methods that include nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy, positron emission tomography, and computerised tomography – have led to debates among scientists and scholars as to whether racial categories are in fact a viable way of determining human difference (*Between Camps* 47). For this reason, Gilroy, contrary to Andreasen, claims that “racial difference” cannot always be “readily correlated with complex genetic variation” (*Between Camps* 49). Instead, he believes current arguments for racial difference must be based solely on social factors.

Despite these new scientific developments that suggest cellular and molecular differentiation to be the solely reliable way of determining race biologically, and that are themselves contentious as to their viability as effective determinants of racial difference, racial

categories continue to have enormous impact on individual self-perception, particularly in the United States. The reason behind the persistence of these categories is both social and economic.

Hill explains:

Historically, racial designations of black or white were made with regularity and ease based on rules such as hypodescent (or the “one drop rule”) or, even more practically, on physical features. The racial classification system in the United States equated skin color with race, assumed racial purity by forcing people to identify with only one racial group, and created panethnic racial groups that subsume distinct ethnicities and ignore their differences. Dark skin automatically marked one as a racial minority, and should the skin color test fail, an interracial person with a white and a racial minority parent was legally classified as belonging to the race of the nonwhite parent. (26)

The status of belonging to the majority that Whiteness brings, with all of its social and economic privileges, helps to explain white colour preference. This belief that Whiteness is superior and/or that it brings racial advancement, furthermore, makes evident the reasons behind the historical practice of racial passing.<sup>13</sup>

Richard Dyer underscores the appeal of passing as White: that White is not seen as a race, but rather as the norm. He asserts that it “is something only applied to non-white peoples” and that “as long as white people are not racially seen and named [they] function as a human norm” (1).<sup>14</sup> Dyer argues that the ideological position that enables one to claim that one is “just being human” is the most powerful position possible because it implicitly contains within it “the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity” (2). He states that “raced people can’t do that – they can only speak for their race,” – a deficiency which he believes has had an enormous and negative impact on Black Americans “who are automatically ‘othered’ in their own society” (2). Dyer’s argument reinforces the idea that the driving force behind the desire to pass as White may very well be the desire to “not be raced” (2). Furthermore, the position of being a member of the cultural norm (in this case being “just human”) rather than a member of a racial minority, can lead one to be more likely to obtain social and material wealth. There are, after all, undeniable

social and material benefits to being White. As Dyer explains, “We have not yet reached a situation in which white people and white cultural agendas are no longer in the ascendant. The media, politics, education are still in the hands of white people, still speak for whites while claiming – and sometimes sincerely aiming to speak for humanity” (3).

Aside from those members of the Black community who are light-skinned enough to pass for White, many other Black individuals strive to be “Whiter” precisely as a strategy for economic advancement. As Staples and Johnson argue, Blacks who struggle to attain the capitalistic ideal of a nuclear American family may be endorsing an economic, as much as cultural, lifestyle (184). The “Black is Beautiful” campaign of the 1960’s sought to put an end to the practice of striving to be culturally “Whiter” by encouraging Blacks to collectively embrace their cultural and physical differences from other racial groups. The historical link between Whiteness and privilege, however, necessarily qualifies any belief system that suggests Blackness is equal to or superior to Whiteness, at least in terms of potential economic upward mobility. Many African Americans endorse White middle-class Judeo-Christian values as the primary means through which to attain economic security. Staples and Johnson assert: “the classic assimilation model assumes a direct link between upward socioeconomic mobility and adoption of American values, practices, and identity” (37). These values are based on White middle-class Judeo-Christian ideas of morality. They are clear to point out that this link has historically applied to European immigrants in addition to African Americans, a fact that was once used by scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier to challenge the argument for Black biological inferiority (38). This adoption of beliefs is not to suggest that the identification or repudiation of the core values of a particular ideology or belief system is a purely conscious or intentional process, but rather that the economic aspect of taking on specifically White middle-class Judeo-

Christian values is a tangible and often realised phenomenon, whether it applies to racial passing or a conscious or subconscious conformation to popular unjust views of what constitutes sexual practice. As Staples and Johnson point out, however,

challenging this model are the experiences of post-1965 Black immigrants from the West Indies, Africa, and Latin America. For these recent immigrants, Americanization does not necessarily lead to upward mobility. Some immigrants and their children become Americanized and do poorly, while others who retain strong ethnic identity achieve high socioeconomic status. (38)

Nevertheless, in the United States, economic advancement has historically been linked to the adoption of White belief systems for Blacks. Hill highlights that there has always been economic disparity amongst Blacks in North America. Many current affluent and middle-class Black Americans are the descendants of the first free Blacks on the continent, or are related to the slaves who functioned as house slaves, while many impoverished and working-class Blacks are the descendants of the first African field slaves (Hill 27-28).<sup>15</sup> House slaves were historically more likely to embody prevailing trends of opinion, values and practices of White society than were field slaves. They were often perceived to be aristocratic, with lighter skin-tone usually equalling greater privilege, and were looked to by many field slaves for ““a pattern of politeness and gentility”” (Hill 28).<sup>16</sup> As Hill explains, exposure to White households resulted in the accelerated assimilation of these Blacks into White culture (28). On the contrary, the descendants of field slaves, who formed the bulk of the poor and working-class Black population, were less likely to have continuous employment and were less susceptible to the influence of White values and social structures. Crucially, the social disparity between these different “castes” gradually made itself felt in a perceptible difference in values between impoverished, working-class and middle-class and/or affluent Blacks.

After slavery, one of the main criticisms that White middle-class Americans had of newly freed Blacks was, as Hill describes it, “that they were failing to embrace the respectable gender and family norms of the day” (30). Therefore, it became of the utmost importance for many Black Americans, particularly middle-class and affluent Blacks, to adopt the marital values of their White oppressors, and they soon began efforts to marry legally (Hill 30). This desire to effect a moral identification with White society, however, was less possible for impoverished and working-class Blacks who simply lacked the financial resources to sustain traditional nuclear families. Some scholars, such as Franklin and Moss, however, argue that from slavery onward, Blacks of all classes have “evinced their concern about the family unit” (3). They stress that the family has been and continues to be “one of the strongest and most important traditions in the black community” irrespective of social stratification, and that it was only after the 1960’s that this structure became significantly weakened (4). In her study of the history of African American marriages, Frances Smith Foster’s research supports this claim. She reminds us that “those who have created the picture of African American love and marriage that dominates the contemporary imagination” were not African Americans themselves, and that, “In spite of slavery and legal restrictions, and in spite of the stories we’ve been told, in African America mature men and women were expected to marry, and marriage was understood as the prerequisite to parenthood” (xii, xv). Foster underscores:

marriage was not illegal for all Americans of African descent because not all antebellum African Americans were enslaved. For enslaved African Americans, marriage was legally impossible because marriage was then as now a legal contract between human beings and by the law, slaves were chattel or property that, for particular legal purposes were defined as three-fifths human. Legally defined as partial people, they could not enter into legal contracts. But not all religions, not all slaveholders, and certainly not all enslaved African Americans agreed entirely with the law. And many slaves married. (5)

In fact, Foster emphasises that for many enslaved Blacks, marriage vows were meant “to last for as long as they lived – or beyond death,” and furthermore, “When they could not marry whom they chose under circumstances of their own choosing, some enslaved people chose not to marry at all” (26, 37). These facts suggest that the pressure to conform to White middle-class codes of respectability were in place not only after but during slavery for both the enslaved and the free, and therefore cut across both social and class boundaries.

As these conflicting points of view emphasise, there remains no settled scholarly consensus concerning the effects slavery has had and continues to have on Black families. Hill makes the case that after the Civil War, “at least for a significant minority of black women, the cultural and economic resources they had garnered during slavery, their sense of autonomy and independence, and the viable female-centered families they had formed led them to resist efforts to force them to marry” (53). Many Black women of all classes, she maintains, simply did not find married and domestic life desirable (17). Central to Hill’s analysis is the idea that Black family structures that differ from the two-parent mould are a choice and are not the result of the social or economic inability to achieve the White social standard (55). Instead, she believes these choices are determined by the cultural consequences of oppressive economic circumstances. Hill suggests that slavery initiated a work-family-gender system that prioritised the work roles of Black people and demanded that they transgress dominant conventions of family and morality, in ways that denied that there was a crucial link between marriage, sexuality, and childbearing (56). She argues that “slavery and racism demystified hegemonic marriage ideals, exposing their patriarchal and economic underpinnings and serving to disabuse African Americans of the belief that intimacy and family had to unfold within the confines of a legal marriage contract” (56).

Some scholars argue that another contributing factor to why Black Americans embraced family structures that differed from the heterosexual two-parent construction is that they formed families according to cultural traditions that date back to pre-colonial Africa and that were reinforced by the experience of slavery. Staples and Johnson explain that although marriage was at the centre of African “tribal” life, these unions were often instituted primarily for economic or other utilitarian reasons (1-2). Love was not of primary importance in many pre-colonial African marriage unions (Staples and Johnson 178). Consequently, acts such as premarital sex were often not stigmatised, and aspects of married life such as sexual exclusivity, highly valued in Western societies, were not always included in traditional African tribal unions (Staples and Johnson 180). Staples and Johnson remark that “the diversity of African cultures precludes any generalizations about African sexual behavior” (94). However, they also contend that there remains a “lack of religious strictures among Africans” concerning sexuality and that although “throughout Black Africa there is a concept of a supreme being and creator ... the supreme being issues no edicts concerning sexual morality” (95).

Hill argues the survival of Black culture itself depended to a significant degree upon the creation of such varieties of family life because traditional nuclear families were not a viable economic option for most African Americans (57). This acceptance of alternative family structures set a different familial standard for many Black Americans, which in turn led to greater sexual diversity than was allowed for by White Judeo-Christian social and legal codes of sexual permissibility. Charles V. Willie and Richard J. Reddick’s recent research on Black families describes one manifestation of this different familial standard as being a site in which equal power distribution is highly valued (98). This alternative familial practice incorporates “role exchange between family members” (106). It is an “egalitarian family model,” as they

refer to it, that therefore offers “a new contribution to society that has emerged largely from the black experience” (151). Furthermore, they argue, it serves to explain the high rate of family breakup among Blacks, as it is a pioneering new family formation (153).

The breakup of such revolutionising family formations coupled with both the inability and/or lack of desire to adhere to the dominant White-middle-class familial model and the fact that African Americans “are far less likely to ever marry than are their white counterparts,” has resulted in greater sexual diversity in Black communities (Hattery and Smith 44). Some of these diverse practices include sex out of wedlock, relationships that are not monogamous for both partners, promiscuity and “man sharing.” The term ‘man sharing’ first came about as part of the title of Audrey B. Chapman’s book *Man Sharing, Dilemma or Choice: A Radical New Way of Relating to the Men in Your Life*. The term is used to refer to the rising practice of more than one woman having a sexual and/or emotional relationship with the same Black man. Niara Sudarkasa attributes the practice to the surplus of Black women to Black men in the United States:

factors such as the higher birthrate of females compared to males, the earlier deaths of males, the migration of males in search of work, and the incarceration and execution of large numbers of black males during their prime reproductive years converged to cause a relative scarcity of men in relation to women in many black communities.

Some men [respond] to the realities of this unequal sex ratio by having serial marriages and/or common-law living arrangements with various women, consecutively. Other men remained legally monogamous while maintaining liaisons with other women. (177)

It is significant to note that economic disadvantages are clearly responsible for several of these factors, from gang-related deaths of young Black males to their search for work and the prevalence of their incarceration. James T. Patterson, in his 2010 sociological study of Black family life, underscores some of these startling discrepancies. He points out, “The poverty rate among blacks . . . is roughly three times that of non-Hispanic whites . . . and twice that of the

nation as a whole,” and furthermore, that “black children in 2008 were nine times more likely than white children to have a parent in prison” (208).

Michael W. Williams argues that the invention of concepts such as “man sharing” to describe these high rates of non-monogamous sex on the part of Black men are “attempt[s] to sanction the existence of some form[s] of polygyny in the black community” (172). It is useful to think about these aspects of culture in terms of Gayle Rubin’s theoretical reflections on the valuation of sex acts in the modern Western world. Rubin believes that the United States in particular appraises sex acts according to the hierarchical system of sexual value, “the erotic pyramid,” in which variant sexual practices including promiscuity, fetishism and practices that transgress generational boundaries are much closer to “the very bottom of the pyramid” (“Thinking Sex” 11, 12). Sexual variety among Blacks within the framework of Rubin’s pyramid is neither a form of perversion nor is it a type of rebellion against White religious right wing ideology: it is a side-effect of the racial and economic discrimination to which Black Americans are subjected. In regards to marriage, however, as previously noted, the embracing of cultural pre-colonial African practices in current Black American familial and non-familial relationships must also be seen as one of the central elements responsible for the decline in the institution.

In order to understand the reasons for the high diversity of contemporary Black American sexuality we need to consider more fully the complex economic and social underpinnings that resulted in these varied practices. The culture of slavery produced social and familial fragmentation among American Blacks who were constantly torn away from their kin by slave owners. For this reason, many slaves adopted very different codes of sexual morality to those of their White oppressors. It was impossible, of course, to live up to White Judeo-Christian codes of sexual acceptability with daily slave abuses such as studding, rape, and the prevention of legal

marriage. As Foster points out, these activities were considered to be abhorrent by Blacks. They were not events to which they were reconciled. However, they were occurrences to which they were accustomed, therefore they were, as Foster puts it, “not usually a matter that would destroy or even appreciably damage” relationships between Black men and women (19). For these reasons, codes of conduct intrinsic to the value system of White Christian society – such as the emphasis upon the virginal status of unmarried women – were impossible to maintain in the culture of enslavement. The majority of Black women were soiled or damaged goods, by Judeo-Christian sexual standards, as they were regularly used sexually by their White owners. The history of hundreds of years of sexual exploitation meant that a Black woman could not value what was impossible for her to maintain, namely her virginity, and moreover, “Black males did not classify women into bad and good groups on the basis of their virginal status” (Staples and Johnson 96). Taken together, all of these socio-historical factors help to explain why White sexual standards failed to dominate in the Black culture (Staples and Johnson 95-96). For the vast majority, a different set of values arose to regulate the beliefs and actions of many Black women and men. Staples and Johnson point out that these values included a more permissive sex code than that accepted by White Christian society (96). Acceptance of sexual variety thus did not come about as a result of social and political progress, but rather was forced on many Black Americans due to the impossibility of living up to White codes of sexuality within the living conditions imposed by the economic context of slavery.

Contemporary economic problems continue to contribute to more permissive sexual codes of behaviour in Black American communities. The relative concentration of poverty in Black neighbourhoods has not only led to widespread gang activity and higher rates of incarceration, but also to poorer health care and urban planning segregation, poorer education

including sex education, high concentrations of non-marital births and a high proportion of single-parent families (Willie and Reddick 34). Each of these factors helps to explain a wider acceptance of varied sexual practices among impoverished and low-income Blacks. Moreover, Audrey B. Chapman points out the statistic that Black men marry women of other races more than twice as often as Black women (294). Thus, Black women, she argues, frequently find themselves “sexually auditioning for a meaningful relationship,” and thus find themselves involved in polygamous relationships (294).<sup>17</sup> Patterson points out the statistical increase of non-marital babies born to Black mothers over non-Hispanic White mothers. From 1995 to 2002, between 68 and 70 percent of Black births were out of wedlock compared to 20 percent of the non-Hispanic Whites – a rate, as Patterson phrases it, “higher than the overall percentage in any other Western country” (191). The rate of non-marital *first* births in the United States in the early 1990’s rose to 81 percent among Black women, while the rate for non-Hispanic White women resided around 33 percent (Patterson 191). A similar statistic found that irrespective of marriage, by 2006, only 35 percent of Black children lived with both parents (Patterson 205).<sup>18</sup> Willie and Reddick call to our attention that, regardless of race, “It is well known that the number of intact families consisting of married couples tends to increase as the level of family income increases,” thus they “are more inclined to attribute the lower rate of intact families among black people compared with white people to the different economic circumstances of these two population groups” (152). As they stipulate, “Economic resources are substantially greater among white people than among black people” (152). It is, however, crucial to keep in mind the lack of distinction for these writers between “intact families” and families in which the parents are married couples.

This higher incidence of poverty is likely also partially responsible for different sexual norms between Black and White children. Smith and Undry have suggested that Black children make an earlier entrance into sexual relations because “they are more likely to live under overcrowded conditions where they can observe sexual behavior at first hand,” and as a result, may attempt to imitate the acts they observe at such close quarters (Staples and Johnson 108). Similarly, Hill’s sociological data concludes that the percentage of sexually active high school students “remains much higher among blacks (73 percent) than among whites (44 percent)” (102). However, it fails to make a distinction between social classes. Hill also stipulates, however, that studies have shown “that the onset of sexuality is earlier for blacks than for whites,” a finding that offsets the economic argument for different sexual norms between Black and non-Hispanic White children (102).

Economic problems are also responsible for continuing sexual and emotional tensions between Black men and women. One such tension is engendered by the perceived debasement of Black women by Black men, which is both a historical and contemporary problem in impoverished African American communities. Hill’s research shows that “social class position is the strongest predictor of physical assault, violent crime, and murder; that is, those who are poor are most likely to engage in such behaviors” (172). Such violence pertains directly to intimate partner abuse (Hill 172). The fact that an African American is more than twice as likely to be impoverished as a White American can therefore in part explain the high incidence of abuse of Black women by Black men. After collecting extensive sociological data on the abuse rates of American women, Hattery and Smith conclude that “although the overall rates for experiencing [Intimate Partner Violence] were the same for all women regardless of their race or ethnicity, African American women are more likely to report certain forms of IPV” (93). These specific

forms of abuse more frequently experienced by African American women include the higher likelihood of being pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped, choked and beaten up (Hattery and Smith 93). They are forms of abuse that Hattery and Smith describe as being the most “severe, near-lethal forms of violence” (94). For this reason, economic disadvantage remains one of the significant underlying causes of abuse in Black communities. These acts range from verbal and physical abuse to sexual infidelity. They are forms of abuse that in turn function as justifications for the White supremacist argument of Black racial inferiority.

Hill attributes the origins of Black female debasement by Black men to conditions that “undermined the provider role for black men, whose position in the family was tenuous and often not even acknowledged” as a result of slavery (8). She asserts that freedom from slavery has subsequently meant the freedom to beat one’s wife for many Black men, “who, deprived of legitimate sources of power, often cling tenaciously to the ideology of male dominance and see controlling black women as crucial to their claim to masculinity” (98). According to sociologists such as Harriette Pipes McAdoo, this situation has become one of the primary causes for the widespread disinclination of many Black women to marry, and in consequence to the high incidence of Black single mothers (163). Hill stipulates that for other Black women, “Fears of racial disloyalty, public intervention in their lives, and the feeling that black men behave as they do because they are victims of racism” have also led to high levels of tolerance of abuse (190). Such incidences of abuse have led to the development of particularly pernicious stereotypes of Black men.

For any literary analysis of modern and contemporary African American writers’ work, and in particular their choice to depict characters who love and desire in unconventional ways, it

is crucial to recognise the damaging and prolonged effects that racism has had on African American culture. While divergences of sexual practice are of course multiply determined, and it is not the purpose of this thesis to conclude what has led to them either culturally or sociologically, the recognition of the impact racism has had highlights the contributions these writers make to trying to solve the problems of their society by undermining it. The work of these modern and contemporary writers emphasises how the prejudicial sexual images that have formed as a result of racial oppression have served to retard and frustrate the social and political advancement of Black American men and women, and have also served to reinforce White heterosexist notions of acceptable forms of erotic and sexual behaviour. These writers' choice not only to engage with a diverse cross-section of Black sexual stereotypes, but to complicate and ultimately transmogrify such myths, reflects their determination to expose and break apart two-dimensional depictions of African Americans. Recognising the sexual repercussions of racism for African Americans makes clear the connection between racial and sexual discrimination and highlights why modern and contemporary African Americans are in a particularly good position from which to fight social injustice. These authors, writing as they have during and after the attainment of Civil Rights, have the capability, not historically available to Black writers, to depict fully rounded Black characters that need neither be sanitised nor embody derogatory Black stereotypes in order to fight social injustice. By portraying complex characters of not only Black, but also White and mixed ethnicity, these writers humanise them, thereby shifting ethical standards of sexuality from being act- or partner-based, to the particularities of the sexual acts themselves.

Baldwin, Walker and Morrison's experience with racial injustice therefore places them in a particularly unique position from which to open up the current conventional American

understanding of “sexual perversion.” Their persistence in addressing destructive Black sexual stereotypes speaks to their desire to bring about a more just consideration of both the universal treatment of Black people and of sexuality itself. Their depictions of diverse forms of love, eroticism and sexuality serve as opportunities from which the reader can question current assumptions about what constitutes romantic and sexual legitimacy. Their ability to cause us to partake in such an ethical analysis highlights their concern with the attainment of human rights for all individuals. Through their literary contributions, which are quintessentially entrenched in the American literary tradition, they thus succeed in continuing the fight against racial and sexual discrimination in the United States.

## **Politics, Aesthetics and Diverse Sexualities**

### **in the work of James Baldwin, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison**

I do not think that I am the first person to notice this, but there is probably no greater (or more misleading) body of sexual myths in the world today than those which have proliferated around the figure of the American Negro. (Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* 151)

“Sexual perversion” is defined in the 2009 Oxford English Dictionary as: “sexual development or behaviour regarded as abnormal or deviant” (“Sexual Perversion,” def. S2). This generic explanation evokes more questions than it answers. What constitutes “abnormality?” What constitutes “deviancy?” Who is doing the “regarding?” Implicit in this definition is the presence of a dominant and imposing ideological system against which the participants of such sexually “perverse” desires and acts exist. In order to investigate the extent to which James Baldwin, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison’s fictional portrayals of forms of love, eroticism and sexuality, that are excluded or prohibited by social norms, destabilise heteronormativity as the only legitimate social option for erotic and sexual expression, it is crucial to address these most essential questions about the political and moral systems by which love, eroticism and sexuality historically have been and continue to be judged and evaluated by American society.

The first recognised appropriations of the term “perversion” for describing the dysfunctional sexual state of an individual occur toward the end of the seventeenth century. Prior to this period, from as early as the third and fourth centuries, the link between “perversion” and sexuality is not yet present. The term, rather, was used in the theological sense to refer to “the action of turning aside from what is true or right; the diversion of something from its original and

proper course, state, or meaning; corruption, distortion” (“Perversion,” def. 1a). It referred to a “change from Christian belief or truthfulness to non-Christian belief or falsity” (“Perversion,” def. 1a). Since its metamorphosis in the late seventeenth century, and in particular from the late nineteenth century onward, to refer to “abnormal” or “deviant” sexual development or behaviour, one of the primary dictionary definitions of perversion has become “sexual behaviour or preference that is different from the norm; *spec.* that which is considered to be unacceptable or socially threatening, or to constitute a mental illness” (“Perversion,” def. 1b).

Michel Foucault’s three volume work *The History of Sexuality*, an assessment of the relationship between sex and power in Western societies that reaches as far back as the fourth century BCE through to the late twentieth century, provides a useful starting point from which to contextualise current assumptions about “sexual perversion.” He argues it is the Victorian regime on which current Western socio-political attitudes towards sex are largely founded: a regime based on repression, in which forms of sexual practice that strayed from socially acceptable acts were subject to prosecution (*Introduction* 3-4). Foucault’s work contends that the pathologising of sexuality and the subsequent phenomenon of having sexuality define personal identity are modern occurrences, whose foundations lie in the first two centuries of our era, but which really took hold in the nineteenth century. The Roman physician Galen, Foucault states, was preoccupied with questions of the negative effects of sexual practice and as a result recommended virginity and abstinence as positive alternatives. However, it was only with the advent of sexology as an extensive field of so-called “scientific” study – best illuminated by such nineteenth-century transformative works as leading sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1894), Havelock Ellis’s *Man and Woman: A Study of Secondary and Tertiary Sexual Characteristics* (1894), Magnus Hirschfeld’s *The Homosexuality of Men and*

*Women* (1894), and Sigmund Freud's development of psycho-analytic theory based on what was perceived to be the "science" of sexuality – that the tendency to pathologise or "dis-ease" sex and label its participants as "perverse" took hold as a form of social regulation (*Introduction* 43).

In *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, Lucy Bland and Laura Doan note that the "radical, new discipline" that was to be termed "sexology" in the early twentieth century "developed throughout Britain, Europe and North America from the 1870's," and referred to "the study and classification of sexual behaviours, identities and relations" (2, 1). It was not to be accepted as a recognised science until the interwar years (2). They point out that its founders "sought to produce an exhaustive classification of the multiple aspects of sexuality by tracing its etiology, scrutinizing its fantasies, its fetishes and the numerous pleasures of the body, and constructing new pathologized individual identities, such as the homosexual, pervert, sadist, masochist, and frigid woman" (2). Furthermore, they note that while the new field "sought to label bodies and desires, it was also concerned with populations as an object of study and set about delineating the criteria for human and 'racial' betterment through the regulation of procreation and biological heredity" (2). The controversy surrounding this new discipline centred on what Bland and Doan summarise as "the question of whether sexology constituted a boldly innovative and emancipatory investigation into human sexuality or whether it was merely another tool of social repression," insofar as it rendered "what was culturally inscribed as 'natural'" (2, 4). While the new "science" could, as Bland and Doan explain, lend "legitimacy" to various individuals and interest groups, it could simultaneously work to stigmatise and disempower such individuals and groups (2).

Foucault's work argues that at the end of the nineteenth century "legitimate" sexuality, what he alternately refers to as "productive" sexuality, was found only in the monogamous heterosexuality of the sanctioned married couple. He maintains: "The couple imposed itself as model, enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy" (*Introduction* 3). Conversely, what was regarded as perverse when definitions were first put forth among scientific and academic populations and exposed to the public at large as classifications of erotic behaviour, encompassed almost any sexual act or impulse that was not monogamous, marital and procreative:

On the list of grave sins, and separated only by their relative importance, there appeared debauchery (extramarital relations), adultery, rape, spiritual or carnal incest, but also sodomy, or the mutual "caress." As to the courts, they could condemn homosexuality as well as infidelity, marriage without parental consent, or bestiality. . . . For a long time hermaphrodites were criminals, or crime's offspring, since their anatomical disposition, their very being, confounded the law that distinguished the sexes and prescribed their union. (*Introduction* 38)

This perception of what was sexually "perverse" was so large that even within marriage a couple was confined to generally understood norms. Foucault argues that the mere mention of sex was considered to be indecent, an idea that is supported by Krafft-Ebing's deliberate choice to title his study of sexuality in Latin as a deterrent for "sexual deviants" who may have wanted to read it for personal sexual gratification (*Introduction* 18, Krafft-Ebing v). In fact, *Psychopathia Sexualis* was originally written as a guide "to assist courts in understanding sexual crime" (Bland and Doan 2).

This pathologising of sex that Foucault outlines as the cornerstone of nineteenth-century thought pertaining to sexuality is elucidated in the writings of the period's most prominent sexologists. Krafft-Ebing's work is one such example: a series of moralistic judgements thinly disguised as scientific fact.<sup>1</sup> In his study, he divides pathology into thirteen sub-categories of

anomalous practice, encompassed within the wider schema of three types of sexual neuroses: peripheral, spinal, and cerebral. It is within this third category that a modern analysis of what would today be considered consensual or mutual sexual anomaly occurs: the group he lists as Par aesthesia, one of four sub-groups of cerebral neuroses. Par aesthesia, or perversion of the sexual instinct, is to Krafft-Ebing, “excitability of the sexual functions to inadequate stimuli,” or, in other words, fetish-driven psychopathology (37). He describes how the “condition” manifests itself in choices made by people who are “as a rule,” free from mental disease, and is itself considered to “lead to the commission of perverse and even criminal acts” (37). Perversion by this standard includes acts of sadism, masochism, fetishism, and homosexuality. Peripherally, it also includes alternative communal and tribal practices such as swinging, swapping, group sex, shared sexual partners and polygamy.

This Victorian notion of labelling sexual desires and practices that did not fit within the confines of what was considered to be socially and politically “legitimate” as “perverse” is a reflection of the period’s medicalising of sex as a way in which to justify political and moral conceptions of deviance. Furthermore, this strategy to justify white patriarchal conceptions of acceptable sex finds a parallel in the period’s similar essentialist understanding of race. Bland and Doan point out, “The use of the term ‘race’ to refer to a division of people based on physical (rather than genealogical or national) differences . . . originated in the late eighteenth century when Carl von Linnaeus and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach first classified human beings into distinct racial groups” (201-02). They explain: “In the logic of biological determinism, the surface and interior of the individual body rather than its social characteristics, such as language, behaviour or clothing, became the primary sites of its meaning,” and furthermore, that

“because of the cultural authority of an ostensibly objective scientific method, these mappings of racial difference were produced as facts of nature and were used to justify the economic and political disenfranchisement of various racial groups within systems of slavery and colonialism” (202). As Bland and Doan emphasise “the bodies of sexual degenerates (homosexuals and prostitutes) were analogous to criminals and ‘primitive’ races” (202).<sup>2</sup> They explain that degeneracy was “understood as a kind of reverse evolutionary process, in which the usual progression towards more ‘civilized’ mental and physical development was replaced with regression instead, resulting in a weakened nervous system and the emergence of ‘primitive’ physical and mental traits” (202).<sup>3</sup> In the case of the “diseasing” of sex, this phenomenon led directly to sexual desire and practice determining not only one’s social standing, but also one’s personal identity. Foucault explains how under this context

the homosexual was now a species.

So too were all those minor perverts whom nineteenth-century psychiatrists entomologized by giving them strange baptismal names: there were Krafft-Ebing’s zoophiles and zoerasts, Rohleder’s auto-monosexualists; and later, mixoscopophiles, gynecomasts, presbyophiles, sexoesthetic inverters, and dyspareunnist women.

*(Introduction 43)*

Freud’s work, although ostensibly offering a counter argument to the position that all desires and acts outside of the monogamous heterosexual sanctioned married couple were indications that the individual involved was sexually “perverse,” is equally a reflection of this clinical discourse. Contrary to popular nineteenth-century scientific and academic thought, his psycho-analytic method, which as Peter Gay tells us he insisted was “a new branch of science – a new psychology” – the purpose of which was to cure “certain forms of nervous disease (the neuroses) by a psychological technique,” maintained the position that *all* people to some extent, were affected by such “perverse” desires or acts (xxi, xxii).<sup>4</sup> In “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” Freud argues: “No healthy person, it appears, can fail to make some addition that

might be called perverse to the normal sexual aim; and the universality of this finding is in itself enough to show how inappropriate it is to use the word perversion as a term of reproach” (Gay 253). Freud’s claims reversed the social understanding of “normalcy” from the traditional Christian interpretation as conventional heterosexual desire to an interpretation that allowed for a certain degree of naturally occurring “perversion” (Gay 253). He argued that it is only when “a perversion has the characteristics of exclusiveness and fixation” that one is in fact “justified in regarding it as a pathological symptom” (Gay 253). One case in point is his discussion of fetishism in which he maintains that

A certain degree of fetishism is . . . habitually present in normal love . . . .

The situation only becomes pathological when the longing for the fetish passes beyond the point of being merely a necessary condition attached to the sexual object and actually *takes the place* of the normal aim, and further, when the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the *sole* sexual object. These are, indeed, the general conditions under which mere variations of the sexual instinct pass over into pathological aberrations. (Gay 250)

Freud’s new rules for distinguishing between “normal” and “healthy” “perversion” and pathological instances meant that some of those acts held as socially and criminally “perverse” were by his findings, to some extent, reified. Homosexuals (referred to by him as “inverts”), he writes, “cannot be regarded as degenerate” under this system of belief (Gay 242). Thus, Freud’s extensive research led to a narrower definition of “perversion” as “sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim” (Gay 247).

Freud’s account of the “perversions,” while narrower in scope than the other leading experts of the day and, to a degree, opening up the notion of socially acceptable sexual desires and acts, nonetheless managed to do little more than substitute one set of “perverse” sexual

desires and practices for another, rather than determining “perversity” by the conditions under which such desires and acts were to be carried out. This approach placed Freud, as much as the other leading scientists of the day, in complex and controversial territory, leaving him to determine the lines between what was “natural,” “perverse” and “pathological.” The Victorian period, as Foucault asserts, was rife with such codifications of conduct and with the strict regulation of what was permissible and what was forbidden in terms of places, partners and acts (*Use of Pleasure* 32).

It would be an error to attribute the Victorian pathologising of sexual desires and acts that so largely determines our own edicts regarding acceptable and unacceptable sexual desires and practices entirely to the Christian morality of the period, as the origins of this system, Foucault points out, borrow directly from “the moral philosophy of antiquity,” from “pagan philosophy” that “notes a certain association of sexual activity with evil, along with the rule of procreative monogamy, a condemnation of relations between individuals of the same sex, and a glorification of self-restraint” (*Use of Pleasure* 15). He argues that the later Greco-Roman associations between sexual activity, disease, and evil, and the importance placed on the conjugal bond of the heterosexual married couple further contributed to the development of Christianity (*Care of the Self* 238). The specific impact of Christianity on modern sexuality, Foucault reasons, lies in the “compulsory” precepts the religion embodies and the “universal” scope with which the religion was put into practice (*Use of Pleasure* 21). Christianity, Foucault maintains, was “a unified, coherent, authoritarian moral system that was imposed on everyone in the same manner” and as such distinguished between “normal” and “abnormal” behaviour (*Use of Pleasure* 21, 97). For this reason, sexuality came to be seen as “a domain of moral experience” (*Use of Pleasure* 24). Such moral judgements regarding sexuality, according to Foucault, led to

its pathologising and the subsequent label of “perversion” as a means of elucidating the significance of practices that didn’t conform to these compulsory precepts.

It is worth examining Foucault’s consideration of the vast differences in the way sexuality was judged in ancient Greece as a means of comparison with the strict Victorian regulations. He explains: “not only did the Greeks not seek to define a code of conducts [sic] binding everyone, neither did they seek to organize sexual behavior as a domain governed in all its aspects by one and the same set of principles” (*Use of Pleasure* 251). Rather, he argues that “moral conceptions in Greek and Greco-Roman antiquity were much more oriented towards practices of the self and the question of *askēsis* than toward codifications of conducts [sic] and the strict definition of what is permitted and what is forbidden” (*Use of Pleasure* 30). This set of values explains why, for example, Foucault makes a case that sexual relationships between men and boys in ancient Greece cannot merely be thought about as an accepted form of what we now conceive of as homosexuality, because

The Greeks did not see love for one’s own sex and love for the other sex as opposites, as two exclusive choices, two radically different types of behavior. The dividing lines did not follow that kind of boundary. What distinguished a moderate, self-possessed man from one given to pleasures was, from the viewpoint of ethics, much more important than what differentiated, among themselves, the categories of pleasures that invited the greatest devotion. To have loose morals was to be incapable of resisting either women or boys, without it being any more serious than that.  
(*Use of Pleasure* 187)

Foucault’s thesis outlines the ancient Greek preference for particular sex acts to be nothing more than a reflection of a “character trait” and “not a matter of topology involving the individual’s very nature, the truth of his desire, or the natural legitimacy of his predilection” – a system of evaluating sexual desires and practices in stark contrast to the Victorian regime (*Use of Pleasure* 190). A morally admirable man, then, was one who exhibited self-mastery in the form of restraint: he was in control of his sexual appetite in terms of moderation, timing and quantity

(*Use of Pleasure* 250). Such self-mastery held him in the highest esteem and superseded the need to conform to the moral philosophy of the day that, as we have learned from Foucault, did contain a certain condemnation for specific sex acts such as homosexuality.

Many feminist critics have taken issue with Foucault's discussion of ancient Greece insofar as it focuses exclusively on "the figure of the free Greek male." This is a problem, Lisa Downing comments, because of its "elitism as well as the masculinism of the political context defining it" (107). Sandra Lee Bartky argues that Foucault's discussion of the male subjective experience occurs at the expense of examining the rules and regulations of sexuality in these regimes as they pertained to the female subjective experience. She states: "Foucault treats the body . . . as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ . . ." (63). It is her contention that Foucault "is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine" (64). Jean Grimshaw takes this argument further to not only include Foucault's lack of discourse surrounding femininity, but to include what she believes are the "dangers and gaps in Foucault's analyses of power and subjectivity" generally (53). She argues, "Foucault seems wholly to evade questions, which are crucial to feminism, about the forms of self-monitoring and self-surveillance which he characterises as autonomy, or as the power of the self over the self" (66). Her contention is that she does not know how Foucault can decipher when such actions are truly autonomous, a product of self-stylisation, and when they are forms of social constraint (66). Grimshaw also adds racial concerns as a major issue of neglect in Foucault's work in conjunction with class and gender (53). She surmises that for all of these reasons his work in this area "is disappointing, and somewhat depressingly unaware of anything that feminists have written about ethics or morality," and says that it "offers a masculinist conception of the self which sidesteps many of the most crucial questions in ethical

thinking which feminism needs to confront” (70). Downing points out another major potential oversight in Foucault’s history: his “Western projection of the kind Saïd has critiqued in *Orientalism* (1978), in which the white Western subject imagines the East as a continent of mystery and exotic delights – a fantasy which served as implicit justification for colonialism” (91). Her argument is predicated upon Foucault’s conscious “East-West binarism” in which he positions the East as concerned only with the “intensity” and “quality” of “bodily pleasures” in contrast to the West’s concern with “the underlying motivation for individual sexual behaviour” which has led to its subsequent pathologising of sex (91). This polarisation indicates a certain romanticising of the East that dangerously stereotypes or falsifies individual experience.

Despite these and other legitimate critiques of Foucauldian theory, his work remains an invaluable tool for illuminating the culturally-specific and ever-shifting nature of perceptions of love, eroticism and sexuality. His examinations of Victorian and Greek society are part of his larger project to contextualise the moral, ethical and legal judgements of sexuality within any particular time period and place. Keeping in mind these shortcomings in regard to race, gender, class, and “othering,” his stipulation that “An erotic practice or ‘preference’ has not always, everywhere, been assumed to have the same significance, but rather that behaviours and choices that today we would understand as ‘sexual’ mean different things at different periods and in different locations,” provides the necessary contextualisation of the concept of sexual “perversion” to a study of its implementation in modern and contemporary African American fiction (Downing 86). These fluctuating valuations, Foucault claims, are what determine the significance and social acceptability of sexual practices. Implicit in his point is the realisation that determinations such as “normal” and “abnormal” are either consciously or unconsciously arrived at by subscribing to socio-political rules that are, at least initially, externally determined.

In this way his argument problematises essentialist assumptions in regard to sexual preferences and practices and instead presents sexuality in constructionist terms as a product of social and historical contingents, often in part, and in some manifestations entirely. In lieu of Foucault's insights, and those of his critics, when analysing the fiction I will work with an understanding of the term "perversion" as a layered, multifarious, and contextual concept that has undergone significant historical transformations. My research will consider the shift in thought these modern and contemporary African American writers bring to the concept by revealing "perversion" to be a matter of violations and particularities rather than as an event determined by specific erotic or sexual acts.

Rubin's 1994 tract, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," highlights key themes and issues in Baldwin, Walker and Morrison's writing that are the product of this reformulated understanding of "perversion." Her thesis, building on Foucault's constructionist theory about the ever-shifting perceptions of sexuality over time and its relation to power, is grounded in the belief that sexuality is the last acceptable realm of prejudice in American society. She argues, "Progressives who would be ashamed to display cultural chauvinism in other areas routinely exhibit it towards sexual differences" (15). Rubin's statement alludes to the current American reality that in no other area of private endeavour is there as much government interference as in matters pertaining to sexuality. On issues such as gay marriage, nudity in the media and pornography, there is a vast network of social, political and legal standards that judge and prejudge individual behaviour. Rubin's theory calls attention to six sexual myths that she discerns as the underlying impetus behind both the legal and social sexual discrimination in the United States; myths that echo Foucault's analysis of the impact of Christian thought on the modern world. These are sexual essentialism – "the idea that sex is a

natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions;” sex negativity – the idea that sex is considered by Western cultures to be a sin; the fallacy of misplaced scale – the idea that “Sexual acts are burdened with an excess of significance” because of their ties to the religious idea of virtue; the hierarchical system of sexual value in which marital, reproductive heterosexuals are “alone at the top,” and the lack of a concept of benign sexual variation – the idea that there is one best way to have sex and that everyone must conform to this standard of acceptability or be judged and punished accordingly (9, 11, 15).<sup>5</sup>

Rubin’s theory is concerned with exposing the United States’ current religious valuations pertaining to sexuality, as it continues to base many of its legal and social tenets on beliefs and customs that linger from past oppressive regimes. Although, Rubin argues, heterosexual sex can be unemotional, unaffectionate, and devoid of kindness, it is still valued more favourably than alternative sex acts that are emotional, affectionate and kind, because heterosexual sex fits within the boundaries of what has historically been conceived of as normative whereas alternative sex acts do not (15). Alternative sex acts, to Rubin, embody any sex that is considered to be aberrant by these conventional and widespread standards (14). For Rubin, sex of this kind “may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in ‘public,’ or at least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles” (14). As Rubin emphasises: “Promiscuous homosexuality, sadomasochism, fetishism, transsexuality, and cross-generational encounters are still viewed as unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, kindness or transcendence” (15). Rubin notes in particular that “fetishism, sadism, masochism, transsexuality, transvestism, exhibitionism, voyeurism, and pedophilia are quite firmly

entrenched as psychological malfunctions” (12). She underscores: “Books are still being written about the genesis, etiology, treatment, and cure of these assorted ‘pathologies’” (12).

In “Thinking Sex,” Rubin formulates a new and ethical method from which to judge individuals’ sexual desires and practices. Her theory rests on the notion that sex should be judged “by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide” (15). Thus, according to Rubin, if sex is mutually considerate and consensual, it shouldn’t be considered harmful. Her theory is intent on developing a sexual system that judges a sexual act based not on “hierarchies of sexual value,” but rather on these premises of consideration and consent. It is grounded in the belief that it is only through an acceptance of variation and a rejection of rhetorical frameworks that insist on a lack of such variation that a pluralistic system of ethics can be developed (15). To Rubin, such a pluralistic system would speak to the human rights and needs of all Americans, rather than to the religious minority.

Rubin’s theory, like the restrictive and flawed regimes Foucault describes, presents a list of determinations by which to judge sexual desires and acts that appear to be based on socio-political rules – in this case a retaliation against the socially acceptable rules of the day that are quite blatantly discriminatory. Her criteria, however, unlike those of these other regimes, are based on what she believes to be a set of universal ethics that must be implemented in order to assure individual human rights. For this reason, Rubin, like Foucault, is unconcerned with whether sexual desires and acts are innately biological, socially determined or some combination of the two, and thus does not address this question. Instead, she focuses on the creation of a theory of sexuality based solely on the premises of fairness and consent. In this way, Rubin’s approach borrows from the Greek moral conception of sex as Foucault outlines it: judging

sexuality based not on specific sexual desires and acts deemed appropriate or inappropriate by the moral philosophy of the day, but rather on a code of personal ethics. In this case, however, the ethics needed for a new American politics of sexuality are vastly different from the ones Foucault presents as having been implemented by Greek males. These ethics would not be based on a set of “aesthetics of existence” that is essentially a “power game” made up of “inequalities and constraints,” but rather would be based on a set of egalitarian ethics concerned only with consideration, consent and the quality of the pleasure provided. Rubin’s theory, thus, unlike the Greek practice of an aesthetic of the self, presents an alternative type of stylistics – one that addresses feminist concerns: mutual respect, kindness, and in some cases, love. Her theory, however, is problematic in its adoption of general and vague concepts. Notions of “quantity” and “quality” are imprecise and arbitrarily determined. It is questionable, for example, how one might go about determining what constitutes “considerate” or positive treatment: something about which Rubin remains ambiguous. Furthermore, the issue of what constitutes consent, rather than being a definite and evident matter, is also nebulous and controversial. Nikki Sullivan, for example, underscores how many feminists have taken the position “that the notion of consent has long been used to justify the unequal position of women” and furthermore, “that the fact that women often say that they consent to certain patterns of male domination exemplifies how deeply the internalisation and naturalisation of oppression go” (163).<sup>6</sup> These are significant flaws in Rubin’s theory. However, the strength of her argument lies in its success in dissolving sexual desire and practice as determinations of personal identity.<sup>7</sup> Her theory therefore emphasises the necessity of eradicating derogatory sexual labels and stereotypes. It also brings to the forefront a set of ethics by which to judge love, eroticism and sexuality.

Sexologist John Money categorises work such as Foucault's and Rubin's ideas about the social and discursive construction of sexuality as a particular brand of social-constructionism – what he terms sexosophy: a culture's "collective sexueroetic philosophy and values," with sexueroeticism referring to "the singular noun for sexuality and eroticism" (*Principles of Developmental Sexology* 20,19). For Money, sexosophy is thus distinct from the newer field of sexology, which he defines as the "scientific" study of sexuality and eroticism (20). Critics of sexology, however, challenge what Janice M. Irvine refers to as "the cultural idealization of science," arguing that science itself "is a social construction masquerading as 'pure truth'" (*Disorders of Desire* 15). To these scholars, "objectivity," she argues, "a characteristic supposedly immanent in the scientific enterprise, is simply an attractive fiction with roots in the social and political context of the seventeenth century; scientific process is a set of social relations, values, and beliefs that largely reflect the political and professional interests of scientists themselves" (15). Irvine explains that for this reason, the term "sexology" has now been appropriated by many other scholars and theorists to refer to "a multidisciplinary group of researchers, clinicians, and educators concerned with sexuality," including "scientists, pornographers, feminists, transvestites, therapists, and others" (*Disorders of Desire* 2).<sup>8</sup>

Pioneering feminist, gender and queer theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Monique Wittig and Judith Butler, to name but a few, have worked to shatter the illusion that such objectivity as it pertains to stable forms of identity – whether it be to gender or sexuality – exists: rather such categories are exposed as being the product of specific interest groups and economies.<sup>9</sup> In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Irigaray theorises that there is only one sex, the masculine sex, that "elaborates itself in and through the production of the 'Other'": "we are always one and the other, at the same time. If we separate ourselves that way, we 'all' stop

being born. Without limits or borders, except those of our moving bodies,” while Sedgwick, in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, argues that labels such as “homosexual” are distinct and indispensable primarily to those who define themselves against them, and that such binary oppositions as “homosexual” and “heterosexual” – while embraced by many people who view themselves as fitting tightly into one category or the other – are in effect essentialising fictions (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 25, Irigaray 217, Sedgwick 83). In a similar line of thinking, Wittig and Butler both emphasise, as Sullivan points out, in slightly different ways, that “heterosexuality is a complex matrix of discourses, institutions, and so on, that has become normalised in our culture, thus making particular relationships, lifestyles, and identities, seem natural, ahistorical, and universal” (Sullivan 39). Butler’s groundbreaking theory of gender performativity, in particular, underscores this point. In *Gender Trouble*, she asserts “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through *a stylized repetition of acts*” (191). Queer readings that have developed in response to both the more modern, broader understanding of sexology and to such groundbreaking theories as those presented by these counter-hegemonic theorists are explained by Nikki Sullivan as the practice of making strange, counteracting, or delegitimizing “heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and that (in)form them”(vi). David Halperin explains them as “by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” and states that “Queer” therefore “demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-a-vis* the normative” (62). Lisa Duggan highlights how these kinds of analyses therefore allow for “the promise of new meanings, new ways of thinking and acting politically” (11).

Along these lines, my analysis of Baldwin, Walker and Morrison's fiction, in the following chapters, reveals an ethical system at play in their multitudinous depictions of love, eroticism and sexuality very similar to that presented by Rubin. In their novels, erotic and/or sexual relationships do not conform to traditional stereotypes in which legitimate and/or non-harmful relationships are to be found only in monoracial, monogamous, heterosexual marriages.<sup>10</sup> These writers instead challenge prescribed norms of sexual behaviour by creating abundant and functional depictions of alternatives to traditional models, including interracial ones. In their novels, considerate and pleasurable eroticism and sexuality may or not conform to socio-political standards of lawful and/or perceived rightful eroticism and sexuality. Instead, legitimate forms of eroticism and sexuality are determined not by the type of sexual desire or act itself or by the individuals involved – in other words, by norms that are externally determined – but rather by a system of particular ethical considerations. Furthermore, in their work, desires and acts that do not embody these ethical standards may still contain redemptive elements, or, alternatively, serve to emphasise the complexity of situations that are harmful. This process often succeeds in shifting, at least in part, the culpability for these desires and acts from the perpetrators of the crimes to social and historical contextual considerations, dispelling that which is normatively considered to be aberrant in the process. Thus, Baldwin, Walker, and Morrison use their literary abilities to open up issues about ethical values by granting access to scenarios that are not otherwise readily available for consideration. By presenting a multitude of complex alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality, Baldwin, Walker and Morrison normalise desires and acts that have historically been considered to be aberrant. This process in effect works to legitimise all forms of love, eroticism and sexuality that are non-harmful. By

deconstructing the idea that these alternative forms of erotic and sexual expression are “perverse,” the writers frustrate heteronormative conventions as the only legitimate form of sexual desire and practice. In this sense, the writers call attention to such conventions as being socially-constructed fictions, and as such, they are successful in queering heteronormativity.<sup>11</sup> Further, the African American status of these writers has meant that their choice to take on taboo sexual themes has been an effort to engage thematically with two-fold oppression: racial and sexual. While some cultural critics have argued that African American depictions of sexuality, and in particular Black sexuality, only result in the double exploitation of African Americans through the exposure of these two types of oppression, this thesis will argue that in the case of Baldwin, Morrison and Walker, depicting alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality not only serves to assert individual and cultural differences but is also a fundamental expression of social freedom.

Using cultural criticism that is imbued in the poststructuralist position that, as Sullivan summarises it, “there are no universal truths, but rather particular forms of knowledge, and the ways of being that they engender, become ‘naturalised’, in culturally and historically specific ways,” my theoretical approach will argue for a queer reading of Baldwin, Walker and Morrison’s novels that underscores the writers’ treatment of sexuality as a discursive construct (Sullivan 39).<sup>12</sup> Specifically, this reading looks to the writers’ treatment, and subsequent legitimisation, of alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality that are non-harmful – a process that, in each case, serves to counteract White heteronormativity as the only rightful option for sexual desire and practice, realising it instead to be an effect of particular systems of power and knowledge (Sullivan 119). This theoretical position, therefore, draws in particular on the poststructuralist tenet that our sense of identity is always relativistic (Barry 65). It argues that

it is shaped by culture, by the others around us, and that there is, therefore, no “true,” autonomous, knowable self isolated from social and linguistic forces (Sullivan 39). By working to legitimise taboo forms of love, eroticism and sexuality that are non-harmful, these writers’ novels deconstruct the idea of the “other” as “perverse” – an action that decentres and denaturalises White monogamous heterosexuality in contrast to its historical invisibility, as representative of the normal, in much the same way that Whiteness and maleness have historically functioned (Sullivan 119, Dyer 1).<sup>13</sup>

This thesis aims to show how Baldwin, Walker and Morrison’s novels call attention to the sexual consequences and side-effects of both sexual discrimination and racial oppression on African American life, and how this exposure marks a new phase in African American writing that draws on past African American literary movements, but that takes this subject matter in new and progressive directions. The intertwining themes of race and sex with which the writers engage have been a subject of interest and contemplation in American writing that reaches as far back as the first anthropological, historical, sociological and literary accounts of the new world. The origins of this long historical trajectory were connected with issues of Black inferiority, Black “hypersexuality,” sexual exploitation and abuse of Black slaves, miscegenation, and interracial relationships. During the Harlem Renaissance and, later, during the Black Arts Movement, the subject of race also became intricately connected with the subjects of homosexuality and bisexuality. These dual themes of race and sex have been included by both Blacks and Whites in social, political and historical studies, songs, folktales, spirituals and personal histories including the first slave narratives, as well as in drama and literature. While it is impossible to address this history at length in this thesis, I will attempt to give a brief account

of a few of the critical texts that engage with them in order to properly situate these African American writers within this context.

One such foundational text is Thomas Jefferson's 1795 publication *Notes on the State of Virginia* in which he proposes abolishing what he describes as a "great political and moral evil," that is, the institution of slavery, while at the same time making the case for Black biological inferiority (94). In Query XIV "The Administration of Justice and Description of the Laws?" he writes of this Black inferiority in terms of ugliness, "hypersexuality," and the incapacity for love: "They have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odour. . . . Their love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination" (146-47). These perceived "inferior" racial and sexual qualities are used as Jefferson's justification for his recommendation of the total separation of Blacks from Whites after emancipation (151). "The circumstance of superior beauty," he writes, "is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?" (145-46). The social, political, and legal climate of the United States can in part be attributed to such foundational political polemics.

Works like Jefferson's resulted in the adoption and generic mutation by African Americans of the early Puritan captivity narratives that were a product of early New World settlement: simple factual accounts of the trials and tribulations of captivity during early settlement life on the frontier such as Mary White Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* – a testimony of the humiliation and suffering she endured after having been captured in 1675 by Native Americans and released the following year. Rowlandson's and other Puritan captivity accounts were themselves appropriations of earlier sixteenth century captivity narratives that told

stories of Englishmen captured by foreign enemies.<sup>14</sup> The accounts often included a process of humiliation and then religious redemption when forced to live among a “savage” culture. The adoption and mutation of this style of writing that came to be known as the first African American literary genre during the antislavery era, the slave narratives, – what Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to as “powerful acts of resistance” written by and about the lives of escaped slaves – included an intentional and calculated focus on race and sexuality, and was a deliberate and effective strategy implemented by Black and White abolitionists (xvi). This appropriation and mutation gave the new genre reflexivity, authority, and solidity, by presenting the reader with both a familiar literary form and a Biblical framework from which to interpret it: the stories thematically echo Moses’ words to Pharaoh “Let My People Go” (*Holy Bible: King James Text*, Exod. 8:21). The form also appealed to White reason by placing Whites in the position of the sexual “savage” while elevating Blacks in the White reader’s esteem to the position of “civilized” citizens.

In particular, Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and Harriet Jacobs’ 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, sought to bring about the abolition of slavery by directly contradicting claims such as Jefferson’s about the “natural” biological inferiority of Blacks while revealing the horrors of the racial and sexual exploitation and abuse of Blacks, and the devastating effect such forms of oppression had on the development of one’s masculinity and femininity. Both stories depict Black mental suffering as indeed equal to the suffering experienced by Whites. They also establish the Black desire for higher aspirations, religious redemption, and Black intellectual sophistication. As Anthony Appiah evidence of the full humanity of black people” (xii). He explains that “that is why so many of the published narratives have the words ‘written by himself’ (or ‘herself’) in their titles. Seizing on

the available captivity narrative genre and appropriating it in this way not only assured readers that the authors had experienced the horrors and violations recounted at first hand; it also demonstrated that black people could write real literature” (xii-xiii). While Douglass’ text is concerned with his manhood and the ability of slavery to “transform” a man “into a brute,” Jacobs’ writing is specifically concerned with womanhood, in particular the sexual violations of Black female “property” (Douglass 68, Jacobs 151). These slave narratives led to the subsequent development of fiction careers for African Americans who continued presenting depictions of sex and race in this new literary form. Douglass himself is considered one of the first canonical African American novelists. His 1853 novella *The Heroic Slave* was published the same year as the first African American novel to be published in Britain: William Wells Brown’s *Clotel*, otherwise known as *The President’s Daughter*, a story infamously based on Thomas Jefferson’s relationship with his slave mistress and their two daughters (Andrews 114; Ashwill 77). Soon after, in 1859, the first full-length African American novel, Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* was published in the United States: a tale of interracial seduction (Foreman 317-18).

This focus on sexuality and race in the initial age of the novel during the Anti-Slavery Era was also a major subject of interest for White authors. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is famous for being the book that sparked the Civil War (Turner 405). Its main objective was to point out the immoral and evil nature of slavery, a goal that according to Baldwin was met by terrifying Whites into wanting to end the practice out of a fear of losing their own salvation (*Notes* 13). Sexuality and race continued to be of major thematic importance to both Black and White writers throughout the Reconstruction era and into the twentieth century, from these integrationist-style protest novels that presented Black characters as morally superior beings (a form that was also embraced by many Black writers of the day in an effort “to emphasize their similarities to other

educated Americans and to protest their exclusion from the American mainstream”), through similar works that presented the inherent inferiority of Black subjects, and finally to separatist style works that embraced the folk spiritual tradition in which the first inklings of “Black Pride” can be found (Bruce 464).

Mark Twain’s 1894 novel *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, in many ways reminiscent of Stowe’s work insofar as it is the author’s attempt to get across his “loathing” for slavery, takes a very different turn with its underlying message of Black inferiority (Gooder xviii). The story, about the “tragically compromised” mulatto slave woman Roxy, is seriously marked by what R.D. Gooder refers to as Twain’s “ideological and moral prejudices” (xvii, xvi). It is the tale of a beautiful slave woman, “fifteen parts white and one part black” who is “seduced” by a distinguished Earl, impregnated by him, and who subsequently switches their child for the Earl’s White son so that her own son may escape a life in slavery (Gooder xix). Roxy, however, is only to be devastated later on, by the reality that the child’s biological Blackness ultimately prevents him from being able to nobly take on such a role. Gooder concludes: “he can’t after all become what he isn’t, and turns out a silly wastrel, selfish, cowardly, and cruel” (xix). This novel, one of the first famous “passing” stories in American literature, paved the way for subsequent tales by African American writers, such as Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel written during the Harlem Renaissance, itself entitled *Passing*, the homoerotic story of the bisexual woman Clare Kendry Bellew who “becomes” White and her friend Irene Westover Redfield, a woman who “passes occasionally,” in which, as Thadious M. Davis articulates, the author “represents passing as a practical, emancipatory option” (xi).

Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 African American folklorist novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, although overlooked during Hurston’s lifetime, is a reflection of the oppositional position

of separation. It is concerned with an all-Black cast of characters and is famous for its attempt to capture the African American vernacular of the period – a notable trademark of the Harlem Renaissance writers. As Steven Watson notes, many of the movement’s novels were written “in the urban idiom of Harlem street slang and in the rural idiom of folklore” (94). Hurston perhaps best embraced the separatist tradition in her work with her all Black community and overtly sexual themes “intend[ed] to shock” (Rayson, “Black Autobiography” 40). The novel is the story of the strong Black female protagonist, Janie Crawford, a woman who is guided by her third husband and most sensual lover, the younger man Tea Cake, to “a deeper understanding of African American culture” (Wall 389).<sup>15</sup> This novel, as well as many other seminal writings by the other Harlem Renaissance writers known to be part of “the Niggerati”: namely works by Hughes, Thurman, McKay and Nugent, appeared to express opposition to DuBois’ stance of elitist racial uplift with its portrayal of open sexuality and Black realism (Wirth 268).<sup>16</sup>

While Hurston’s story is set in Florida, Watson underscores how the Harlem Renaissance writers were predominantly concerned with presenting the ghetto realism of Harlem. He explains how they “presented prostitutes, homosexuals, and sweetbacks; they set their stories in rent parties, basement cabarets, and Lenox Avenue tenements. They viewed such melodramatic features of black life as its most vital, its truest, and its greatest hope for an indigenous black literature” (94). Their writing was a reflection of the period’s mixture of high and low culture, inclusive of, as Watson describes, “jazz, poetry, liquor, sex, and clubs” (10).<sup>17</sup> While the Harlem Renaissance was not a political movement per se, it was, as Cary D. Wintz notes, an expression of both artistic experimentalism and the political realities of Black urban life in the 1920’s (190). He explains how the movement had “no common bond of political or racial ideology, personal experience, background, or literary philosophy” but rather was held together by the literary

activity of Harlem itself which provided the writers with “a sense of community, a feeling that they were all part of the same endeavour” (2, 3).<sup>18</sup> Among the most subversive works of the period that take on racial and sexual themes are Hughes’ poems “Young Sailor” and “I Loved My Friend,” McKay’s novel *Home to Harlem* and Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring*. Most notable, however, is Nugent’s 1926 publication *Smoke, Lilies and Jade*, the modernist, stream of consciousness story of the bisexual protagonist Alex who brings home a male stranger at four o’clock in the morning with whom he undresses, lies in bed, and sleeps (Wirth 40-1).<sup>19</sup>

The story is described by Thomas H. Wirth in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* as a tale of same-sex desire, a “declaration of artistic independence” with “explicitly homoerotic content” (75). Wirth further characterises it as an “uncoded invitation to the reader of any sexual orientation to enter the interior consciousness of a bisexual man and assume a homophilic subjectivity” (41). “There is none of the guilt and anguish,” he adds, “that had previously characterized most writing about male same-sex desire,” but rather it “celebrates sexual attraction between men with exquisite sensitivity, without apology or prurience” (41). Nugent, he points out, was the first Black writer to write from such an openly gay perspective (Wirth 1). Henry Louis Gates Jr. extends this point, describing how Nugent was also “the first writer who directly raised the issue of what being black and being gay might have to do with each other, three full decades before . . . *Giovanni’s Room*,” a stand that not only challenged concepts of Blackness, but that also challenged mainstream notions of legitimate sexuality (*Gay Rebel*, Foreword, xii). In *Smoke, Lilies and Jade*, Alex, a man who openly challenges a wide array of social norms – he has no money, is content to “lay and smoke, and meet friends at night . . . to argue and read Wilde . . . Freud . . . Boccaccio and Schnitzler . . . to attend Gurdjieff meetings and know things . . .” – clearly declares he is in love with a woman named Melva (Nugent, 77, 82).

Yet, Alex is also unashamed and unapologetic about taking home a male stranger at four o'clock in the morning for sexual purposes (81). When Alex takes Adrian back to his room, he thinks longingly and unabashedly about Adrian's physical beauty and desirability (82). The story goes on to clearly demonstrate Alex's simultaneous and equally passionate sexual attraction and feelings of romantic love and desire for both Adrian and the woman Melva. Alex fantasises about Adrian's "firm white thighs . . . the rounded buttocks . . . then the lithe narrow waist . . . strong torso and broad deep chest . . ." yet is equally aroused by the thought of his female lover (82). He thinks: "her breath was perfumed . . . her features and her cheeks were soft and warm to his touch" (86). In this groundbreaking story, Alex's interracial sexual attractions for both sexes culminate with his final declaration that "one *can* love two at the same time": two that are not only opposite genders, but also of a different race (87). It would not be until James Baldwin that another African American would emerge as an openly gay writer and would work so overtly to challenge sexual and racial norms (Wirth 57, 61).

The Harlem Renaissance writers' works thus mark the beginning of the movement from Black and White writers' concern with the intertwining themes of race and sex primarily as modes of political expression, to their equal concern with these themes as modes of aesthetic and experimental expression (Werner 469). William Faulkner is one White writer who marks this shift. In his 1932 novel *Light in August*, for example, he explores themes of interracial homoeroticism and alternative sex practices with the absence of an overt ideological agenda. The racially unidentifiable Joe Christmas has eroticised and has sexual relationships with a variety of Black and White characters in which his own gender, as well as that of his friends and lovers, is at times in question (177). Such works by Faulkner pushed the boundaries of what was perceived by the dominant culture to be legitimate sexuality by exploring subjects that had yet to be

portrayed in American literature in new and experimental ways. Some writers, however, did continue to write ideologically-driven protest literature after the Harlem Renaissance. Most notable among them is Richard Wright. Wright's fiction, however, as previously mentioned, in addition to being shaped by his communist ideology, was also highly influenced by modernist aesthetics, by existentialism and primarily, by naturalism (Rampersad xii-xiii). In *Native Son*, for example, Bigger Thomas is a product of both his heredity and environment and in consequence is fated to be a victim of his social, economic, and sexual circumstances (Werner 468). However, other Black writers, such as Ralph Ellison, were most clearly concerned, like Faulkner, with producing art, and with explicitly not presenting a dogmatic agenda. Ellison's groundbreaking 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, now coined as Black experimentalism, about the nameless protagonist's journey to the self-realisation that "he alone is responsible for his self-definition," explores White perceptions of Black sexuality and Black incest, but does so, as Ellison puts it, "as a way of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who [is] both black and American" (Reckley 218, Ellison xxii). Ellison was determined to not have his novel be read as a type of Black protest literature (Reckley 218). He responded to Howe's 1963 criticism of his work by saying: "If it fails, it fails aesthetically, not because I did or did not fight some ideological battle" (Reckley 218).

It is in this aesthetic tradition, spearheaded by the Harlem Renaissance writers, that Baldwin's anti-protest style fiction must be read. Baldwin, like Ellison, made a concerted effort to break away from what he felt were didactic works, focusing instead on the creation of psychologically complex, realistic characters who could not be pigeonholed into conventional racial or sexual stereotypes (Smith 470). His work, much of which straddled the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's, in effect posed some of the first

subliminal critiques of the concept of “authentic blackness” – a term not yet present in the American consciousness but the meaning of which was longstanding and widespread, in fact almost universally assumed, in both Black and White writing alike. Baldwin’s rejection of such racial stereotyping, coupled with his rejection of sexual stereotyping, together formed his personal philosophy about unjust human categorisation. This standpoint led to depictions in his work of multiple sexual desires and acts perceived by the dominant culture to be aberrant, marking both a continuation and the elaboration of themes touched on by the younger generation of Harlem Renaissance writers, most notably Bruce Nugent. It was a remarkable achievement in the light of the increased persecution of homosexuals during the Cold War (Nero 161).<sup>20</sup> Baldwin’s engagement with these themes, James Campbell notes, in fact did lead to the FBI’s constant surveillance of him (*Syncopations* 80). He contends that during the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr. himself wanted to keep Baldwin at a distance due to Baldwin’s homosexuality (*Syncopations* 95). It is equally noteworthy that Baldwin’s comprehensive engagement with alternative sexual themes began prior to the sexual revolution – a phenomenon that, as David Allyn points out, really started to take hold in the early 1960’s (5).<sup>21</sup> During the 1950’s when both *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Giovanni’s Room* were published, the political climate of the country was very much against such depictions of alternative sexual desire and practice. Baldwin furthermore continued to engage with these themes throughout the mid to late 1960’s, when the dominant movement of the antiracist struggle, the Black Nationalist movement, and its artistic counterpart the Black Arts Movement, were driven in no small part by misogyny and homophobia (Smith 471).<sup>22</sup>

For these reasons, Baldwin can be read as a fundamental part of the pioneering effort that has led to the current intellectual African American literary climate within which Walker and

Morrison are writing: a climate that encourages exploration of a vast array of forms of love, eroticism and sexuality. In large part, as a combined result of his work, the successes of the Civil Rights Movement and the sexually explicit work of writers such as William Burroughs and Dennis Cooper that present an even greater challenge to sexual heteronormativity – they write about sexual scenarios that include everything from the fetish of defecating during homosexual sex to consensual sexual torture and murderous sado-masochistic sex – there has been an upsurge in African American writing from the late 1960's onward addressing a range of sexual and racial issues that might otherwise have been left aside, including ones of alternative sexual preference and expression (Smith 471-2).<sup>23</sup> Clarence Major is one such writer who has written extensively about sexual themes, encompassing taboo subject matter that ranges from prostitution to the pleasure of orgasm and fellatio.<sup>24</sup> Many alternative sexual themes are also evident in the profusion of Black feminist literature and Black gay and lesbian literature now readily available (Smith 471). Pat Parker and Cheryl Clarke are two African American lesbian feminist poets who address a wide range of alternative sexual topics, while Ann Allen Shockley, the first African American woman to write fiction from the perspective of a Black lesbian protagonist, addresses such themes as interracial lesbian relationships, abusive romantic relationships, lesbian infidelity and the conflicts between White and Black lesbians.<sup>25</sup> Randall Kenan is one of the many Black gay writers whose work continues, in more modern ways, to engage with the theme of trying to come to terms with Black homosexual desire in the face of repressive social codes of morality.<sup>26</sup> Joseph Beam's 1986 Black gay anthology *In the Life* and Essex Hemphill's 1991 collected anthology *Brother to Brother*, that was conceived by Beam prior to his untimely death, are two other examples of the edgy, controversial, proud and unapologetic writing that has come about in the wake of this effort. These collections address a plethora of sexual themes including Black

gay love, masturbation, Black gay simultaneous desire and hatred for White men, Black male effeminacy and androgyny, fist-fucking, Black gay promiscuity, homosexuality and AIDS, loveless sodomy, gay rape, hedonism, homosexuality and suicide, homosexuality in the military, and sado masochism. Together, the collections, in addition to showcasing the writings of Beam and Hemphill, include work by a vast array of other iconic Black gay writers including Melvin Dixon, Samuel R. Delany, and Marlon Riggs. More recently, the up and coming writer Victor LaValle, in addition to addressing many of the aforementioned topics, has also written about the themes of unprotected sex while cheating, orgies, under-age male prostitution, female pedophilia, emasculation, and the fetishisation of semen, blood, hair, nails and bodily waste in the form of saving these human byproducts in bottles for sexual arousal.<sup>27</sup> In no small part due to Baldwin's courageous and unapologetic portrayals of alternative love and sexuality, works such as these serve both to "to reclaim the history of slavery" and "to liberate the literary ancestors by representing what had previously been deemed unspeakable" (Smith 472).

While literary critics have written about the political implications of Baldwin, Walker and Morrison taking on taboo sexual themes in a number of different ways, these themes have consistently been treated as individual practices and critics have been primarily concerned with elucidating their inextricable links to racism. More often than not, this approach has led to limited interpretations that pigeonhole these writers as political spokespersons for individual causes: classifying them as the mouthpieces of specific identity politics. My work, conversely, will focus on multiple alternative erotic and/or sexual relationships occurring in their novels that are predominantly not addressed by critics, who have tended rather to focus on highly politicized acts such as homosexuality and rape. It is my intention, while keeping in mind the symbiotic nature of sexual and racial oppression, to investigate how this group of African American

authors, through the act of writing about characters who deviate from prescribed norms of sexual behaviour, each in his/her own distinctive way, bring about a political reconsideration of what constitutes aberrant sexual desire and practice, thus enabling the reader to separate his/her personal ethical understanding from the social norms and standards of his/her culture. This reconsideration points to a new understanding of the concept of sexual “perversion” which, even more importantly, serves to indirectly reveal these writers’ larger preoccupation with an analysis of ethics. Through the breadth of sexual desires and acts they write about, they open up these themes not as ideas that only pertain to specific minorities, but rather as fundamental and universal human values.

The primary shortcoming of the past critical discourse pertaining to sexuality in Baldwin, Morrison and Walker’s fiction, is the critics’ choice to analyse specific aspects of sexuality in great detail at the expense of looking historically at the transformation of Black sexuality over time, or at the larger significance of multiple variant erotic and/or sexual practices within any one individual piece of writing. In addition to this compartmentalized approach to sexual analysis, there is a glaring gap in the criticism that does not address, or dismisses as peripheral, many of the taboo types of love, eroticism and sexuality that occur within Baldwin, Walker, and Morrison’s novels: the acts of group sex and love, as well as many instances of bisexuality, incest, and the age taboo. These gaps in analysis prevent a thorough understanding of the sexual relationships that critics have discussed and make it impossible to adequately address the topic of what constitutes a “perverse” sexual practice within the context of twentieth-century African American modern fiction, and more importantly within modern American society and modern Western society as a whole. These failings ultimately do a disservice to the subtlety and diversity

of the authors themselves in addressing more pointed questions of human morality, law and ethics.

Foucault's premise of exclusion helps expound why some of these taboo acts have not yet been addressed and sheds light on what might be gained from an analysis of them. In his Appendix to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, "The Discourse on Language," he states:

I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.

In a society such as our own we all know the rules of *exclusion*. The most obvious and familiar of these concerns what is *prohibited*. We know perfectly well that we are not free to say just anything, that we cannot simply speak of anything, when we like or where we like; not just anyone, finally, may speak of just anything. (216)

Foucault's words urge us to consider why, in the context of African American modern and contemporary fiction, such taboo acts have been consistently overlooked in current criticism. The severe lack of knowledge about many subversive forms of love, eroticism and sexuality in Baldwin, Morrison and Walker's fiction, although very different from the context under which Foucault was writing, necessitates an examination of what has been historically written off as too taboo for discussion: Black sexual diversity itself; an ironic void, given that these African American writers have felt themselves equipped to take on such controversial subject matter. The emergence of an ethical system by which to judge what constitutes "perverse" sexuality is therefore dependent on the opening up of Black sexuality in all of its forms to areas of critical discourse. The issue of multifarious sexual practices in African American literature must be addressed if we are to gain an understanding of the political ramifications of the erotic and/or sexual relationships presented by these writers.

In the case of Baldwin, critics have extensively analysed his representation of homo-erotic desire and practice. There is a tendency to view his fictive engagement with the subjects of

female sexuality, the role of women, and bisexuality as covers for the dominant theme of homosexual bonds within his work, while other prevalent sexual themes such as homosexual incest and group sex have been almost entirely disregarded. This focus on homosexuality at the expense of other alternative sexual practices is evident in most of the criticism pertaining to sexuality in Baldwin's fiction published since the 1980's— a surprising fact given the diversity of feminist, LGBT and queer theoretical perspectives from which it has largely been written. Andrew Shin and Barbara Judson's queer reading, for example, typifies this trend. They conclude that "Baldwin's is a voice ahead of its time" but, solely for his attempt "to articulate a gay ethic well before 'gay' entered common parlance" and before queer theory became a critical discourse (247). They view his work as "a vision of the homosexual as the chief instrument of cultural renovation" (248). Similarly, Roderick A. Ferguson's cultural materialist analysis describes Baldwin's novels as being really or primarily concerned with "the racial and sexual discourses having to do with gay and African American men" (255). This stance overlooks the multifarious forms sexuality takes within Baldwin's novels. Furthermore, it does not take into account his contribution to sexuality theory insofar as he incorporated variant sexual practices into the domain of other critical discourses.

The practice of bisexuality in Baldwin's fiction, when it has been addressed, as Susan Feldman points out in her queer reading, is most commonly characterised as either an intermediate stage on the way to recognition of male same-sex desire and sexual practice, or more blatantly, as a cover for homosexuality (90). Early critic, John S. Lash, for example, argues the former: that bisexuality is "a stage in the development of phallic maturity" (51). More recent scholars such as Mikko Tuhkanen, argue the latter. His psychoanalytic reading identifies the reason behind Baldwin's reluctance to support an openly gay collective in the following way:

It is well known that Baldwin remained suspicious of openly gay agendas; he never felt the need to support anything like the gay liberation movement. William Cohen argues that Baldwin's omissions in *Another Country* are due to the book's having been written before Stonewall, before homosexuality became politicized in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Cohen points out that self-identified gay men are repeatedly described in derogatory terms, in the novel, and that the male protagonists who sleep with men are more accurately defined as bisexual. (576)

Tuhkanen's position suggests that the bisexual label functions as a buffer between derogatory homosexual labels and the homosexual desires of the men in Baldwin's fiction. Bisexuality, therefore, exists not in its own right, but rather as a mask for homosexual bonds between men (Feldman 90). In a similar vein, Cora Kaplan's feminist perspective takes the position that bisexual identification is what solidifies male bonds. She writes in regard to Baldwin's bisexual characters, "Their ability to desire and even love – as well as hate – women secures their identities as men and allows them to insist, as Baldwin does autobiographically, that their feeling about themselves and for men have 'nothing to do with women,'" while Warren Carson discusses love triangles in Baldwin as a vehicle through which male/male bonds can continue to develop and establish themselves (Kaplan 45, Carson 227).

Some critics, however, do acknowledge bisexuality to be more than just a cover for homosexual desire. Jerome de Romanet, in his analysis of the religious and sexual continuum in Baldwin's work, interprets the author's choice to have bisexual characters as "the solution to . . . the 'sexual panic' of American society" (12). Feldman extends these lines of thought, declaring that "Bisexuality challenges the assumption that an individual's gender identifications are necessarily stable or singular, and provides an understanding of desire freed from the specificity of the sexed and gendered body" (97). These interpretations are promising, but are not extended to other forms of variant sexual expression within Baldwin's work, disallowing any serious

consideration of his treatment of alternative sexual desire and practice as a topic of theoretical interest that goes beyond a political consideration of homosexuality and bisexuality.

In the case of Walker, due to her political activism, a similar problem occurs. Over the last three decades, critics have been quick to pigeonhole her writing, in her case as “womanist,” a particular brand of feminist fiction. Gerri Bates notes that Walker is credited for having coined the term: a word that, she informs, has come to represent “a new theoretical approach ... which serves the purpose of exploring the reserves of literature and art by African American women and women of color” (37). Psychoanalytic critic Geneva Cobb Moore explicates Walker’s links to the two social movements that led to the formation of her womanist political activism:

Walker embraced the national ethos of protest, resistance, and liberation that defined the revolutionary 60’s, and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, especially in the segregated South, was a sign of her profound commitment to changing society and to being a viable part of the struggle for African American liberation and women’s freedom from the exterior forces of oppression. (111)

Knowledge of this political position has created a bias in the literary interpretation of Walker’s fiction that has led critics, more often than not, to analyse it as the polemical manifestation of her political activism. Philip M. Royster’s early criticism of her work exemplifies the origins of this critical shortfall. In his words:

Walker has committed her efforts to at least two great social movements that have stimulated the alteration of consciousness in the last half of the twentieth century: the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Liberation Movement. Walker’s involvement with these movements both generates and reflects her intention, first articulated in 1973, to champion as a writer the causes of black people, especially black women. (348)

This sentiment behind Royster’s words, that Walker’s political views have both brought about and shaped her artistic achievements, has limited discussions of love, eroticism and sexuality in her work to her success or failure at challenging heteronormative Black masculinity by disrupting the notion of the patriarchal nuclear family: an institution revealed by feminist critics

to be both physically and psychologically damaging to Black women (Jenkins, “Queering Black Patriarchy” 969).

Maria V. Johnson is one such critic whose reading of Walker’s fiction occurs through this ideological lens. She stipulates, in her examination of Walker’s writing and its links to the blues, that Walker writes about “women who struggle and suffer a great deal, who are oppressed but not defeated; women who command respect and reject the mistreatment of men” (223). In a similar vein, Linda Abbandonato asserts, in reference to *The Color Purple*, that “Celie’s story – the story of that most marginalized of heroines the black lesbian – challenges patriarchal constructions of female subjectivity and sexuality and thus makes representation itself a compelling issue for all women, regardless of their ethnicity or sexual orientation” (1106). These feminist critics are chiefly concerned with Walker’s female characters as feminist trailblazers who rebel against destructive masculine interests and practices. One central theme that has come out of this standpoint is the critics’ analyses of the interpretation of rape as a traditional eraser of feminine subjectivity. Martha J. Cutter, in reference to *The Color Purple* maintains that “Walker’s novel revises the myth of Philomela by creating a heroine’s text that reconfigures the rhetorical situation of sender-receiver-message and articulates Celie’s movement away from an existence as a victim in a patriarchal plot toward a linguistic and narratological presence as the author/subject of her own story” (163). In this case, Cutter establishes the shift in status for Walker’s female characters from victims to autonomous women.

In specific regard to sexuality, the critical tendency has also been to confine this discussion to issues of celebrations of women’s bodies or to reclaiming sexual agency more generally. The critic Molly Hite’s poststructuralist reading, for example, asserts that Walker is “[setting] out to appropriate [the] body for [her] own purposes, writing especially from the

standpoint of the woman who experiences herself as sexual, rather than from the standpoint of the outsider who experiences the sexed woman as an object of desire” (121). Keith Byerman’s Lacanian reading also argues that personal agency is achieved through an appreciation of one’s sexual body parts. He stipulates that “in *The Color Purple*, a crucial moment in Celie’s transformation comes when she perceives the beauty of her genitalia” (321). Moore’s more recent Jungian reading argues more generally, that Walker is writing “about the individuation process with its aims of bringing the questing individual to a state of spiritual maturity and peace” (111). Similarly, Maxine Sample discusses this self-acceptance as Walker’s conscious attempt to teach women that they must “unlearn” sexist ideology (170). This movement from female sexual object to female sexual subject exemplifies the trend in analysis that marks Walker as a female liberationist. Confining critical discourse to Walker’s womanist and/or conventional feminist body politics, however, limits the scope of the sexually diverse practices she describes in her writing – practices that range from unconsummated erotic desires to intergenerational love, swapping and consensual incest – and limits the meaning of the practices that are frequently topics of critical discussion to this specific underlying political agenda.

Recent scholarship on Morrison’s work has been much more successful at addressing the diverse range of erotic and/or sexual relationships represented by the author. Over the last two decades, critics have analysed, among other sexual themes, Morrison’s depictions of sexual debasement, anal orgasmic pleasure, biracial sexuality, incest, and pornography. These topics however, are largely treated as violent, regressive and pathological. Kathryn Bond Stockton’s queer reading of the novel *Sula*, which contends that Morrison values debasement, is one exception (82). The story, which Stockton describes as being “fixed on the anus and the violence of piercing it,” critically debases Freud’s discussions of anal eroticism among other forms of

taboo sexuality, and in so doing succeeds in inverting judgements about what should constitute appropriate forms of sexual expression (82, 86, 93). The majority of critics, however, treat such alternative desires and practices as signs of pathology or regression. Karin Luisa Badt, for example, argues that Morrison's preoccupation with bodily themes is actually a statement about returning to a more primitive state. Her psychoanalytic reading of Morrison's work is as follows:

Her novels break down proper body boundaries, thrusting the characters into a primordial chaos in which the experience of identity flounders. Reading one of Morrison's novels is like entering the warm, sensuous, and overpowering ambiance of a womb. Over and over again, we have characters that regress, in psychoanalytic terms to the undifferentiated sense of self characteristic of an infant. (567-68)

Other interpretations of taboo sexuality within Morrison's work include readings of these sexual practices as beneficial to communities, but only inasmuch as they reify heteronormative behaviour. Cedric Gael Bryant's Foucauldian reading of *Sula* describes how Sula's "aberrant" sexual choices serve as an example of what not to be for those around her. He observes the community's exploitation of her: "While Sula lives, community members unconsciously use her to order and improve their relationships to one another" (734).<sup>28</sup> Bryant's reading of Sula's sexual practices is anti-utopian. Her actions provide other characters, by example of what not to be, with the necessary tools with which to adopt a more traditional sexual lifestyle.

In some cases, however, taboo sexuality is considered to be a locus of feminine power, but only inasmuch as this power is used in fierce and sadistic ways in order to make an argument for the continuing and sustained racial oppression against Blacks in the United States. Pamela E. Barnett, for example, in reference to *Beloved*, makes the case in her feminist reading of the story, that "By representing a female rapist figure and a male rape victim, Morrison foregrounds race, rather than gender, as the category determining domination or subjection to rape" (419). Despite *Beloved's* female agency, this use of sexuality is a violent and troubling one; Barnett's reading

presupposes Morrison's choice to exploit Black sexuality as a way in which to make her case for racial oppression.

Other critics have read Morrison's portrayals of taboo sexuality to be expressions of male inter-racial bonding. John N. DuVall's work makes reference to sexual transactions in Morrison's fiction as positive gestures between Black and White men. He interprets these gestures, however, as being in direct contradiction to female sexual agency or pleasure. DuVall describes how, for example, in *Song of Solomon* "the men signal their approval of Milkman by their willingness to share their prostitute, Sweet" (327). Racial harmony between men comes here at the expense of an impoverished, desperate Black woman.

Another taboo act that has been recurrently examined by critics in Morrison's novels is incest. There has been a tendency to treat this theme as a metaphor for African American degeneracy. While incest, as Lynn Orilla Scott has recently pointed out, "circulates as a form of social control" for vulnerable groups such as the poor and people of colour in order to justify White supremacy, there has been a trend in critical analysis to keep this supremacy intact by attributing it to dysfunctional early childhood development (90, 83). Cheryl Alexander Malcolm, for example, asserts of Cholly, from *The Bluest Eye*, that his "treatment when a teenager at the hands of white racists destroys what may be considered his normal sexual development," thus leading to his eventual sexual violation of his daughter Pecola (117). Laurie Vickroy, one of the first critics to look extensively at the subject of incest in the novel, in her postcolonial analysis, lays the blame on both Cholly and Pecola's mother Pauline's dysfunctional childhoods. She states: "Cholly was rejected by both of his parents, Pauline was made an outsider because of a limp. Traumatized children themselves, they continue the trauma by denying their own weakness in their abuse of parental power, by instilling their own fears of impotence, and by calling upon

their children to fulfil their own unmet needs” (93). Building from this critique, Steven R. Luebke affirms that incest is “an expression of anger and frustration” (90). He contends that Cholly “is angry at himself, angry, perhaps, at the society he lives in, and he is frustrated by his powerlessness” (90). He too, argues that Cholly “displaces his self-hatred, his ‘guilt and impotence,’ onto his innocent daughter” (90). For these critics, the exposure of Blacks to sustained racial and economic oppression is used as an explanation for what is perceived to be socially defunct, harmful, even monstrous sexual behaviour.<sup>29</sup>

Some instances of incest in Morrison, on the other hand, are interpreted as restorative. In reference to *Beloved*’s sexual desire for her mother Sethe, Badt claims:

the return to the maternal is necessary in order to restore “authentic” identity. All of Morrison’s novels begin with individuals who have an unsatisfactory relation to themselves and others. They lack a true sense of centeredness – a core self – and they are drawn to the body of the (m)other in order to restore the integrity of their own. Boundaries must be blurred before they can be remade. (568)

Her analysis, then, emphasises that this return must be read as “a political project to repair the black mother” (569). The act of incest, even when it is considered as a viable and necessary sexual practice, is only interpreted to be so as a last attempt to restore a broken-down social order. It is an act of desperation only necessary for those who start from a place of incompleteness or personal trauma. My work will go beyond these interpretations of taboo sexuality to consider Morrison’s portrayals of incest and the age taboo as not entirely violent and/or regressive but also, at times, as examples of quality and redemptive sex acts, or as symbols of the human dilemmas that result from social oppression.

In contrast to these past critical trends that brand Baldwin, Walker and Morrison as spokespersons for individual causes, or that limit their analysis to particular sexual acts, this

thesis will strive to open up the significance of these writers' contributions, exposing their concerns with the themes of justice and equality, thereby underscoring their larger contribution to an ethical analysis of what constitutes romantic and sexual legitimacy. Through their diverse thematic explorations of alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality, these authors urge us to question and to re-think social norms. This reconsideration, rather than producing or playing into American master narratives on sexuality, succeeds rather in disrupting them. This thesis aims to show that Baldwin, Walker and Morrison are part of a collection of American literary writers who are able to transcend pre-determined moral codes of sexuality in order to consider the desires, needs and rights of all people. My decision to focus specifically on their work resides in their choice to take on such a large diversity of alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality and do so with such frequency. The continuing prejudicial treatment of sexuality in the United States highlights the non-conformist nature of these three writers. By showing sexual desires and acts as needing to be determined by particular ethical considerations rather than by norms that are externally determined, they open up the gamut of sexual desires and practices to allow for the possibility of alternative types of sexual expression for those who desire them.

Each of these writers portrays in different ways the overlapping and constantly shifting boundaries between celebrating sexual diversity and suffering its discriminatory repercussions, in addition to suffering from racial discrimination. They each present the tension or interplay between accepting socio-political modes of intolerance and what is perceived as aberrant, and struggling to make space for new, more liberating sexual choices. Sex, in these novels, often becomes a more serious focus of prejudice than racial discrimination, yet this double dose of prejudice ironically works to cancel itself out in the literature. Instead of inheriting a more repressed sense of sexuality than the dominant model, a sexual freedom emerges: one in which

the borders of what is considered sexually acceptable and what is considered sexually aberrant merge. Baldwin, Walker and Morrison reclaim sexual diversity as a viable choice: in their work, it is at times a positive alternative to the constraining socio-political rules of American sexuality. It is specifically through these writers' depictions of taboo sexual desires and acts that their most progressive strides are made, because it is here that their work conceptualises a new understanding of the term "perversion," no longer based on specific sexual desires and acts that do not conform to socio-political Western norms, but rather based on whether the desires and acts are ethically sound. In this way, these writers turn the current conventional social understanding of "perversion" upside down: what is "perverse" is no longer a wide array of particular sexual desires and acts between certain partners, but rather the arbitrary religious code of morality that determines what desires and acts are to be found acceptable and which ones are to be condemned. By presenting the subject of "perversity" in this way, these writers open up the themes of race and sex as human values, not as an issue of "perversion" or as an issue of race. It is my hope to show in the following chapters how Baldwin, Walker and Morrison demonstrate that ethical sex can incorporate erotic variety and how this effort works to support a sexual system of tolerance. Showing sex in these ways is key to understanding human relationships generally, and allows these writers to articulate a certain point of view that is vital to all of our experience.

## **Debunking Normalcy:**

### **Bisexuality, Group Sex and Incest in James Baldwin's Fiction**

The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality.  
(Baldwin, qtd. in Goldstein 178)

In the final three paragraphs of "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," Baldwin galvanises what emerges as one of the central ideas behind his literary corpus:

Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated – in the main, abominably – because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires.

Most of us, however, do not appear to be freaks – though we are rarely what we appear to be. We are, for the most part, visibly male or female, our social roles defined by our sexual equipment.

But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other – male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it. (260)<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Baldwin forces the reader to reconsider "freakishness" as its antithesis:

"normalcy." To be a "freak," he stipulates, is to embody the seemingly polarising characteristics that mark our identities as separate. Furthermore, Baldwin's words also express his concept of the self as a kind of iceberg: only partially visible. We may appear "normal" to ourselves or to others only because we do not acknowledge our more "freakish" aspects. When we see these

qualities in others we are reminded of what does not conform to the social roles we have invented for ourselves, and we react negatively, by violently distancing ourselves from those who, wearing their "freakishness" on the outside, show us to ourselves. This androgynous vision is predicated upon the universality of the human experience, and signals Baldwin's belief in non-racial and ungendered humanism: the catalyst for his struggle against racial and sexual injustice.<sup>2</sup> His subscription to the idea that we *all* – irrespective of race or gender – embody polarising characteristics indicates his disbelief in culturally coded concepts that serve to separate people because of their differences. This dual condemnation is a result of a structural similarity that Baldwin perceives between the way in which both genders and races contain what he identifies as their "other." In the following chapter, I hope to show how Baldwin, through his presentation of a variety of love triangles between people of different ethnic backgrounds that defy conventional American concepts of socially acceptable forms of love, eroticism and sexuality, works to lay out a series of broadened possibilities of sexual acceptability by encouraging a rethinking of social norms grounded in culturally coded concepts, such as "authentic Blackness," that serve to separate people. A queer reading that takes into account this vast array of alternative desires and relationships highlights how such concepts ultimately reinforce both sexual and racial forms of oppression by failing to acknowledge their constructed nature: that they are "a (historically and culturally) specific truth-effect of systems of power/knowledge" (Sullivan 39). In so doing, Baldwin decentres and denaturalises such concepts, thereby making space for the legitimisation of alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality.

Although homocentric readings of Baldwin's fiction have had a considerable influence on the critical reception of his work, and have effectively exposed the writer's use of homosexuality (and to some extent, bisexuality) as a tool with which to confront such sexual and

racial discrimination, they have imposed clear limitations on a full understanding of the ways in which Baldwin utilised multifarious forms of sexuality as a forum through which to fight social injustice. Contrary to these readings, this chapter argues that Baldwin's work presents a wide array of positive sexual practices between a variety of both male and female characters, some of whom may even be biologically related. This wider understanding of acceptable sexuality in Baldwin increases our view of the full extent to which his fiction opened up theoretical discourses surrounding both race and sex. The primacy of these themes, then, gives new meaning to the interconnectedness of different theoretical realms within Baldwin's work and broadens the traditional understanding of socially acceptable forms of love, eroticism and sexuality. This new conception of permissibility encourages a reconsideration of the status quo, and in so doing, represents Baldwin's even greater contribution to ethics.

In their biography of Baldwin, Randall Kenan and Amy Sickels identify this contribution, describing the author's place in American history as the country's primary literary spokesman for civil rights. They note that Baldwin was the first leading Black novelist to profoundly explore the interconnectedness of sexual and racial oppression (7). Baldwin's work is also part of a longstanding literary tradition – continuing in the vein of canonical American writers such as Melville, the Harlem Renaissance writers, Faulkner and Ellison – that explores instances of taboo sexuality with the added complicating element of race in order to call attention to social injustice. There is a progression in the taboo nature of the relationships Baldwin chooses to depict from his earliest writing to his later work, a movement marked by a transition from implied or unconsummated sexual desires and practices to realised and consummated acts. Despite this progression, however, Baldwin is consistently able to compel the reader to accept as ethically sound what has been socially determined to be “perverse,” despite the chronological

augmentation in the shock value implicit in his work. This persuasive technique can be attributed to various aspects of his writing, a few of which I will focus on for this analysis: his depiction of characters that, despite the taboo nature of the sexual acts in which they choose to participate, consistently defy fixed racial and sexual stereotypes, their social contexts and the narrative perspectives of the novels. Through these facets of his writing Baldwin is thus able to demonstrate the concept of “authentic Blackness” to be a false identity marker that serves to categorise individuals, thereby separating them from the rest of society. Furthermore, he opens up the notion of what is considered to be acceptable forms of love, eroticism and sexuality, allowing for the possibility of an almost limitless selection of positive and meaningful relationships. In Baldwin’s work, specific sexual desires and acts are not condemned or perceived as aberrant simply because they stray from heteronormative practices. Instead, determinations of ethical sex and love practices are founded on the premises embraced by Rubin: mutual consideration, the absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures provided.<sup>3</sup> These ethical valuations in Baldwin’s novels result in the revaluation of “sexual perversion” in terms solely of the presence of exploitation, coercion and failure of reciprocity, not by traditional religious or social determinants. For this reason, acts conventionally viewed as socially acceptable, in his work, are at times confined to the realm of mediocrity, disappointment, or dysfunction, while acts conventionally viewed as “perverse” are frequently redemptive.

This chapter will begin by extending and commenting on the brief synthesis of critical views offered in chapter one concerning Baldwin’s writing. While I have worked to establish that forms of love, eroticism and sexuality viewed as too taboo to be discussed – in Baldwin acts

such as bisexuality as a conscious life-choice rather than as a cover for homosexuality, instances of incest, and group sex and love – have been overlooked by many critics, there are notable exceptions. William J. Spurlin, in an article that calls for a coalescing reading of queer, lesbian and feminist perspectives in Baldwin's novels, extensively analyses Baldwin's choice to reveal the interconnectedness of race, gender, sexuality and class oppression through the familial and/or sexual interactions of the characters in his fiction. He believes Baldwin to have made this decision because of its "potential for coalition, especially across boundaries of race and sexuality" ("Culture, Rhetoric, and Queer Identity" 111). Yasmin Y. DeGout's feminist reading argues that this coalescing effort has resulted in Baldwin successfully undermining hegemonic gender hierarchies ("Masculinity" 129). She stipulates: "The way Baldwin re-vision[s] notions of gender and sexuality and debunks conflation[s] of this ideology with other identity signifiers ultimately deconstructs the (American) idea(l) of masculinity (or manhood) as it affects and is critiqued through characters presenting a range of genders and sexualities" ("Masculinity" 134). This idea that Baldwin's depictions of polymorphous love relationships are an attempt to break apart restrictive identity categories is also well articulated by Feldman, who claims that Baldwin's work is an "interactive play among gender, race and sexuality" in which he "seeks to overcome the false opposition between private and social realms, between individual and collective change" (89). Continuing in this manner, Feldman states that his work "dismantles the simple opposition between the sexual and the political by exposing the connection between sexual repression and social oppression, and the manner in which structures of domination are maintained through repressed desire" (90). James A. Dievler's similar perspective describes this interactive play as specifically love-based. In this spirit, he claims that "Baldwin asserts that all these categories are intertwined and most effectively transcended through love-based sex – sex

that is itself taking place beyond the socially constructed senses of sexuality that have dominated the twentieth-century” (163). Dievler terms this concept of sexuality “postsexuality,” asserting that for Baldwin “it is only in such a ‘country’ that the other categories (race, gender) will cease to exist as well” (163).<sup>4</sup>

Most of the exceptional critics that do recognise Baldwin’s novels to be a site of coalition for multiple socially-oppressed groups, however, fail to build on these promising interpretations, instead viewing the writer as prioritising the issue of race over other forms of social oppression. Charles P. Toombs’ analysis of what he terms Baldwin’s “gay aesthetic,” for example, suggests that “Baldwin’s texts insist that characters be unarguably black before their homosexuality takes up narrative space” (106). Kemp Williams’ critique of Baldwin’s sexual themes goes one step further in this direction, arguing that depictions of sexuality in Baldwin are a metaphor for the racial problem of Black oppression and discrimination. In reference to David in *Giovanni’s Room*, he claims that the protagonist’s “‘bondage to sexual being’ is simply a more specific example of the bondage many people feel born into because of their race” (25). William A. Cohen’s assessment of what he perceives to be Baldwin’s liberal humanist ideology is that this is because “the critique Baldwin wanted to make about race he could only express fully in terms of sexuality” (216). This argument, Cohen maintains, is ultimately that “individual love could conquer racial discord” (216). Marlon B. Ross’s queer analysis echoes this sentiment. He argues that it is through Baldwin’s portrayals of taboo sexuality that his greatest contribution to African American culture is made:

Baldwin’s contribution to African American culture lies in his ability to imbalance the cultural conception of normalcy and in his linking of normalcy to racist ideology. The concept of normalcy, according to Baldwin, is the legacy of a European American system of racism. White supremacist culture needs a norm in order to trust its own illusion of black inferiority and white supremacy. More precisely, it needs a sexual norm in order to perpetuate the myth of whiteness as a racial norm.

(“White Fantasies” 44-45)

Here, Ross is articulating the idea that by disputing the foundation upon which sexual oppression is justified – by recognising the concept of normalcy to be a social construct that is neither true nor false, disputing it as an objective and unalterable truth and viewing it instead as a shifting concept subject to the social morality of the period – Baldwin successfully undermines the foundation upon which racial oppression exists. His ability to destabilise the White American cultural concept of normalcy is predicated on his positive depictions of a wide array of sexual desires and practices conventionally pigeonholed as “perverse.” Debunking the notion of “sexual normalcy,” as outlined in chapter one of this thesis, – a euphemism for prescriptive sexuality that has its roots both in Pagan philosophy and Judeo-Christian morality – is therefore, most significantly, a way to call attention to the imbalance inherent in conceptions of race that view Whiteness as the norm and Blackness as in opposition to it (Foucault, *Use of Pleasure* 15, Dyer 1).

The more rare analysts that diverge from this position by placing primary importance on sexual themes in Baldwin’s novels largely tend to reduce his effort to dismantle identity markers (sexual labels and stereotypes), solely to occurrences of homosexuality in the novels. For example, there is much discussion in various individual analyses of Baldwin’s fiction about the relegation of women to secondary roles. Charlotte Alexander’s feminist reading of the women in Baldwin’s fiction is that they are the force that drives the men to homosexuality. She depicts what she terms Baldwin’s “mother/whore dichotomy” in her discussion of the main characters in his two novels, *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*: “This fascination and revulsion – or, intimacy – felt by David, Yves, Eric, Vivaldo . . . for women, rooted perhaps in early experiences with mothers or mother-figures now fixed in the memory, seems to be the psychic fact behind

their tendency to hold themselves ‘virginal’ or, at the other extreme, to prostitute themselves” (89-90). Elsewhere, although Kaplan provides an extensive commentary on the function of Baldwin’s female characters, she, similarly, ultimately concludes that in Baldwin “Women are, like Eve, the bearers of important but bitter knowledge for men, not the agents or vehicles of hope” (34). Clarence E. Hardy, in agreement, claims that “Baldwin erases women’s central place in reproduction and replaces it with an all too-familiar fixation on male prowess. Given his willingness to obscure the central place women hold in creation, it is perhaps not surprising that Baldwin sometimes seems so blind to the crucial question of sexism in his analysis of white supremacy” (71). These critics’ assertions imply that Baldwin’s decentralising of heterosexual normativity inadvertently sets up a new form of subjugation: gender oppression, and this viewpoint is explicitly rooted in a homo-centric reading of his work.

There is also much reductivism in the critical treatment of bisexuality in Baldwin’s work, as briefly addressed in chapter two of this thesis. Douglas Field, for example, argues that Baldwin “is careful to frame his ‘homosexual’ relationships through bisexuality” in an attempt to keep his masculine status intact, a state which, he argues, would otherwise be difficult to maintain given his support of the Black Nationalist Movement and its stance on homosexuality as a sign of “inauthentic Blackness” (“Looking for Jimmy” 458). Field points out the links between the Black Nationalist Movement and the Black Panther Movements which “increasingly came to view ‘passivity’ (i.e. non-aggression) with Uncle Tom behavior, which in turn became synonymous with homosexuality” (“Looking for Jimmy” 464). He also points to Baldwin’s endorsement of these organisations in later life and the near homophobic stance Baldwin himself had to take on in order to justify such support (“Looking for Jimmy” 469). Stefanie Dunning stresses the reasoning behind this acceptance of bisexuality as a less

stigmatised activity for Black Nationalists. She points out that this view “turns on an understanding of nationalism that recognizes the importance of reproduction as a stabilization of national identity. Sexual acts are ‘perverse’ when they do not serve the purpose of reproducing a homogenous (sexually and racially) nation” (96). She elaborates:

sex acts that make impossible the birth of “black” children are denounced by black nationalism; like miscegenation, homosexuality is undesirable because, as white and black homophobic thinking alike argues, it “endangers the normal development of our young toward their own duty to reproduce,” arguing that homosexuals are “selfish, unnatural, anathema to the building of a strong black nation. (98)

As a result of the Black Nationalist stance on homosexuality, these critics have interpreted bisexuality in Baldwin’s fiction as the perfect alibi for what they view as the author’s homosexual characters. They argue that these characters, by functioning as bisexual, escape the judgement of being gay and, therefore, unwilling to reproduce. These critics have argued that the characters in Baldwin’s fiction are still free to reproduce through their sexual interactions with women, thereby divesting themselves of the stigma of “perversion”: they are somehow “less” gay because of these interactions. This stance reinforces a reading of bisexuality as a buffer for Baldwin’s characters, and a position with which I will take issue throughout my analysis. Instead, this chapter will attempt to call attention to hitherto overlooked ways in which Baldwin works to establish bisexuality and other unconventional sexual practices as viable choices in their own right. It will posit that Baldwin’s novels, contrary to individual readings that reduce his efforts to either Black or homosexual concerns, do in fact provide coalition among socially-oppressed groups inclusive of both women and forms of love, eroticism and sexuality that fall outside of socially-acceptable forms of expression, and aims to add to the small body of research that highlights this effort.

It is important to preface my analysis of the literature with a brief discussion of the term “incest.” In its broader etymological sense, incest is defined as, “The crime of sexual intercourse or cohabitation between persons related within the degrees within which marriage is prohibited” (“Incest,” def. 1a). The words “within the degrees within which marriage is prohibited” are problematic and require further explanation, as standards of what determines such degrees – both biological and social considerations – vary according to historical period, social status and culture. In addition, this definition does not account for the various vernacular meanings that the word has taken on over the last century. For this reason, developing a single working definition of the term is difficult. In Baldwin’s fiction, Trudier Harris notes that incest is defined

not only as sexual contact between persons who are related by biological ties, but [as] sexual contact between individuals who have lived closely enough together to form extended families that are often bonded together more solidly than families with biological ties. Incest here can also mean the *desire* for sexual contact among the members of those closely knit extended families; it also refers to the hidden desires of members within biologically related families to engage in sex with each other.

(*Black Women* 76)

As in Harris’s definition, I will use the term with all of its figurative manifestations. I will consider it as a product of the current culture, rather than purely in the legal or anthropological sense. It will refer to representations not only of unsanctioned familial sexual intercourse, but also to depictions of the blurring of conventional social roles, both sexual and emotional, between family members and even groups of close friends. Much like the term “perversion” itself, incest has become a multifaceted and ever-changing subject of interest. In exploring both its straightforward and vernacular meanings, it is important to note that, in reality, the two meanings have little in common other than having been equally branded as intolerable social relationships. In order to clarify and develop this theme, this chapter will set out to explore

different instances of incestuous bonds including erotic relationships between groups of close friends, and a sexual relationship between two family members.

Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is famous for its introduction of the theme of homoerotic love through the sexual innuendo present between the protagonist John Grimes, a fourteen-year-old African American boy living in Harlem in the 1930's, and his pastor's nephew Elisha, a devout seventeen-year-old who has recently moved to town and who tries to convince John to acquire religious faith. A closer examination of the novel, however, discerns the emergence of Baldwin's engagement with the themes of bisexuality, group sexual desire, and incest. This interpretation is supported by two factors: the presence of the frequently overlooked character Ella Mae, the attractive seventeen-year-old granddaughter of a dedicated member of the church, and the boys' familial-like bond with one another.

Very early on in the novel, John finds himself sexually attracted to Elisha. The taboo of John's homoerotic desire is compounded by Baldwin's allusion to the two teenagers as having a familial bond. In fact, it is the language of the church itself that lays the foundation for this identification: from the beginning of the novel, at the first mention of Elisha, John thinks of him as "Brother Elisha" (13). The common titles of "brother" and "sister" to refer to members of the congregation evoke a familial connection between the two boys, thereby coding John's interest in Elisha as incestuous. Harris points out the recurrence of this motif in Baldwin's corpus: "Notions of brotherhood and sisterhood have pervaded all of Baldwin's works. Usually common in a religious context, the titles have nonetheless taken on other overtones at times" (*Black Women* 193). Significantly, John's familial reference to Elisha as "brother" early on in the novel is directly followed by a passage that emphasises his developing sexual attraction to him:

John stared at Elisha all during the lesson, admiring the timbre of Elisha's voice, much deeper and manlier than his own, admiring the leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday suit, wondering if he would ever be holy as Elisha was holy. But he did not follow the lesson, and when, sometimes, Elisha paused to ask John a question, John was ashamed and confused, feeling the palms of his hands become wet and his heart pound like a hammer. Elisha would smile and reprimand him gently, and the lesson would go on. (13)

Elisha too makes this familial identification. Harris remarks that "Elisha refers to John as his 'little brother' in the Lord and feels a responsibility for him even before John is converted" (*Black Women* 193-94). This brotherly bond takes on sexual significance, however, when Baldwin insinuates that, on an unconscious level, Elisha is in fact reciprocating John's homoerotic overtures. One day in church Elisha explains to John how he is trying to convince the girls at his school to redouble their spiritual commitment: "Boy, they don't know what to make of old Elisha because he don't go to the movies, and he don't dance, and he don't play cards, and he don't go with them behind the stairs. . . . And boy, some of them is real nice girls, I mean *beautiful* girls, and when you got so much power that *they* don't tempt you then you know you saved sure enough" (55). In this passage, Elisha ironically mistakes his own lack of sexual interest in girls for Christian devotion. The reader, however, is able to connect this perceived lack of attraction to beautiful girls, especially when coupled with Elisha's strong allegiance to "brotherhood," to his own subconscious homosexual desires. These desires become more obvious on the day he and John begin wrestling in church:

Elisha let fall the stiff gray mop and rushed at John, catching him off balance and lifting him from the floor. With both arms tightening around John's waist he tried to cut John's breath, watching him meanwhile with a smile that, as John struggled and squirmed, became a set, ferocious grimace. With both hands John pushed and pounded against the shoulders and biceps of Elisha, and tried to thrust with his knees against Elisha's belly. (52)

Shoshana Felman argues that violence can be an acting-out of displaced sexual desire: "It is indeed because sexuality is essentially the violence of its own non-simplicity, of its own inherent

‘conflict between two forces,’ the violence of its own division and self-contradiction, that it is experienced as anxiety and lived as terror” (111). With this thought in mind, this physical exchange between the boys, presented as an act of male rough-housing, takes on new meaning: the image of Elisha being “pushed and pounded” by John who is trying to “thrust” against him evokes associations of violence as a substitute for repressed sexual desire.

Furthermore, the erotic language and physical violence of this passage, a seeming transfer of D.H. Lawrence’s famous wrestling scene between Birkin and Gerald in *Women in Love* – in which the two men wrestle naked with one another in an erotic, physical expression of the mental and spiritual intimacy they feel for one another – is here transposed into a Black context in which religion, rather than women, acts as the factor that legitimises the homoerotic element (Lawrence 306-17). In fact, this sexually-driven encounter is itself made possible because for the boys it is inseparable from the religious experience itself. Religion in this context acts as both a cover for and an excuse for homosexual desire.

It is significant that this acting-out is occurring for both boys. It is Elisha, after all, not John, who makes the first move to engage in the physical exchange. As Harris points out, the sense of brotherhood between the two is further cemented after John’s religious conversion is complete, at which point “Elisha emphasizes that he is now John’s ‘big brother in the Lord’” (*Black Women* 194). John’s desire for his “brother” Elisha and what he perceives to be the reciprocation of this desire are what truly “save” him. Baldwin’s choice to have John’s step-father doubt his epiphany foreshadows John’s larger revelation that he desires males. If John has been “saved” in any way, it is through this unconscious realisation which has the power to lead him toward a life of moral autonomy and self-determination; a life in which he is able to move beyond social conventions and expectations.

Although, as Harris concludes, “Potential surfacing of sexual contact is repressed forever in the Brotherhood of the church . . . it has been insinuated enough to support Baldwin’s developing thesis” (*Black Women* 194). As Michael L. Cobb’s queer analysis points out, in the instance of the usage of this religious term, “brother,” the language of the church works to “render not religion but queer desire” (“Pulpitic Publicity” 292). This rendering takes place through the term’s interconnection of religion, homosexual and incestuous, or brotherly, desire. In this case, the use of the religious term “brother” provides John with the literal language he needs to express this desire. Cobb argues that such religious terms become “a strong language that simultaneously hides and expresses the queer within the more ‘normal’ narratives of violence, pleasure, and survival people understand as constituting the public, however intimate or pathological that public might be” (“Pulpitic Publicity” 293). In the case of the term “brother,” language entirely reveals the hidden sexual same-sex desire, couched in the safety of the rhetoric itself. Cobb points out: “Conversion is the way in which John could strive for the publicity of white straightness that is also the African American historical story. According to this logic, this conversion, however, must kill the queer effect, the generating qualities of blackness and injury in a public sphere” (“Pulpitic Publicity” 301). Ironically, it is Elisha who converts John. Therefore, it is the queer love object himself who comes closest to pushing John back into the White, heterosexual world. He is also the motivation for John to be saved. But, as Cobb highlights, “The promise of conversion fails, and not only does John remain queer, but his queerness is given a voice” (“Pulpitic Publicity” 301). Cobb’s reading therefore underscores Baldwin’s effort to legitimise an erotic relationship that falls directly outside of the White monogamous heterosexual norm.

The incestuous overtones between John and Elisha are, furthermore, more intricate than a straight homoerotic reading will allow. They are complicated by the presence in the novel of Ella Mae. Her introduction shifts the developing homoerotic tension into a bi-erotic register, serving to further emphasise Baldwin's effort to dismantle White heteronormativity as the only legitimate option for sexual desire and practice. Shortly after Baldwin establishes John's budding sexual desire for Elisha, this desire transmogrifies into sexual titillation at the thought of Elisha with Ella Mae. John's sexual attraction to Elisha expands to encompass what he believes is the sexual desire Elisha feels for her. The narrator describes John's reaction to the pastor's sermon about his discovery of finding Elisha and Ella Mae together one Sunday after church and his fear that the two are "in danger of straying from the truth":

And as Father James spoke of the sin that he knew they had not committed yet, of the unripe fig plucked too early from the tree – to set the children's teeth on edge – John felt himself grow dizzy in his seat and could not look at Elisha where he stood, beside Ella Mae, before the altar.

. . . And John wondered what Elisha was thinking – Elisha, who was tall and handsome, who played basketball, and who had been saved at the age of eleven in the improbable fields down south. *Had* he sinned? Had he been tempted? And the girl beside him, whose white robes now seemed the merest, thinnest covering for the nakedness of breasts and insistent thighs – what was her face like when she was alone with Elisha, with no singing, when they were not surrounded by the saints? He was afraid to think of it, yet he could think of nothing else; *and the fever of which they stood accused began also to rage in him.* (16, 17)<sup>5</sup>

John's sexual desire increases throughout this passage. In it, his desire for Elisha expands into an erotic fantasy in which he imagines Elisha's sexual titillation at the thought of being alone with Ella Mae. This intimation of arousal by proxy, however, is not the only form of sexual desire evident in the passage. John's highly sexualised, graphic description of Ella Mae's clothing and, in particular, his reference to her "insistent thighs" is also evidence of his own sexual desire for her. Consumed with wonder at what her face reveals when she is alone with Elisha, John's attraction, not only to Elisha but to the girl, is firmly established. John is titillated at the thought

of a sexual triad. Close analysis of the relationship between John and Elisha reveals that their sexual attraction for each other is most frequently manifested through their mutual sexual fantasy of the incorporation of Ella Mae into their sexual desires. This vision of homosexual desire by way of an opposite sex detour – Ella – places her in the position of substitute for another love object, but also points to the interchangeability of the boys’ sexual enjoyments, suggesting a primary bisexuality more than a primary homosexuality on both of their parts. Although this triad is never realised during the course of the novel, John’s sexual arousal introduces what will be a consistent theme in future Baldwin novels: the innocuous desire for or realisation of polymorphous sex.

Baldwin’s choice to situate the story in a fervent religious environment with tremendous social pressure to conform to it reinforces this reading of John’s transgressive sexual desires not only as non-harmful, but also as a legitimate alternative to the imposed heteronormative model of his childhood. The narrator describes his “earliest memories” as being “the hurry and brightness of Sunday mornings” as the family prepared to go to church; his father leading the family “in prayer before breakfast,” his mother wearing “the close-fitting white cap that was the uniform of holy women” (11). John’s memories of the walk to church are dominated by images that he has come to interpret as “Sinners along the avenue . . . men still wearing their Saturday-night clothes, wrinkled and dusty . . . muddy-faced; and women with harsh voices and tight, bright dresses, cigarettes between their fingers or held tightly in the corners of their mouths” (12). These perceptions of the opposition between what he observes to be his family’s upstanding way of life and the debauched life of the non-Church-goers on the street emphasises the impact his religious upbringing and the moral views of the people that surround him have had on his life. The novel’s first two lines emphasise the pressure John remembers as always having

had to face as a result of the religious expectations of his community: “Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself” (11). It is only once John has turned fourteen that, the reader learns, “he really [began] to think about it,” and his budding sexuality is forced to compete with the imposing religious messages and ways of life that encircle him (12). Rosalyn Diprose, in her seminal work of feminist philosophy *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*, argues that “sexed identity and difference is constituted through, rather than prior to, social exchange” (Introduction x).<sup>6</sup> She contends that individual identity does not exist prior to relations with others but that, in fact, the role of others is integral to the formation of our identity (102). Shane Phelan’s work of lesbian feminist theory *Getting Specific: Postmodern Lesbian Politics*, similarly maintains that identity is both fluid and negotiable, and is constituted by community (x, 81).<sup>7</sup> For both of these theorists, subjectivity is therefore established through relations with others, whether it be through contact with another individual or with one’s community at large. John’s bisexual desires, seen in this light, are created by, or at the very least, in part shaped by the repressive religious regime in which he is expected to live and conform. In his case, his manifestation of desire is an oppositional reaction to the constrictive social norms and practices with which he has always been and continues to be faced.

Further contributing to this sense that John’s sexual desires are not “perverse” but rather are understandable – a legitimate and non-harmful alternative to the imposed social regulations surrounding him – is the third-person-limited narrative style Baldwin chooses to implement throughout the course of the novel. Divided into three parts, each one narrated by a third-person narrator who is confined to the mind of the section’s protagonist, the story’s narrative

perspective lends an objectivity to the reader who is simultaneously granted access into the intimate thoughts and feelings of the character in question and remains outside of, and therefore distinct from, the story's action. This narrative technique allows the reader to at once sympathise with and embrace the transgressive while maintaining a larger sense of the philosophical questions at play surrounding the topic of John's developing sexuality and the social context that has helped to create it. If John has a chance at achieving personal transcendence of sexual norms by the novel's end, it is therefore not through the religious conversion he undergoes, but rather through the possibility of personal redemption in the form of sexual self-acceptance, even if that acceptance explicitly contradicts the values and regulations of his Harlem community: he is a person capable of feeling sexual desire for both males and females. Although John's sexual desires are largely predicated upon his fantasies of the various boys and men in his life, the conversion scene indicates Baldwin's belief in such redemption through a lack of self-denial and an acceptance of personal desire (Dievler 163). With this novel, Baldwin begins to establish one of the most profound ideological undercurrents of his literary corpus: his characters must be willing to pursue alternative paths, in this case sexual, to the regimes of social regulation of their time and place if they are to survive physically and/or emotionally intact.

In Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, set in Paris, about White expatriate gay society, the theme of polymorphous sexuality continues to be developed through the form of a love triangle between the protagonist David, his fiancé Hella, and his young Italian lover, Giovanni.<sup>8</sup> Baldwin's decision to write a novel devoid of Black characters has been interpreted in various ways by critics. Henderson astutely argues that the work "signified, for its author, a liberation from what had been construed, if not always assumed, as the traditional burden of the

Negro writer” that “black authors must write about what was euphemistically referred to as ‘the Negro problem’” (“Expatriation” 313). In this sense, she suggests that Baldwin took race out of the equation in order to focus his attention explicitly upon issues of gender and sexuality. For Henderson, this choice marked a significant shift in African American writing more generally, because it “freed the author to explore the complexities of gender, national, and sexual identity, uncomplicated by the issue of racialized blackness” (“Expatriation” 313). As Ross points out, however, Baldwin was not the first African American writer to so free himself. In 1952, Chester Himes’ *Cast the First Stone* with its cast of White characters and White point of view, dealt with uncannily similar themes, was written in a similarly claustrophobic setting – in this case a prison – and had a similarly tragic outcome (“White Fantasies” 20). For this reason, Ross believes Baldwin’s novel to be a political statement on the rights of Black men. He asserts: “Baldwin wanted to prove that once the black man becomes articulate, he does have something to say, and he can say it in whatever color he chooses” (“White Fantasies” 25). He argues, “If the characters had been black, the novel would have been read as being ‘about’ blackness, whatever else it happened actually to be about” and states, “Given the invisibility of whiteness as a racially constricted burden of desire . . . Baldwin also shows how even the most deeply taboo and widely outlawed desire can be cushioned by the privileged invisibility of whiteness” (“White Fantasies” 25). For Ross, “the color dilemma is [therefore] mapped onto the question of same-sex desire” in the novel (“White Fantasies” 33). He articulates, “The ‘white’ homosexual desire depicted in *Giovanni’s Room*, then, is also Baldwin’s inheritance, for it is the further thinking through of the moral dilemma foisted on him by the history of denial he shares with all the Davids of the world” (“White Fantasies” 33). Robert F. Reid-Pharr, in his analysis of homosexuality and the production of Black masculinity in the late twentieth century, takes this argument further,

arguing that “the question of Blackness, precisely because of its very apparent absence, screams out at the turn of every page” (616). Developing this theme, he suggests that “Baldwin’s explication of Giovanni’s ghost-like non-presence, his non-subjectivity, parallels the absence of the Black from Western notions of rationality and humanity while at the same time pointing to the possibility of escape from this same Black-exclusive system of logic” (616). It is clear from Ross and Reid-Pharr’s analysis that the text offers fascinating new insights into the racial dynamics of the United States. However, it is crucial that these readings not be couched solely in terms of same-sex desire when the novel equally engages with the theme of bisexuality and with other forms of polymorphous relationships. A queer reading that encompasses this larger range of forms of sexual desire and expression provides a more thorough analysis of Baldwin’s effort to not only de-stigmatise, but also to legitimise forms of love, eroticism and desire that are non-harmful.

While most critics read Hella as a cover for David’s homosexual desires, in fact she functions as both an object of desire for the protagonist and as a friend. Her presence forces the reader to contend with David’s ever-shifting sexual identity. Contrary to the claims of Reid-Pharr, who states that Hella is “a woman whom we only hear about in the second person until rather late in the novel” and therefore functions as little more than “a demonstration of [David’s] heterosexuality and his authenticity,” Baldwin establishes her as an insightful, intelligent, and fully-realised character in her own right from the outset (618). At the beginning of the novel, David, reflecting upon the reason why he asked Hella to marry him, recounts: “nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom. I suppose this was why I asked her to marry me: to give myself something to be moored to. Perhaps this was why, in Spain, she decided that she wanted to marry me” (5). The freedom that David refers to in this reflection on his past is

certainly the shame and discomfort he has experienced when faced with his sexual desires for men. However, his words also establish the centrality of Hella to his life; Hella has been a strong and principal figure in David's unstable world. At one point in the novel, David remembers a moment between them that catalyses, for the reader, the intimate connection that they share: "As we started up the stairs, the light went out and Hella and I began to giggle like two children. We were unable to find the minute-switch on any of the landings – I don't know why we both found this so hilarious, but we did, and we held on to each other, giggling, all the way to Hella's top-floor room" (133). Effectively, Hella is the stabilising force that holds David intact, preventing him from forever disappearing into the downward spiral of sexual shame in which he finds himself. When David is no longer able to repress his physical desire for the man he has been introduced to in Paris, Giovanni, it is the image of Hella that he turns to as his last defence against his homosexual desires. He reflects: "I hoped to burn out, through Hella, my image of Giovanni and the reality of his touch – I hoped to drive out the fire with fire" (122). Hella functions as the primary entity holding David's precarious heterosexual identity in place, but she is much more than just a tool with which David is able to validate this sense of himself. David's choice of words – to "drive out the fire with fire" – suggests his desire for Hella to be an equal match to his desire for Giovanni. This burning image supplants in the reader's mind a connection between David and Hella that is erotic: his pull to her is heated, passionate, and frenzied. When David is reunited with Hella after having spent months apart, he recounts: "I took her in my arms and something happened then. I was terribly glad to see her. It really seemed, with Hella in the circle of my arms, that my arms were home and I was welcoming her back there. She fitted in my arms, she always had, and the shock of holding her caused me to feel that my arms had been empty since she had been away" (120). David feels a sense of personal completion when he

embraces Hella. His reference not only to the feeling of “home” that overtakes him when he reaches out for her, but also to her physical body as fitting within his own, emphasises this realisation.

Later, when David ceases to feel physically attracted to her, even this lack of attraction is grounded in the recognition that desire is something that was once present, but is now lost. He reflects:

I don't know, now, when I first looked at Hella and found her stale, found her body uninteresting, her presence grating. It seemed to happen all at once – I suppose that only means that it had been happening for a long time. I trace it to something as fleeting as the tip of her breast lightly touching my forearm as she leaned over me to serve my supper. I felt my flesh recoil. Her underclothes, drying in the bathroom, which I had often thought of as smelling even rather improbably sweet and as being washed much too often, now began to seem unaesthetic and unclean. (158)

It is David's developing love for Giovanni that appears to terminate his desire for Hella. David reflects:

Everything was as it had been between us, and at the same time everything was different. I told myself I would not think about Giovanni yet, I would not worry about him yet; for tonight, anyway, Hella and I should be together with nothing to divide us. Still, I knew very well that this was not really possible: he had already divided us. (121)

While David's choice to not tell Hella the truth about his desire for men can be read as his need to remain closeted about his homosexuality, his words here imply that it is also his attempt to protect Hella from the pain and shame she will experience upon such a discovery – a side-effect of his once present romantic love for her. David's thoughts reveal his ambivalent position between two love objects.

As the novel progresses, David's increasing acceptance of his same-sex desires occurs in conjunction with his decreasing desire and availability for Hella, but despite this change, he continues to be forcefully drawn to her: “I was terribly aware of her body, and of mine. I walked over to her and put my head on her breast. I wanted to lie there, hidden and still. But then, deep

within, I felt her moving, rushing to open the gates of her strong, walled city and let the king of glory come in” (123). Although this passage seems to imply Hella’s immediate desire for sex and David’s reluctance for it, it also highlights David’s desire for physical closeness and emotional intimacy with her. Hella represents a way for David to hide from the world. Effectively, she is his “closet,” and the safety with which she provides him has a specifically amorous component. Even with the erosion of their sexual life, David continues to approach Hella for comfort, and is particularly drawn to her as a source of power and femininity. These attributes cause him to want to run away with her irrespective of his fading sexual attraction to her. He pleads to her: “Let’s just get out” (135). David’s compulsion to escape his life need not be inclusive of Hella since he has other outlets in which to mask his homosexual desires. He has, for example, continued to sleep with other women. For this reason, his choice to leave specifically with Hella serves as another indication of the central role she plays in his life.

Baldwin’s persistence in establishing Hella as a constant force in David’s life allows for a reading of the novel not as the tragic story of realised and later lost homosexual love, but rather as a tragic love triangle. David’s depleting sexual passion for Hella is not solely expressed in terms of his fading attraction to her, but is also clearly marked by his ambivalent feelings of attraction to, and revulsion for, Giovanni. Entering Giovanni’s room one evening, in a moment of loathing, David describes the way Giovanni’s breath makes him feel: “His touch could never fail to make me feel desire; yet his hot, sweet breath also made me want to vomit” (105). This repulsion for Giovanni’s breath symbolises David’s shame at becoming involved in a sexual relationship with a man, but it also highlights the startling similarity between David’s psychological reaction to Giovanni’s bodily odour and to Hella’s underclothes hanging in the bathroom. This reaction to the smells of both of his lovers, at different times and for different

reasons, points to David's perception that love is compounded by desire and disgust, and establishes both relationships as equally important to the narrator's personal development. These complex feelings inspired by both Hella and Giovanni underscore Hella not only as lovable, but also as having a very real intimate and loving connection with David. It is this relationship that provides the tension in the novel, serving as a valid threat to David's relationship with Giovanni.

Conventional accounts of Baldwin's depictions of "dirty" or smelly sex indicate this specific treatment of sexuality to be an extension of his political belief that the boundaries of sexual permissibility are unjust insofar as they are manifestations of religious and social norms rather than boundaries determined by ethical considerations. Shin and Judson explain how Baldwin repudiated such injustices by "reveling in the sensate" and "celebrating the messiness of bodily odor and fluid," thereby depicting "a convergence of bodies that opposes the formulations of white liberalism and black radicalism" (251). They point out how this position is in direct contrast to the racial uplift stance "based on industrial and agricultural education for young blacks, which is linked to the discrete, clean body" (251). However, if we choose to read the character Giovanni on this metaphorical level as a representation of Black America, as Shin and Judson's comments suggest, his room a dirty, messy array of chaos, his body the source of sickly sweet odours invoking associations of disease, Hella, by contrast, must be read as a representation of White America, inclusive of Booker T. Washington's sanitised portrait of White American society (Shin and Judson 251-52). If this is the case, then such a reading is complicated by David's perception of Hella's underclothes as inherently dirty: "unaesthetic" and "unclean." This depiction of both lovers as somehow foul and messy indicates what Shin and Judson refer to as Baldwin's offering of "the indiscreet body of funky armpits, drunkenness, and sexual arousal" as "expressions of the feminized, bohemian body that achieved greater and

greater political significance in the context of the civil rights movement in which Baldwin became increasingly involved” (252). Such an interpretation forces the reader to acknowledge David’s competing struggle between White and Black identifications, as well as between heterosexual and homosexual society. In this light, David functions as a polarising force, dividing identities.

Ultimately, David’s relationships with both Giovanni and Hella are loci of missed opportunity for the character to arrive at a place of personal redemption from his sense of sexual shame. In regard to Giovanni, David’s sexual passion for him and selfless desire for his happiness at all personal cost to himself is evidence of the positive nature of their love. Unconcerned with notions of monogamy and possession, Baldwin’s characterisation of David’s love for Giovanni presents their relationship as a true and honest form of romantic love. In regard to Hella, David’s admiration of her constant persistence in pursuing truth and honesty has a hold on him that is equally strong. She asks him: “What is it you’re not telling me? Why don’t you tell me the truth? Tell me the *truth*. . . . You’ve gone away somewhere and I can’t find you. If you’d only let me reach you –!” (161). For Hella, lies are the only unbearable reality. In her quest for the truth, Baldwin presents honesty as an expression of love to be another path to personal redemption from repressive and restricting social norms: one that will also remain undiscovered by David.

David’s fear of hurting what he loves, then, rather than his fear of homosexuality exclusively is what prevents him from achieving self-acceptance and personal happiness. His pejorative perception of “les folles,” the transvestites he encounters in Paris, both underscores this point and foreshadows David’s ultimate self-demise. In the bar where Giovanni works, David is given a warning by a transvestite; a man whom he perceives to be an “It,” “a mummy or

a zombie . . . something walking after it had been put to death” (38). When David tells the man: “Go to hell,” in response to his intuitive comment that Giovanni will be “*very dangerous*” for David, the man retorts by telling him: “Oh, no . . . I go not to hell . . . . But you, my dear friend – I fear that you shall burn in a very hot fire” (40). The transvestite’s words forecast David’s inevitable self-destruction; if he cannot have tolerance for the sexual differences of others, how will he learn to tolerate his own new-found homosexual desires? It appears that David so violently rejects the transvestite because he sees his own repudiated homosexuality in him, and he cannot bear it. David believes his desire for Giovanni is representative of the dark and “perverse” aspect of his nature. He worries: “The beast which Giovanni had awakened in me would never go to sleep again; but one day I would not be with Giovanni anymore. And would I then, like all the others, find myself turning and following all kinds of boys down God knows what dark avenues, into what dark places?” (84). David’s panic that his homosexual relationship with Giovanni will only lead to other more frequent aberrant behaviour underscores his discomfort with all displays of variant sexual practice. He believes his homosexual desires will eventually lead to other, intolerable sexual urges. David, in this sense, functions as the fictional embodiment of the “we” Baldwin refers to in the final three paragraphs of “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood.” However, even participating in considerate and pleasurable sex with the people of both genders he loves is threatening to David. Not only does this threat make his own happiness impossible, but the measures he takes to protect himself from it are ultimately responsible for the obliteration of Hella’s dreams and for Giovanni’s death.

In the end, David’s desire to be “clean,” to live out the acceptable sexual codes outlined by his society, proves to be the true pollutant in his life. His inability to recognise that it is not his bisexuality, but rather his inability to free himself from social judgements, explains the tragedy

of the novel. In this way, as Henderson believes, the text ultimately “aims to debunk the traditional American myths of innocence and purity” (“Expatriation” 326). David’s fear of judgement takes precedence for him over both the happiness of those he loves and his own. This obsession with social perception causes him to lie to himself by repudiating his sexuality and prevents him from finding happiness and from keeping Giovanni safe. While telling the truth to Hella is incommensurate with keeping her “safe” insofar as David’s lie about his sexual desires for men is what holds their relationship intact throughout the course of the novel, ultimately, Hella’s only chance at finding a reciprocal, and therefore fulfilling romantic relationship is predicated on David being honest about his shifting sexual desires.

For David, however, the sexual norms with which he has been raised in his middle-class neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York consistently continue to overpower the more tolerant and diverse reception to sexuality he discovers in Paris, France. His inability to break away from American judgements of transgressive sexuality as aberrant, however, since they so contradict and therefore inhibit his personal feelings of love and desire, serve only to cripple him throughout the novel, and lead both to his self-destruction and the destruction of his lovers. Baldwin’s choice to narrate the story in first-person, from David’s point of view, unlike in *Go Tell It* in which the third-person narration lends a degree of objectivity to the narrative, contributes to the confining, subjective sense of turmoil David experiences throughout the novel. The reader, stuck in David’s repressive mindset, must sink down into the abyss of tragedy and destruction with him as he fails to embrace an alternative path to the heteronormative conventional sexual expectations of his country of birth. In the end, Emmanuel S. Nelson argues “David’s failure to face himself and the existential void within him inevitably leads to moral and spiritual blindness” (28). His liberal-humanist reading argues that David “fails to achieve a valid

sense of self or span the chasm of otherness mostly because . . . he fails to forge his human identity through an acceptance of his sexuality and the suffering it entails” (28). While, indisputably, David’s failure to face himself keeps him in a place of suffering and despair, in light of Diprose and Phelan’s perceptions of identity as constituted through social exchange, Baldwin’s thesis can be read as more of a comment on the constrictive social norms and practices of American society than as a statement about David’s inability to forge a solid sense of personal identity grounded in alternative expressions of love and desire. While, as Nelson stipulates, David does deny his most basic urges in order to feel sexually “pure,” to feel a sense of social acceptance and belonging – a practice that only results in his emotional instability – his failure to achieve an integrated sense of self due to fear of the American social gaze therefore more crucially highlights, as Degout puts the matter, “the destructiveness of existing value systems,” that by portraying in literary form Baldwin hopes will produce social change (“Dividing” 433). There is no “true” identity that David can seek out for himself: only a sense of himself in relation to the society around him that shapes and determines his self-judgements. Baldwin’s second novel, thus, at once progresses his project to open up the notion of what are considered to be acceptable forms of love, eroticism and sexuality by presenting David’s physically realised bisexuality and regresses it, as we are left with the sense that for David, unlike John, there will be not even a possibility of redemption in the form of acceptance of personal desire that strays from the conventional heteronormative model. David is left trapped, longing to be free, unable to accept his sexuality even in the wake of the tragedy that this lack of acceptance has created.

Baldwin's third novel, *Another Country*, is in this regard far less tragic. Unlike in Baldwin's previous two novels, where escape from constrictive social norms does not seem to be a likely option for the characters, in this story, many of them are able to achieve a way out from under such judgements. Dievler summarises the novel's objective, declaring that in it Baldwin "portrays the devastation wrought in a country dominated by a categorically limited sexual culture and offers both a view of and the means of transport to 'another country,' beyond the confines of the narrow identity categories that imprisoned Americans in the immediate postwar period" (162-63). The sheer scope of alternative sexual relationships present in the novel marks a transition in Baldwin's comfort level in regard to taking on taboo sexual themes. In this novel, he explores sexual practices that range from realised and consummated acts of homosexuality and bisexuality, to acts of group sex and intimations of incest. Harris notes that the characters in *Another Country* "are all surprisingly humane and sophisticated about the sharing of bodies and beds" (*Black Women* 195). While it is not possible to address the sexual developments of all of the relevant characters in the space of this chapter, a close analysis of the intertwining relationships between the Black protagonist Rufus Scott, who dies tragically at the beginning of the novel, his younger sister Ida, and Rufus's White friend Vivaldo underscores Baldwin's effort to legitimise a wide array of unconventional forms of love, eroticism and sexuality that are non-harmful. Building on Dievler's observation, a queer reading of the novel highlights this attempt to break apart White heteronormativity as the only rightful option for sexual desire and practice, calling attention to both the relativistic nature of identity, and the ways in which it is shaped by the political and moral forces of the day.

Vivaldo's movement from self-denial to self-realisation, and eventually to self-acceptance of his polymorphous sexuality is a long, arduous one that begins with his declaration

to Rufus that he isn't "queer" (48). Despite this emphatic assertion, the reader is made privy to Vivaldo's sexual attraction to his friend. When Vivaldo arrives at Rufus's apartment late one afternoon, Rufus has not yet arisen from bed. Baldwin describes how a naked Rufus "threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. He raised his arms high and yawned and stretched" (27). Vivaldo's reaction to his friend's display is to tell him: "You're giving quite a show this afternoon" (27). Critics such as Toombs have interpreted this remark to be evidence of Vivaldo's long-time admiration and sexual desire for his friend's penis (119). This reading is plausible, given Baldwin's efforts to place other indications of Vivaldo's same-sex desires early on in the novel. The narrator, for example, describes other men's suspicion of Vivaldo's sexuality: "they . . . saw something in him which they could not accept, which made them uneasy" (56). Later, the reader also learns that, as a youth, Vivaldo has colluded in an act of homosexual violence with a group of friends. He confesses participating in this crime to his friend Cass:

One time, . . . we picked up this queer, a young guy, and we drove him back to Brooklyn. Poor guy, he was scared green before we got halfway there but he couldn't jump out of the car. We drove into this garage, there were seven of us, and we made him go down on all of us and we beat the piss out of him and took all his money and took his clothes and left him lying on that cement floor, and, you know, it was winter.  
(97)

This confession, calling to mind Felman's theory that violence is a substitute for repressed sexual desire, signals Vivaldo's revulsion for openly homosexual men. His confession begins with his use of the identity category "queer," assigning the label to his victim in such a way as to make it the man's defining characteristic. Although it is clear from the passage that Vivaldo has sympathy for what the young man has been subjected to, his words make evident his association of homosexuality with weakness and powerlessness. The young man in his story is someone to be pitied, someone whose gay desire is markedly different from the gay desire of the seven teens who rape him and leave him for dead: the gay desire of those men like Vivaldo himself who are

not identifiable as “queer.” In this instance, violence functions as a cover for homosexual desire for the friends. By beating up the “gay” man, they symbolically exorcise their own homosexual desires, and so render this desire permissible since its satisfaction takes place alongside its repudiation. The violence and cruelty of this act is not fully appreciated by Vivaldo even as he confides the story to Cass, but is rather camouflaged by his perpetual need to submerge his homosexual urges. Cass surmises how “he regarded it with a fascinated, even romantic horror, and he was looking for a way to deny it” (98). At the same time, however, for the first time, the confession marks Vivaldo’s acknowledgement of his sexual inclinations toward men.

Vivaldo begins to discover that his denial of these same-sex desires is deeply entangled with his suppressed racial fears. His long-time denial of his sexual desires leads him to find alternate ways in which to fulfil them. Baldwin describes the activities he participated in with Rufus when Rufus was still alive: “They had slept together, got drunk together, balled chicks together . . . . They had balled chicks together, once or twice the same chick – why? And what had it done to them? And then they never saw the girl again. And they never really talked about it” (116). Vivaldo’s recounting of his sexual experiences with Rufus signals his emerging need to piece together his sexual identity. He comes to believe that “Somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white boy because he was white. Somewhere in his heart Vivaldo had feared and hated Rufus because he was black” (116). The connection between racial fear and sexual denial is further contemplated by Vivaldo when he remembers a sexual exchange in which he participated with a “colored buddy” in the presence of an anonymous girl one night in a bar while on leave from the service in Munich:

Laughing, they had opened their trousers and shown themselves to the girl. To the girl, but also to each other. The girl had calmly moved away, saying that she did not understand Americans. But perhaps she had understood them well enough. She had understood that their by-play had had very little to do with her. But neither could it be

said that they had been trying to attract each other – they would never, certainly, have dreamed of doing it that way. . . . He had thought, Hell, I'm doing all right. There might have been the faintest pang caused by the awareness that his colored buddy was doing possibly a little better than that, but, indeed, in the main, he had been relieved. It was out in the open, practically on the goddamn table, and it was just like his, there was nothing frightening about it. (117)

Vivaldo's memory of this incident once more highlights his discomfort with openly expressing his same-sex desire. Again, his desire for intimacy with a male friend must be couched in the pretence of desire for a woman. Vivaldo's longing to see his Black friend's penis discloses his susceptibility to the White racist mythology that has historically aligned Black men with "hypersexuality": the Black penis as a source of pride and as Collins argues, what society has characterised as the defining Black male feature (161). However, the realisation of this longing instantly serves to dispel such myths of Black "authenticity," making it clear to Vivaldo the reality that there is no difference between his friend and himself.

Vivaldo's developing realisation throughout the novel that his dependence upon a number of restrictive social myths are preventing him from experiencing true intimacy and happiness marks the beginning of his redemptive process. He starts to take responsibility for his past actions; actions that were driven by his subscription to both racist and homophobic ideology. Contemplating Rufus's suicide, Vivaldo tells Eric: "I wondered, I guess I still wonder, what would have happened if I'd taken him in my arms, if I'd held him, if I hadn't been – afraid" (288-89). This expression of regret at having let his homophobia prevent him from being intimately available for his friend is Vivaldo's acknowledgment of the role he feels he played in Rufus's untimely suicide, and furthermore marks the beginning of his personal transformation from self-delusion to self-acceptance. Although Dievler argues that Vivaldo ultimately fails to overcome his sexual and racial intolerances, leaving him "lonely and unable to write" by the end of the novel, Vivaldo's relationship with his gay friend Eric suggests otherwise (176). When

Vivaldo wakes up in Eric's arms one day to find Eric watching him, the narrator explains his perception that "Eric really loved him and would be proud to give Vivaldo anything Vivaldo needed" (323). The reader is told: "With a groan and a sigh, with an indescribable relief, Vivaldo came full awake and pulled Eric closer" (323). After the two friends make love, the narrator describes how it was "as though he were . . . being shielded – by Eric's love. It was strangely and insistently double-edged, it was like making love in the midst of mirrors, or it was like death by drowning. But it was also like music, the highest, sweetest, loneliest reeds, and it was like rain" (324). This experience functions as an epiphany for Vivaldo, who opens himself up to the experience of sexual pleasure with a man, an experience he did not think possible of himself. Not only does it cause him to break free of the cultural sexual expectations he has until this point tried so desperately to live by, it also allows him to re-evaluate the meaning of his prior relationship with Rufus.

During Eric and Vivaldo's love-making, Vivaldo's thoughts return to Rufus, thoughts which shape and frame his experience with Eric. It is after awakening from a dream in which Vivaldo imagines Rufus chasing him that he realises he is clinging to Eric's body in bed. In this dream, Vivaldo has imagined Rufus pushing him up onto a wall and encouraging him to jump off it, only to discover he is standing on the very same bridge from which Rufus has committed suicide. He has imagined Rufus jumping through the air and impaling himself on a spike, then expressing his delight when Rufus opens his arms to him as he lies bloodied on the ground with glass about him (322). Vivaldo's dream can be read as a metaphor for his struggle to accept his homosexual desires. In it, Rufus is both instigator and accomplice in Vivaldo's painful "coming out" process. In the dream, Rufus encourages his friend to come to terms with his sexual desires: a sentiment that is solidified by his welcoming, yet bloodied, embrace. The dream appears to

function as a warning to Vivaldo that if he fails to embrace his homosexuality, he will find himself on the same path of destruction that ultimately destroyed his friend, and will end up like Rufus himself. When Eric and Vivaldo finish having sex, Baldwin describes Vivaldo's state of mind: "Vivaldo seemed to have fallen through a great hole in time, back to his innocence; he felt clear, washed, and empty, waiting to be filled. . . . He slowly began drifting off to sleep again, beams of light playing in his skull, behind his eyes, like the sun" (325-26). As Dievler observes, the affair between the two men can "be seen as a metaphorical rendering of Vivaldo's transcendence beyond a categorical approach to identity" (180-81). Baldwin's depiction of Eric as the most androgynous character in the novel further supports this reading. Vivaldo describes Eric's face as one "which suggested, resonantly, in the depths, the truth about our natures," adding that Eric's "masculinity was defined, and made powerful, by something which was not masculine. But it was not feminine, either" (278). These observations indicate Eric's ability to defy categorisation. If David is the "we" Baldwin refers to in "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," Eric is the quintessential "freak" himself, embodying the polarising characteristics that mark all of our identities. Vivaldo's sexual involvement with Eric, therefore, symbolises his developing ability to overcome his homophobia, moving him toward a place of sexual self-acceptance inclusive of alternative forms of desire and practice.

Furthermore, as Feldman argues, it is Vivaldo's experience with Eric that ultimately allows him to understand "Ida's story," and to come to the realisation that he is in love with her (99-100). He tells him, "you're very beautiful, Eric. But I don't, really, dig you the way I guess you must dig me. You know? . . . So what can we really do for each other except – just love each other and be each other's witness? And haven't we got the right to hope – for more? So that we can really stretch into whoever we really are? Don't you think so?" (333). It is Vivaldo's

acceptance of and subsequent living-out of his homosexual desires that ironically lead to their deterioration. No longer afraid of the consequences of being marked with a homosexual identity, Vivaldo frees himself to love a woman: Ida.

Vivaldo's love for Ida is established early on in the novel, long before he has the courage to confront the reality of his homosexual desires. He thinks: "*Oh, God, make her love me, oh God, let me love*" (123). This love, however, is initially infused with Vivaldo's repression of his past homosexual inclinations and racial prejudice. While Vivaldo tells Richard: "I don't think Ida's color has a damn thing to do with it, one way or the other," referring to his attraction to her, the issue of race is always present in their relationship, retarding their chances of emotional intimacy with one another (135). One night, in the heat of passion, Vivaldo admits to Ida: "I love your colors. You're so many different colors" (150). This preoccupation with Ida's colours is more than just visual. During one of their sexual encounters, as described by the narrator, Vivaldo, reflecting on the experience, thinks: "It was not like the thrashing of the night before, when she bucked beneath him like an infuriated horse or a beached fish. . . . he felt that he was travelling up a savage, jungle river, looking for the source which remained hidden just beyond the black, dangerous, dripping foliage" (151-52). These words, unlike Vivaldo's previous verbal declaration about Ida's colours, are infused with a series of shifting ideas and attitudes about violence and tenderness, power and powerlessness, submission and dominance. They reflect Vivaldo's varying views of Ida as animalistic, savage and mysterious: perceptions that call to mind White racist sentiments of Black slaves. In this imaginary representation of gender relations, Vivaldo's admission that just one night earlier Ida seemed to him to be the literal embodiment of a wild animal – a bucking horse or beached fish – invokes associations of chattel slavery when Blacks were viewed as animalistic property. Furthermore, Vivaldo's thoughts align

him with the White slave master of the plantation, perceiving the Black woman to be nothing more than a primitive, violent and morally incapacitated animal. His description reveals his susceptibility to believing Black sexual stereotypes, in this case, the stereotype of the sexually-available Black female: as Day describes it, a person viewed as a sub-human object ready for White male consumption and exploitation (32). Ida, however, is not solely derogated and dehumanised by Vivaldo in this passage. His preoccupation with his own need to be attentive signals his desperation to remain close to her; to not let her, in his mind, exist solely as a Black sexual stereotype. Although Vivaldo does find it impossible to disassociate Ida from this typecast, he is determined to confront these harmful, racist myths in an attempt to bridge the colour divide between them as a means to secure their love. He thinks: "I'd give up my color for you, I would, only take me, take me, love me as I am!" (260). This plea to be judged not by the colour of his skin, but by his individualism, foreshadows his love for Ida as the source of his personal redemption, as Vivaldo is aware that it is only through an ability to see past the racial prejudices that surround Ida that he will be able to overcome the sexual prejudices he is so afraid to confront in himself.

Ida's journey throughout the course of the novel charts a similar path from bigotry and ignorance to enlightenment. Through Ida, Baldwin's ideas about sexual tolerance manifest themselves beyond the realm of male homosexual desire to include women, bisexuality and incestuous love. Contrary to Toombs' declaration that "The women characters, used as pawns by men and by Baldwin, lack depth, self-perception, and self-purpose," and that their primary purpose in the novel is "to reveal the deeply complex nature of being gay in American at mid-twentieth century," Ida is a female character who occupies a central place in the narrative and whose ideas shift and progress throughout the course of the novel (106). Her presence not only

causes us to confront multiple sexual stereotypes that have negatively impacted on Black women since the days of slavery, but also functions as an example of the human potential to overcome racist mythology.

At the beginning of the novel, Baldwin characterises Ida as the militant Black Nationalist movement personified. She repudiates all White value systems, including a rejection of homosexuality - an act, as aforementioned, viewed by the movement as a kind of abnormality that signalled Uncle Tom behaviour or, in other words, a type of Black passivity (Field, "Looking for Jimmy" 462). Her discontent with White masculinity is most apparent in her daily interactions with Vivaldo. At one point in the novel, when she and Vivaldo are having a fight, she pronounces: "All you white bastards are the same" (145). Later, when the two are walking and discussing Rufus's relationship with Rufus's White girlfriend, Leona, and Rufus's subsequent death, it is clear that she views White women in the same terms. She proclaims that "there's nothing like a Southern white person, especially a Southern *woman*, when she gets her hooks into a Negro man. . . . And now she's still living, the filthy white slut, and Rufus is dead" (225). Ida's frustration with White society manifests itself most commonly in the form of racist invectives about Vivaldo himself. At various points throughout the novel, she refers to him as a "white motherfucker," and as a "big, white, liberal asshole" (237). Ida uses Whiteness as grounds for derogating and stereotyping all of the people who surround her. Her life experiences have led her to the conclusion that all Whites view Blacks as animalistic savages. She tells Vivaldo: "I know how white people treat black boys and girls. They think you're something for them to wipe their pricks on" (273). Ida's hatred for the White forces that she holds responsible for her oppression, propel her to take refuge in the dogma of the radical Black Nationalist movement. She decides early on to embrace her "Blackness."

In addition to looking to Black “authenticity” as a coping mechanism, Ida also looks to her brother Rufus for validation, security, and protection. In fact, Baldwin depicts Ida’s attachment to Rufus as erotically charged. Harris maintains that Ida’s “nearly fanatical perpetuation of Rufus’ memory hints at the incestuous connection between brother and sister” (*Black Women* 97). She describes their relationship as “the psychological antecedent for what becomes a major theme in Baldwin’s later fiction,” asserting that Ida “worships her brother,” and that “To Ida, Rufus is the quintessential big brother. . . . Rufus becomes a godlike figure to Ida personally and symbolically in that he dies in order that she may live, grow, and blossom into her full potential” (*Black Women* 97, 100-01). Harris further claims that Ida’s “major objective is to live for Rufus” (*Black Women* 102). In fact, she argues, this objective appears to have been mutual. When Rufus is still living, Harris asserts, “it was just as important for [him] to keep the romance going with her as it was for her to believe in that romance, even if it meant he had to borrow money from Vivaldo to play the big man with his younger sister” (*Black Women* 107). In one particularly revealing exchange between Ida and Vivaldo, in which she refers to her brother, she tells him: “He was terribly attractive, wasn’t he? I always think that that was the reason he died, that he was too attractive and didn’t know how – how to keep people away” (224). These sexualised memories of Rufus are linked to Ida’s own search for personal redemption; in her case, redemption from the racial prejudice that has so consumed her. As Harris points out, “Incestuous contact is sometimes a way for characters to try to ‘save’ themselves, almost in a religious context, from other unpleasant circumstances in which they may be involved” (*Black Women* 169). Ida’s romantic attachment to her brother works to replace and therefore mask the sexual desire she develops for Vivaldo, a desire that because of his whiteness she is determined to reject.

As the narrative continues, however, Ida's sublimation fails as her desire for Vivaldo overtakes her. Unable to resist him, when they are out together she tells him: "You are the cutest thing I've ever seen" (128). Although she believes she's "got to watch [her] step with [him]" because she has "never loved a white man," she cannot dismiss her sexual attraction to him, and more crucially the love that is developing between them (150). The narrator describes Ida's perception of him the first time they have sex: "She touched him for the first time with wonder and terror, realizing that she did not know how to caress him" (151). She tells Vivaldo: "It never happened to me before – not like this, never" (153). Although it is clear from this description that Ida feels she does not know how to go about making love to Vivaldo, her experiences with him prove to go beyond any sexual gratification she has known before. Baldwin describes the closeness of their bond: "They ate and drank and talked and laughed together, and lay naked on their narrow bed in the darkness . . . and tasted each other's lips and caressed each other in spite of the heat, and made great plans for their indisputable tomorrow. And often fell asleep like that, at perfect ease with one another" (271).

Embedded in Baldwin's portrayal of Ida and Vivaldo's relationship is the suggestion that love can provide the means to overcoming racial prejudice. By the end of the novel, as a result of her love for Vivaldo, Ida's mindset has shifted from racial hatred to not only racial tolerance, but to a genuine acceptance for the racial "other," expressed in the form of an embracing of romantic love beyond racial demarcation. Although she tells Cass, "Love doesn't have as much to do with it as everybody seems to think" and that therefore she cannot ever see herself marrying Vivaldo, she makes clear that she "[doesn't] care about the color of his skin," and remains sexually and emotionally involved with him (292). Her choice, as she describes, is based on her belief that excepting Rufus, Vivaldo is the best man she has ever known (292). In the end, as Dievler

asserts, Ida “realises how society’s racial and sexual configurations have damaged her and prevented her from loving” (177). In this regard, her love for Vivaldo allows her to overcome her own violent and oppressive history. Her relationship with him propels her to choose love and honesty with a White partner irrespective of the social consequences that will result from such a choice. Although this ideological position is the same one that becomes apparent by the end of *Giovanni’s Room*, insofar as it critiques notions of authenticity and lays out a universalist human experience that transcends racial and gendered lines, in this novel, Baldwin provides a glimpse into this standpoint put into practice. While it is true that Ida and Vivaldo’s relationship is imbued with difficult personal and social consequences as a result of their differing skin colours, it is also a path to overcoming oppression and to self-acceptance. In this novel, then, unconventional relationships can be functional and rewarding possibilities that are not only personally gratifying but that also contribute to a rethinking of social norms grounded in discriminatory practices.

Baldwin’s decision to set the story in cosmopolitan, late 1950’s New York and to write it specifically from the perspective of a group of Bohemian artists living in Greenwich Village underscores his effort to continue to expand the boundaries of what constituted legitimate forms of love, eroticism and sexuality by incorporating new and increasingly transgressive expressions of sexual desire and practice as exhibited by this group of eclectic, sexually-adventurous characters. His choice to write from a third-person omniscient point of view furthers this effort by giving equal weight to the thoughts and experiences of all of the primary characters, both male and female. While the novel begins from Rufus’s perspective – the narrator describes how “He was hungry, his mouth felt filthy. He realized too late . . . that he wanted to urinate. And he was broke. And he had nowhere to go” – it soon shifts to Vivaldo’s point of view – “Vivaldo felt

a chill go through Leona's body" – and later to the perspectives of multiple other characters including Cass, Eric and Ida (9). This interweaving technique, in and out of the various central characters' points of view, unlike in Baldwin's first two novels, functions as an egalitarian method of narration, part of the political aesthetic of the novel, that works stylistically to underscore the writer's thematic egalitarian sexual ethics. By granting us access to the inner thoughts and feelings of all of the major characters in the story, Baldwin validates multiple alternative points of view and ways of living, an undertaking that serves to effectively deconstruct the idea of the "other" as aberrant, thereby calling attention to the ways in which particular customs and behaviours have historically dominated the social understanding of what is acceptable, and as a result have become naturalised as the only legitimate way of living.

For many critics, Baldwin's next novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, signals a departure from this progressive ethical trajectory with respect to his engagement with sexual themes. This perspective has arisen out of the critical opinion that Baldwin prioritises race over sexuality in this, his penultimate novel published in 1968. Field stipulates that the novel was "more often than not dismissed and ignored by critics" because it was interpreted as "Baldwin's attempt to reconcile his sexuality with black radical politics," a racial stance that Field maintains Baldwin was pressured into by Black Nationalists ("Looking for Jimmy" 469, 471). Field also argues that this novel is "In sharp contrast to criticism that Baldwin offered [about] love as a social and political palliative in *Another Country*" ("Looking for Jimmy" 470). In *Tell Me*, Field claims, this "is explicitly 'not enough' to deal with the racism between Leo and his white lover, Barbara" ("Looking for Jimmy" 470). While in this novel – set primarily in Harlem and, once again, Greenwich Village – Baldwin returns to a first-person style of narration, confining the

reader to the point of view of the story's Black protagonist Leo Proudhammer, a close look at the array of loving sexual relationships prevents a reading of it as Baldwin's unilateral attempt to reconcile sexuality with Black radical politics. Instead, the novel warrants critical reconsideration as it is within it that some of the author's greatest achievements are made with respect to sexual themes. While critics have focused on Leo's relationship with the young militant Black Christopher as evidence of Baldwin's support of the Black Nationalist movement, this reading is complicated by an examination of Leo's love attachments and sexual relationships with a variety of characters, most notably his relationships with his older brother Caleb and his White lover Barbara. In fact, *Tell Me* presents an abundance of sexual possibilities that continue the work of decentring and denaturalising White monogamous heterosexuality put forth in his previous novels, and similarly, continues to question the viability of condemning as "perverse" forms of love, eroticism and desire that are non-harmful and considerate. The plethora of sexual potentialities is clearly recognisable in one particularly revealing scene in which Leo rides in a cab with a group of close friends:

Barbara's head was on Jerry's shoulder, Madeleine had her hand in mine, Fowler whistled as he drove, Matthew's thigh was against my thigh. Perhaps for the first time, certainly not for the last, I had a sudden, frightening apprehension of the possibilities every human being contains, a sense of life as an arbitrary series of groupings and regroupings, like the figures – if one can call them figures – in a kaleidoscope. I think we all felt this, in our different fashions. Barbara hid her head in Jerry's warm and gentle shadow. Fowler whistled, Matthew hummed, shifting his weight from time to time, Madeleine held my hand. (144)

This portrait of a group of both male and female close friends of various racial and ethnic backgrounds all relying upon and enjoying one another paints a verbal portrait of Baldwin's sentiment in "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," that we are all androgynous and that there is only one human experience. The scene indicates the personal and social potential of

participating in non-harmful and considerate polymorphous forms of love, eroticism and sexuality, inclusive of even those branded the most socially taboo.

Arguably the most taboo of these depictions is the sexual relationship that develops between Leo and his older brother Caleb. This literal representation of brotherly incest calls to mind the metaphorical brotherly incest between John and Elisha in *Go Tell It*. Baldwin's full-circle return to this construct, in which the stakes are now much higher, is brought forward here in an exceptionally tender manner. At the time the brothers' relationship becomes sexual, Leo is fourteen and Caleb is twenty-one. Caleb is Leo's best and, for a long while, only friend, as well as his teacher and older brother. As an adult looking back, Leo recounts: "He was my touchstone, my model, and my only guide" (14). Caleb is the first person to treat Leo like a man and to introduce him to the reciprocities of emotional relationships. Leo explains: "I did everything I could to live up to his expectations: not to be a crybaby, to fight back, no matter how big the adversary was . . . to wash myself, even in the coldest weather, to be respectful to old folks (if they were colored), to do my schoolwork right . . ." (92). This vulnerability, expressed through the idealisation of his older brother, has a reward: emotional intimacy with Caleb manifested in the form of physical closeness. In the novel, the adult Leo lingers over the memory of the physical intimacy the boys shared as children. He describes lying in bed at night, at ten years of age, curled up against his older brother:

I just remember the sound of his voice in the darkness, the breathing of our parents in the other room, the ferocious industry of the rats which we heard in the kitchen, in the walls, which sometimes took place beneath our bed, the music coming from another apartment, the frost on the windows, so thick sometimes that one could not see out, the blunt, black shape of the kerosene stove which had now been extinguished, for safety and thrift, and Caleb's arm around me, his smell, and the taste of chocolate, and the electrical sound of paper. (92)

Leo finds comfort, safety, and pleasure in the arms of his older brother. He is drawn in by him, attracted to his skin and to his smell, associating him with delights and pleasures that appeal to a little boy.

The movement from this parental role that Caleb fulfills for Leo, to lover, does not take place between the brothers until years later. It is not until there has been a role-reversal in which Leo has become Caleb's protector that the act of physical incest occurs between them. When Caleb returns home a broken man, after having been unjustly accused of stealing and having been put away in prison for years, Leo, now fourteen, describes the figure his brother has been reduced to: "Caleb, had become, for me, an object lesson. Furtively, I watched him. Covertly, against my will, God knows, I judged him. My brother. My brother. Big, black, beautiful, he should have been a king. . . . And now there was something in Caleb lonely and sad, shrinking and hysterical. It broke my heart to watch him. He had been beaten too hard" (158). Leo, an adolescent, is old enough to have an understanding of the oppressive forces his brother has faced in the outside world. He is already beginning to understand his family's place in the world as distinct and separate from the White majority surrounding them. We are compelled to contemplate what lessons young Leo is taking away from the story of his brother's downfall. Having already been witness to his brother's arrest by White police officers for a crime that he had not committed, then seeing him return in this broken state from prison, Leo is all too acutely aware of the deadly effects of the racism he is subject to as an African American male. This realisation is the catalyst for Caleb's expression of sexual love toward his brother, and it is also the impetus behind Leo's reciprocation of his brother's sexual desire for him.

Awakened by the sound of Caleb's weeping on the night of his arrival home, Leo, feeling that *he* is now the big brother, becomes enraged with both the world and with God at what has happened to Caleb. His thoughts are significant enough to merit quoting in their entirety:

I fell into a stormy sleep, and awoke to find myself, like Jacob with the angel, struggling with a very different god, and one yet more tyrannical, the god of the flesh. My brother held me close, and he was terribly excited; his excitement excited me. I was briefly surprised, I was briefly afraid. But there was really nothing very surprising in such an event, and if there was any reason to be afraid, well, then, I hoped that god was watching. He probably was. He never did anything else. I knew, I knew, what my brother wanted, what my brother needed, and I was not at all afraid – more than I could say for God, who took all and gave nothing; and who paid for nothing, though all His creatures paid. I held my brother very close, I kissed him and caressed him and I felt a pain and wonder I had never felt before. My brother's heart was broken; I knew it from his touch. In all the great, vast, dirty world, he trusted the love of one person only, his brother, his brother, who was in his arms. And I thought, Yes. Yes. Yes. I'll love you, Caleb, I'll love you forever, and in the sight of the Father and the Son and the fucking Holy Ghost and all their filthy hosts, and in the sight of all the world, and I'll sing hallelujahs to my love for you in hell. I stripped both of us naked. He held me and he kissed me and he murmured my name. I was full of attention, I was full of wonder. My brother had never, for me, had a body before. And, in truth, I had never had a body before, either, though I carried it about with me and occasionally experimented with it. We were doing nothing very adventurous, really, we were only using our hands and, of course, I had already done this by myself and I had done it with other boys: but it had not been like this because there had been no agony in it, I had not been trying to give, I had not even been trying to take, and I had not felt myself, as I did not, to be present in the body of the other person, had not felt his breath as mine, his journeys as mine. More than anything on earth, that night, I wanted Caleb's joy. His joy was mine. When his breathing changed and his tremors began, I trembled, too, with joy, with joy, with joy and pride, and we came together. (162-63)

In this passage, it becomes clear that the grim reality of Caleb's life as a Black man in America is ultimately, if only indirectly, responsible for his sexual relationship with his brother. The reason for this fraternal bond developing into a sexual one is placed on White society itself: Caleb and Leo's societal exclusion is the motive for the socially-construed "inappropriate" level of intimacy between them. In fact, as Leo himself voices, it is the "agony in it" – the pain that Caleb has experienced at the hands of White racists, so identifiable to Leo himself – that fuels their sexual passion. As with John and Elisha's erotic encounter, religion is a powerful force that

comes into play for Leo, although in this case, it is not in the foreground, but is rather sublimated by Leo's feelings of love and intimacy for Caleb. In this scene, as Harris points out, incestuous expression becomes a way for the characters to try to "save" themselves (*Black Women* 169). Caleb becomes Leo's new religion – his anger and bitterness for "the Father and the Son and the fucking Holy Ghost and all their filthy hosts" is transmogrified into sexual intimacy with his brother and the subsequent gratification he feels as a result of this experience. Although the love between Leo and Caleb is a life-affirming and ecstatic occurrence for the brothers, it is the racist, degenerate state of the nation that has "perverted" Caleb and that has forced the brothers to find solace only in each other. Caleb's abusive past experiences cause in him an intense need coupled with an intense distrust, and Leo finds himself in the position of the only person who can satisfy Caleb's needs and loneliness: he is a healer, the only possible one for Caleb, and his brother's helpless desire is more sexually stimulating for him than any past desire has ever been.

Leo, now in the self-appointed position of his brother's protector, is the one who takes the active role in this sexual union. Although he is legally a minor, and his brother is committing an incestuous crime by having sexual relations with him, Leo's proactive role in their sexual exchange is an assertion of his personal agency. Warren J. Carson argues, "In an effort to give Caleb back a measure of his manhood, Leo assumes the role of the 'big brother'" (222). It is a means to a new kind of spiritual fulfilment and peace for Leo and, to a degree, for Caleb as well. Engaging in a sexual relationship with his brother is Leo's attempt to reject a religious upbringing that has not sufficiently served to help lift him out of his unhappy circumstance and is a way in which for him to develop his own sense of what constitutes a positive sexual relationship. In Leo's world of oppression and racism, poverty and struggle, intimacy with Caleb is the one outlet afforded him for psychological and spiritual peace.

After this night of intimacy with his brother, further evidence of the positive, affirming nature of their sexual experience is revealed as Caleb wakes a new man. His once broken spirit is restored, and he approaches life with a renewed sense of vigour and joy, turning on the kitchen radio, dancing and laughing with his mother, and agreeing to accompany his father to the shipyard to begin working in the morning. The relationship between the brothers is only strengthened the next day. Leo remembers waiting at a bus stop together with Caleb and thinking: “He was looking at me. He looked worried and thoughtful and happy: no one had ever before looked at me with such a concentrated love. It stunned me, as I say, for he made no effort to hide it. It made me very proud, and it frightened me” (170). Perceiving the intensity of Caleb’s love, Leo feels able to confide to his brother his lifelong dream to become an actor, a decision that results in him receiving his older brother’s approval. Caleb tells Leo that he is proud of him (170). For the first time, Leo feels like his brother’s contemporary: “it was only now that Caleb could talk to me without remembering that he was talking to a child. I was determined to make him know that I was no longer a child. I didn’t understand everything he was saying, and yet, in another way, I did. I was concentrating on not being a disappointment to him: I wanted him to know that he could lean on me” (175). Leo and Caleb’s sexual experience proves to be an equalising force for the two brothers. It is the catalyst that establishes Leo’s rite of passage into manhood.

Although Leo and Caleb’s sexual relationship has been brought about by the sexual abuse inflicted upon Caleb by White men, Baldwin’s choice to highlight the life-affirming aspects of the boys’ sexual expression with one another allows us to interpret the experience as a positive one. Sex between the brothers transforms racial exploitation into affirmation via non-normative sexual practices. While Carson argues that the love the brothers share “only temporarily can

abate the disillusionment that threatens to destroy them both,” this love nonetheless serves to redeem each of them in distinct ways (223). For Leo, the experience with Caleb plays a crucial role in his future sexual development, transforming his understanding of sexuality into a more fluid one, and making possible for him the experience of loving other individuals who by societal standards are not considered to be suitable sexual partners for a Black man such as himself.

This more open understanding of acceptable romantic partnerships is first expressed for the young adult Leo in the form of an unconventional triad that develops between himself and the White couple, Barbara and Jerry, when he takes a small-town job working in a theatre one summer. Harris argues that the relationship between the three friends becomes so close that it resembles a familial bond: “Barbara, Leo, and Jerry all share a house when they are working in summer theatre in New Jersey. Barbara and Jerry are lovers and share the downstairs bedroom; Leo sleeps upstairs. All three share food, social outings, and their desires to become successful in the theatre; they therefore form a family group” (*Black Women* 195). The townspeople however, condemn this unconventional living arrangement. Leo explains:

When Jerry and I walked through town together, for example, everyone assumed we were queer – there couldn’t be any other reason for our walking together; and so we sometimes walked with our arms around each other. . . . Of course, when Barbara and Jerry walked through town, Barbara had only to put her head on Jerry’s shoulder for them both to become, at once, a pair of lewd and abandoned lovers; while for the three of us, walking together and holding hands, they had no words at all. (104)

Leo’s past experiences with his brother have left him unaffected by derogatory interpretations of his relationship with Barbara and Jerry. In fact, for Leo this assumption of a stereotyped identity defuses its toxic value by making it something with which Leo can play. He is content to let others indulge in whatever disparaging assumptions they may have about him and his friends, and even goes as far as to deliberately provoke their misjudgements in an effort to parody them,

underscoring his lack of interest in upholding arbitrary and discriminating codes of sexual conduct.

Although Leo does acknowledge the difficulty in being branded a sexual and therefore social outcast – he expresses that dealing with such people “was very, very hard” and that they “avoided them as much as possible” – it does not prevent him from pursuing a romantic relationship with Barbara throughout the course of his life (268). Leo describes his first sexual experience with her as the two camp out in the mountains alone one night: “we were not only joined to each other, but to the night, the stars, the moon, the sleeping valley, the trees, the earth beneath the stone which was our bed, and the water beneath the earth. With every touch, movement, caress, with every thrust, with every moan and gasp, I came closer to Barbara and closer to myself and closer to something unnameable” (278). This elevating experience, unlike anything Leo has previously experienced, forms the groundwork for his enduring love with Barbara. While the racial prejudices the couple face do succeed in preventing them from having a life with one another, Leo is unapologetic in his love for her. In fact, both Leo and Barbara are adamant that they are happier being apart and loving each other than they would be having denied their love. When Barbara is asked whether she would be better off without Leo because he is Black, she is steadfast in her belief that she is much happier with him in her life: “I’m better off . . . because at least I’m not lying now” (210). Barbara, like Hella, values honesty and truth beyond any other measure. Part of this dedication to honesty includes her unwavering acceptance of Leo’s bisexuality. She states: “I’m *glad* you know you’re bisexual. Many men don’t” (211). Furthermore, she asserts that she only wants to “*share*” Leo’s life, not control it or own it (211). This expression of unconditional romantic love is reciprocated by Leo. Reflecting back on the

course of his life, Leo is resolute in his claim: “I loved Barbara. I knew it then, and I really know it now” (208).

The freedom that Barbara and Leo’s love provide for them, coupled with the social forces that inevitably come between them, also allow for other opportunities throughout the course of the novel from which Leo comes to further explore his ever-shifting sexuality. When he first meets Black Christopher, the militant Black radical who will later become his lover, he explains the effect the young man has on him: “If I was afraid of society’s judgment, he was not: ‘Fuck these sick people. I do what *I* like.’ Or, laughing: ‘You afraid that people will call you dirty old man? Well, you *are* a dirty old man. You’re *my* dirty old man, right? I dig dirty old men” (339). Despite the large age difference between the two men, Black Christopher’s assertion that he does what he likes, not what others expect of him, places him in the position of mentor to Leo, who struggles to live out Black Christopher’s beliefs throughout the course of his life. By taking on the label of “dirty old man” and reassigning its value as “sexy,” Black Christopher detoxifies it for Leo. Baldwin characterises this repudiation of social expectations by Black Christopher as a noble choice. His appropriation of the label “dirty old man” serves to free Leo of any negative associations he may have of himself as a consequence of his sexual desires and choices. After their first long conversation, Leo verbally labels himself a sexual “pervert” to Black Christopher. He declares: “*I’m* the monster here,” to which Black Christopher responds: “You? You’ll have to prove it to me” (345). Here, Leo seems to be exorcising his self-representations, trotting them out so that Black Christopher can defuse them through appropriation and denial. Christopher’s point of view alleviates in Leo any remaining insecurities he may have as a result of his unconventional sexual choices. Field points out that Black Christopher provides Leo with

“physical protection and emotional security, functioning as both bodyguard and mother/father-figure” (“Looking for Jimmy” 471).

Leo’s relationships with Caleb, Black Christopher, and Barbara all reveal Baldwin’s larger ambitions for the novel. While it is possible to read Baldwin’s depiction of Black Christopher as a direct and rather flat character representation of the Black Nationalist movement, it is clear from a study of Baldwin’s portrayal of Leo and Caleb’s relationship, and the subsequent after-effects of their union, that the author in fact manages to continue putting forth subtle and complex literary work in this novel. Through these various relationships, Baldwin shows love between unlikely partners put into practice as he does in *Another Country*, taking it to an even higher level with representations of non-harmful and loving metaphorical and literal cases of familial incest. It is with this novel that Baldwin therefore made his boldest move to date, representing that which has historically been socially branded the most sexually taboo.

In “Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood,” Baldwin states: “the American categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven, very early in my life. Not without anguish, certainly; but once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have power to define you to yourself” (256). This lesson Baldwin describes having learned, to not succumb to other people’s judgements, appears to be the impetus behind his project to actively challenge the intimidating forces that undertake to disrupt the ethical “mores, morals and morality” of contemporary American culture (“Freaks” 192). By writing with subtlety and skill about characters who reject the notion that varied erotic practice is a “sin,” Baldwin’s work helps to legitimise forms of love, eroticism and desire conventionally viewed as aberrant. Furthermore, his choice to link taboo sexuality to personal satisfaction and autonomy reinforces an understanding of sexual variety as

non-harmful and a positive aspect of human relationships. Baldwin's work can, therefore, be read as a struggle to expose the constructed and arbitrary nature of codes of morality that lead to both racial and sexual discrimination. His novels relay an ethical approach to judging sexual desires and practices by portraying love relationships that are non-harmful, consensual and considerate, thereby opening up the gamut of legitimate forms of sexual expression. Baldwin's fictional characters represent a space in which coalitions may be formed by unlikely partners and diversity functions as a site of empowerment.

## Uncovering the Trap of Social Roles:

### Erotic Familial Bonds in Alice Walker's Fiction

While love is dangerous  
let us walk bareheaded  
beside the Great River.  
Let us gather blossoms  
under fire.

(Walker, *Revolutionary Petunias* 68)

In her statement upon accepting the 1994 California Governor's Award for Literature, entitled "If We Are to Be Treasures, Let Us Demand to Be Treasured," Walker warns: "Our last five minutes on Earth are running out. We can spend those minutes in meanness, exclusivity, and self-righteous disparagement of those who are different from us, or we can spend them consciously embracing every glowing soul who wanders within our reach" (Walker, *Anything We Love* 146). These words offer a slanted, yet ultimately similar world view for our critical contemplation to those written by Baldwin nine years earlier in "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," in which he asserts his androgynous vision that "each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other" (260). While Walker's words specify a belief in human diversity, they too, like Baldwin's, present a vision of human inclusiveness in which embracing others is necessary not only for progressive social change, but also for a more individual sense of wholeness: a theme that, as Patricia Holt states, is a common one in Walker's work (14). Walker's words, further echoing Baldwin's, presuppose an ethics of egalitarianism: to her, all people, no matter how dissimilar from ourselves, are equally "glowing" individuals and therefore

must be accepted. These analogous sentiments effectively lay out the parallel but variant social visions the two writers embody at the core of their controversial, sexually-explicit fiction.

Walker, however, is a writer who has been received by critics in much more extreme terms, and this reception cannot be readily correlated to differences in gender, ethnicity, or background.

There are those who endorse what they view as the Black feminist political agenda behind her fictional endeavours, and those who vilify her, either for their perception of this agenda or for the sexually-explicit nature of her work. Walker's public political affiliations with both the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement are primarily responsible for her frequent categorisation as a didactic writer. Yet, Baldwin too was a highly vocal spokesperson for Civil Rights, and while critics have been preoccupied with particular themes and controversies in his writing, the aesthetic integrity of his work has not been viewed as secondary to the political ideology that foregrounds it. Why then, is Walker's fiction received with so much more, often hostile, fervour? While there is no single answer to this question, it is possible to uncover various factors that have likely contributed to this trend.

The first, and perhaps most crucial of these factors, has to do with the changing American political climate. Walker had her first literary success in 1970 upon publication of her novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. The critical frenzy surrounding her work, however, really began to take hold in 1982 after the publication of her now most famous work, *The Color Purple*. This period in American history was marked by the end of the sexual revolution and a rise in the modern conservative movement headed by Ronald Reagan, an occurrence that, as Maria Lauret notes, was the result of "the combined appeal of conservative sobriety ('fiscal responsibility', e.g. cuts in public spending) and religious fervour" (*Liberating Literature* 169). Lauret surmises that the public attraction to this New Right was largely fuelled by the blame placed on the 1960's

social movements that were seen as being responsible for creating the problem “of moral degeneracy,” specifically, “Urban unrest, the rise in crime, drug abuse and – later – AIDS . . .” (*Liberating Literature* 169). One side effect of the Reagan administration’s push to advocate Christian “family values,” was the estrangement of minority groups, in particular sexual minorities, African Americans and women (Allyn 5). Throughout his two-term presidency, Reagan was notorious for exhibiting, as Jeremy D. Mayer puts it, a “consistent insensitivity to black concerns,” and was, he notes, “[more] than any other political figure . . . responsible for the defeat of the forces of Civil Rights within the Republican Party” (83, 87). In regard to sexual minorities, as the earliest clusters of people infected with AIDS were identified in the major urban centres of New York, California, Texas, Colorado and Florida, gay and bisexual individuals as well as prostitutes and those people thought to be promiscuous or to otherwise reside outside of the structure of heterosexual, monogamous, marriage were heavily stigmatised (Shannon 114). Similarly, Reagan’s pro-life policies alienated many women. Catherine Helen Palczewski holds that for Reagan, “the compelling state interest of protecting the ‘life of each person before birth’ could not be outweighed by the rights of women” (272). She underscores that “Reagan’s discourse [delimited] women’s identity to that of mother and hence [excluded] them from consideration within the civil religion” (272-3). As Lauret articulates, these and other New Right policies resulted in “the contraction of American feminism’s political space” and “brought a reaction against the Women’s Movement in its train, which had its effects upon feminist culture and theory too” (*Liberating Literature* 165). In fact, this new conservatism led to a rise in both Black women’s writing and feminist criticism (Lauret, *Liberating Literature* 2). As Lauret points out, this “second generation” of feminist criticism was distinctive from early feminist criticism in that it was less concerned with “forging a female tradition of women’s

literature through the ages” and with “feminist fiction as a mode of political writing” than with “insert[ing] itself into the symbolic order of theoretical correctness” (Lauret, *Liberating Literature* 2-3). During the 1980’s, Walker’s stories grappled with sexual themes arguably no more transgressive than Baldwin’s, but such themes were likely received as more subversive merely as a result of this new, wholly different political atmosphere. While, as Lauret emphasises, much women’s fiction during the period can be read “as backlash fictions which exemplify the defensive retreat of feminism under the impact of economic recession and the ideological offensives of the New Right,” Walker’s work was not complicit with this backlash, but rather continued to consistently challenge the (patriarchal) hegemonic order of the Right (*Liberating Literature* 7, 8).

A second factor contributing to the perceived subversive nature of Walker’s work is that her fiction is explicitly rooted in African American social contexts, and is concerned with the personal pursuits of specifically Black characters. Her work, as Lauret observes, is in this sense a continuation of “Hurston’s anthropological and literary achievement in giving voice to the Black voice” (*Liberating Literature* 39). While Baldwin’s fiction does not directly work to counter the classic historic myths of Blacks that Morrison identifies as the “Africanist presence” at the centre of canonical American literature, Walker’s fiction undeniably sets out to do so (*Playing* 6). Her work presents portraits of Blacks that overtly defy the enduring stereotypes whose roots, as I argue in chapter one of this thesis, are grounded in the two constructions of beastliness and subservience. Unlike in Baldwin’s fiction, where protagonists can be either Black or White – and the reader is at times made to not even be racially aware due to Baldwin’s concern with issues beyond racial specificity – in Walker’s novels the author’s deliberate attempt to present racial portraits that oppose conventional Black sexual stereotypes is ever present. Intensifying the

extreme critical responses to her work is the fact that she accomplishes this task not by desexualising her Black characters, but rather by empowering them with alternative forms of sexual desire and expression, and equipping them with noble personality traits. For all of these reasons, Walker has presented, and continues to present, a threat to White conservatism.

Lastly, Walker's fiction at times is decidedly didactic. In certain short stories and novels, she has a tendency to slip into using her characters as mouthpieces for her political views. It is the combination of all of these various factors that, I argue, is responsible for the critical zeal, both positive and negative, surrounding her work.

In the space of this chapter, I hope to show how Walker's fiction, too often pigeonholed as a specific brand of Black feminist writing, presents a continuation of the Harlem Renaissance writers' and later Baldwin's more extensive groundbreaking effort to open up the spectrum of socially acceptable forms of love, eroticism and sexuality, by depicting conventionally taboo desires and relationships as non-harmful, considerate and pleasurable experiences. My analysis will focus on how her novels, like Baldwin's, lay out a series of broadened erotic possibilities that embody this ethical code at the centre of Rubin's theory of sexuality. This effort succeeds in confounding heteronormativity, which no longer can be read as the solely acceptable social option for love, eroticism and sexuality. It works to legitimise desires and acts historically considered to be aberrant and, furthermore, to expose the socially-constructed nature of heteronormativity, which thus comes to be understood as a truth-effect of systems of power and knowledge (Sullivan 39). I hope to show how Walker's fiction asserts a philosophy of sexual permissibility and understanding from a female point of view that portrays the sexually transgressive desires and practices Baldwin dared to expose so explicitly – acts such as bisexuality, group sex and incest. Furthermore, it is my intention to uncover how her literary

corpus is in some ways more subversive than Baldwin's for two important reasons: First, her efforts have been made after the end of the sexual revolution, throughout sustained periods of American conservatism, and second, they have grappled with an even wider array of forms of love, eroticism and sexuality considered by this normative standard to be part of what constitutes the taboo. Primarily in her later fiction, Walker engages thematically with the practices of swinging, swapping, polygamy, voyeurism, and unconsummated incestuous desire. As it is not possible to discuss all of the ways in which Walker puts forth these themes in the space available, this chapter will focus on one aspect of her fiction that successfully carries them forward: her depictions of alternative models of unconsummated erotic familial bonds. It is important to focus on these relationships in particular because they have, for the most part, been left out of the critical debate. Furthermore, it is in the subtlety of these particularly transgressive relationships that some of Walker's greatest literary contributions are made. It is here, by humanising Black characters that function outside of socially acceptable sexual structures, that she de-legitimises the views which form the basis for social and economic inequality of Blacks, by dispelling some of the very harmful Black sexual stereotypes she is accused by her harshest critics of perpetuating in some of her other pieces of fiction, that are decidedly more didactic in nature. Furthermore, this effort shifts ethical standards of what constitutes legitimate love, eroticism and sexuality from being act- or partner-based to the particularities of the sexual desires and practices themselves. These accomplishments are a testament to Walker's literary boldness and bravery, and speak to her originality and artistry as a writer of fiction.

If, as Kenan and Sickels assert, Baldwin is remembered as the country's primary literary spokesman for Civil Rights, Walker, one of the most censored writers in American literature, is

likely to be remembered as one of, if not *the* leading Black feminist literary activist (Holt 1). Twenty years Baldwin's junior, and a staunch supporter of integration, as Evelyn C. White points out in her biography of the author, Walker came to be known as one of "the emerging voices of the Civil Rights Movement" (*Alice Walker: A Life* 194). White explains that "she took as her model freedom fighters like Fannie Lou Hamer, who when criticized by segregationists for 'seeking equality' with whites, had replied, [in reference to the topic of separation,] 'I don't want to go down that low. I want the true democracy that'll raise me and the white man up'" (*Alice Walker: A Life* 177). Since the Civil Rights era, Walker has consistently remained a very public activist dedicated to social justice. She has spoken out on a broad spectrum of issues including not only women's and African American rights, but also other minority rights, Animal rights, and Cuban issues, and has been a vocal anti-weapons protestor. Holt argues Walker "is a writer who has almost single-handedly made world audiences aware of issues involving domestic violence, incest and female genital mutilation" through her literary achievements (17).<sup>1</sup> She is also credited, as previously mentioned in chapter one, for having coined the term "womanist," a word, Bates explains, intended to "[identify] African American feminists and feminists of color without referring to their color while simultaneously liberating them from a group that has an attachment to oppressors" (37). As a result of all of these factors, as Harris notes, Walker has become "almost universally recognized as a spokeswoman for black people, especially for black women" ("On the Color Purple" 155). In fact, Walker herself identifies as a Black feminist activist. In her well-documented concluding speech to the 1995 graduating class at Spellman College, the author states: "I give you my word that I shall continue to struggle for and with you, to think of and work for your well-being as women of color, constantly. And to continue to find joy, and freedom, in this" (*Anything We Love* 107). Unlike Baldwin, who reacted against

identification labels, Walker's embracing of them indicates her personal belief in such racial categories. By extension, it also indicates her acceptance of Black "authenticity." I will set out to show, however, how this personal belief in essentialism is undercut in parts of her fiction through the implicit and sustained effort to reveal the dominant American perception of what constitutes legitimate love, eroticism and sexuality to be the truth-effects of particular power/knowledge systems which are themselves discursive constructs. By debunking sexual essentialism in this fashion, Walker's work inadvertently causes a subsequent questioning of racial essentialism.<sup>2</sup>

Most critics miss the crucial ways in which Walker's artistic achievements have been able to surpass her political affiliations. Distracted by her public persona as a political activist, they have (both her supporters and those who denounce her politics) unconsciously side-stepped some of her most noteworthy and impactful literary contributions. In some instances, as in the case of *The Color Purple*, this understanding is categorised as falling under the guise of the African American folk tradition. Bates describes the folk tradition as "rooted ... in the use of the proverb, that rhetorical medicine of instruction and the embodiment of wisdom" (47). Walker's writing is in other cases, described by critics such as Bernard Bell as having "an emphasis on literary neorealism," what he defines as the practice of "examining the human condition from both a literary method and a philosophical and political attitude" (Bell 47, Bell qtd. in Bates 48). While it is the case that such classifications of Walker's fiction have, as with Baldwin's work in regard to homosexuality, exposed many of the topics the author has used as ways in which to address sexual and racial discrimination – including rape, incest, violence against women, and Black female oppression – such categorisation imposes limitations on a full understanding of the

ways in which Walker uses sexual themes as a means to expose the social and historical factors that shape judgements of both race and sexuality.

This chapter, following the structure of chapter three, will begin by considering in greater detail critical trends and arguments concerning Walker's fiction, briefly touched on in chapter two of this thesis in order to elucidate the necessity of a new critical analysis of her work that does not circumnavigate her literary achievements in order to fit her fiction within the confines of her political affiliations. As is the case with Baldwin's work, the majority of Walker's critics have grappled with the question of which themes – race, gender or sexuality – take precedence in the author's work, at the cost of failing to analyse the ways in which her fiction at times functions as a site of an egalitarian sexual ethics that calls attention to the nature of all forms of oppression. There are, however, some exceptions in this regard. Feminist critic Candice M. Jenkins argues, for example, that *The Color Purple* poses “‘dangerous’ questions about the black family and, by extension, the black community” (“Queering Black Patriarchy” 985). She contends that “By challenging conventional definitions of the black family, indeed, by challenging the very figure of the black patriarch, Walker challenges the very structure of the black community, inasmuch as that community is considered a kind of black patriarchal family-writ-large” (“Queering Black Patriarchy” 985). Her analysis is concerned with, as she puts it, how Walker's fiction “deconstructs a black family romance and represents unequivocally the ways in which ‘traditional’ – and traditionally idealized-family structures can endanger black women both physically and psychically” (“Queering Black Patriarchy” 970). Jenkins, then, recognises in Walker a concern with multiple forms of oppression, arguing that Walker is brave at the expense of isolating herself even from other Black women, who often fall prey to what she

terms “the salvific wish,” – that is the “aspiration ... to save or rescue the black community from white racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety” (“Queering Black Patriarchy” 971). Linda Selzer is another feminist critic who recognises Walker’s writing as a forum in which to consider multiple forms of oppression. In reference to *The Color Purple*, she states that “Walker’s mastery of the epistolary form is revealed precisely by her ability to maintain the integrity of Celie’s and Nettie’s domestic perspectives even as she simultaneously undertakes an extended critique of race relations . . .” (68). She specifies that Walker’s engagement with these multiple themes transpires “through two important narrative strategies: the development of an embedded narrative line that offers a post-colonial perspective on the action, and the use of ‘family relations’ – or kinship – as a carefully elaborated textual trope for race relations” (68). Selzer thus maintains that Walker’s use of Celie and Nettie’s perspectives and her exposure of the gender and sexual oppressions they encounter only serve to further call attention to and critique racial discrimination. She argues that “Critics who believe that *The Color Purple* sacrifices its ability to critique the public world of blacks in favor of dramatizing the personal experiences of its narrators not only run the risk of reducing the narrative’s technical complexity, but also of over-looking the work’s sustained critique of racial integration levied from *within* the domestic sphere” (79). Cobb Moore also recognises the expansive nature of Walker’s writing. She believes the author to be writing about “the psychological process that promises individual harmony and wholeness for those earnestly seeking self-knowledge and well-being,” and perceives in Walker’s work a progression from an “authorial emphasis” on what she terms “the external conditions of society,” to what she views as “the internal psychological development of the individual” (111). In regard to the 1992 novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Cobb Moore makes the author’s links to Baldwin especially

apparent when she argues that “Walker gives specific voice to the inner power of the individual to change and to mature spiritually, a Jungian psychoanalytical discourse that enables Walker to acknowledge yet downplay the power of society over the individual” (112). Each of these female critics recognises in Walker a writer who moves beyond racial and/or feminist politics to issues pivotal to the human condition as a whole.

The majority of criticism on Walker’s fiction, however, is notably reductive insofar as it tends to pigeonhole her work into one of two categories: womanist or conventional feminist fiction. Feminist critics that perceive Walker to be a womanist writer, such as Shelley Reid, argue that Walker is creating a specific sect of Black protest fiction (321). Reid claims that Walker is an author who writes about “strong black women who already know who they are and what they need,” and whose writing refutes Black sexual stereotypes (314). Similarly, Deborah McDowell asserts that in her fiction, Walker “has made the private public, and in the process created a new literary space for the black and the female idiom against and within a traditionally Eurocentric and androcentric literary history” (151). Abbandonato, alternatively, views Walker as upholding a more conventional feminist position. In reference to *The Color Purple*, she argues “that by exposing and opposing a powerful ideological constraint, institutionalized or ‘compulsory’ heterosexuality, the novel appropriates the woman’s narrative for herself, in effect reinscribing ‘herstory’” (1106). She furthermore asserts: “The color purple is encoded within the novel as a sign of indomitable female spirit” (1113). Along similar lines, at the centre of Cutter’s criticism on *The Color Purple*, is her emphasis on Walker’s feminist standpoint at the expense of the author’s critique of oppressive racial social structures. She states: “Walker’s text gives Philomela a voice that successfully resists the violent patriarchal inscription of male will onto a silent female body” (163). She furthermore claims that “Walker’s reconfiguration of the myth of

Philomela thus overturns the master discourse *and* the master narrative of patriarchal society” (164). Her conclusion about the novel is that it “engages in a wholesale revision of the archetypal rape narrative of Philomela as well as the dominant master narrative of patriarchal culture itself: the silencing and objectifying of women and ‘others’ as the basis for male subjectivity” (176). These interpretations of Walker’s fiction have been taken in multiple directions. Johnson, for example, uses a Black feminist lens to analyse Walker’s use of the Blues. She argues that in “Nineteen Fifty-Five” and *The Color Purple* “Walker employs the character, language, structure, and perspective of the blues to celebrate the lives and works of blues women, to articulate the complexity of their struggles, and to expose and confront the oppressive forces facing Black women in America” (221).

Other critics, rather than being proponents of what they perceive to be Walker’s gender and racial political agenda and her literary ability to write with political effect, are scathing in their evaluations of her work. These analysts view Walker’s political programme as coming at the expense of her literary potential. One such critic who feels that for this reason much about Walker’s fiction “deserves complaint,” is Harris, who in her 1984 critique of *The Color Purple*, asserts:

*The Color Purple* reads like a political shopping list of all the IOUs Walker felt that it was time to repay. She pays homage to the feminists by portraying a woman who struggles through adversity to assert herself against almost impossible odds. She pays homage to the lesbians by portraying a relationship between two women that reads like a schoolgirl fairy tale in its ultimate adherence to the convention of the happy resolution. She pays homage to black nationalists by opposing colonialism, and to Pan Africanism by suggesting that yes, indeed, a black American does understand and sympathize with the plight of her black brothers and sisters thousands of miles across the ocean. And she adds in a few other obeisances – to career-minded women. . . .”  
 (“On *The Color Purple*” 160)

Harris argues that the problem with what she views as Walker’s highly political writing, especially in the case of this novel with all of its critical acclaim and accolades, is that it has been

taken as “a large and representative slice of black life, U.S.A.” (“On *The Color Purple*” 158). For her, Walker’s particular brand of fiction-writing, what she describes as “the fabulist/fairy-tale mould of the novel” – a type of fantasy-couched in the pretense of historical fiction style – is inherently dangerous insofar as it has only served, in her view, to reinforce racist Black stereotypes, thereby creating a veritable “circus of black human interactions” (“On *The Color Purple*” 155, 159). She takes issue with Walker’s overt politics, arguing that Walker herself is inadvertently succeeding only in producing a new form of racist literature against Blacks. She states:

The book simply added a freshness to many of the ideas circulating in the popular culture and captured in racist literature that suggested that black people have no morality when it comes to sexuality, that black family structure is weak if existent at all, that black men abuse black women, and that black women who may appear to be churchgoers are really lewd and lascivious. (“On *The Color Purple*” 157)

Black writer and literary critic Darryl Pinckney agrees with Harris’s position, asserting that the novel is a work “of the imagination that makes claim to historical truth,” and that it is furthermore “a didactic narrative” in the vein of Harriet Beecher Stowe (17, 18). He views Walker’s characters as flat, “literary clichés,” which he sums up as a group of “[r]idiculous pickaninnies, stern matriarchs, big brutes, noble sinners,” and “feeble-minded ladies:” stereotypes that he points out “have been part of the American popular imagination since the abolitionist movement” (20). Thus, Pinckney maintains that “Walker’s role as champion of the victims of the past places her in a position of cultural arrogance not unlike that of white missionaries to black Africa” (18).

Byerman approaches the novel from a masculinist, realist point of view, condemning it as “in essence, a ‘womanist’ fairy tale” in which the characters “after great travails, live happily ever after” (“Walker’s Blues” 59). He argues that Walker’s creation of a place in which “all the

characters are reunited in a feminized space with female traits and free of the hostility, oppression, guilt and cruelty of the male and white worlds” is “in fact another system that requires the same denial of history and difference as the order it has supplanted” (“Walker’s Blues” 66). He further contends that “to live ‘happily ever after,’ as the folk characters do in *The Color Purple*, is, ironically, to live outside the folk world” (“Walker’s Blues” 66). Byerman’s view of the novel is that it is a feminist diatribe that denies Black history. Ironically, hooks agrees with this assessment. She articulates that “this fantasy of change without effort is a dangerous one for both oppressed and oppressor. It is a brand of false consciousness that keeps everyone in place and oppressive structures intact” (“Writing the Subject” 227). Royster goes even further in his critique, claiming that Walker is perpetuating “racism, sexism and colorist values” (369). He stipulates that the author is attempting to take on “the role of rescuer,” but instead only succeeds in alienating her audience (349). He, furthermore, accuses her of viewing herself “as an outcast of those whom she regards as having themselves been cast out,” and ultimately of “using black people for her own scapegoat victims” (351, 354). Royster contends that “Walker’s attitudes towards black folk suggest more about who she is and the way she writes than they do about who black folk are” (354). She has, he admonishes, “abandoned all of her notions of the writer’s social responsibility,” in order to put forth her political agenda (356).

For more than two decades after the publication of *The Color Purple*, critics who write from a variety of theoretical positions have continued to view much of Walker’s work with equal vehemence, regarding it as little more than political diatribe. The critic Angeletta Gourdine’s particularly stern critique of Walker’s work in her article about *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is one such example. Here, she describes the author as being on a “womanist mission” (238). She asserts: “Unquestionably, this is a novel by a woman, about women which argues for the rights

of women. The particular right that Walker champions, struggles to protect/defend/encode is that which insures that African women will continue to ‘possess the secret of joy’” (237-38). She claims that rather than novelist, Walker acts as “ethnographer,” a position that she argues burdens the text with an “anthropological taint” (240, 241). She declares: “Though I respect Alice Walker’s right to cast her creative eye upon whatever she chooses, her intrusion into the fictional text of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* suggests that the novel is more than fiction. I contend that this text exists somewhere on the boundaries of cultural criticism (a Reading) and fiction (a reading),” with the result that “Walker categorically castigates African women’s histories and possesses their bodies in a bizarre struggle to free her own” (242). These derisive critical evaluations, while offering important insights into the literary hazards of didactically supplanting one’s political beliefs into one’s creative work, are equally reductive to the assessments by her proponents that focus on individual thematic sources of oppression in her fiction at the expense of failing to expose her larger contribution of opening up the scope of what the dominant culture perceives to be the legitimate expression of love, desire, eroticism and sexuality.

It is important to point out that Walker has consciously devoted short stories and even novels, to voicing her political concerns on a wide range of subjects throughout her years as a writer – the most prominent example being her novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*: a work, she explains, written explicitly to expose the physical and psychological consequences of the ritualistic practice of female circumcision – what Walker is famous for having termed “Female Genital Mutilation” (*Anything We Love* 126). In these instances, the author’s fiction is polemical inasmuch as her characters serve as mouthpieces for her political views on a variety of sexual practices with which she vehemently disagrees, most frequently pornography and

sadomasochism. In one such illustration, her short story “Coming Apart,” Walker tells the tale of a wife’s discomfort and displeasure with her husband’s need to gratify himself sexually with the aid of pornographic magazines. In the story, the husband comes to understand, “What he has refused to see – because to see it would reveal yet another area in which he is unable to protect or defend black women – is that where white women are depicted in pornography as ‘objects,’ black women are depicted as animals. Where white women are depicted at least as human bodies if not beings, black women are depicted as shit” (*You Can’t Keep* 52). The man learns that “he has bought some if not all of the advertisements about women, black and white. And further, inevitably, he has bought the advertisements about himself. In pornography the black man is portrayed as being capable of fucking anything . . . even a piece of shit” (*You Can’t Keep* 52-53; 2<sup>nd</sup> ellipsis in orig.). Byerman points out that in this story, “Pornography is shown as part of a phallogocentric order which annihilates the selfhood of women” (“Desire” 322). White views the piece as a story about a Black woman “[fighting] back” by evoking in her husband the need “to question his [own] sexuality” (*Alice Walker: A Life* 238). In another short story entitled “Porn,” Walker’s Black female protagonist denounces the practice of incorporating pornography into her sex life with her lover. Throughout the course of the story, the relationship between the protagonist and her male lover, described as “a close connection” and “a strong bond,” with “incredibly good” sex, turns sour after her lover decides to share his porn collection with her (*You Can’t Keep* 77, 78). After sharing this aspect of his sexual enjoyment, the protagonist cannot stop thinking of the women depicted in the pornography “and is horrified” (*You Can’t Keep* 82). The narrator describes how “Now, when he makes love to her, she tries to fit herself into the white-woman, two-black-men story. . . . She cannot stop herself from thinking: *Poor: Ignorant: Sleazy: Depressing*. This does not excite or stimulate” (*You Can’t Keep* 83). Katha

Pollitt observes that these tales “occupy a sort of middle ground between personal statement, political parable, conventional story and vaguely experimental fiction” (A6). She contends that such stories are “too partisan (the black woman is always the most sympathetic character),” and that they thus succeed only in “calling our attention to the author as inventor and manipulator of every aspect of what we are reading” (A6).

Characters that, as Pollitt describes, are “half political or narrative conveniences” are also present in other stories by Walker (A6). In *Possessing the Secret of Joy* the character Pierre asserts: “In pornography ... [the] ability of woman’s to take pleasure in diverse ways is projected in a perverted way” (182). An equivalent to this direct judgment of pornography occurs in Walker’s short epistolary story “A Letter of the Times, or Should this Sado-Masochism Be Saved.” In this story, the author Susan Marie is profoundly offended at her friend Lucy’s choice to dress up as Scarlett O’Hara at the Women for Elected Officials Ball. This offense is due to her view that such a choice reflects her friend’s endorsement of the character Prissy, Scarlett’s slave who is depicted as a shrilly-voiced, childish and insensible girl. In her letter to Lucy, in which she explains her displeasure at her friend’s choice, she describes watching a television show in which an interracial lesbian couple partakes of sadomasochism – “The white woman, who did all the talking, was mistress (wearing a ring in the shape of a key that she said fit the lock on the chain around the black woman’s neck), and the black woman, who stood smiling and silent, was – the white woman said – her slave” (*You Can’t Keep* 121). She informs Lucy:

All I had been teaching was subverted by that one image, and I was incensed to think of the hard struggle of my students to rid themselves of stereotype, to combat prejudice, to put themselves into enslaved women’s skins, and then to see their struggle mocked, and the actual enslaved *condition* of literally millions of our mothers trivialized – because two ignorant women insisted on their right to act out publicly a ‘fantasy’ that still strikes terror in black women’s hearts. (*You Can’t Keep* 121)

David Bradley views such stories that blatantly condemn specific sexual products and practices as “flawed by unassimilated rhetoric, simplistic politics and a total lack of plot and characterization” (4). Walker’s choice to use characters to voice these political standpoints does not serve her literary purpose to call attention to inadequate social norms pertaining to sexuality, rather it pulls the reader out of the narrative, and significantly weakens both the quality of her prose, and her authority as a writer. However, much of Walker’s work, unlike these examples, is rhetorically complex and does make implicit to the story the need for alternate systems by which to judge sexuality. In these instances, the reader is not told what to think, but is subtly guided into adopting Walker’s political position through her ability to depict fully-rounded, stereotype-defying characters.

Critics have extensively shown how Walker has accomplished this rhetorical complexity in her portrayals of sexuality in many of her short stories and novels, from her earliest writings in the late 1960’s to her very recent work. They have primarily analysed her literary depictions of Black male sexual abuse of females, originally put forth in her first novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), carried through in short stories such as “The Child Who Favored Daughter” (1973) and the novel *Meridian* (1976), and most extensively examined in *The Color Purple* (1982). While all of these stories embody multiple examples of such abuse, in *The Third Life* I refer foremost to critical examinations of the relationship between Brownfield and his wife Mem whom he *shoots* and murders, while in “The Child Who Favored Daughter” my reference is primarily to the analysis of the father’s act of violent abuse against his daughter, in which he cuts off her breasts and feeds them to his dogs. In *Meridian* critical examination has focused on the rape of the white woman Lynne by a Black man, while in *The Color Purple* it has considered both the repeated rape of Celie by her mother’s husband and Mr. \_\_\_\_’s sustained abuse of her.

In some instances, critics have not only examined these particular cases of abuse, but have also considered the subsequent forms of taboo love, eroticism and sexuality that develop either indirectly or directly with other characters in response to such acts of violence. Truman's alternative relationships with both his wife Lynne, whom he loves platonically by the end of the novel, and with his friend Meridian, with whom he becomes romantically involved by the story's close, is one case in point. Another such example is the critical examination of the lesbian relationship that forms between Celie and Shug in *The Color Purple*. However, all of the above relationships arise as a result of blatant acts of abuse. This analysis, as it has come about over the last forty years, has therefore been primarily concerned with Walker's depictions of harmful, non-consensual, violent sexuality or the effects thereof on the individuals involved. My analysis, in distinction, will identify how Walker also achieves this rhetorical complexity in some of her most overtly transgressive scenes in which such violent abuse is absent. These non-harmful cases of taboo eroticism and sexuality, in their own right, have remained largely overlooked. By only focusing on the author's moralistic portrayals and the rhetorically complex depictions that arise out of abusive situations, critics have done a disservice to her work, failing to bring attention to this aspect of it, one of her greatest literary achievements. This analysis, furthermore, calls attention to the broader spectrum of sexually diverse scenarios with which Walker engages.

One such achievement surfaces when considering a particular aspect of Walker's representations of love and eroticism: her use of fabulism as a tool with which she is able to lend a mantle of acceptability to erotic familial bonds generally regarded as aberrant by current Western socio-political norms. Fabulism is a term I use broadly to refer to both the insertion of elements of the conventional fable, namely the deliberately crafted outcome of the story in order

to impart a particular moral or social lesson, and/or to the magical realism of the text. In *Magic(al) Realism*, Maggie Ann Bowers explains magical realism to be a particular narrative mode that “relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings” (3). She notes, “For this reason it is often considered to be related to, or even a version of literary realism,” but that “Its distinguishing feature . . . is that it fuses the two opposing aspects of the oxymoron (the magical and the realist) together to form one new perspective” (3). It is, she explains, “considered to be a disruptive narrative mode” that is “suited to exploring . . . and transgressing . . . boundaries,” and for this reason is generally perceived to be “at odds with racism, ethnicity and . . . homogeneity” (3, Zamora and Faris qtd. in Bowers 3; ellipses in orig., Brenda Cooper qtd. in Bowers 4).<sup>3</sup> These inclusions of crafted, mythical, extraordinary or supernatural elements into otherwise seemingly realist writing and the narrators’ acceptance of such elements as natural, when they have been recognised, have mostly been interpreted as deep flaws in Walker’s work: ways in which she is able to assert her political agenda, particularly in regard to womanism. However, a close analysis of the transgressive erotic relationships between the protagonist Grange and his son Brownfield’s eldest daughter, Ruth in her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Señor Robinson and his youngest daughter Susannah in her much later novel *By The Light of My Father’s Smile*, reveals how it is precisely through these fabulist elements of the stories that Walker is able to most subtly and effectively call attention to the arbitrary nature of social codes of sexual acceptability, and as a result, elicits a questioning of why specific types of love, eroticism and sexuality are condoned while others are regarded to be aberrant by the dominant culture.

While Walker's presentation of Grange and Ruth's relationship has been read as anything but subtle by most literary critics, it should in fact be interpreted as the first in a series of three-dimensional and complex character interactions that Walker puts forth throughout her literary corpus. Most critics are stuck in an analysis of the novel's overt womanist themes at the expense of adequately uncovering the intricacies of Grange and Ruth's relationship and the statement it makes about alternative forms of love and eroticism. In his article on history and genealogy in two Walker novels, for example, the critic Butler-Evans describes the novel as "[oscillating] between ... two discourses," what he describes as "the broad racial experiences of American Blacks, without regard to gender issues," and "the histories of Black women" (105-06). His analysis is concerned with these, what he views as Walker's competing polemical messages and their insufficiency when it comes to presenting accurate and complex representations of social history. Donna Haisty Winchell reinforces this idea by focusing her analysis of the novel on "The idea of the black man taking out his frustrations on the black woman because he dare not risk taking them out on a white person of either gender" (48). Bates too examines how "Walker's novel points out the preponderance of violence in poor African American households," while Josephine Hendin is concerned with how it "disappoints by explaining Grange's conversion in political clichés" (Bates 70, Hendin 5). In a similar vein, W. Lawrence Hogue maintains: "*The Third Life* reproduces and reinforces many feminist values, codes, conventions, and myths. It produces a feminist narrative which invents what Frederic Jameson calls imaginary 'formal resolutions' to 'unsolvable social contradictions' in the social real" (97). He concludes that for this reason the novel "produces a myth about the American and Afro-American historical past" (98). These readings that either entirely disregard the fabulist aspect of the novel in favour of reducing the work as a whole to an expression of Walker's "womanism,"

or in the latter case, that perceive Walker's fabulism to be an intrinsic flaw – an inaccurate if not socially irresponsible representation of African American history – insofar as the novel strays from historical accuracy, overlook the ways in which this structural aspect of the novel contributes to its artistic merit: in the case of this study, to Walker's representation of familial eroticism. For these critics, many of what they view to be the novel's problematic aspects are the result of their efforts to read the work as straight racialised, realist fiction. A close analysis of Ruth and Grange's relationship, however, exposes how integral to her philosophical underpinnings is the fabulist element of the story, and how it is as a result of Ruth and Grange's utopian bond that is only allowed to occur as a result of the fabulist context in which it is allowed to flourish, that Walker is able to succeed in presenting considerate and pleasurable types of love and eroticism that fall outside of socially acceptable modes of such expression, thereby challenging the dominant American perception of what constitutes an ethical erotic bond. By "utopian" I refer to Ruth and Grange's bond as symbolising a visionary social relationship suggestive of the writer's "*desire*" for a "different (and better) [way] of being" than living in her current time and place (Sargisson 1). As Lucy Sargisson points out in *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*, this new way of being is predicated on an understanding of utopianism that is not rooted in "the concept of perfection," but is rather based on, as is the case in much feminist utopian literature, "Debates concerning equality and difference, the construction of meaning through language, and the construction of subjectivity . . ." (2, 3). This type of utopianism "journeys into uncharted and unfamiliar territory, . . . creates spaces in which visions of the good can be imagined. . . . [and] let[s] go of the stability and certainty of the search for conclusions in favour of an approach that is resistant to closure" (5).<sup>4</sup> It is therefore, Walker's use of fabulism that allows for the presence of such a utopian fantasy to occur within the story.

The novel, as Bates summarises it, tells the story of Grange Copeland, a man who “travels three roads that represent three lives or three lifetimes: the road of economic suffering as a sharecropper in the South, the road of urban degradation in the North, and the road of self-respect and improved personal development in his return to the South” (53). During Grange’s third life, he receives custody of Brownfield’s youngest daughter, Ruth, after Brownfield has shot and murdered his own wife Mem, the mother of his three children. While this relationship has been read in purely non-sexual terms – Ruth is described by Bates, for example, as Grange’s “precious granddaughter who will become the hope of the Copeland line” while Winchell reads the relationship as Grange’s cathartic desire to make up for past mistakes by “[preserving] Ruth’s soul in its youthful freshness” – there is much in the novel that points to a profound sexual connection between the grandfather and granddaughter (Bates 54, Winchell 54).

The first indication of this eroticism is noticeable in Ruth’s feelings of competition for Grange’s wife, Josie, when she first moves into their home. The reader is told: “At the beginning Ruth was jealous of Josie, for she thought maybe Grange found her pretty. But Grange also thought his wife was not very nice, and he said so often and loudly. He said she lived like a cat, strayed away from home too much. Josie was one of those fat yellow women with freckles and light-colored eyes . . .” (124). Walker establishes Ruth’s feelings of hostility for Josie right from the outset. She is initially jealous of what she perceives to be Grange’s physical attraction to his wife; a perception that leads her to self-comfort by convincing herself that what Josie may offer in the way of looks is countered by her unpleasant demeanour. Ruth’s perception of Josie as “yellow” underscores for the reader her own dark skin. It marks Ruth’s observations of Josie’s appearance as in direct connection with the light-skinned concubines of chattel slavery and the Reconstruction, and links her jealousy of Josie to the social and economic advantages that

generally accompanied this position of preferred desirability, often at the expense of darker-skinned Blacks.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the comparison of Josie to a stray cat emphasises her animalistic status: a comparison that ties her to the concubine imagery, as concubines were viewed as embodying indiscriminating, unrestrained sexuality.<sup>6</sup> By characterising Josie in animalistic terms, Ruth, then, engages with the myth that the Black woman was “bestial in bed” (Day 32). Ruth and Grange therefore unconsciously reinforce the exploitive stereotype of the Black woman that spans more than four centuries of development and perseverance, as sexually unrestrained and uncivilized. Josie is the embodiment of the Jezebel. The reader learns that when Ruth looked at Josie, “what she saw was a fat yellow woman with sour breath, too much purple lipstick, and a voice that was wheedling and complaining; the voice of a spoiled little fat girl who always wanted to pee after the car got moving” (124). Her perception of Josie’s breath and lipstick furthermore perpetuates the Jezebel stereotype: to Ruth, Josie is dirty, over-sexed and socially inappropriate. In addition, Ruth’s references to Josie’s voice and her comparison of it to a spoiled fat girl further establishes an imagined role-reversal between them: Ruth perceives herself to be an adult, and Josie to be a child. A Freudian interpretation of these references suggests them to be attempts to override her perception of Josie as a mother-figure of whom she is exceedingly jealous insofar as Josie is thus competition for her in regard to obtaining her father-figure’s attention.<sup>7</sup> However, while Ruth’s perceptions of Josie reinforce the degrading stereotypical image of the sexually-available Black female, in order that she may override Josie’s status in Grange’s eyes, Walker in no way portrays Ruth herself as conforming to any such pigeonholing Black female stereotype. In fact, Ruth is the antithesis of both the Jezebel and Mammy constructions: she is adult-like, powerful, complex, and by no means constrained by White social structures. Walker’s fully-rounded portrayal of her thus, despite her malicious,

stereotyping perception of Josie, makes space for her developing sexuality as liberating rather than oppressive, while simultaneously highlighting the erotic nature of her relationship with Grange.

This erotic dynamic is further emphasised through Ruth's perception of not only Josie, but also of her deceased paternal grandmother, Margaret, as a threat to her relationship with Grange. The reader is told: "Ruth also knew that Grange had had another wife, Margaret, whom he had never got over. He cried whenever he talked about her (only when he was drunk) and Ruth hated her (dead though she was and had been for many years) with all her heart" (136). Ruth's hatred of Josie is therefore not personal, but can rather be read as a reflection of her unresolved Oedipus complex: her desire to be the sole love object in her grandfather's life. Much to her pleasure, the romantic role that she longs to play in Grange's life becomes more of a reality with each passing day. Soon after Ruth's arrival, she and Grange start going places together, and, the reader is told, "More often than not she and Grange left Josie at home" (125). Eventually, Josie is not only cut out of Grange's affections, but is almost entirely cut out of his life. The narrator describes how "Gradually, sulkily, Josie faded into the background, and Ruth and her grandfather became inseparable. They did not plan it this way; but always they were together; where Grange went, Ruth went, what he did, Ruth did" (127). The pair takes on the ethos of a young couple in love and courting, while simultaneously maintaining their close familial bond.

This multifaceted dynamic serves to increasingly fuel Josie's jealousy of Ruth, further contributing to the developing sense that Ruth and Grange's relationship cannot be pigeonholed into the prescribed social roles of grandfather and granddaughter. The narrator describes how "Josie saw them dancing together once, in the small log cabin Grange had built Ruth as a

playhouse. It was on Ruth's tenth birthday and she was dressed from head to toe in brand-new clothes. Josie was furious. Grange had not bought clothes for her since they'd been married. And he had never, after Ruth came to stay with them, taken the trouble to dance with her" (133). Josie's response to the scene is to emphatically declare: "It ain't decent!" (133). She surmises that it is only "after Ruth came to stay with them" that such chivalries ceased on the part of Grange toward herself (133). Josie is caught between an assessment of Ruth and Grange's developing bond as normatively familial and unconventionally romantic. She identifies the log cabin as a grandfather's innocuous gift of a playhouse for his grandchild, but observes Ruth's new clothes and Grange's efforts to dance with her as distinctly romantic gestures. Ultimately, this blurring of two separate relationships, that by social standards must never be so blurred, causes Josie to interpret their bond as indecent. Her observations reinforce in her mind her developing belief that Ruth has replaced her, and secures in the reader the sense that Ruth and Grange have come to provide complex and indefinable roles in each other's lives: roles that cannot be reduced to the traditional social relationship prescribed for them.

As Walker continues to weave the intricate tale of Ruth and Grange's expansive, alternative relationship, she supplants indicators that such a love is progressively beyond the prescribed one. The reader gains access to Ruth's reflections on Grange as an erotic being: "[She] thought her grandfather a very sexy sort of old guy. He was tall and lean and had a jutting hip. When he danced you couldn't tell if his day had been bad or good. He closed his eyes and grunted music" (133). In addition to being acutely aware of Grange's appealing physical appearance and soulful presence, it is time spent alone with him that invokes in Ruth an understanding of her own sexuality. She muses: "They danced best when they danced alone. And dancing taught Ruth she had a body. And she could see that her grandfather had one too and she

could respect what he was able to do with it” (133-34). The narrator describes how for Ruth, “Dancing was a warm electricity that stretched, connecting them with other dancers moving across the seas. Through her grandfather’s old and beautifully supple limbs she learned how marvelous was the grace with which she moved” (134). Ruth’s perceptions of Grange’s body and of her own are imbued with overtly sexual language. They make evident his ability to bring about in Ruth a sense of excitement, connection with others, and sexual independence. His erotic appeal as a sexually-attractive man in his own right functions as a symbol of all that he offers Ruth throughout the course of the narrative, elevating her sense of self and allowing her to develop the life skills she will need in order to succeed in an oppressive social context.

Further contributing to the sense that it is their relationship that provides them with the only form of salvation from oppression that they will know is Walker’s choice to highlight the mutual bonds of love, comfort and freedom the two feel as a result of being alone in each other’s presence. The reader is told, “Both of them loved to walk home through the woods, not only because Grange kept a still between the schoolhouse and his house, but because the woods offered the privacy and quiet they both enjoyed” (183). The pair is steady in their appreciation of their time alone together and ritualise their private experiences with one another. In fact, this ritualising becomes literal one day when the two are outside putting up a fence around Grange’s property in order to further augment their privacy by keeping out the neighbours. On this particular occasion, Grange and Ruth partake in a blood oath ritual. Grange, the reader is told, “drew her down beside him on the grass and stuck their two bleeding fingers together” (174). The narrator recounts Ruth’s reaction: “‘But Grange,’ she said scornfully for so young a girl, ‘they didn’t stick *fingers* together. It was *arms*, right here’ – she pointed – ‘they stuck this part of the *arm*.’ She placed her tenderer forearm next to his darker, more sinewy one” (174). Grange’s

choice to initiate a blood oath ritual with Ruth – a custom historically used to secure a promise between men or tribes by the symbolic merging of bodily fluids – reveals Grange’s desire to be physically connected with her. The allusion disrupts heterosexual modes of sexuality as the only viable, ethical option by the infusion of this traditionally fraternal ritual into their increasingly erotic, heterosexual, bond. Contributing to this appropriation of the blood-brothers ritual is Ruth’s willingness to participate in it. In fact, she is eager to take it to what she perceives as an even more authentic level, by suggestion that she and Grange rub arms together. Walker’s description of her young lighter flesh next to Grange’s “darker” and “more sinewy” skin further highlights the taboo nature of this exchange, calling attention to both their disregard for the age difference between them and social hierarchies based on skin tone privilege.

After the ritual is complete, sitting in the shade near the fence, it is evident that the event has created a newfound level of comfort, intimacy, and security between Ruth and Grange: “‘I never in my life seen such a womanish gal,’ [Grange] said, stretching out with his back to a tree and taking out his pipe. She lit a match, held his fingers while he lit the pipe, then blew it out” (179). Grange’s comment about Ruth’s “womanish” presence and Ruth’s subsequent act of helping him to light his pipe, calls to mind other intimate sex rituals: smoking after intercourse, and oral sex. While there is nothing to suggest that Grange and Ruth have participated in a physical sexual act, their symbolic ritual has achieved a similar purpose: they have participated in a mutually considerate, consensual and pleasurable exchange.<sup>8</sup> Walker has infused these intimate moments with homoerotic, interracial and intergenerational sexual overtones. Yet her careful construction of the scene normalises a relationship that would otherwise be seen as aberrant by conventional standards, as it rearranges heteronormative erotic rituals. This tactic

results in a new understanding of what constitutes an appropriate mode of erotic expression – an understanding that does not limit bonding rituals to specific partners and acts.

In contrast to these subversive scenes that mark as evident the ways in which mutually desired unconventional love, when left unnamed, can flourish and benefit the individuals involved, is Grange's increasing need to make sense of his feelings of love for Ruth by attempting to fit her into the only socially prescribed modes of expression available to him. The reader learns:

[Ruth] was allowed to ride on the back of the truck while they were on the dirt road which led to the highway. Each time, as they approached the highway, Grange stopped the truck and either sent her back home or put her inside on the seat next to him. "You not some kind of field hand!" he muttered sharply when she said she'd love to ride on top of the cotton all the way to town. (125)

Grange's concern with the public perception of his relationship with Ruth becomes apparent in this passage. Although it is clear that Ruth experiences a child-like delight from riding "on top of the cotton," and Grange is privately happy to indulge her in this innocent pleasure, he is adamant that the townspeople not see her in this state. Instead, he insists on treating Ruth like an adult, more specifically like a wife, and seeks to elevate her status as much as is possible when the two are entering the public sphere. This special treatment, invokes a new-found confidence in Ruth who "[begins] to get the feeling she [is] very special" (125). Her special status, however, backfires on her, resulting in drastic, negative social consequences. Instead of viewing Grange's actions as noble or endearing, both the townspeople and Ruth's peers at school come to view her as part of a "perverse" familial relationship. The narrator describes how the children at school stand around and stare at her, calling her names such as "Miss Stuck-up" and "*Mrs. Grange*" (125).

Further contributing to this sense of the harm caused by forcing Ruth into a prescribed social role is Grange's increasing perception of her as a sexually-available woman. The narrator grants the reader access to his developing eroticisation of her: "For all that [Grange] liked to see her self-sufficient, he was against her acting boyish. He grumbled when she spoke of cutting her hair, an unruly, rebellious cloud that weighted down her head. He insisted she trade her jeans for dresses, at least on weekends, and placed jars of Noxzema and Pond's hand cream on her dresser" (214). As Grange increasingly perceives Ruth in these terms, his response to her becomes ever more limiting. His preference that her hair be long, "unruly" and "rebellious" despite its weighting her down, and his choice to buy her gifts of cleansers and creams – objects that serve to reinforce patriarchal standards of conventional female beauty – solidify in the reader's mind his perception of Ruth as distinctly female, and his desire to foster the feminine within her. Such gifts, in addition, highlight Grange's continuing desire to elevate Ruth's social status. Similar to his desire to not have her ride in the back of his truck on top of the cotton bales, such purchases that soften and refine the skin are intended to pamper and are a sign of his developing objectification of Ruth, and also of his desire to assert his superior economic position in relation to the townspeople. Grange's perception of Ruth as a fragile, soft object of desire calls to mind Cather's depiction of Nancy, in particular her description of Nancy's slender, nimble and flexible hands, in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (18). His unconscious objectification of Ruth's body propagates perceptions of Black women as inferior mental beings. Here, Walker skilfully implies that while Grange's love and nurturing of Ruth gives her the needed confidence to become a mature woman, it also reinforces certain oppressions. This realisation makes more poignant Walker's philosophical underpinnings: without other available modes of expression for them, Ruth and Grange's relationship becomes increasingly trapped in the norms and

expectations society imposes on it. These norms are artificial, inadequate and lead to harm in the form of sexism and discrimination. It is when their relationship cannot be given a name, and furthermore when they choose not to succumb to the social limitations and prescriptions of society that their love for one another, in fact, thrives.

Walker successfully invokes in the reader an understanding that despite the judgements of others, and Grange's inadvertent attempts to force Ruth to conform to a limiting and oppressive social mould, their relationship is, however, able to overcome these setbacks. As the narrative progresses, Grange and Ruth's relationship increasingly fulfils multiple essential needs for both of them, leading to their personal growth and salvation. This configuration is especially apparent moments before a confrontation they have with Brownfield and Josie. The reader learns:

On that day they had indeed strolled along the edge of the school grounds like lovers, Grange carefully tucking her scarf around her neck every few steps. They were murmuring and giggling about the black janitor at the white library in town, whom Grange managed to get drunk each time he went to the library to steal books for her. They did not see Brownfield and Josie until they almost bumped into them. (203-04)

In this scene, Grange and Ruth are positioned as seeming contemporaries. Happy to stroll along the edge of the school property together, with Grange missing no opportunity to constantly touch Ruth; the two fawn over each other, completely involved in one another to the exclusion of everyone and everything else around them. Grange's flirtatious gestures and the reference to his stealing for Ruth further cement the reader's awareness that the two are allies. The pair, oblivious to everything but themselves, does not notice Brownfield and Josie until they almost run into them. At the same time, however, Walker reminds the reader of Grange and Ruth's familial connection. When Ruth is threatened by Brownfield moments after the encounter, she "press[es] herself into her grandfather's side" for protection (204). As her face rubs against his

gabardine overcoat, the narrator informs, “It was very soft against her . . . and it surprised her that her face reached all the way to his shoulder” (204). With these words, the reader is instantly reminded of Ruth’s age – she is just barely able to reach her face to Grange’s shoulder. Furthermore, with this image, Walker forces the reader to contend with Grange as both grandfather and romantic figure to Ruth. This strategic presentation of the blurred roles that Grange occupies for Ruth legitimises an alternative to traditional models of acceptable erotic expression: after all, Grange is a strong, supportive, and healing force in Ruth’s life. Ultimately, this new idea of legitimate eroticism comes about specifically as a result of Walker’s construction not only of Ruth as defying the stereotypical constructions of beastliness and subservience, but also as a result of Grange’s defiance of them. Together, the pair refuses to succumb to the restrictive social boundaries their context imposes on them.

Further compounding the sense of Grange as a positive force in Ruth’s life is the calibre of person he develops into throughout the course of his “three lives.” Walker highlights the most profound life lesson he has learned throughout the course of the narrative:

*I know the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. I fell into the trap myself! And I’m bound to believe that that’s the way the white folks can corrupt you even when you done held up before. ‘Cause when they got you thinking that they’re to blame for *everything* they have you thinking they’s some kind of gods! . . . *Shit!* Nobody’s as powerful as we make them out to be. We got our own *souls*, don’t we? (207)*

In addition to this wise realisation Grange has come to learn about hate, injustice, and disempowerment, he exhibits the full extent of his humanity when he sacrifices his own life in order to protect Ruth. Moments after Brownfield has been granted back full custody of her in the town courthouse, the reader learns: “[Brownfield] felt himself thrown back as if by a great gush of wind. He sank limply to the floor and did not manage to get a word out before he died. Underneath his flared tail coat Grange had carried his blue steel Colt. 45. With it he had shot

down his son” (246). Grange is aware that this act of murder will result in him also being killed. He has even taken precautions to protect Ruth from further harm, having removed her gun from their home before the trip to the courthouse. When the police arrive at their house after a quick escape from the scene of his crime, Grange runs into the back woods in order to lead the police away from Ruth. He knows that these actions will mean “that she [will] live longer . . . at least in this battle” (247). Grange’s final and ultimate sacrifice is made with the belief that Ruth will survive his murder, but the battle against injustice and inequality will be much harder for her to escape. Walker heroicises Grange with these final musings. His wise realisations coupled with his self-sacrifice in order to better Ruth’s life, underscore his personal integrity – a quality that subsequently cannot be forgotten when considering those elements of his and Ruth’s relationship that are socially transgressive, yet mutually considerate and pleasurable. Grange is a disciplined, intelligent, independent and strong masculine figure. By humanising him in these ways, Walker, furthermore, offers a counter image to the historical “Africanist persona” existent in countless novels. For both of these reasons, her portrayal of Grange and Ruth’s relationship legitimises a form of love and eroticism conventionally defined as aberrant.

While their relationship is perceived by the other members of their community to be a psychological malfunction, Grange and Ruth are able to heal and find redemption in their lives as a result of it. As Lauret argues “the ending quite clearly shows that Grange’s separatist leanings are misguided and have no future – this is why he has to die,” an example that underscores Walker’s fabulist construction of an otherwise seemingly realist text (*Modern Novelists: Alice Walker* 37). This need to kill off Grange to make the political point that progressive racial change must reside in the form of integration not separation, highlights the crafted, fabulist nature of the novel, and also indicates that it is only as a result of this tactic that heroicises

Grange that his relationship with Ruth is able to be read as legitimate rather than sexually aberrant. In this sense, Walker's invented "formal resolution," rather than being interpreted as a kind of falsification of African American history, can be read as an intrinsic and crucial element of the story itself insofar as it is precisely this aspect of the novel that allows for the development of Ruth and Grange's utopian bond: a connection that leads to personal transcendence and freedom for both Ruth and Grange even if the price of that freedom is separation and, in Grange's case, death (Hogue 97). While aspects of Grange and Ruth's erotic relationship appear to reinforce rather than dispel sexist, racist, and colourist ideology, their relationship thus ultimately functions as a haven in which considerate and pleasurable love and eroticism can reside outside the realm of socially-acceptable cultural scripts, a message that is overlooked when reading the novel as straight racialised realist fiction.

In *By The Light of My Father's Smile*, Walker is more sexually explicit in her depiction of unconsummated transgressive erotic familial bonds. In this novel, she presents an inside look into the sexual life of the woman Susannah, from the perspective of her deceased father, Señor Robinson, who has unrestricted access to her most intimate thoughts and feelings and is a ghostly voyeur during her sexual interactions with her two lovers. While there is little literary criticism written about the novel, reviews of it range from unqualified praise to caustic dismissals. White, who pays tribute to the novel, surmises that it is "A passionate, richly detailed celebration of sexuality," and "Walker's most erotic novel" ("Alice Walker on Finding Your Bliss" 43). Colleen Sell, similarly, contends that the novel "is a magical celebration of the human spirit that speaks eloquently about the rarely explored role of fathers in the sexual and spiritual well-being of their female children" (61). Gayle Pemberton credits Walker specifically for taking on such

taboo subject matter. She points out, “It is . . . terribly risky for a novelist to confront the stereotype of black women as salacious and predatory by writing them into scenes of erotic intensity, both heterosexual and lesbian,” and for this reason believes that the novel “goes farther . . . in its attempt to redeem black female sexuality, making it quintessential to the development of the whole self” (21). This statement underscores her awareness of the pervasive racism that Black women in the United States continue to face and her recognition of Walker’s bravery for confronting it. Other reviewers present a much harsher assessment of Walker’s novel. Nedhera Landers, for example, calls the novel “a disappointment,” and claims that “almost every character [is] a two-dimensional stereotype” (30). Even more derisive is R. Z. Sheppard’s interpretation. In his review he sarcastically asks: “Is it fiction or is it gynecology?” (96). Sheppard argues that “Walker flits gnomically through space and time to tell the story of an American family and its transformation from a repressed patriarchal unit to a spiritual sorority of free radicals” (96).

The majority of the reviewers, both those who extol and those who disparage it, categorise the novel in much the same terms as Walker’s earlier works, in particular, *The Color Purple*, viewing it as a didactic, feminist fairytale. Pemberton, for instance, refers to the novel as an “elaborate fable,” while Donna Seaman posits that within it Walker “[burdens] her art with her polemics” (Pemberton 20, Seaman 1671). She concludes that “Walker has created a romantic but propagandistic fairy tale that veers disconcertingly from the facile to the heartfelt” (1671). As is the case with critical interpretations of *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, these readings reveal Walker’s deliberate use of utopianism. Yet these critics too fail to keep this aspect of her work in mind when analysing it. In fact, I argue that it is precisely through Walker’s use of the protagonist Señor Robinson’s ties to the utopian fictional tribe, the Mundo, that she is able to

exhibit artistic complexity in her portrayal of his relationships with his two daughters. This fabulist element of the novel is what allows Walker to utilise a controversial narrative device – familial voyeurism – through which she makes implicit the ideological undercurrents of her story: this narrative technique in turn allows Walker to normalise father/daughter eroticism, a practice otherwise interpreted as threatening because of its perceived cultural aberrance. Through her portrayals of taboo familial erotic desire, Walker’s text further serves to challenge dominant social valuations of what constitutes legitimate, as opposed to pathological, forms of love, eroticism and sexuality.

The information the author imparts throughout the novel regarding the fictional Mexican people, the Mundo, provides the foundation for the philosophical reconsideration of what comprises sexual morality in the text. The Mundo, the reader learns, are “a tiny band of mixed-race Blacks and Indians who’d fled across the border during the Civil War,” and who “thought of themselves not as Africans or as Indians, but as dark-skinned Mexicans” (14). It is this group of people living in the Mexican Sierras that the Robinsons – two Black American anthropologists – go to study in Mexico accompanied by their young daughters Susannah and Magdalena. They arrive under the guise that Señor Robinson is there “as spiritual advisor to Mexico,” on behalf of his Black church in the United States (14). The Mundo are the moral force behind the novel, teaching Señor Robinson in death, as Pemberton puts the matter, “to celebrate eros shorn of vulgarity, shame or loathing, to light . . . the darkness around it” (21). Emphasising the tribe as the authority on philosophical matters, Pemberton informs us that “*Mundo* is the Spanish word for “world” (20). This term is actually used to refer to both “the world” and “the people of the world” or “the whole world.” Walker has therefore imbued this ethnic group with worldly relevance and power. As Bates notes: “Walker’s Mundo people provide the mythological

embodiments of truth and teach their ways to the Robinson family. The perceptions of the Mundo inspire revelation into the purpose of love and healing, lessons for the Robinsons to learn in life or in death” (134). She emphasises, “Mundo cosmology acknowledges the interconnectedness of the human spirit and/or soul to all existence since time immemorial” (137). It is thus only once Señor Robinson accepts the Mundo teachings on love that, as Bates puts it, “the door opens for him to experience full reconciliation with all of his family members” (137). By giving the reader access to a new and wholly different value system through this alternate utopian culture, Walker emphasises the imposing ideological system in the West responsible for determining what constitutes sexually “deviant” or “perverse” behaviour.

The reader comes to learn about specific rites of passage in Mundo culture through the character Manuelito, a deceased Mundo, the former love of Magdalena’s life, and as Bates puts it, “the guiding spirit that assists Señor Robinson in the reconciliation with his daughters” (139). These ritualistic practices are in many ways the antithesis of White Western codes of acceptable sexuality. Manuelito explains: “When a child is born it is kissed by both its parents in five places: its ears are kissed, its eyes, its nose, its mouth and the place where life begins. When someone dies those who intimately love her or him will also kiss these same places” (162). This ceremony is performed, he informs Señor Robinson, in order to “kiss all the places that let in the light” (208). Furthermore, Manuelito tells Señor Robinson:

If you are in love, and going to meet your lover, to make love, you think of the moon as a father, happily looking down on you. For Mundo fathers *are* happy that their children, the girls as well as the boys, enjoy what your culture calls sex. And that is why a young girl sings, as she goes to her lover, just as does a young boy: “by the light of my father’s smile!” And that is why no one among the Mundo would marry when the moon is full, but only when it has waned and then reappears, as a smile in a dark face, in the sky! (210)

Walker accordingly has chosen to title the novel in reference to this Mundo tribal truth: love-making is inherently good and a father's role should be like that of the moon – looking with approval onto all of his children, irrespective of gender, when they experience sexual pleasure. Because Señor Robinson failed to fulfil such a role for his own daughters in life, now in death he must make amends by participating in a Mundo ritual of reconciliation. Manuelito explains: “The dead are required to finish two tasks before all is over with them: one is to guide back to the path someone you left behind who is lost, because of your folly; the other is to host a ceremony so that you and others you have hurt may face eternity reconciled and complete” (148).

Through Manuelito, Walker further informs the reader of the atrocities that have been inflicted on the Mundo by missionary priests as a result of their customs:

they did not appreciate the idea of a mother and father touching the breasts and kissing the vulva and phallus of their grown children, even to bless them. We explained that the kissing was respectful, the lightest touch. But they did not care. Because we practiced this, they raided our villages, hacked off our heads with machetes, enslaved us to work in the gold and silver mines. Burned our children alive.  
(163)

The Mundo pay the ultimate price for their embracing of sexuality as a natural, pleasurable and shame-free aspect of living. This exposure to the deadly consequences the Mundo suffer as a result of their fundamental beliefs underscores the injustice the tribe must endure as a result of following a different code of sexual ethics to that of the Western world. This information also provides the necessary sympathetic context the reader must develop for Señor Robinson in order to accept the unconventional voyeuristic style of narration he provides throughout the novel: it is not that Señor Robinson is a psychologically defunct incestuous voyeur, rather he is a sympathetic man following an alternative code of ethics, looking to redeem himself through a process of reconciliation and healing of his daughters. Walker's implicit use of the Mundo's

practices and customs in consequence subtly guides the reader into adopting her own political philosophy. By confronting the theme of voyeurism in this way, Walker works to dispel a taboo sexual act typically regarded as pathological. Her choice to have Señor Robinson normalise this practice underscores her attempt to bring about in her reader a wider understanding of what may constitute legitimate forms of love, eroticism and sexuality.

Near the beginning of the novel, Walker clarifies the reason for Señor Robinson's estrangement from his daughters in life and the reason he must now, in death, make reparations for his past tragic actions. After discovering that his eldest daughter Magdalena has been having sex with her Mundo friend Manuelito at age fifteen, Señor Robinson brutally beats her with a leather belt "covered with small silver disks" that Manuelito has himself made for her (26). This act of abuse occurs as a result of Señor Robinson's embarrassment by, and inability to come to terms with, Magdalena's sexually-curious, "wild" nature – both his wife, Langley, and the Mundo accept her as she is – he, however attempts to control and punish her for it, by preventing her from being with her Mundo friends. When this control tactic fails, and Señor Robinson resorts to "[thrashing Magdalena] in silence," his act of abuse is witnessed by his youngest child, Susannah, and causes irreparable damage to both his relationship with her, and also to her perception of sexuality in general (26). From the moment of the beating onward, the reader learns: "he would never again be permitted to really know or enjoy his [daughter]" – at least not in life (27).

While as Pemberton notes, "Magdalena is victimized by the scrutiny and repression of her father as she enters puberty," an occurrence that tragically affects the rest of her life and is ultimately responsible for her untimely death, with the guiding wisdom of Manuelito, Señor Robinson, in death, comes to appreciate, even honour, the sexuality and eroticism he so

denounced in both of his daughters during his lifetime (20). The damage that he has inflicted upon Magdalena's life, however, is irreversible. For this reason, Señor Robinson cannot bear to bring himself to look in upon her in appreciation and celebration of her sexuality when she reunites with Manuelito many years after their forced separation. He is able, however, to make reparations to Susannah by following Mundo custom and looking in on her in celebration as she experiences the joys and pleasures of her lovers. Victoria Kingston notes, Señor Robinson "hovers constantly, with his nose, as it were, pressed against the window, voyeuristically relating to us details of Susannah's life that are entirely personal and would be denied to him as a living man," – an act that she summarises as just plain "[eery]" (9). This voyeurism, however, is not exploitive, but is rather, as Manuelito tells, "completely natural" and healing (149). Señor Robinson is present in Susannah's private sexual life in order to help her heal from wounds that he has inflicted. He wants her to know that she is "crippled in a place that should be free" due to his wrongdoings, and thus comes to recognise the beauty of Susannah's sexuality, and learns to honour it (28).

After witnessing his own funeral, Señor Robinson describes watching Susannah and her Greek husband make love late into the night:

The bed shook with her laughter, but she also did not make a sound. She felt herself warm, beginning to tingle inside, and thought: All play leads up to this moment. . . . he had climbed up into the bed, was on top of her, was inside her, was soaking in her scent of lemongrass and cloves. He floated on her, his penis a rod, a branch of the olive tree, no, the very olive tree itself, whose olives she loved. The ancestral tree that fed all of Greece. (44-45)

Imbued with a variety of pleasing warm, wet, citrusy and spicy sensory descriptions, in this passage, Señor Robinson associates his daughter and her husband's love-making with the classic Biblical symbol of peace, fertility and purity: the olive tree. Susannah's husband's penis, initially described as an olive tree branch – an allusion to the dove's offering of an olive leaf to Noah to

demonstrate the end of the flood – comes to be viewed as the olive tree itself – the source of his power and wisdom (Gen. 8.11). Here, Walker uses graphic sexual language to describe the lovers' sexual passion for one another, while simultaneously tempering their raw sexuality with this famous Biblical image. Her choice to frame the sexual act – an act that is itself in keeping with conventional norms of sexual “acceptability” insofar as it is married, monogamous and heterosexual – with a Biblical symbol of purity, works to de-emphasise the taboo aspect on which these observations are being made: the reader is consequently able to accept even more readily Señor Robinson's voyeuristic access to Susannah's sex life, as the spirit in which his observations are made is in keeping with current American religious valuations pertaining to sexuality. This second tactic, in addition to her use of the Mundo as a utopian tribe, is implemented by Walker to further expand the reader's range of sympathy for an act that is conventionally viewed to be a type of psychological malfunction. Consequently, Walker succeeds in constructing a new set of determinations about what in fact should compromise legitimate expressions of love, eroticism and sexuality – a perspective in keeping with the Mundo worldview.

This conventional disruption furthermore serves to assuage the earlier shock value Walker achieves in her presentation of Señor Robinson's voyeuristic observations of Susannah's unconventional sexual activity with her female lover, Pauline, at the outset of the novel. Señor Robinson observes the two women making love:

[Susannah] listens to the woman softly snoring beside her, and then, switching off her mind, she begins to stroke her awake. The woman is responsive instantly, as if she'd never really been asleep. She permits my daughter free-roaming access to her heavy breasts, hot to the touch, and to her furry belly from which the scent of sandalwood floats upward through the sheet. My daughter places her nose in the crease of the woman's neck, which, like her breasts, is incredibly warm. The woman rolls over and is suddenly the aggressor, on top of my daughter, straddling her. My daughter has wanted this. She widens her body on the bed and slips off the thin chemise she is

wearing in order to permit full contact. The woman flings off her strip of a garment, something barely gathered around her loins, and begins to ride my daughter, hard, as if she would drive her into the mattress that sits on a delicate frame of bamboo. (9)

As with the scene between Susannah and her husband, here Señor Robinson's description of Susannah's sexual experience with Pauline permeates with pleasurable sensory references to warm body parts and natural, woody scents. A scene that at the outset of the novel appears to overtly push the boundaries of dominant notions of acceptable expressions of sexuality, read in the context of Walker's later depiction of Susannah's sexual experience with her husband, puts forth similar allusions to reciprocal, justified sexual desire. Susannah and Pauline approach and respond to each other with equal passion and desire to that of Susannah and her husband. As Señor Robinson describes it, they participate in a mutually consensual and pleasurable exchange. Furthermore, Walker presents the two women as unashamed to embrace alternative codes of sexual desire and expression.

During this sexual encounter, through Señor Robinson's observations, Walker introduces the reader to other transgressive taboo elements of Susannah and Pauline's sexual arousal. Señor Robinson describes how:

Pauline is conscious of the slightest tremor of my daughter's body but she is also venting her "lust" for the Kalimasan boy. She imagines him coming through the bamboo curtain at the foot of the bed, penis – a smooth and heavy one, she is happy to find out – erect, dripping in hope and shy anticipation. She imagines ordering him to the bed, to her backside. Imagines he is in her, driving her, and she drives herself against Susannah . . . (10)<sup>9</sup>

He furthermore observes:

When she retrieves her tongue from my daughter's throat, she laps her armpits, her sides; she claims my daughter's body as she wriggles expertly backward, toward the slippery penis of the boy, whose heat she feels in her cunt, in her ass, in her ovaries and womb. This is not the moment to recall her own grandsons, half the age of the Kalimasan boy. But she does. Sex is like a stew for her, everyone in it at once. She imagines the thrust of the penis of the Kalimasan boy. She feels her own clitoris huge against the body of the woman with whom she is so angry. She wants her grandsons to

know this kind of power over a woman, or over a boy. It is the only power over others she wants them to have. The power to give pleasure, ruthlessly, and to leisurely take it.  
(10)

Through Señor Robinson's explicit observations, Walker introduces a third imagined lover into this sex scene, imbuing the event with Pauline's desire of a sexual threesome in which her attraction to both her female lover and the Kalimasan male is made clear. Her desire to be in control of him serves to enhance her sexual passion for Susannah, causing her to thrust deeper against her present lover. Pauline's simultaneous desire for Susannah and fantasy of this added player bring out a gratifying, animalistic pleasure within her. Aware that there are some social sexual conventions that she herself should not disobey, she is so overcome with passion that it is impossible to follow them. Instead, she imagines her own grandsons, young boys themselves, and wants them to know this – as she describes it, the only acceptable – form of dominance over another human being. In this one erotic exchange, Walker encapsulates and counters the taboo subjects of voyeurism, bisexuality, sexual threesomes and incestuous desire. In this way, the scene functions as a concentrated depiction of the various sexual relationships Baldwin put forth throughout a series of scenes in a variety of novels. In one powerful scene, Walker succeeds in forcing the reader to confront multiple social codes of morality. Furthermore, by allowing the reader to see the full extent of Susannah's humanity, and the consensual, non-harmful and pleasurable result of her experience with Pauline, she evokes understanding and acceptance of an activity conventionally perceived to be aberrant.

As she approaches orgasm, Susannah's thoughts, furthermore, become inextricably bound up with her parents as, unbeknownst to her, her father peers down, observing her pleasure:

Susannah feels herself mounting to the clouds, and tries to slow herself down from arriving there. Unbidden, in that moment, she thinks of me and of her mother, so often fighting, when she was a child. Only to emerge from our bedroom after a fight

completely peaceful, tranquil, with each other. Our every movement one of indolence, our every utterance marked by an unfathomable calm. (13)

In her moment of uncontrolled climax, Susannah's mind reverts to an image of the romantic bond she so fondly remembers that her parents once shared. This vision of sexuality as the magic remedy to life's problems, underscores her positive association with sex as a powerful and healing tool. In this context, Walker highlights the mutually beneficial and pleasurable potential of sexual experience. Susannah's memories of her parents' love-making naturalises this idea of sexuality as a fluid and redemptive practice: something to be savoured and enjoyed.

As the narrative progresses, Susannah and her father's mutual eroticisation of one another becomes more evident. Señor Robinson reflects:

she was dreaming about me constantly. She was "feeling" a presence lounging and lurking about her house. She was wearing black more and more, as if in imitation of my bogus priestly frock. She was wearing onyx on her finger, jet about her throat. When she slipped into her black car on her way down the mountain, it was as though she were entering me, her dark father, of whom she had once been so proud. So trusting, and so unafraid.

And I, my nose pressed now against the window of her love life, and especially her sex life. Trying to have a place in an area I had nearly destroyed. (149)

In this passage, Susannah's increasing connection to her father is made apparent. Now dreaming of him, feeling him, and dressing like him, her life becomes entirely infused with her father's ghostly presence. The author also makes evident a type of psychological role-reversal that has taken place in both Susannah and Señor Robinson's minds: Susannah, now embodying traits of dominance and penetration – the reader is told "it was as though she were entering [him]" – comes to resemble a male, patriarchal figure, while Señor Robinson with his "nose pressed ... against the window of her love life" has become significantly disempowered, resembling a young child, and trying to make reparations for past mistakes.

Señor Robinson's embracing of Mundo tribal customs transforms him into a guiding presence for both of his daughters: an act that serves to reconcile him with Magdalena and to help Susannah realise the full potential of her personal sexual desires and practices: the key to her life's fulfilment. Throughout the course of the novel, he comes to learn that his greatest mistake in life has been his sexual hypocrisy, a flaw that has led to both Magdalena's death and to the psychological damage that Susannah has endured. Señor Robinson is able, however, to make peace with Magdalena after her death. In true Mundo custom, he hosts a ceremony welcoming the childhood love-making cave of Magdalena and Manuelito – what he has since come to regard as “perfect” (205). Señor Robinson refers to Manuelito as his son, and expresses his love for Magdalena. It is the combination of this reconciliation, and his ability to guide back Susannah to the true path of her individual sexuality, that leads to Señor Robinson's personal redemption by the end of the novel. He is as a result able to cross over after death assured that his newfound understanding of Mundo customs have allowed him to set both of his daughters free.

By presenting Señor Robinson as violent and evil only when he *does* conform to his prescribed social role as father (needing to curb and restrict his daughters' sexuality), and by portraying him as loving, civilised and humbled when he lets go of such prescriptions, Walker makes an argument about the invalidity of conventional Western sexual norms. Through his existential journey, Walker destabilises sexual typecasts: Señor Robinson and his daughters' complex erotic relationships work to collapse derogatory labels and prescribed social roles. Instead, a new set of ethics emerges by which to consider what constitutes positive sexuality. Like Foucault, Walker, in her case through her fictional accounts, creates an alternate system by which sexuality is judged to that of the modern United States. However, whereas Foucault

neglects to factor racism and sexism into his work, Walker puts these themes at the forefront of her text. Her novel is in many ways a fictional feminist appropriation of Foucault's male conception of the self. It can also be read as a fictional representation of the axioms upon which Rubin's theory of sexuality is based. Like Foucault and Rubin, Walker's fiction subsequently illuminates the culturally-specific and shifting nature of perceptions of sexual desire and practice.

Walker's complex depictions of love and eroticism thus serve to underscore the premise that perceptions of both personal identity and social roles are in fact social constructions that have become naturalised. There is therefore no true identity or role that exists apart from these discursive constructs. Such constructs are consequently neither adequate nor ethically viable. By humanising characters who partake in erotic scenarios outside of normative sexual displays, Walker ultimately succeeds in queering White heteronormativity, putting it in its place as nothing more than the dominant current social construction that has thus become normalised in American society. This effort to contextualise White heteronormativity creates a space in which Black characters can be sexually transgressive without being depicted as "perverse," and without being reduced to Black sexual stereotypes. Furthermore, these alternative expressions of love and eroticism are presented as not only non-threatening, but also as ethical and legitimate occurrences. When contemplating Walker's literary corpus, Bradley states that he "would like to forget about 30 percent of what she has written and said" (8). He contends, however, that "the remaining 70 percent is so powerful," that "there is no writer in [the] country more worthy of the term seer" (8). Earlier in the chapter, I quoted Bradley's antagonism toward Walker, however, he is also able to see the power she exhibits as a subtle and skilful writer of fiction in much of her work. Bradley's words emphasise the crucial need to separate Walker's literary achievements

from her polemical failings as a populist fiction writer. While much of her work is consciously dedicated to pursuing her political beliefs, it is ironically not in her political declarations, but rather in the complexity behind some of her most evocative portrayals of character relationships that she exerts her greatest political influence. In moments such as these that unite rather than alienate, Walker's imagery carries forth her most profound philosophical beliefs pertaining to freedom, individualism, and social justice. It is through her ability to depict three-dimensional, complex relationships that evoke in the reader a questioning of the arbitrary nature of codes of sexual morality that Walker's fiction serves to directly confront and dispel the Black sexual myths and derogatory racial labels grounded in the oppressive constructions of beastliness and subservience. These character portrayals are anything but the stereotypes of "ridiculous pickaninnies, stern matriarchs, big brutes, noble sinners," and "feeble-minded ladies" critics such as Pinckney have accused her of perpetuating. In fact, Walker's character portrayals serve not only to break apart stereotypes of Black "authenticity," but also constitute a tool with which to fight other forms of oppression. In regard to sexuality, these efforts work to redefine "sexual perversion" as a social concept – an endeavour that is ultimately an assertion of social freedom. By evoking sympathy for characters who would otherwise conventionally be viewed as "perverse," Walker shares a common project with Baldwin: she develops a broader understanding of what constitutes ethical love, eroticism and sexuality, effectively exposing the hidden source of multiple forms of discrimination. Her work, in conjunction with Baldwin's, represents a stepping-stone in the historical chain of American writers' representations of eroticism and sexuality, and functions as a source of insight and courage for future writers interested in continuing the fight against arbitrary social rules and regulations. It is therefore the very factors responsible for the critical vilification of her work that mark her contribution to

American literature as indeed bravely extending the controversial themes other African American writers before her, in particular Baldwin, dared to expose, and in fact surpassing them in new and transgressive ways.

## **Exposing the Human Dilemma: Incest and Erotic Triads**

### **in Toni Morrison's Fiction**

My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served.  
(Morrison, *Playing* 90)

Morrison is a writer who, like Walker, has made considerable use of the theoretical discourses surrounding race and sex that the Harlem Renaissance writers and, subsequently, Baldwin opened up. Her work has also enhanced the aesthetic and experimentalist traditions established by writers such as Ellison and Faulkner, who were determined to present psychologically complex and realistic characters that could not be pigeonholed into conventional racial or sexual stereotypes. Her first novel, like Walker's, was published in 1970, and although she is therefore a Black female author writing throughout the same period in American history, in contrast to Walker, Morrison places herself in the high literary tradition both as a critic and novelist. As she expresses it in the opening of *Playing in the Dark*, as a critic, it is her intention to "[extend] the study of American literature into . . . a wider landscape" (3). This ambition is realised in *Playing* as she sets out "to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions" (11). This undertaking is based on her belief that there is a gap in

scholarship that fails “to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behaviour of masters” (12). Morrison’s efforts to unmask the White literary imagination, not only as it pertains to the mindset and actions of perpetrators of racism against Blacks, but also the ways in which American literature “[behaves] in its encounter with racial ideology,” provide insight into her critical endeavours, but also into the ways in which the literary question successfully drives the form of her fictional stories (*Playing* 16).

Morphologically, much of Morrison’s work, unlike Baldwin and Walker’s, closely parallels the slave narratives that served to expose the consequences of White racial oppression of Blacks. As with these narratives, Morrison’s fiction is a direct testimony to the evils of slavery (Appiah xii). For this reason, her work also resembles African American folklorist novels by writers such as Hurston, presenting all or mostly-Black casts of characters and period vernaculars, and concerning itself with sexual themes that are frequently non-consensual, violent, and/or illegal. This literary style is not to be confused with Walker’s womanist appropriations of Black historical events, as in the case of *The Color Purple* – a novel that ultimately attempts to rewrite the insurmountable atrocities of the past. Rather, in Morrison’s fiction, and in contrast to Baldwin and Walker’s frequently utopian portrayals of alternative relationships, taboo forms of love, eroticism, sensuality and sexuality are often distinctly anti-utopian, inasmuch as individual desires and acts are composed of both harmful and non-harmful elements. Commonly, in her work, sensual and sexual experiences cannot be surmised as wholly detrimental or beneficial to the individuals involved: they do not break down to such obvious binaries. These symbolically layered events are rather a reflection of Morrison’s complex character depictions, that in their own unique ways serve to disabuse the reader of common Black sexual stereotypes by complicating and transmogrifying them, and furthermore portray taboo forms of love, eroticism,

sensuality and sexuality in such a way as to allow for a reconsideration of sexual norms that challenges all forms of social injustice. Love, as in Baldwin and Walker's novels, is present in relationships conventionally perceived to be unacceptable. In Morrison's fiction, however, rather than re-writing the legitimate sexual couple through unlikely and taboo, yet functional, social pairs and triangles, and legitimising acts such as erotic familial desire and voyeurism, the traditional understanding of what constitutes legitimate sexuality is further complicated by infusing positive elements into sensual and sexual acts that (whether occurring between socially acceptable or unacceptable pairs and triangles) appear to be nothing other than violent, illegal or psychologically regressive.

This approach has resulted in considerable debate from the critics regarding what Morrison's work is in fact about. In contrast to critical assessments of Walker's novels, for example, there isn't an obvious consensus about what the novels mean, or what she as a writer contends. Critics have argued, however, that like Walker, Morrison's interests are different from Baldwin's in two fundamental ways, proposing that she is concerned principally with female characters and that her novels are explicitly Afro-centric. In regard to her preoccupation with women, Stockton claims that Morrison's fiction "refutes the thesis that matriarchy constitutes a problem," and argues that her work "is a warning that *coupledom* constitutes a 'paradigm that just doesn't work'" (98). These ideas suggest her interpretation of Morrison's writing to be anti-patriarchy and anti-nuclear family, instead making the case for alternative forms of social hierarchy and bonding. Keith Mitchell, conversely, argues that the writer's use of what he observes to be "the monstrous-feminine" ultimately serves "to reify . . . heteronormative behaviour, underscored by black masculinity and the maintenance of the patriarchal black family unit" (273). He attributes what he views as Morrison's inadvertent alignment with the status quo

to her unconscious tendency to have “at the ends of all of her novels, heteronormative social behavior . . . invariably maintained” (272). This disjuncture in critical analysis also occurs in interpretations of the significance of Morrison’s Afro-centric stance. On one hand, critics such as Michael Nowlin allege that the author is writing explicitly to a Black reader (159). He contends that she “variously describes the ideal reader of her fiction as herself, the characters in her novels, or the black ‘village,’” asserting that “the common denominator here is a reader who has no personal stake in the category of whiteness and thus has nothing to lose by getting close to the racially marked other” (157). Nowlin stipulates that Morrison “clearly feels the political attraction of an identitarian understanding of race, in which race grounds identity” (159). His position is predicated on an understanding of Morrison as deliberately exclusive rather than inclusive, interpreting her motive as desiring solely to affect the African American social consciousness in order to evoke new conceptions of African American racial and sexual identity. Other critics, such as Vickroy, disagree, arguing that “Morrison emphasizes communal or collective knowledge” in an effort to articulate and share the atrocities of the past (102). She argues that “the greatest value” of Morrison’s work lies “in helping readers to empathize with and share the victim’s experience from the victim’s point of view” and “in insisting . . . that we all must explore our own role in this victimization, whether our guilt take the form of direct responsibility or complicity” (102). Vickroy interprets Morrison’s mostly-Black casts of characters as the writer’s attempt to make the history of Black oppression visible to all readers in an effort to bring about change in the collective American social consciousness. Her understanding of Morrison’s Afro-centric choices also echoes Henderson’s assessment of Baldwin’s reverse choice in *Giovanni’s Room* to write the novel devoid of Black characters – a

decision made, she contends, in a deliberate effort to take race out of the equation in order to focus explicitly upon other issues such as gender and sexuality (“Expatriation” 313).

This chapter will argue that irrespective of both these thematic divergences and Morrison’s political and motivational differences to Baldwin, her writing subsumes the efforts put forth by the Harlem Renaissance writers and Baldwin himself, in effect presenting an understanding of forms of love, eroticism, sensuality and sexuality beyond those that are socially prescribed. Unlike in Baldwin’s fiction, where this understanding more often than not arises as a result of love triangles that point to the characters’ bisexuality and interracial desires, or in Walker’s fiction where it can be seen among other places, in her portrayals of erotic familial relationships, in Morrison’s work, it is visible through frequent and sustained instances of incestuous sensuality and sexuality, in which love is often seemingly absent.

In the past, critics have acknowledged Morrison’s use of the tropes of dirt and anality as devices meant to challenge prescriptive norms of behaviour, thereby emphasising her understanding of boundaries of sexual permissibility as manifestations of puritanical ideals. Her invention of the fictional town the Bottom, in her novel *Sula*, is arguably the most overt example of this appropriation of the abject as a means to re-thinking such norms. Stockton contends that Morrison’s use of the Bottom indicates the site of abjection as a metaphor for the economic and social displacement of Blacks (85). She explains how the “novel positions black folks outside the white capitalist complex, linking white folks to the mill, but black folks to the Bottom and its alternate, anal economy” (85). From this positioning, Stockton concludes that for Morrison’s characters, “Reaching bottom is theologically enjoined, sexually pleasurable, but economically dangerous for marginalized people” (85). Her thesis turns on an understanding of Morrison as valuing “debasement” (82). It proposes that Morrison is in effect “humiliating” “the dominant

culture's stand against anality," and in doing so, is inadvertently supporting the notion of sexual pleasure as a trumping factor over the prescription of specific normative sexual acts (84).

Consequently, to Stockton, abjection represents a form of liberation (84). She argues, "In staking her claim with and for the Bottom, Morrison seeks to invert entrenched cultural judgments about regression, and by implication, about debasement" (93). Her theory supposes that through the taboo of anal eroticism/anal enjoyment, Morrison makes us re-think what constitutes "perverse" sex: embracing the Bottom, in a literal and figurative sense, is what leads to salvation (108).

Bryant goes even further with this line of thought, arguing that the site of abjection is turned into a new source of salvation in Morrison's work. He describes her representation of unconventional sexuality as an "unusual survival strateg[y]" that functions as a "desperate remed[y] that challenge[s] the conventional social definitions of madness and sanity, humanity and inhumanity, as well as life and death" (740). The representations of the bottom are interpreted by these critics as extolling the objectionable elements of the body, reclaiming them as necessary, authentic, and often joyous aspects of human sexuality.

In the space of this chapter, I hope to show how Morrison's engagement with the project of reconstituting what qualifies as legitimate sensual and sexual acts extends, however, far beyond these tropes. I will work to establish how her thematic depictions of incest, sensual and sexual triads serves to provide a set of historical, social and ethical considerations on which to evaluate various forms of love, eroticism, sensuality and sexuality. Her work exposes, in particular, how social and historical context can cause an individual to act destructively toward others. This process, as with Baldwin and Walker's fictional depictions, reveals all forms of intimate, romantic and sexual expression to be discursive constructs, and thus serves to eccentricise and denaturalise White heteronormativity. While the extent to which Morrison

explores these themes throughout her entire literary corpus cannot be addressed in these pages, it is my hope to give a sense of the primacy of them to her “literary imagination” by focusing on key relationships in three of her novels, representative of three decades in which she has been writing. These portrayals reveal Morrison’s links to the classical Western literary tradition that, as with Baldwin and Walker’s writing, elevates the reader from the particular circumstances and politics of the plot to an understanding of the human dilemma that is uncovered in the fiction that is relevant to us all. One of the profound elements to be gleaned from these presentations is that, like Baldwin and Walker, Morrison therefore takes the reader out of the particular and into predicaments with mythical status, into the human position.

Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* is the story of Pecola Breedlove, a twelve-year-old Black girl living in poverty who is pregnant with her father’s child. Pecola views herself as ugly: a perception that comes about as a result of the constant ridicule she receives from those around her because of her black skin and her family’s low economic status. By the end of the novel, she is driven mad by her desire to live up to White social standards of beauty. Many critics have interpreted the incest theme in the novel as Morrison’s feminist outcry: an effort to call attention to social gender imbalances and the devastating consequences of incestuous rape. Madonne M. Miner, for example, reads the novel as a tragic version of the rape of Philomela myth – what she articulates as “a sequence of rape, madness, and silence,” in contrast to Walker’s feminist appropriation of the tale in *The Color Purple* (176).<sup>1</sup> Miner contends that Pecola “remains behind blue eyes, an inarticulate, arm-fluttering bird” (189). She describes how the novel’s plot sequence echoes Philomela’s experiences: Pecola, like Philomela, is raped by a family member, subsequently impregnated, and silenced (189). Both women, she argues, endure “violation” and

later “an enclosure or undesirable transformation” (178). When examining the rape scene between Pecola and her father Cholly, the parallels to this myth become evident. The narrator describes how “Crawling on all fours toward her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke” (162). The reader is told:

His mouth trembled at the firm sweetness of the flesh. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist. . . . He wanted to fuck her – tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made – a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon. (162-63)

Pecola, silent and helpless in this passage, is depicted as a delicate and violated female figure whose life, like Philomela’s, is tragically condemned and silenced by the abuse from a male family figure. In this scene, Cholly is presented in barbaric, animalistic terms, crawling towards his prey on all fours. His overbearing, violent presence is larger than life: the “gigantic thrust” he makes into Pecola is a force impossible for the young and powerless girl to defend against. Morrison describes Pecola, conversely, as a young and innocent virgin. Her reference to the “firm sweetness of her flesh” invokes associations of Pecola with under-ripe fruit, while Morrison’s reference to “the tightness of her vagina” alludes to her virginity. Furthermore, the author’s reference to Pecola’s intake of breath, like the “rapid loss of air from a circus balloon,” signals not only Pecola’s fragility and powerlessness, but also the depletion of her life force itself. Miner concludes that Cholly’s rape of Pecola ultimately destroys “her vision of love and its potential,” explaining that “Following the rape, Pecola, . . . knows that for her, even love is bound to be dirty, ugly, of a piece with the fabric of her world” (188). This interpretation alludes to what Miner views as Morrison’s attempt to connect sexual abuse with racial oppression. In this reading of the novel, Pecola’s incestuous rape is an expected consequence of her economic and social circumstances.

Other critics have engaged with this line of thought more explicitly, by discussing the incest theme in the novel directly as a symbol for the trauma and oppression African Americans have faced as a result of the horrors of slavery. Vickroy, for example, argues that Pecola represents “the neglect, exploitation, disempowerment and disavowal” of her African American community and that the novel is the story of the “oppressive social and familial forces” that result from colonization (92, 91). She holds that the novel “explores how the traumatic experience of social powerlessness and devalued racial identity prevents the African American community from joining together and truthfully evaluating the similarity of their circumstances, much less finding ways to oppose dominant forces” (92). This interpretation of Morrison’s use of incest approaches the subject allegorically: incest becomes a symbol for the chaotic social destruction that results from racial inequality. Scott agrees, asserting that Morrison uses incest to obscure “other ‘tabooed’ subjects that are, in fact, more ‘unspeakable’ than incest” – in the case of Pecola, she argues, “that subject is racial self-loathing” (84). Scott views incest in the novel as Morrison’s attempt to expose the even “darker” system of “racial othering” that is woven into the fabric of American life; in the novel Cholly fails to “fulfil the role of father” as a result of this system of racial othering (87). Pecola, described by Scott as “one of the most poignant victims in all of American literature,” is, she argues, “raped by ‘Whiteness’ long before her father enters her” (89). To Scott, the rape “completes the dehumanizing and scapegoating of Pecola that the reader has been viewing from the novel’s opening pages, confirming for the community her status as an ‘other’ marked by immorality, ugliness, and blackness” (90). This interpretation functions as an indirect justification for the Black Beast Rapist stereotype that Cholly appears to occupy; Cholly may be a Black savage, but he too is a scapegoat, just one of a different kind – he is the perceived perpetrator of a crime that in reality extends far beyond his own. Here, Scott

brings to our attention the poignancy of Morrison's work: through this horrific act, the author takes us out of the particular, and makes us aware of the greater horror of slavery and its lasting impact.

When examining the rape closely, it becomes apparent that Cholly's violation of his daughter, while imbued with such symbolic political significance, on a more literal level works to expose his humanity. Furthermore, while an abusive infringement of Pecola's body, the rape is the only validation of self worth she is to receive throughout the course of the novel. As Luebke points out, Cholly's act of rape against Pecola originates "not out of lust," but out of "a tenderness, a protectiveness": a sentiment that calls to mind Leo's incentive for participating in physical intimacy with his brother Caleb in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (90). Scott herself acknowledges that the incest scene in the novel "represents not just another violation but also an act of love," and points out how Morrison gets across this message of love by executing the scene exclusively from Cholly's point of view (89). This tactic, she contends, allows Morrison to steer clear of portraying Cholly as "a monster" (90). Miner also recognises how Morrison's three-dimensional depiction of Cholly stands in the way of the reader's unequivocal condemnation. She explains how he is acting out of "misdirected feelings of love, tenderness, and anger" (188). These discussions of Cholly as a tragic figure arise as a result of his conflicted and damaged mental state that is attributed to the oppression he has suffered as a result of being Black.

Morrison provides the reader with insight into Cholly's state of mind before and after his act of abuse – evidence of his conflicted emotions. Having just returned home drunk, the narrator describes his thought process immediately prior to the rape:

Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her – ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched

back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him – the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? (161-62)

In this passage, Cholly's simultaneous feelings of guilt and impotence suggest his conscious awareness of his failure as Pecola's parent to provide her with what she needs for healthy development, and his belief in his powerlessness to meet these needs. The word "impotence" is imbued with sexual overtones that bring to the forefront Cholly's feelings of inadequacy as a man, and the failure he feels as a father. Viewing himself as worthless, as a "burned-out Black man," when he looks into Pecola's face, he sees her pain and her need for him, yet perceives himself to be a failure. Cholly doesn't know how to cope with his own helplessness, and it transmogrifies into irrationality: first irritation, and then rage. These new emotions are directed toward Pecola, as Cholly proceeds to blame her for his own inadequacies. Morrison's reference to his self-perception as "befuddled" is also imbued with a double-meaning: Cholly sees himself as an old, confused drunk, and as a useless parent to his child. He feels unworthy of Pecola's love and so undertakes to destroy it by violating her.

The reader is subsequently granted access to Cholly's deeply conflicted emotional state after the act of abuse:

Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbour of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her. (163)

As he abruptly brings his crime to an end, it is clear that Cholly is conscious of the full extent of the violation he has committed against the child for whom he feels such ambivalence. Aware of

Pecola's youth, innocence, and lack of reciprocation of his desire – as Morrison's reference to "the dry harbour of her vagina" makes evident – Cholly is once again incapacitated. He is unable to bring himself to pick up his daughter and help her, yet his guilt and love for her prompt him to make one small gesture of repentance: he covers her up. This action, that cannot begin to counterbalance the crime he has just committed, signifies Cholly's parental instinct to protect his child as, on some level, still precariously intact. This final act of tenderness, at the very least, as Luebke stipulates, indicates that Cholly loves Pecola enough "to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (90). By complicating Cholly's motivations in such a way, Morrison prevents a reading of his character as a unilateral example of the Black Beast Rapist stereotype. Rather, Cholly is portrayed as a deeply damaged and flawed man whose violating actions result in harming his child. This exposure of the pitiful nature of his situation uncovers something different about the nature of child sexual abuse. In Morrison's fictional world, no one is a monster, not even the paedophile himself. In this set of circumstances, Morrison's ability to invoke pity for Cholly despite his abusive behaviour underscores his humanity. Cholly is the perpetrator of a horrific crime, yet he is also presented as a human being. By dispelling the monster taboo this way, Morrison successfully expands the reader's range of sympathy for a sexual act conventionally viewed as monstrous.

This reading of Cholly as a tragic figure, rather than as a savage monster is reinforced by Morrison's choice to provide detailed background information about his life that works to explain his damaged mental state and this subsequent sexual violation. Throughout the course of the novel, the narrator reveals that as a teenager, on the night of his first sexual experience with a girl named Darlene, Cholly is discovered by two White men with long guns who proceed to

force him to have intercourse with Darlene at gunpoint while they shine flashlights on the two teenagers and laugh:

“Get on wid it, nigger,” said the flashlight one.

“Sir?” said Cholly, trying to find a buttonhole.

“I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good, nigger, make it good.” (148)

Cholly’s feeling of sheer powerlessness is made explicit:

With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear. . . .

Darlene put her hands over her face as Cholly began to simulate what had gone on before. He could do no more than make-believe. The flashlight made a moon on his behind. (148)

After this traumatic violation, Cholly, unable to express his hatred toward the men – the reader is told that “Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless” – instead foists his hatred onto Darlene (150). Morrison’s decision to precede Cholly’s act of abuse against Pecola with this traumatic act of past abuse reveals his subsequent crime against his daughter to be the dysfunctional misdirection of his anger. Cholly is enraged at the world around him, in particular at the mistreatment he has been subjected to as a Black man in a racist society. His abuse of Pecola is therefore the result of the sustained oppression he has endured throughout his life. Malcolm contends that Morrison’s depiction of Cholly’s past allows the reader to recognise that for the rest of Cholly’s life every female would represent that painful night with Darlene. They would “remind him yet again of the ‘one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight’” (118). Vickroy agrees that Cholly’s abuse of Pecola is the re-enactment of his abusive treatment as a teenager. His actions, she argues, are merely perpetuating the historic cycle of abuse to which he has been subjected (93). Seen in this light, Cholly harms Pecola out of his own sense of powerlessness. Raping her, rather than a deliberate effort to harm her, is a misguided and

desperate attempt to save himself by taking back sexual control: in this case, placing himself in the role of the White men and displacing his own victimisation onto his child. However, as Vickroy testifies, expressing his pain and anger in the wrong directions is a futile and misguided effort that can only serve to keep him oppressed and dejected (94). Cholly remains a product of racial oppression and only succeeds in perpetuating the destructive cycle of abuse.

While, as Vickroy argues, Morrison is not condoning Cholly's abuse of power – his rape of Pecola is unequivocally an act of violation – her decision to write about Cholly's crime as infused with conflicting feelings of love and tenderness sets his treatment of Pecola apart from the other characters' treatment of her throughout the novel. In the moments before the rape, it is the sight of Pecola's feet and the beauty and innocence Cholly sees in them that sexually arouses him. He thinks: "The creamy toe of her bare foot scratching a velvet leg. It was such a small and simple gesture, but it filled him then with a wondering softness" (162). Malcolm interprets Cholly's thoughts here as "the only time that the otherwise ugly Pecola is seen as beautiful" (116). With this access to Cholly's state of mind, it becomes clear that Cholly views Pecola as both emotionally vulnerable and physically desirable. His references to the creaminess of her toe and the velvety appeal of her leg convey his sexual attraction to and physical acceptance of what the reader has otherwise come to view as Pecola's inherent "ugliness." Significantly, Cholly is the one character in the novel who does not subscribe to the accepted belief that Pecola is unattractive – a belief that has already served to so destructively affect her sense of self. Pecola has come to believe that Whiter is better – a sentiment that is made manifest in her desire for blue eyes. This lack of conformity to the racist status quo in regard to female social codes of beauty highlights Cholly's love and acceptance of Pecola as a Black girl. He is the only character throughout the novel that expresses love and desire for her (Vickroy 96).

This love acts as a counterbalance to Pecola's belief in White superiority, indicating her value as an individual irrespective of her ability to live up to arbitrary and racist standards of beauty. While Pecola is in no way an accomplice in this criminal act, critics such as Malcolm have argued that Morrison's choice to make Pecola twelve contributes to a reading of her character as having some personal agency. She argues that Pecola's age at the time of the rape "suggests a departure from childhood to maturity, from innocence to sexual experience" (121). She claims that Cholly sees a beauty in Pecola, and thus "briefly grants her wish for it" (121). Cholly's ability to find Pecola sexually desirable, while an abhorrent and criminal misdirection of sexual attraction, is also then the only possible point in the novel from which Pecola has the potential to develop a sense of desirability and self-worth. In this way, Cholly's abusive actions provide Pecola with the tools she will need to overcome the damage done to her by internalising White standards of conventional beauty. It is only during this sex act that Pecola receives acknowledgement and validation of her individual beauty. This perception of his daughter as beautiful is in contrast to Grange's developing perception of Ruth as sexually available. While both scenarios show the harm caused to the child when a familial authority figure begins perceiving a girl as a sexually-available Black female, in Grange's case this perception marks the degeneration of a relationship as it becomes forced into the socially prescribed one. In Cholly's case, in contrast, his perception of Pecola, while criminal and extremely harmful to her, is in fact defying the socially prescribed view: to him, Pecola is not ugly because she is black. She is beautiful.

Cholly's act of abuse, infused with this possibility of freedom from social judgements, is reinforced by an examination of Pecola's destructive encounters with the notorious paedophile Soaphead Church. The narrator describes Soaphead's sustained abuse of girls: "His attentions . . .

settled on those humans whose bodies were least offensive – children. And since he was too diffident to confront homosexuality, and since little boys were insulting, scary, and stubborn, he further limited his interests to little girls” (166). Morrison’s portrayal of Soaphead is in sharp contrast to her depiction of Cholly, which further serves to humanise Cholly’s abuse of Pecola, yet even in this case, Morrison is careful to provide Soaphead too with a history. This history similarly humanises him, providing insight into those aspects of his personality that have been ingrained as a result of his familial heritage, and that have at least in part led to his subsequent development into a paedophile. Morrison presents Soaphead as a self-proclaimed misanthrope who appears calculating and in control at all times. He is an aesthete and a materialist with “rare but keen sexual cravings”: a sexual predator who commits sustained acts of abuse against young girls (166). The narrator explains, however, how he comes from a long line of “lecherous and lascivious” men of “mixed blood,” who in order to get ahead in life, have separated themselves “in body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa” (168, 167). Situating Soaphead in this historical context serves to undercut the image of the sexual savage that Morrison also subverts in Cholly.

Soaphead’s interaction with Pecola further serves to undermine the notion that he is nothing more than a child-molesting monster. While it appears that he will be more of a physical threat to Pecola than her own abusing father, this idea is thwarted when she arrives at Soaphead’s door with the hope that he will be able to help her realise her dream to have blue eyes. The reader is told that: “he saw a little girl, quite unknown to him. She was about twelve or so, he thought, and seemed to him pitifully unattractive” (173). With this initial thought, Soaphead reveals himself to be incapable of seeing beyond oppressive social norms. He does not desire Pecola despite his paedophilic urges because of what he perceives to be her “ugliness,” and so

makes no attempt to sexually exploit her. It is, ironically, the sustained racism he has been raised to embrace that in this instance saves Pecola from physical harm. In this way, Morrison establishes the notorious paedophile to be physically harmless, allowing the reader to identify with Soaphead as a human being. He is a paedophile only in description as we do not witness him violate a child, in contrast to our observations of Cholly.

When Pecola asks Soaphead to grant her blue eyes and is subsequently made to believe that her wish has come true, this lie, however, does prove to be harmful. In fact, the psychological harm it inflicts on her surpasses the physical harm Cholly's act of abuse has inflicted: It proves to be the catalyst that sends her into madness. Miner discusses Soaphead's reason for convincing Pecola that her dream has come true and the negative effect it will have on her:

Soaphead's creation of false belief is not necessarily right for Pecola, but for himself. Morrison substantiates this assessment of Soaphead's creation a few pages later, when she portrays its effect on Pecola. Imprisoned now behind blue eyes, the schizophrenic little girl can talk only to herself. Obviously, this instance of male-female interaction parallels earlier scenes from the novel: 'rape' occurs as Soaphead elevates himself at the expense of Pecola. (189)

Characterising this betrayal – the attempt to convince a little girl of such a lie – as a form of rape highlights the extent to which Miner believes Soaphead's actions to be a psychological infraction. The elevation Miner refers to is the elevation to God-like status Soaphead feels at having been able to convince Pecola that her eyes have in fact changed colour. With this realisation, Morrison simultaneously makes apparent Soaphead's guilt and innocence in much the same terms as she does with Cholly. Soaphead's calculated collusion in maintaining the status quo of White superiority reveals the danger he poses to Pecola's psychological well-being, yet his lack of physical violation cannot be disregarded. His actions, however, prove to be more dangerous to Pecola's well-being than her father's act of physical abuse. As Vickroy reminds us,

Pecola's "desire for blue eyes," and in particular "her conviction that she has been given them by Soaphead Church (the man who promises her a miracle)," is what leads to her "complete psychic disintegration" (97). In this way, Soaphead's abuse of Pecola serves to soften Cholly's act of physical abuse by highlighting his emotional sympathy and love for his child. Cholly has violated Pecola's body, but he has been the sole source of love and validation available to her. Soaphead, on the other hand, has not physically harmed her at all, yet he is responsible for violating and perverting her mind, brainwashing her into believing that she has finally achieved that characteristic of Whiteness that she holds as the symbol of beauty, acceptance and love.

In this instance, Morrison has constructed a lie that reinforces the myth of White superiority as equally, if not more destructive, than the very act of sexual abuse. While Cholly's rape of Pecola is a terrible crime, as Allen Alexander summarises it, he does not "rape her mind the way that Pauline and Soaphead do" (301). For Pecola, there is no possible way to transcend her oppressive circumstances. She is too mired in socially-determined ideas about beauty and self-worth to accept herself as unique and worthwhile as a Black girl. Morrison's choice to have Cholly's sexual violation of Pecola work as a counterpoint to the arguably more abhorrent offense of intellectually violating her – Cholly after all desires Pecola's Blackness – while by no means serving to endorse his physical abuse of her, does, to a certain extent, temper it by inserting a redeeming element into this taboo and criminal act; one that does not work to endorse such an event, but that does transmogrify it into a complex, emotive action that must be considered in its historical and social context. Furthermore, Morrison's presentation of Cholly and Soaphead as complex human beings serves to specifically disassemble the Black savage myth that has historically underpinned African Americans' social and economic inequality. Abusive, incestuous love in this novel, then, is used as a forum for a consideration of the larger

philosophical consequences slavery has had on African Americans. In this novel, there can be no considerate and pleasurable sex, as the only means to self-acceptance for Pecola comes from her father's act of sexual abuse. However, what has driven these characters to commit such horrific physical and psychological acts of abuse becomes clear. Morrison's choice not to merge these two profoundly violating abuses into the actions of one character, but rather to divide them between two characters, both of whom are to some degree sympathetic, is a strategy that reveals two of the profoundly disturbing consequences of slavery while avoiding the trap of reducing her Black characters to sexual stereotypes. By complicating the abuses Pecola is subjected to in these ways, the author exposes the complex nature of child sexual abuse and allows us to understand something about the motivations of the perpetrators of such crimes. This exposure to their humanity through their past tragedies lets us identify not only with the victim of their crimes, but also with these damaged men themselves. It is Morrison's ability to transform these situations of abuse into comprehensible acts that underscores the complex impact racial and economic oppression has had on African American sexuality and, furthermore, highlights the inadequacy of conventional White prescriptions of what constitutes legitimate sexuality as the measure by which to judge sexual desires and acts.

Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, written seventeen years later, is another exploration into the devastating impact of slavery on the African American consciousness. Written in the slave narrative tradition, it tells the story of the escaped slave Sethe and her youngest daughter Denver, who are living in a house at 124 Bluestone Road that appears to be haunted by the baby ghost of Sethe's eldest daughter, whose tomb-stone is marked only with the word "Beloved." The ghost's presence makes itself known with "a pool of red and undulating light" (10). Once Sethe's lover

Paul D succeeds in forcing this haunting presence out from the house, Denver and Sethe are visited by what appears to be the grown-up reincarnation of the dead child: the woman who calls herself Beloved. Throughout the course of the novel, the reader learns that the dead child, at the age of two, was murdered by Sethe in a desperate effort to avoid having her children captured and returned to a life of slavery on the plantation Sweet Home – the estate from which Sethe has escaped. While it remains an unsolved mystery whether this zombie-like woman that shows up on the doorstep eighteen years later is actually Sethe’s dead baby incarnate, at the age she would have been if she had lived, Morrison infuses the work with multiple uncanny events that lead both the characters and reader to this conclusion.

Beloved is described in terms reminiscent of a young child. The reader is told that she has “new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands” (61). She is half Denver’s size, and conducts herself “like a two-year-old,” constantly “[making] demands” of those around her (116, 283). She also knows details about Sethe’s life that only one of Sethe’s own children could know. She asks her: “Where your diamonds?” referring to the earrings Sethe used to dangle in front of her now dead baby girl as an infant (69). At a later point in the novel, Beloved begins singing the song Sethe used to sing to all of her children when they were young, a song that Sethe informs Beloved, “Nobody knows . . . but me and my children” (207). Since Beloved crosses conventional sensual and sexual boundaries with Sethe and Paul D – at one point in the novel she effectively succeeds in banishing Paul D from Sethe’s bedroom and seduces him herself – these potentially incestuous acts have resulted in most Morrison critics interpreting her presence at 124, and her complex entanglement with the other characters in the novel, as narcissistic, pathological, and even vampiric. Beloved is viewed as a source that depletes others both psychologically and physically. She is often analysed as an abject, ghostly figure, who by

the end of her stay at 124 has managed to drain the other characters of life, while she herself grows bigger and stronger.

Many critics have chosen to analyse the novel on the assumption that Sethe and Beloved are mother and daughter. Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos's feminist perspective, for example, argues that the novel "is the first book-length work to examine the dangers of mothering to the individuation of the mother herself" (52). Her thesis stipulates that the novel is a comment on how "The institution of slavery, the atrocity of historical time, denies Sethe her mothering and destroys the natural cycles of maternal bonding" (52). She concludes that the novel "examines the death of the maternal in a woman so that her Self might live" (58). Barbara Schapiro's psychoanalytic reading likewise describes what she views as the mother/daughter relationship, as "a mutually destructive, frighteningly boundless narcissism" (203). She claims that the two women's need to possess and objectify each other "cannot satisfy – it imprisons the self within its own devouring omnipotence" (203). Along similar lines, Mitchell argues that Sethe and Beloved's relationship "signifies a grotesque switch in the mother-daughter knot" (279). He argues that by casting out Beloved at the end of the text, Morrison is in effect re-inscribing "black patriarchal heteronormativity in light of a perverse system of human subjugation and depravity": in this instance, Beloved is the literal embodiment of this perverse system, and it is her banishment that allows such heteronormativity to prevail (279). All of these readings unambiguously interpret Beloved's presence as a pathological force.

Some critics' interpretations of the characters play off the supernatural innuendoes present in the novel. Nancy Kang, for example, who characterises Sethe and Beloved's mother-daughter relationship as "parasitic" – Beloved's deliberate effort to infect and contaminate Sethe's and Paul D's relationship – argues that Beloved is a succubus that "strips Paul both of his

emotional and physical life force (that is, his sperm)” (839, 845). She states that the metaphor “reminds readers of Sethe’s stolen milk, the gag-inducing semen symbolically ‘nursed’ from fellating the prison guards, the bloodied milk that Denver imbibes after the murder, and the semen that Beloved rapes from Paul that also plants seeds of discontent in his mind” (845). To Kang, Beloved comes to represent “the antagonistic position that the white slave owners previously held” (851). Here, Beloved is the literal embodiment of corruption and evil, with her licentious and draining sensuality.<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Barnett claims that Paul D and Sethe experience Beloved “as a sexually menacing nightmare figure” (421). She argues that “Beloved attacks her mother, Sethe, in a form that more closely resembles that of a vampire” (421). Beloved, Barnett claims, “is the reanimated body of Sethe’s murdered baby, and she metaphorically drains Sethe’s vitality,” enacting what Barnett, psychoanalytically, refers to as “an infantile sexual desire for the mother” (421, 422). This plotting, she states, is a metaphor for the White vampirism of Blacks during slavery: “Beloved embodies the particular violations Sethe and Paul D have suffered, violations characterized by sucking (being sucked or being forced to suck). Through this trope of eating, which links sexual violence with vampirism, a human being becomes the source of another’s sustenance” (422). This reading brings to mind in particular instances of sexual exploitation of Black slaves on the part of their White slave masters.

Many critics have used a psychoanalytic approach, in particular interpretations of Freud’s Oedipal Complex, to analyse Beloved and Sethe’s relationship. Much of their analysis grows out of Freud’s thesis regarding the emotional needs of the child in “Female Sexuality.” In this essay, Freud states: “Childish love knows no bounds, it demands exclusive possession, is satisfied with nothing less than all. But it has a second characteristic: it has, besides, no real aim; it is incapable

of complete satisfaction and this is the principal reason why it is doomed to end in disappointment and to give place to a hostile attitude” (Freud, “Female Sexuality” 286). With this pre-Oedipal interpretation of the mother/child bond in mind, Jean Wyatt’s Lacanian reading testifies that Beloved is the “preverbal infant who has not made her way into the symbolic order” (484). She describes Beloved as desiring “a total union with the mother, to have her and to be her,” contending that “The text literalizes a nursing baby’s fantasy of oral greed consuming the breast, the mother and all,” and that Beloved “gets to live out the preoedipal wish ‘to be the exclusive desire of the mother’” (482, 481). By the end of the novel, Wyatt argues, Sethe’s position embodies a revised Lacanian schema: “Sethe, having recognized herself as subject, will narrate the mother-daughter story and invent a language that can encompass the desperation of the slave mother who killed her daughter” (484). However, she stipulates that this “enclosure of the mother in the symbolic, leaves out the preoedipal daughter, who wanders lost in the epilogue” (484). Therefore, according to Wyatt, Beloved “remains outside language and therefore outside narrative memory” (484). In a similar line of thought, Badt argues that at the centre of *Beloved* is the idea that “Identity formation involves a return to the body in all of its significance: the place of birth, the object of oppression, and the seat of desire” (571). She discusses Beloved’s draw to Sethe as her “psychological desire to recover the repressed – the lost object of desire – and an expression of a political desire to recover the past” (567). Her reading of the novel is that it is the story of Beloved’s necessary “return to the maternal . . . in order to restore ‘authentic’ identity,” arguing that “All of Morrison’s novels begin with individuals who have an unsatisfactory relation to themselves and others. They lack a true sense of centeredness – a core self – and they are drawn to the body of the (m)other in order to restore the integrity of their own” (568). In Beloved’s case, Badt concludes that she is “subsumed by the mother, never to

return” (574). Her use of the term “authenticity” here refers both to Beloved’s sense of her own individualism and her identification with her African roots and more generally, her Blackness. Barbara Offutt Mathieson, in agreement, argues that *Beloved* “charts the explosive intricacies of the preoedipal bond from the simultaneous perspectives of mother and child” (1). She contends that “Morrison explores their mutual hunger for a loving union as well as the inevitable struggle for control,” and that this process “degenerates quickly into a nightmare”: what she refers to as “preoedipal suffocation” (1, 4, 19). Mathieson claims that “Here infantile love’s dark undercurrent, which runs rampant at the end of the novel, reveals its shadowy presence,” and that the novel is “a rapacious struggle to the death for possession and self-possession” (4).

Peter Nicholls’ Lacanian reading diverges from these theories on identity formation in the novel, but arrives at a similar conclusion. He argues that Morrison’s novel is post-modern insofar as it is can be read as an application of Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, meaning, as Nicholls explains it, “deferred action” and “retroaction” (53).<sup>3</sup> This concept refers to the idea that, as Carl Plasa summarises it, “it is only with the advent of those later events that the full significance of the past first emerges: the subject becomes traumatised after the fact . . .” (134). Nicholls’ reading is therefore concerned with how “subjective time is patterned according to Freud’s strange logic of belatedness” (Plasa 134). Nicholls points out, “Belatedness, in this sense, creates a complex temporality which inhibits any nostalgia for origin and continuity – the ‘origin’ is now secondary, a construction always contained in its own repetition . . .” (54). This theory stresses that the original violence of *Beloved* is only truly felt as trauma upon Beloved’s return to 124, stressing the non-linear sphere of trauma that characterises the text. As with Wyatt, Badt and Mathieson’s readings, Nicholls ultimately concludes that “Beloved returns . . . but she

will be forever ‘unaccounted for’, (*B*, p. 275), impossible to memorialize in some metaphysical History” (59).

Jennifer Fitzgerald emphasises that such psychoanalytic readings, however, are not wholly sufficient for analysing a text like *Beloved* for the following reasons:

psychoanalysis isolates psychic experience from the diversities of ethnicity and class; furthermore, it focuses intensively on the interaction of infant and mother as if this existed as a freestanding relation, independent of the economic, political or social conditions which affect the circumstances of parenting. In doing so, it defines motherhood according to a very specific, restricted norm, and places a huge burden of responsibility, not to say blame, on mothers. It pathologises non-normative families, privileging the healthy development of individual autonomy, highly valued by white Western capitalism. (110)

For this reason, she limits her psychoanalytic perspective to one particular school of psychoanalytic thought: object relations theory.<sup>4</sup> This theory, she points out, “suggests that just as the infant refuses to see the mother as a separate individual, so the mother may be tempted to treat her child as a part of herself” (118). This line of thinking allows her to arrive at the conclusion that “Such a mother may well believe that she killed her child for its own good” (118). On a larger scale, Fitzgerald surmises that “Ultimately, . . . the responsibility for Sethe’s confusion lies in slavery, which positioned her as object and denied her the experience of bonding with her own mother through which she could arrive at a separate subjectivity, and which precipitated her entry into good motherhood, whose practices equally denied a sense of individual self” (118). Each of these critical interpretations signifies *Beloved* and Sethe’s relationship to be a metaphysical, unresolved Oedipal Complex, indicative of both the child and mother’s pathological states and their inability to fully escape them in order to restore health.

These pathological readings, whether or not interpreted as a metaphor for the position of African Americans at the close of the Civil War, fail to acknowledge the extent to which the love bond between *Beloved* and Sethe does in fact resolve itself, irrespective of the outside

community, by the end of the novel, resulting in some semblance of peace for both Denver and Sethe. A close examination of the relationship between Beloved, Denver and Sethe makes evident the pleasurable and considerate aspects of the three women's relationships with one another. When Beloved first arrives at 124, the reader is told that Denver "looked at [the] sleepy beauty and wanted more" (63). The narrator describes how "Denver tended her, watched her sound sleep, listened to her labored breathing and, out of love and a breakneck possessiveness that charged her, hid like a personal blemish Beloved's incontinence" (64). Denver, unwavering in her love for this lost woman whom she immediately identifies as being connected with the spirit of her dead older sister, is intent on protecting and sheltering her. The narrator describes how "Denver's skin dissolved under [Beloved's] gaze and became soft and bright like the lisle dress that had its arm around her mother's waist. She floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. Needing nothing. Being what there was" (139). Denver's later emphatic belief that Beloved is her sister returned from the dead invokes in her a profound sense of love. Her uncanny presence serves to sustain Denver in a way that nothing else can – for the first time she is filled with a sense of fulfilment and self-acceptance induced from merely being in close proximity to Beloved. For this reason, Denver, like an addict, begins to crave Beloved's attention in order to experience this sense of euphoria.

This relationship of desire and need is paralleled, but intensified, in Beloved's relationship with Sethe. The narrator describes, "Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes" (68). Beloved is consumed with Sethe. She tells Denver: "She is the one. She is the one I need. . . . she is the one I have to have" (89). Sethe, reciprocally, is eager to take in Beloved's presence. The reader learns how "Sethe was flattered by Beloved's open, quiet devotion. The same adoration from her daughter [Denver] (had it been forthcoming) would have annoyed her;

made her chill at the thought of having raised a ridiculously dependent child. But the company of this sweet, if peculiar, guest pleased her the way a zealot pleases his teacher” (68). This adoration, furthermore, is imbued with sensuality for both women. The reader learns: Sethe “was sliding into sleep when she felt Beloved touch her. A touch no heavier than a feather but loaded, nevertheless, with desire” (69). Sethe begins to crave this touch. She thinks how “Beloved’s fingers were heavenly. Under them and breathing evenly again, the anguish rolled down. The peace Sethe had come there to find crept into her” (114). Beloved, furthermore, evokes in Sethe, a comfort and pleasure in purging painful memories from the past. The reader is told that “Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling,” and this pleasure is transferred from Beloved to herself (69). Morrison describes how as Sethe “began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it – in any case it was an unexpected pleasure” (69). Previously a devastatingly painful memory for Sethe, recalling to her mind her dead baby and her murderous actions, when recounting the story to Beloved, Sethe’s anguish and sorrow dissipate. Beloved feeds off the painful story, eating up Sethe’s hurt and allowing Sethe to heal from her past crimes. This sensual exchange of “remembering,” as Badt terms it, makes evident Beloved’s love for Sethe as not only powerfully alluring, but also healing (571).

Ultimately, consistent with theories that argue their relationship to be an example of the Oedipal Complex, Beloved is unable to distinguish between herself, Sethe, and the desire she feels for her. Morrison’s poetic prose underscores this morphology as Beloved thinks: “I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing” (248). A few pages later,

Beloved's stream-of-consciousness thoughts further highlight this process of transformation that fuses the women together:

my face is coming I have to have it I am looking for the join I am loving my face so much my dark face is close to me I want to join she whispers to me she whispers I reach for her chewing and swallowing she touches me she knows I want to join she chews and swallows me I am gone now I am her face my own face has left me I want to be the two of us I want the join. (251-52)

Beloved's merging thoughts and words signal the way in which she has become indistinguishable from and united with Sethe. The reference to "a hot thing" invokes in the reader an understanding of Beloved's feelings for Sethe to be fiery, heated and passionate. This reference coupled with Beloved's highly sexual word choice – Beloved referring to her face as "coming," to her "chewing and swallowing" as she reaches for Sethe as well as Sethe's reciprocation of these actions make it difficult to ignore the erotic overtones of the passage. This erotic fusion of identity is also evident in Sethe's feelings for Beloved. She thinks: "Beloved/You are my sister/You are my daughter/You are my face; you are me/I have found you again; you have come back to me/You are my Beloved/You are mine" (255). Completely consumed with Beloved and what she believes to be her return to 124, Sethe focuses all of her attentions on her at the expense of the other people she loves and used to care for, namely Denver and Paul D.

Even the ways in which Beloved appears to betray Sethe prove to be another manifestation of her need to be as sensually close to her as possible. Beloved's seduction of Paul D, her biggest and most overt betrayal of Sethe in the novel, occurs as a result of her desire to separate them not out of a sense of jealousy toward Sethe, but rather out of a sense of jealousy for Paul D. When Beloved first approaches Paul D for sexual intercourse, she repeatedly tells him: "I want you to touch me on the inside part" (137). Fitzgerald stipulates that "Sex does not

initiate her into adult relations but allows her to prolong infantile dependence: by breaking Sethe's sexual tie with Paul D, she has found a means of keeping Sethe to herself" ("Selfhood and Community" 116). For Beloved, Paul D's penis itself appears to function as a conduit between herself and Sethe, allowing her "inside part" to be touched by the same flesh that touches the inside of Sethe. Beloved's actions are therefore also an attempt to realise – the only way she knows how and the only way physically possible – her desire for Sethe. This manifestation is repeatedly made successful. The reader learns how Paul D's manipulation by Beloved causes him to feel like a used rag doll. He thinks:

picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter. Fucking her when he was convinced he didn't want to. Whenever she turned her behind up, the calves of his youth (was that it?) cracked his resolve. But it was more than appetite that humiliated him and made him wonder if school-teacher was right. It was being moved, placed where she wanted him, and there was nothing he was able to do about it. (148)

These sexual transgressions, however, in addition to underscoring Beloved's insatiable desire to be close to Sethe, also reveal other ways in which the text disrupts notions of White heteronormativity as the sole potential for redemptive sexuality. Mary Paniccia Carden, for example, argues that Paul D's (metaphorically incestuous) sex with Beloved is depicted as a necessary and healing process from which he is able to confront his tragic past life as a slave. She makes the case that "sex with Beloved stages Paul D's necessary engagement with his avoided history and therefore leads to the reanimation of his red heart . . . his sexual relations with 'a girl young enough to be his daughter,' a girl who in fact occupies the position of his daughter in Sethe's household, tends to become secondary . . ." (126, 413). In addition to this de-emphasis on the licentious aspect of Beloved and Paul D's sexual relationship in favour of the necessary healing it provides for Paul D, is the fact that both Beloved and Paul D invert gender norms in their sexual interactions with one another. As Carden points out: "The description of

sex between Beloved and Paul D turns the power dynamics embedded in the heterosexual scene upside down by assigning ‘womanish’ feeling to Paul D and by reversing the gendered gestures of seduction: Beloved forces herself on Paul D, he resists, she prevails” (415). This, Carden, summarises, is a way in which the text deliberately confuses male-dominant and female-submissive positions.<sup>5</sup>

The text’s reorganisation of this betrayal of Sethe, in fact, ironically serves to situate Beloved and Sethe’s relationship as the dominant one in Sethe’s life. When Paul D goes to pick Sethe up from work one day and is followed by Beloved, who later joins them, it becomes even more clear that Beloved’s sensuous desire for Sethe is what has been motivating her persistent mental and physical manipulation of Paul D. The reader is told:

Beloved did not look at Paul D; her scrutiny was for Sethe. She had no coat, no wrap, nothing on her head, but she held in her hands a long shawl. Stretching out her arms she tried to circle it around Sethe.

. . . Paul D felt icy cold in the place Sethe had been before Beloved came. Trailing a yard or so behind the women, he fought the anger that shot through his stomach all the way home. (153)

In this passage, Morrison makes blatantly clear that it is Sethe, not Paul D, who is the object of Beloved’s desire. Oblivious to Paul D from the moment she first encounters them and throughout the entire journey home, Beloved remains solely focused on Sethe and the possibility of assuaging her discomfort. In an effort to subsume Sethe’s attention, she attempts to encircle her with the shawl, an action that is at once indicative of her desire to contain Sethe, and her desire to protect her from the invasion Paul D represents to their bond with one another. The text thus positions us as readers to view Beloved and Paul D as competing lovers, with Beloved winning the battle for their love object’s affections. Paul D’s feeling of coldness signifies his belief in his own lack of importance and necessity for Sethe, and signals to the reader his developing secondary importance as he slowly begins to be replaced by Beloved in Sethe’s affections. This

reality is reinforced by his dejected and infuriated mindset as he tracks home behind the women, effectively revealing how his romance with Sethe has been placed aside, secondary to the sensuality that bonds Sethe and Beloved.

Carden discusses Beloved and Sethe's relationship as "a kind of symbiosis" (412). She argues that theirs is a relationship powerful enough to compromise the stability of the heterosexual romance: a sentiment that is evident in Beloved's replacement of Paul D with herself as Sethe's primary love object. According to Carden, Beloved's "overwhelming need for her mother's love exceeds the boundaries of nuclear family" (412). She desires nothing less than to replace Paul D and to become the sole object of Sethe's affection. Carden, acknowledging Beloved's success at fulfilling this desire, interprets the three-way relationship between Beloved, Sethe, and Denver as "an erotics of relational identity outside of heterosexual structures and organizations of desire" (417). In a similar vein, Leila Silvana May reads the sensuality between Beloved, Sethe and Denver as "the fusion of identities" (141). She interprets this "triangulated feminine desire" as representative of the indistinguishable nature of mother/daughter bonds (133). These arguments are supported by the various levels of synchronisation Morrison creates between the three women throughout the novel, with Beloved always embodying the necessary fusing element. Beloved and Denver, the reader is told, "spent up or held on to their feelings in harmonious ways. What one had to give the other was pleased to take. They hung back in the trees that ringed the Clearing, then rushed into it with screams and kisses when Sethe choked – . . . [Sethe] noticed neither competition between the two nor domination by one" (117). This harmony that Sethe observes between Denver and Beloved is also present in her own interactions with Beloved. She tells her: "when I tell you you mine, I also mean I'm yours" (239). This mutually advantageous association between all three women comes to a climax on two separate

occasions. The first occurs one day when, in the Clearing, the place Sethe goes to reclaim herself and heal, Beloved leans over and kisses Sethe's neck while Denver stands by watching. The reader is told: "They stayed that way for a while because neither Denver nor Sethe knew how not to: how to stop and not love the look or feel of the lips that kept on kissing" (115). Later, a similar and even more evident uniting experience takes place when the three are skating together:

Holding hands, bracing each other, they swirled over the ice. Beloved wore the pair; Denver wore one, step-gliding over the treacherous ice. Sethe thought her two shoes would hold and anchor her. . . . Making a circle or a line, the three of them could not stay upright for one whole minute, but nobody saw them falling.

Each seemed to be helping the other two stay upright, yet every tumble doubled their delight. The live oak and soughing pine on the banks enclosed them and absorbed their laughter while they fought gravity for each other's hands. Their skirts flew like wings and their skin turned pewter in the cold and dying light.

. . . For a moment, looking up, Sethe entered the perfect peace they offered."  
(205-6)

This image of the three women gracefully swirling and gliding in this idyllic natural setting that itself, while beautiful, presents the possibility of impending danger (as made particularly evident with Morrison's reference to "the treacherous ice,") is as a self-sufficient unit. As they skate attached to each other, "making a circle or a line," each one is necessary to the stability of the other two. This closeness between the women makes even defeat not only bearable, but an actual "delight." It is as if they are at once protected and trapped by the living and encroaching natural world – the force that is simultaneously driving them together and pulling them apart. Literally combating "gravity" itself to stay together, Beloved, Sethe and Denver merge into a single band, each one indistinguishable from the collective group.

By the end of the novel, however, this all-consuming triad that Beloved brings about spirals out of control to the point of driving Denver out of the house, and emptying Sethe of her vitality. Barnett points out the toll this symbiosis ultimately takes on Sethe: "As Sethe grows so thin that the flesh between her forefinger and thumb fades, Beloved eats all the best food and

grows a 'basket-fat' stomach" (421). While by the end of the novel it becomes necessary for thirty of the town's women to exorcise Beloved from 124 in an effort to rescue Sethe from her otherwise inevitable undoing, it has been Beloved's presence alone that has opened up the possibility of life free from the burdens of the past for Sethe.

As Paul D enters the house for the first time since Beloved's disappearance, he notices that it is "stone quiet" and that "In the place where once a shaft of sad red light had bathed him, locking him where he stood, is nothing" (318). When he first encounters Sethe, she appears to be only the shell of her former self, stricken with grief over the loss of Beloved. The narrator describes, "Her eyes, fixed on the window, are so expressionless he is not sure she will know who he is" (319). However, Paul D is able to supplant in Sethe's mind the realisation that it isn't the ghost of her dead daughter, nor Beloved, but rather her own self that is of the most crucial importance to herself. He tells her: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (322). Schapiro claims that Paul D is the only character in the novel who "has the capacity to lead Sethe out of her narcissistic isolation and into relationship with the external world" (204). Similarly, Joycelyn K. Moody argues that "Only the example of Paul D's romantic love, on the one hand, and the good faith and good deeds of others like her, on the other hand, can restore Sethe to wholeness," and that in the novel "the relationships between men and women seem to predominate over those among women" (641, 645). However, it is only after her sensual and consuming experiences with Beloved, and as a result of those experiences, that Denver is able to physically escape 124, and Sethe is finally set free from the ghosts and memories that have haunted her for almost two decades. This relief from her tragic past is what, in turn, allows her to continue to live life with Paul D. Before Beloved's arrival, Paul D is unable to save Sethe from her grief. After Beloved's presence at 124, however, the two are able to build a life with one another. Paul D, finally able to

commit to Sethe, tells her: “Denver be here in the day. I be here in the night. I’m a take care of you, you hear? Starting now” (320). As Carden stresses, although Sethe ends up with Paul D – an event that seems to support a heteronormative reading of the text – theirs is an “unconventional romance” in which Paul D is open to “alternative models of manhood” (421). At the end of the novel, the reader’s final image of Paul D is of him sitting in a rocking chair, his hands “limp between his knees” (321). He has become Sethe’s caretaker, nurturing her and offering her the wisdom she will need to continue to survive, and to attain some measure of peace. Beloved’s unconventional desire for Sethe is, therefore, at least partially responsible for her redemption. Her disappearance allows their Oedipal bond to once and for all resolve itself. This reading of the novel that acknowledges Beloved’s influential and life-affirming role in the lives of both Denver and Sethe makes apparent that Morrison’s presentation of heterosexual love is only one of many possibilities from which pleasure and redemption can arise. It is the fleeting period which they spend with Beloved that later proves to be the sustaining force for both Sethe and Denver, making it possible for them to escape the dangers of 124 and continue on with life after Beloved’s disappearance. The collective and unified experience of the three women, in this way, is what is most essential for Denver and Sethe’s survival.

Contrary to reviews of the novel that see Morrison’s intent “as a political project to repair the Black mother,” and therefore only as a type of political allegory for African American history, Beloved and Sethe’s relationship offers new vistas into the measures by which we judge an act of sensuality to be acceptable (Badt 568-69). Sensuous familial love in the novel functions as a necessary stepping-stone to personal happiness and redemption, allowing Sethe ultimately to embrace non-abusive romantic heterosexual love. Morrison, in so doing, opens up the gamut of positive sensual and sexual possibilities, allowing a place for conventional heterosexual love as

well as alternate expressions of love and sensuality. In this novel, the collective well-being is what allows for, as Rob Davidson articulates it, “the individual reconstitution of the self” (355). It is in this way that Morrison, in addition to once again familiarising her reader with the devastating impact of slavery on African Americans, teaches us something about the limited conventional understanding of legitimate sexual desire and practice, widening the range of what should be considered acceptable expressions of love, sensuality and sexuality.

Morrison revisits many of these themes in her novel *Paradise*, published eleven years after the release of *Beloved*. This work, about a group of racially and ethnically-diverse women with varying life experience, who have been marginalised by society and who find refuge at an old Convent on the outskirts of the all-Black town Ruby, in Oklahoma, takes place between the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. The disparity between the physical description of the Convent and the values and convictions of Ruby’s inhabitants well encapsulates the political tensions at the centre of the novel. The Convent, originally an “embezzler’s mansion,” constructed in 1922, was, as Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos points out in her post-colonial analysis of the novel, “first built as a pagan sanctuary for the body” (*Paradise* 71, 169, Fraile-Marcos 23). Remnants of the embezzler’s desires remain strewn about the house even long after its second incarnation as a Catholic school for Indian girls (*Paradise* 223). The narrator lists some of the remaining sexual artefacts:

The nursing cherubim emerging from layers of paint in the foyer. The nipple-tipped doorknobs. Layabouts half naked in old timey clothes, drinking and fondling each other in prints stacked in closets. A venus or two among several pieces of nude statuary beneath the cellar stairs. . . . the brass male genitalia that had been ripped from sinks and tubs, packed away in a chest of sawdust . . . (72)

Magali Cornier Michael contends, in her feminist analysis of the text, that this former happily debauched setting is offered “as a diverse and dynamic space that functions on the basis not only of intersecting subject positions, positioned in tension with the dominant, male-centered culture, but also of a locally developed ethos of mutual caregiving, in both a physical and psychic sense” (653). It is, she argues, a “dialogic space from which [the women’s] own refashioned subjectivities emerge, subjectivities that, collectively, can not only survive a racist and sexist culture but work to resist and redress its injustices” (656). This communal retreat from patriarchal society is in stark contrast to Morrison’s depiction of Ruby – a place that, as Fraile-Marcos argues, despite its efforts to “[construct] an image of itself as an earthly paradise as a consequence of its engagement with the foundational Puritan myths and rituals at the core of American identity,” has come to mimic all that is deplorable in White society (3). As Katrine Dalsgård sums up in her feminist critique, the town has degenerated into “a conservative, patriarchal, thoroughly racialized, and violent community” (233). It prides itself on being “antiperversion,” and takes measures, in particular, to decry lesbianism and homosexuality (*Paradise* 63). Linda J. Krumholz’s queer approach to the novel describes how “in *Paradise* Ruby comes to exemplify the dangers of home based on sameness, unity, and fixity, whereas the convent becomes an ‘open house’ where women of unidentified race convene, move through, and transform the layers of historical accretion” (23). Krumholz, furthermore, reveals that the town has a “hidden history” that exposes “the desire for pure African ‘8-rock blood’” (25). It fears “racial impurity and social change” (Aguiar 516). The novel begins, startlingly, with a modern-day witch hunt of the Convent women by a group of Ruby townsmen in an effort to, as Schur observes, “drive them off and/or kill them” (277). The men’s desire to rid themselves of the Convent women is brought about by the threat of the women’s free sexuality and

unconventional lifestyle. The men have convinced themselves that “every brothel don’t hang a red light in the window”; that the women are not only liberal-minded and sexually-free, but are “Bitches. More like Witches,” and prostitutes (114, 276). As Michael articulates, the women have “become scapegoats for all the town’s problems” (657). The novel’s structure is itself a reflection of the women’s lack of conformity to conventional religious modes of living. Non-linear and splintered, Dalsgård describes it as “an open-ended fabric woven by Ruby’s multiplicity of fragmented and sometimes competing narrative voices” (238). It is a story, she points out, “without a unifying protagonist,” and one that works “against the notion of a totalizing master narrative” (238). The novel’s chapters, for example, are all named after a different woman at the Convent which, Schur indicates, “[accentuates] the multivocal qualities of the narrative” (293).

There has been, in this case, much general consensus as to the larger political significance of Morrison’s story. Schur argues, for example, that the novel is Morrison’s “attempt to put critical race theory into the form of an allegorical novel” by articulating through her character portrayals “that a transcendent, overarching paradise free from racism and sexism may not exist, but discrete theories, methods, and strategies may prove useful in pushing American culture to a better place” (278, 279). He stipulates that with this novel Morrison is insisting that “there can be no simple escape from the effects of race, racism, gender, and sexism without some sort of decolonization” (277). The novel, by his estimation, is a testimony to the evils of colonisation on non-White populations, and a statement about the tribulations of patriarchy: a warning about the destructive and oppressive effects this pervasive social system has on women. Some critics, furthermore, argue that the novel is also Morrison’s outcry against American exceptionalism. Thomas B. Byers defines the concept as “the claim that America is . . . unique, one of a

(superior) kind – and generally that that kind carries with it a unique moral value and responsibility (86)” (qtd. in Dalsgård 234). Dalsgård, in support of this point of view, declares that

In *Paradise* Morrison does not assume the position of a black outsider criticizing a predominantly white exceptionalist America for excluding her. That is, she does not maintain an exceptionalist ethos in the universalist way of implying that, if only African Americans were allowed full and equal participation in the American nation, the nation would indeed be in a position to redeem its paradisiacal promise. Rather, taking as her starting point the idea that the African American community lives its own version of the exceptionalist narrative, she explores its function within this community. (236)

Schur concurs, making the case that “Morrison’s novel is about the transformation of the racist house that is the United States and the attempt to imagine ‘the concrete thrill of borderless ness’” (287). Furthermore, he specifies: “The problem of *Paradise* is how to live in a world where formal racist barriers have been dismantled. Morrison shares a vision and a strategy for social justice with legal writers who see that the battle must now turn to the psychic and cultural effects of race” (289). His remarks underscore Morrison’s concern, in *Paradise*, with the what she terms “new racism” – the idea that, as Collins defines it, “the persistence of poor housing, poor health, illiteracy, unemployment, family upheaval, and social problems associated with poverty and powerlessness all constitute new variations of the negative effects of colonialism, slavery, and traditional forms of racial rule” (55). Collins points out, “[This] new racism reflects sedimented or past-in-present racial formations from prior historical periods,” and that “Some elements of prior racial formations persist virtually unchanged, and others are transformed in response to globalization, transnationalism, and the proliferation of mass media” (55). Seen in this light, the Convent women are, in relation to the townspeople, what Blacks have historically been to Whites: victims of colonisation (Schur 290-91). In this case, the threat they represent is sexual freedom: liberation from historical arbitrary and unjust religious rules and regulations pertaining

to love, eroticism and sexuality. As Schur argues, the Convent women are the townspeople's target of fear and resentment because "Besides being 'free' women and, in the minds of the town, wild, they are in the process of decolonizing their minds" (290). Krumholz interprets their position within the novel as scapegoats for the townspeople's imposing desire for racial and sexual purity in the name of Christianity. The women, who fail to adhere to these social codes, are therefore branded as impure. They come to represent otherness for Ruby's inhabitants – a threat so great in the minds of the townsmen that they feel it worthy of the women's demise and so set out to slaughter them (Krumholz 27). While it is not possible in this chapter to discuss all of the relationships put forth in the novel that articulate and extend these lines of critical thought, I will attempt, through a detailed analysis of the character Billie Delia and the sexual threesomes she has with the twin brothers Brood and Apollo, to reveal how Morrison challenges, through the particular circumstances of Billie Delia's life and context, conventional ideas about what should constitute legitimate and illegitimate forms of love, eroticism and sexuality by calling attention to the White systems of power and knowledge responsible for their creation. As in the case of *The Bluest Eye and Beloved*, this effort creates space for alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality as acceptable and legitimate romantic and/or sensual options for all individuals.

Morrison foreshadows the taboo sexual choices Billie Delia makes as an adult with the story of her developing sexuality as a child, and its subsequent condemnation as aberrant by the townspeople. As a child, Billie Delia takes much delight in riding Hard Goods, the prize-winning horse ridden during the founding of the town. Billie Delia remembers her first sexual feelings when she would ride him, recalling in particular how on one occasion "nobody noticed or cared how perfect her skin felt against that wide expanse of rhythmically moving animal flesh," and that "While she struggled to grip Hard Goods with her ankles and endure the rub of his spine, the

grown-ups smiled, taking pleasure in her pleasure” (150). This sexual delight, however, results in what later proves to be the most traumatising experience of Billie Delia’s life, indirectly impacting her future sexual choices. One day after church, when overcome with excitement to ride Hard Goods in an effort to relive such feelings of sexual pleasure, Billie Delia “ran out into the middle of Central Avenue, where she pulled down her Sunday panties before raising her arms to be lifted onto Hard Goods’ back” (151). This natural and instinctive sexual pleasure that the young Billie Delia derives from the experience of horse-back riding becomes grounds for the marred sexual reputation that haunts her thereafter, as she proceeds through life stigmatised as a “pervert” by the townspeople and her own mother. As a result of this incident, the reader is told that the mothers of the other girls of the town have “warned [their daughters] away from Billie Delia” (151). Furthermore, the narrator describes how for Billie Delia,

Things seemed to crumple after that. She got an unintelligible whipping from her mother and a dose of shame it took her years to understand. That’s when the teasing began, more merciless because her mother was the teacher. Suddenly there was a dark light in the eyes of boys who felt comfortable staring at her. Suddenly a curious bracing in the women, a looking-away look in the men. And a permanent watchfulness in her mother. (151)

As Billie Delia grows up, she is sentient of both her mistreatment by those around her and the reason behind it: “She knew people took her for the wild one, the one who from the beginning not only had no qualms about pressing her nakedness on a horse’s back but preferred it, would drop her drawers in public on Sunday just to get to the thrill of it” (151). Billie Delia in fact becomes stigmatised by almost every member of the community for what can only be taken by the reader to be a natural child developmental sexual inclination. She is subsequently branded as a “slut” through no fault of her own; her sexual enjoyment becoming a point of shame for her.

Ironically, this branding could not be further from the truth, as Billie Delia is not only not sexually promiscuous, she in fact remains sexually “untouched” (151). Morrison etches the idea

in the reader's mind, however, that this social branding is cause to later drive Billie Delia to seek comfort and love in alternative ways that are unacceptable to the townspeople and to her own mother, Patricia Best Cato, the light-skinned schoolteacher and "secret historian of Ruby": Billie Delia becomes "helplessly in love with a pair of brothers" (Krumholz 25, *Paradise* 151). The narrator describes how Patricia's discovery of Billie Delia and the two brothers, Brood and Apollo, engaging in sexual activity with each other results in an ensuing fight between her and her daughter in which Patricia physically injures her child. She proclaims: "I didn't mean to hit her so hard. I didn't know I had. I just meant to stop her lying mouth telling me she didn't do anything. I saw them. All three of them back behind the Oven and she was in the middle" (202). Although Patricia's words about not meaning to hit her child "so hard" indicate her remorse at having hurt Billie Delia, the scene also makes evident her dissatisfaction with her daughter's sexual choice. The bitterness of her tone as she talks about her daughter's "lying mouth" points to her angry disapproval of Billie Delia, making her condemnation of her child indistinguishable from the mistreatment and denigration she has consistently received from other members of the community.

Billie Delia's sexual relationship with the two brothers, additionally, proves to be more than just fleeting, further contributing to her mother's fury. Two weeks and one day after their fight, Patricia reveals how Billie Delia went back to school staying only "long enough to say she wasn't going to" and left "with one of those Poole boys," not to be seen or heard from again until over a year later (202). Patricia describes seeing the three of them together at Billie Delia's friend Arnette's wedding to K.D. (the only surviving male relation to the town's founding father, Daddy Morgan), shortly after Billie Delia's return: "She saw them. She saw those Poole boys. And she saw Billie Delia sit down and talk to one of the girls like they were old friends. She saw

Reverend Pulliam and Steward Morgan argue with the girls, and when they drove off she saw Billie Delia throw her bouquet in Anna's trash can before she strolled off, Apollo and Brood Poole in tow" (203). Much to her mother's displeasure and shame, Billie Delia's choice to be involved with Brood and Apollo is deliberate and consistent.

Morrison, however, effectively establishes Billie Delia's relationship with the boys as most significant, not for what it reveals about Billie Delia's sexual inclinations, but rather for the insight it sheds on Patricia's conflicted moral dilemma about her daughter's taboo sexual choice to be romantically involved with two brothers. Patricia, who prides herself on abiding by decorum and strict social rules, and who is generally regarded as a gentle person, nearly beats her daughter to death after the wedding in a second more severe battle with her. The narrator recounts how after this second abusive event "Pat tried to remember how that pressing iron got into her hand, what had been said that had her running up the stairs with a 1950's GE electric iron called Royal Ease clutched in her fingers to slam against her daughter's head. She, the gentlest of souls, missed killing her own daughter by inches" (203). Unable to cope with her feelings of shame and revulsion at Billie Delia's sexual relationship with the boys, feelings that echo both David's sense of personal shame and revulsion for his homosexual inclinations in *Giovanni's Room* and Señor Robinson's similar feelings of anger and outrage at Magdalena's natural sexual inclinations, Patricia is a blatant example of the town's intolerance for sexual dissidence. Morrison provides insight into the reasons behind her prejudiced mindset: One day, when working on the town's genealogies and considering her own family lineage, she remembers how she knew the men of the town had always "looked down" on her own mother, and how she had despised her father "for marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering" (197). Patricia's thoughts reveal the

reverse-racism with which she has had to contend throughout the course of her life: she too has had to bear the mark of social-stigmatisation as a result of the light skin her mother had, and has passed down to her, and that she herself has subsequently passed down to her own daughter (196). The social out-casting and discrimination to which she has been subjected in her own life invokes in the reader an understanding of her violent and harmful outbursts toward Billie Delia to be a consequence of her own marginalisation. Patricia, like Cholly, is herself a pawn: a scapegoat for the condemnation the town confers on Billie Delia for her sexual relationship with Brood and Apollo.

Seen in this light, Patricia's fights with her daughter are the manifestation of her misdirected anger. Like Cholly, who is truly enraged with his White oppressors, Patricia is infuriated with the town's founding fathers and townspeople who, to her own personal detriment, have upheld notions of Black racial superiority. Like Cholly, abusing her child grants Patricia a sense of empowerment: ironically it is her out-of-control violence that gives her back a measure of control over her own sustained discriminatory mistreatment at the hands of the townsfolk, by displacing her victimisation onto her child. This practice, however, only succeeds in destroying her relationship with Billie Delia, and in keeping her even more oppressed: in addition to discrimination, she must now face isolation from her daughter. Morrison's prose positions the reader at once to condemn her behaviour and pity it: it is evident that she is unconsciously colluding in the perpetuation of the historic cycle of abuse to which she has been subjected. Unlike Cholly who sexually abuses his child, Patricia is guilty not only of displacing the racial discrimination she has been subjected to onto her own child, but also of transmogrifying it into sexual discrimination.

However, as in the case with Cholly, Morrison emphasises Patricia's humanity by showing her sympathy for her child's situation. When sorting through the town genealogies, Patricia discovers that Billie Delia and the brothers are in fact cousins – a situation that Patricia admits to herself is more innocent and less taboo than much of the rest of the town's behaviour. Considering how Billie Delia is in love with the two brothers, she thinks to herself: "there is something wrong with that but other than the number and the blood rules I can't figure out what" (197). This self-admission reveals Patricia's, like Cholly's, ambivalence toward her child: she is both enraged by and understanding of her daughter. Patricia is at once a product of her racist society and a parent of a child suffering the effects of discrimination. She cannot find anything inherently wrong with Billie Delia's romance other than the fact that it involves an unconventional number of lovers, three instead of two, and going against a second conventional social standard, the three may be related. However, her admission that there is nothing else inherently wrong about the relationship signals her understanding of the relationship as non-harmful. Here, Morrison reveals the cause of the problem to be not Billie Delia's sexual choices, but rather the community's misguided and harmful social values pertaining to both race and sexuality. By flipping the traditional race equation upside-down in this novel, the author succeeds in presenting, in more subtle and subversive ways, her argument denouncing racial and sexual discrimination, first put forth almost thirty years earlier in *The Bluest Eye*.

Further contributing to this reading is the fact that Billie Delia proves to be one of the wisest and most independent female characters in the novel. When Billie Delia first runs away after her mother almost kills her with the electric iron, she heads straight to the Convent, as Michael puts it, "seek[ing] refuge" (655). During her two-week and one day stay, the Convent women offer her physical healing, which, as Michael argues, becomes unified with her "psychic

healing” (655). She contends that “While the women treat her physical injuries with practical remedies, they also offer her a caring, loving, non-intrusive, inclusive environment based on mutual respect” (655). The narrator describes how “What she saw and learned there changed her forever” (152). With these few words, Morrison establishes Billie Delia’s independence from the values and strictures of Ruby. Unlike her mother, who, as Davidson puts it, when “Offered the world . . . chooses Ruby,” Billie Delia chooses the alternative values of the Convent and the sense of dynamic individuality with which such beliefs engulf her (366). Her time at the Convent allows her to develop a sense that there are alternative life options for the women of Ruby to marrying one of the town’s unprincipled men, and furthermore that women’s identity need not rely upon these men if they do so choose to marry – sentiments that she has conveyed to Arnette (Michael 657). As Arnette stands across from her groom K.D. on her wedding day, ready to marry him despite his physical abuse of her (he has struck her in the past, and already impregnated her), the narrator grants the reader access to her thoughts: “She believed she loved him absolutely because he was all she knew about her self – which was to say, everything she knew of her body was connected to him. Except for Billie Delia, no one had told her there was any other way to think of herself” (55, 148). Billie Delia’s first-hand awareness of K.D.’s infidelities and lack of principles, coupled with the knowledge she has accumulated as a result of her time at the Convent, is what led to the development of her animosity for him (148). Billie Delia views K.D. as representative of the pervasive insulated and discriminatory male mentality in Ruby. She makes the connection that the town’s conflict with alternative sexual practices is “not about infant life or a bride’s reputation but about disobedience, which meant, of course, the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares and their foals” (150). Krumholz argues that with this thought, “Billie Delia suggests that women also represent men’s power and control

to other men” (26). Billie is able to see what others in the novel can’t – that the townsmen’s desire to control women’s sexuality isn’t really about sex practices at all, but is rather about female disobedience and more largely, lack of patriarchal control.

After the Convent women’s disappearance near the end of the novel, at the child Save-Marie’s funeral, in Ruby, Billie Delia reflects on her time with the Convent women upon her arrival after her fight with her mother: “They had treated her so well, had not embarrassed her with sympathy, had just given her sunny kindness. Looking at her bruised face and swollen eyes, they sliced cucumber for her lids after making her drink a glass of wine. No one insisted on hearing what drove her there, but she could tell they would listen if she wanted them to” (308). These kindnesses that the women have bestowed upon Billie Delia have a lasting impact that, combined with the sense of the freedom with which they have provided her, cause in her an understanding of both the true reason behind their disappearance, and their clear innocence in the crimes committed against them. The narrator describes how:

Billie Delia was perhaps the only one in town who was not puzzled by where the women were or concerned about how they disappeared. She had another question: When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town? . . . A backward noplac ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where; who had seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them. (308)

Aguiar, additionally, contends that Billie Delia is in fact, “the only citizen of Ruby to recognize the Convent women for who they are” (516). At the funeral, “She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metaling their nails, filing their incisors – but out there” (308). Although Billie Delia is aware that this is likely impossible, her desire not only for the women to still be alive, but to return blazing, in the hope of confronting and retaliating against the perpetrators of their crime, makes evident her sense of

injustice and condemnation of the values and strictures of Ruby itself. Furthermore, although Brood and Apollo are temporarily driven apart by their mutual love and desire for Billie Delia, resulting in one of the brothers “lying in wait to slaughter” the other, at Save-Marie’s funeral Billie Delia reminds herself that “a minimiracle” has occurred – one that would make the Convent women “roar” with pleasure: “Brood and Apollo had reconciled, agreeing to wait for her to make up her mind. She knew, as they did, that she never could and that the threesome would end only when they did” (277, 308). Like Sethe, Billie Delia has arrived at a place of reconstituted self in stark contrast to her mother, who Davidson points out “fails at – or defensively backs away from – the liberating process” (368). Billie Delia is able to make up her own mind as to what constitutes acceptable love, eroticism and sexuality and is unapologetic and unashamed of her personal romantic choices. The “safe zone” that the Convent has provided for her thus proves to have a sustained and profound impact on her life (Davidson 371).

Michael contends that “the healing ritual that *Paradise* offers rejects the kind of identity politics that characterized consciousness raising, and actively participates in the contemporary reconceptualization of identity, subjectivity, and agency that radically destabilizes the individualistic basis of identity politics” (656). By “[opening] up the bounds of the racial imaginary without substituting one fixed system for another, without reproducing the ‘white man’s law’ of the racial house,” Morrison’s novel thus works to expand Baldwin and Walker’s projects to put an end to racial and sexual injustice by underscoring the relativistic nature of value judgements surrounding forms of love, eroticism and sexuality and, most crucially, to legitimise desires and acts that are non-harmful (Krumholz 28). In *Paradise*, perversion is to be determined not by sexual partner or act, but rather by the absence of love and tolerance. The novel, therefore, struggles to reveal inherent forms of racial and sexual discrimination embedded

in American culture by presenting alternative acts to heteronormativity as non-harmful and pleasurable (Dalsgård 236). It is only at the Convent, the physical embodiment of these principles, that it is possible to live in Paradise (Dalsgård 244). There, it is possible to “learn to accept self-love,” allowing space for alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality (Aguar 514). Furthermore, Morrison’s construction of Ruby serves to subsequently disabuse the reader of potential positive outcomes from subscriptions to notions of authenticity.

Throughout her literary corpus, Morrison has consistently presented, although with various degrees of subtlety, the violent consequences that racial oppression has on the victim’s children. Her fiction both exposes and works to explain the historical, oppressive trajectories through which the perpetrators come to commit such violent acts of abuse. Unlike with Baldwin and Walker’s fiction, Morrison’s novels do not, therefore, depict utopian sexual relationships. As Krumholz states: “Through her art, Morrison attempts to reveal the invisible presences of history, subjectivity and divinity” (29). Rather, the various ways in which she utilises the themes of love and sensuality persuasively open up codes of sensual and sexual permissibility as her writing style takes the reader along on a journey in which there is no danger of being exploited or alienated. Furthermore, Morrison’s particular style of defying Black stereotypes causes the reader to consider the biases and shortcomings of the “describers” themselves, who previously utilised such derogatory myths. It is in these intricate and multi-faceted ways that her work plunges us into necessary debates about ethics that include, but are not only confined to, issues of race and sexuality.

## Coda

On December twentieth 1987, the New York Times Book Review published Morrison's posthumous tribute to Baldwin, entitled "James Baldwin: His Voice Remembered; Life in His Language." Just twenty days after his death, Morrison's homage expresses the profound and lasting impact of the author's life and literary legacy on both herself and the collective African American consciousness. Addressing Baldwin directly, she proclaims: "Like many of us left here I thought I knew you. Now I discover that in your company it is myself I know. That is the astonishing gift of your art and your friendship: you gave us ourselves to think about, to cherish" (*What Moves at the Margin* 90). Morrison describes "three gifts" that she perceives Baldwin as having imparted on the world. It is these offerings, she contends, that are the source of his power to provide others with the ability to fully realise and appreciate themselves:

You made American English honest – genuinely international. You exposed its secrets and reshaped it until it was truly modern dialogic, representative, humane. You stripped it of ease and false comfort and fake innocence and evasion and hypocrisy. And in place of deviousness was clarity. In place of soft plump lies was a lean, targeted power. In place of intellectual disingenuousness and what you called "exasperating egocentricity," you gave us undecorated truth.

. . . The second gift was your courage, which you let us share: the courage of one who could go as a stranger in the village and transform the distances between people into intimacy with the whole world: courage to understand that experience in ways that made it a personal revelation for each of us.

. . . The third gift was hard to fathom and even harder to accept. It was your tenderness a tenderness so delicate I thought it could not last, but last it did and

envelop me it did. . . . Yours was a tenderness, of vulnerability, that asked everything, expected everything and, like the world's own Merlin, provided us with the ways and means to deliver. (*What Moves at the Margin* 91-93)

As Morrison observes, as an African American, these qualities of honesty, courage and tenderness – that Baldwin himself embodied, and that he presents so clearly through the thoughts, feelings and actions of such a wide array of diverse protagonists – have served as a source of inspiration and strength for African Americans, providing them with the intellectual tools necessary to reject the pigeonholing stereotypes and derogatory labels with which they have been branded. It is my hope that throughout the body of this thesis, I have also shown that the philosophical lessons to be gleaned from his literary corpus go well beyond the boundaries of race, religion or ethnicity. Baldwin's portrayals of alternative forms of love, eroticism and sexuality serve as a catalyst from which to rethink our own ideological positioning. It is in this regard that Baldwin's novels more specifically call to attention the harm caused by the oppressive social structures responsible for indoctrinated, alienating beliefs, and the possibilities of freedom inherent in the adoption of a new set of universal ethics that speak to the needs of all human beings. Baldwin's efforts to expose forms of social injustice and the harmful social structures that foster it have provided the inspiration for Walker, Morrison and other African American writers to carry on with his unfinished project.

With the first “Black” president in American history currently in power, it is timely to think about current ethical debates pertaining to race and sexuality in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, Barack Obama acknowledges that there has been “a profound shift in race relations” in the United States over the last half century, but is also quick to point out that the problem of Black social oppression is far from

resolved (233). He recognises what he describes as “the stereotypes that [the] culture continues to feed [Americans], especially stereotypes about black criminality, black intelligence, or the black work ethic” (235). His comments underscore the reality that the racist structures that have historically perpetuated discrimination and oppression of Blacks are still in place and will not easily disappear. Obama both acknowledges the persistence of these structures and the need to break them down; systems which he considers responsible for discrepancies such as the frequently much lower quality of housing, employment and education of Blacks (243).

In regard to sexuality, however, Obama seems to be consistently unaware of the discriminatory and oppressive social structures that must also be broken down if equality is to be attained both socially and legally. His own prejudices in this area are, disappointingly, equally discriminating toward individuals who do not conform to the structure of institutional heterosexual monogamous marriage as are those horrific and harmful stereotypes of Blacks that he recognises as needing to be dispelled and overcome. This disregard for sexual equality in American society appears to be the result of Obama’s Christian ideological stance. While he professes to “consider decisions about sex, marriage, divorce, and childbearing to be highly personal – at the very core of [the American] system of individual liberty” and that aside from situations in which there is “significant harm to others,” he has “no interest in seeing the president, Congress, or a government bureaucracy regulating what goes on in America’s bedrooms,” his words and actions do not match up to these claims (335). These inconsistencies become evident when considering Obama’s comment about the freedom he experienced during his college years as a youth: “the freedom from the constraints of monogamy or religion was proclaimed without fully understanding the value of such constraints” (31). Obama’s perception of heterosexual, monogamous marriage as a “constraint” signals the inadequacy and limitations

of this social structure even for himself – a man who is now living within the confines of it. This ideological position has led to his view of what he refers to as “the collapse of the two-parent black household” as “a phenomenon that reflects a casualness toward sex and child rearing among black men that renders black children more vulnerable – and for which there is simply no excuse” (245). Such remarks are imbued with a sexual prejudice equally regressive to the prejudice he is working to obliterate in regard to American race relations.

Ironically, while Obama recognises what he describes as “The victories that the sixties generation brought about,” which he summarises as “the admission of minorities and women into full citizenship, the strengthening of individual liberties and the healthy willingness to question authority,” he asserts that “what has been lost in the process, and has yet to be replaced, are those shared assumptions – that quality of trust and fellow feeling – that bring us together as Americans” (36, 37). This comment begs the question, what is meant by “shared assumptions”? In regard to sexuality, the repercussions of this sentiment lived-out would likely be devastating in terms of its impact on individual sexual freedom. While Obama is steady in his claim that Christian fundamentalism should not drive public policy at the expense of “overriding any alternative source of understanding, whether the writings of liberal theologians, the finding of the National Academy of Sciences, or the words of Thomas Jefferson,” as a self-proclaimed Christian, it is apparent how his own ideological point of view influences his political position on subjects pertaining to sexuality (38). He states: “I understand the impulse to restore a sense of order to a culture that’s constantly in flux. And I certainly appreciate the desire of parents to shield their children from values they consider unwholesome; it’s a feeling I often share when I listen to lyrics of songs on the radio” (335). He furthermore asserts: “I want to encourage young people to show more reverence toward sex and intimacy, and I applaud parents, congregations,

and community programs that transmit that message” (335). These moralising sentiments reveal Obama’s prejudice in regard to sexual standpoints different to his own. His viewpoint underscores his inability to see his discriminative position beyond the bounds of gay rights, and even here his desire for full equality under the law is lacking as he has publically declared his support of gay civil unions, but not gay marriage. For a civil rights lawyer, such a large blind spot is even more glaring.

Obama’s point of view highlights a return too, if not merely a direct continuation of, the Christian “family values” ideology of the Reagan administration in regard to sexuality. In fact, in his book, he identifies with what he perceives as the reason for Reagan’s wide public appeal: “Reagan spoke to America’s longing for order, our need to believe that we are not simply subject to blind, impersonal forces but that we can shape our individual and collective destinies, so long as we rediscover the traditional virtues of hard work, patriotism, personal responsibility, optimism, and faith” (31). This point of view masks a dangerous regime of social regulation.

Diprose notes that such regimes

. . . dictate the right way to live, implicitly or explicitly (and) seek to preserve the integrity of every body such that we are compatible with the social body. Not only do these thereby dictate which embodied existences can be transformed by whom and to what end, but, as it is here that comparisons are made and values born, not all bodies are counted as socially viable. In short, the privilege of a stable place within that social and political place we call the “common good” is secured at the cost of denigrating and excluding others. (131)

This belief in a collective or shared understanding of traditional values that leads to inclusion in a particular social or political structure advocates a univocal way of being and underscores the way in which one sexual system, heteronormativity, has become naturalised at the expense of de-normalising acts that reside outside of this regime. It highlights, as Phelan puts it, “The

association of justice with a metanarrative of universal principles and structures” that is both fictitious and vague (*Getting Specific* 145).

Throughout the course of this thesis, I have worked to establish how Baldwin, Walker and Morrison, in their own unique ways, have contributed to a new understanding of what might constitute legitimate forms of love, eroticism and sexuality that is no longer based on a universalising assumption of sameness and conformity. This innovative understanding of legitimate sexualities inadvertently gives rise to an awareness of the moral and political systems that dictate the social understanding of what currently constitutes such legitimacy in the United States. The writers’ revelations are a fictional transposition of one of Foucault’s most profound philosophical findings: that sexuality in American culture is what has, for centuries, determined one’s identity in the eyes of others. This belief is what leads directly to stereotyping and derogatory labelling. Baldwin, Walker and Morrison’s work asserts a move away from such pigeonholing understandings in favour of, as Phelan surmises it, “the nonnation – the nation of non-identity,” that is, a nation “formed not by any shared attribute but by a conscious weaving of threads between tattered fabrics” (*Getting Specific* 154).

In Collins’ Afterword in *Black Sexual Politics* she asserts of Black Americans that

few challenge the social structures that bring about their unhappiness. But without challenging a U.S. sexual politics that installs a hegemonic White masculinity in the center of all assessments of human worth as the gold standard against which we are all measured (and that includes White men); that masks the gender-specific forms of political economy that keep far too many African American women dependent on welfare and African American men locked up in prison; that defends these state practices by reconfiguring institutionalized lynching and rape as forms of sexualized violence suitable for controlling African American populations; and that justifies the new racism with a media that is saturated with updated, class-specific images of bucks and jezebels, how can African Americans develop a more progressive Black sexual politics? (304)

Baldwin, Walker and Morrison are three writers who do challenge these social structures. In so doing, they are part of a rare group of Americans that are working toward the development of a more progressive sexual politics. Collins points out that through his efforts to challenge these oppressive social structures, Baldwin “holds out the heady possibilities of the *benefits* that might ensue should individuals try to change both the systems that confine them and their reactions to those systems” (305). She argues that the greatest of these benefits could be “[finding] a more complex love” (305). Whether or not this is the case, Baldwin, Walker, and Morrison’s efforts help us to uncover the inherent dangers in naturalised forms of knowledge, reminding us that sexual, racial, and labels of any other sort are social constructs shaped by the culture around us. As Phelan stipulates, “we each embody multiple, often conflicting, identities and locations” (*Getting Specific* 140). There are therefore no universal, stable forms of identity, but rather pre-judgements that represent the interests of particular social groups masquerading as empirical forms of knowledge. As she articulates, “Once we see that social formations and memberships are not naturally given but are invented or imagined, we can see the bonds between us. These bonds are not ones of mutual affection or concern, not ones of nature, but are the creation of systems of discursive power and hegemony that tell us who we are and where we fit” (*Getting Specific* 144).

## ENDNOTES

### CHAPTER 1

<sup>1</sup> Taking into account the position expressed by Morrison literary critic Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos that White critics do not have “the moral right to address” Black issues, and furthermore that members of different population groups have no right to address topics specific to other groups, my work recognises, as Jean Wyatt acknowledges of her own work, my “implication in the racist structures” that these African American writers call attention to as a White middle-class woman, and furthermore, in my case, as a Canadian (Demetrakopoulos 58, Wyatt 485). I, like Wyatt, acknowledge “the hazards of venturing into a cultural space not my own,” and am aware of the restrictions involved in my attempt to do so (485).

<sup>2</sup> Using Patricia Collins’ technique as a guide, I have chosen to capitalise White and Black when used as adjectives that refer to population groups, or when they reference ideologies and concepts, either self-defined or imposed (310). The terms are in lower case as necessary when directly quoting other writers (310).

<sup>3</sup> While Baldwin stressed the necessity of Black writers’ choices to write about the African American social condition, he disapproved of both White and Black writers creating reductive and therefore dishonest characterisations. While Baldwin argued that the White social protest writers’ failure lay in their sanitised portraits of Blacks as morally pure and as helpless victims – something he believed did nothing to uplift their oppressive circumstances – he also believed that depictions such as Wright’s were equally insufficient insofar as they portrayed dysfunctional and monstrous images that lacked the truthful complexity of humanity itself. For more on the disconcerting similarity between these seemingly opposing characterisations, see “Everybody’s Protest Novel” in *Notes of a Native Son* 9-17. For information on the subsequent infamous fallout between Baldwin and Wright after this publication, see Mae G. Henderson’s “James Baldwin: Expatriation, Homosexual Panic, and Man’s Estate” 313-27.

<sup>4</sup> The influence of both communist ideology and naturalism on Wright is evident here in both the writer’s choice of subject matter, and in his depiction of Bigger as shaped by both his heredity and by the social forces around him. For more on the subject of literary naturalism and the distinction between American naturalism and its French counterpart, see William Raymond’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* and June Howard’s *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*. I have chosen to put the term “hypersexual” in quotes in order to underscore its constructed nature.

<sup>5</sup> In *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Michael Ferber underscores: “Light and darkness are probably the most fundamental and inescapable terms, used literally or metaphorically, in the description of anything in life or literature” (114-15). For specific literary references to the black/white bifurcation in his work, see pp. 27-29, 114-15 and 234-35.

<sup>6</sup> For Topsell’s linkage of blackness and the devil, and his subsequent justification for the treatment of Africans as racially inferior beings, see *The Historie of Foure-Footed Beasts ... Collected out of All the Volumes of Conradus Gesner, and All Other Writers to this Present Day* (London, 1607) 2-20, as recorded by Jordan p.31. Jordan, however, makes explicit that the idea “that Negroes stemmed from beasts in a literal sense” did not receive wide credence (31). He emphasises: “Far more common and persistent was the notion that there sometimes occurred ‘a beastly copulation or conjuncture’ between apes and Negroes, and especially that apes were inclined wantonly to attack Negro women” (31).

<sup>7</sup> See for example Samuel Purchas’s account of Africans as greedy, lecherous, thievish and dirty in “A Description of Guinea . . .,” in *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes, Containing a History of the World in Sea Voyages and Lande Travells by Englishmen and Others*, 20 vols. (Glasgow 1905-07) vi, 251, as recorded by Jordan p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> For more specifics on the sexual uses of Blacks during and after slavery, see for example Staples and Johnson 95 and Day 39, 122.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the sexual uses of Black females in particular, both during and after slavery, see for example Day 39 and Balkun 116.

<sup>10</sup> While hooks disputes essentialist notions of Blackness, she equally opposes the idea of a universal subjectivity, what she describes as “the myth of ‘sameness’” (*Black Looks* 167). For her, “A distinction must be made between

the longing for ongoing cultural recognition of the creative source of particular African American cultural productions that emerge from distinct black experience, and essentialist investments in notions of ethnic purity that undergird crude versions of black nationalism” (*Black Looks* 30-31).

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the topic of collective Black identity see Tommie Shelby’s *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this reconstruction of race-based solidarity see Shelby’s introduction 1-23. Also, see hooks’ theory on the necessity of a distinction between cultural productions that emerge from distinct Black experiences and subscription to essentialist beliefs in ideas of ethnic purity *Black Looks* 30-31.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of racial passing, see Mary McAleer Balkun’s *The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture*, in which she emphasises that the choice to pass does not necessarily embody an aesthetic preference for whiteness or White culture itself, nor does it necessarily exemplify an adherence to the belief that Whiteness equals racial superiority. Rather, she stipulates, it is often “about individuation, about creating an identity for oneself apart from race,” and a way in which to distance oneself from community, whether it be Black or White (121). For her, passing is thus a type of counterfeiting that is grounded in desire and social and material gain (121). The practice points to “the insufficiency of such terms as ‘white’ and ‘black’ for establishing identity” (Balkun 123). If race is something that can be bought and sold like other consumer products on the market, it is essentially grey in nature, ironically no longer Black or White. Passing, in much the same way as an embracing of erotic variety, therefore “[challenges] the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics ... [disclosing] the truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent” (Ginsberg 4).

<sup>14</sup> In addition, see hooks’ discussion of how essentialism informs representations of Whiteness and the necessity of deconstructing this category in *Black Looks* 12-20, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Impoverished or low-income Blacks are defined here as those individuals whose income is below the poverty line as determined by federal government guidelines and standards, while working-class Blacks are defined as those with incomes above the line at or below the median family income (Willie and Reddick 20-21). Middle-class and affluent Blacks are those with incomes above this median (Willie and Reddick 20-21). For more information on these standards and their annual changes in the Consumer Price Index, see Charles V. Willie and Richard J. Reddick’s 2010 sociological study of Black American families, in particular, ch.2 “Family Life and Social Stratification.”

<sup>16</sup> Here Hill refers to E. Franklin Frazier’s work on Black familial history in which he quotes a former slave on what Hill refers to as “the distinction between ‘aristocratic’ house servants . . . and the lot of those who worked in the fields” (28). For more information on the class and status divide between house and field slaves, see Hill 28-30.

<sup>17</sup> In regard to Black Americans who choose polygamous relationships, it should be noted that the pejorative view many North Americans have of this practice is not uniformly held among other cultures. Thus the practice of polygamy, to take one example, has historical African “tribal” roots and is an accepted and valued lifestyle for many people worldwide (Hill 103; Ducille 111).

<sup>18</sup> For a more in-depth look at the most recent (2010) statistical analysis on Black families, see Patterson’s *Freedom is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America’s Struggle over Black Family Life – from LBJ to Obama*, and Willie and Reddick’s *A New Look at Black Families*, sixth edition.

## CHAPTER 2

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted, however, that despite the failings of these early sexologists to present accurate “scientific” studies – their work did largely serve to stigmatise individuals as diseased – the studies had merit insofar as they were part of the pioneering effort that recognised the significance of sexuality for both the individual and society (Bland and Doan 2).

<sup>2</sup> These parallels can be seen in the writings of sexologists such as August Forel, Cesare Lombroso, Guglielmo Ferrero and Havelock Ellis (Bland and Doan 202).

<sup>3</sup> Sander Gilman’s work on race reveals the period’s inherently White supremacist notion of “primitive” physical characteristics as akin to the features of the non-White races. For more on this topic see his discussion of Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper’s work in *Picturing Health and Illness: Images of Identity and Difference*, in which Gilman points out the anatomist’s “hierarchy of the races” through his use of nasal physiognomy to equate Jews and Blacks as more closely related to apes than other races (83-84). In this work, Gilman extensively highlights the

eighteenth century common discourse that such perceptions of the White standard of beauty equalled goodness, while notions of deformity and ugliness were perceived as indications of illness and evil (52-55).

<sup>4</sup> Money refers to Freud's psychosexual stages as "as unsubstantiated as the biogenic law from which they are descended" (*Principles of Developmental Sexology* 53-54). To him, such findings belong to the field of sexosophy rather than sexology (*Gendermaps* 136).

<sup>5</sup> Rubin's feminist position has strong humanistic underpinnings. Her writings embody the philosophical premises behind humanistic sexology – a practice established in California in the 1960's that Irvine describes as "strongly liberal," and as representing ". . . an impulse toward openness, flexibility, and experimentation in the understanding of human sexual behavior" – whose roots are grounded in humanistic psychology (106, 116, 107). This branch of psychology, as Irvine explains, ". . . was posed as an alternative to both Freudianism and behaviourism . . ." (107-08). It recognised the individual as "a conscious agent" whose actions ". . . were not simple responses to stimuli, but a composite of physical, psychological, and social factors" (108).

<sup>6</sup> For more on this subject see Sullivan's discussion of Diana Russell's position 163-64.

<sup>7</sup> As Judith Butler notes in "The Traffic of Women: The 'Political Economy' of Sex," the theory Rubin presents that calls for the dissolution of the institutionalization of heterosexuality, would also ultimately result in "the overthrow of gender itself" (*Gender Trouble* 101).

<sup>8</sup> For more information on sexology and its metamorphosis since the late nineteenth century, and the criticisms of the field, see Bland and Doan's General Introduction 1-7, and Irvine's study.

<sup>9</sup> For a more extensive look at such theories that encompass this basic premise that gender and sexuality are discursive constructs, see in particular Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985), Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Wittig's *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992), as well as Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (1993), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999) and *Undoing Gender* (2004).

<sup>10</sup> By non-harmful I refer to relationships that do not cause hurt or damage; that do not impair the health or habitual function of the individuals involved (OED, "Harm," def. 1a).

<sup>11</sup> My use of the term "queering heteronormativity" is in reference to Sullivan's use of this term in her preface to *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the philosophical position that our perceptions of truth are artificial constructs based on our conformity to universalising accounts, see in particular Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*.

<sup>13</sup> As Shane Phelan articulates, the appeal of a poststructuralist approach is that "it does not provide a new idealism, a new metanarrative," but rather, "The space once occupied by the metanarratives that regulate our knowledge becomes an open field for politics . . ." (*Getting Specific* 139).

<sup>14</sup> See for example *Piracy, Slavery and Redemption: Barbary Captivity Narratives from Early Modern England*, ed. Daniel J. Vitkus.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the female Harlem Renaissance writers and their depictions of women see Wintz 205-16.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Du Bois had some tolerance for literary depictions of sexuality, as long as such portrayals were in line with his moral code of ethics. Wirth explains that for Du Bois: "Prostitution limned with pathos was acceptable; prostitution painted as an enticing or fulfilling way of life was not. Thus Du Bois defended Langston Hughes's early poems about prostitutes, but he excoriated Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* as 'filth'" (47). He believed that the primary purpose of literature was propagandistic: a way in which to advance the plight of African Americans, which primarily meant high cultural forms (Watson 93).

<sup>17</sup> As Cary D. Wintz clarifies in *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* the movement (known then as the New Negro Renaissance), is generally agreed upon by scholars to have taken place in the 1920's, although some scholars extend the period well into the 1930's (1-2). Wintz argues that it was decidedly distinct from White literature of the period insofar as "race and race-consciousness were constant themes in the literature" (4).

<sup>18</sup> In the 1920's Harlem was the most densely populated and poorest part of New York, an "ethnic ghetto" that "offered a kaleidoscope of literary, political, and hedonistic activity unmatched anywhere in the United States" (Watson 3). According to Wintz, "Harlem reflected the confusing and contradictory position of blacks in the early twentieth century. It was a symbol of the black migrant who left the South and went north with dreams of freedom and opportunity. It also symbolized the shattered pieces of those dreams which lay half-buried beneath the filth and garbage of the city slum. Harlem reflected the self-confidence, militancy, and pride of the New Negro in his or her demand for equality; it reflected the aspirations and genius of the writers and poets of the Harlem Renaissance; but Harlem, like the black migrant, like the New negro, and like the Renaissance writers, did not resolve its problems or fulfil its dreams" (28-29).

<sup>19</sup> This story was originally published in *Fire!*, one of several African American periodicals that were largely responsible for circulating the work of the Harlem Renaissance writers. For more information on these publications and the organizations they represented, see Watson 16-19 and Wirth 13-14. In addition, for a comprehensive exploration of the Harlem Renaissance writers and their contribution to newer, more libertarian depictions of African Americans see works by Watson, Wintz and Wirth as referenced in the bibliography.

<sup>20</sup> Nero emphasises how “the FBI targeted homosexuals as enemies of the state and many were imprisoned, fired from jobs, or forced to hide their identities” (161). He also points out, however, that Baldwin was not the sole writer courageous enough to continue confronting these themes. During this period, Hughes published “Cafe 3 A.M.” – a poem denouncing gay and lesbian persecution in his *Montage of a Dream Deferred* collection (1951) as well as his first short story with homosexual characters “Blessed Assurance,” while Owen Dodson published his novel *Boy at the Window* (1951).

<sup>21</sup> For an extensive understanding of what is meant by the term “sexual revolution” see in particular his introduction 3-9.

<sup>22</sup> Smith notes that the Black Arts Movement “was informed by a spirit of expansiveness” (471). She adds, however, that “it also led to a kind of literary and ideological gatekeeping that judged African American writing on its conformity to a narrowly defined political and aesthetic agenda” (471). The result, she stipulates, was that “only certain styles, topics, and positions were considered authentically black” (471). For more information on the Black Arts Movement and the major writers who defined it, see Smith 470-72.

<sup>23</sup> For more information on the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, which include the development of gay publishing houses and independent bookstores, see Nero 162. For examples of Burroughs’ sexually transgressive writing, see in particular *Junkie* (1953), *Naked Lunch* (1959), *Cities of the Red Night* (1981) and *Queer* (1985). For examples of Cooper’s early transgressive work see in particular *Closer* (1989), *Frisk* (1991) and *Wrong* (1992).

<sup>24</sup> See in particular Major’s novels *All-Night Visitors* (1969) and *No [A Novel]* (1973).

<sup>25</sup> See *Movement in Black: The Collected Poetry of Pat Parker, 1961-1978* and *The Days of Good Looks: The Prose and Poetry of Cheryl Clarke, 1980-2005*. See also Shockley’s first novel *Loving Her* (1974) and her short story collection *The Black and White of It* (1980).

<sup>26</sup> See Kenan’s novels *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989) and *Let The Dead Bury Their Dead* (1992).

<sup>27</sup> For examples of these themes in LaValle’s gritty, street-style fiction, see in particular *Slapboxing with Jesus* (1999).

<sup>28</sup> For more on this subject see also Keith Mitchell’s more recent 2006 article “Femininity, Abjection, and (Black) Masculinity in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.”

<sup>29</sup> See in addition Tessa Ronyon and Katrine Dalsgård’s postcolonial critiques: “A New ‘Romen’ Empire: Toni Morrison’s *Love* and the Classics” and “The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.”

## CHAPTER 3

<sup>1</sup> This essay was later entitled “Here Be Dragons.”

<sup>2</sup> See Gilroy, *Against Race* 29.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the problems surrounding the notion of consent see ch.2 of this thesis, p.55.

<sup>4</sup> Dievler places the word “country” in quotes to acknowledge that it is a play on the title of Baldwin’s novel *Another Country*.

<sup>5</sup> My use of italics.

<sup>6</sup> Diprose’s theory is predicated on Hegel’s belief that identity and difference are constituted “through the production of an interval between self and other” (Diprose 37). Her work, however, diverges from Hegel’s in its assertion that while Hegel believes in a unity between self and other, Diprose argues that such a unity effaces difference to the disadvantage of women (37). The relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s claim to Diprose’s theory, that “the lived body is constituted by its dwelling in the world,” and that “the capacities and habits, and therefore the interests, of any body do not arise separately from its engagement with others nor from the discourses and practices which make up the world in which it dwells” should also be noted here (Diprose 119).

<sup>7</sup> It should be stated that for Phelan, however, “community does not thereby acquire a prior, separate existence, for community is simultaneously constituted by [individuals]” (81).

<sup>8</sup> By “love triangle” I refer to two people who are independently romantically linked to a third, one or more of whom find(s) the arrangement unsuitable.

## CHAPTER 4

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Holt’s claim fails to acknowledge Walker’s devotion to these subjects through her political non-fiction writing and documentaries. It also neglects to take into account the attention other prominent writers have given to such themes, in particular domestic violence and incest – Morrison’s earlier 1970 novel the *Bluest Eye* is one such example that deals with this subject matter. It does, however, point out the significant impact critics and readers alike have consistently attributed Walker’s fiction as having had on world politics.

<sup>2</sup> As Judith Butler argues in the preface to *Gender Trouble*, in regard to the theory of performativity (or in this case, more broadly, the theory of social constructionism) race and gender (or in this instance race and sexuality) should not “be treated as simple analogies” (xvi). However, considering race through this theoretical lens emphasises that it is an equally relevant category of analysis (xvii).

<sup>3</sup> For a much more extensive discussion of magical realism and its distinction from realism, surrealism, and the fantastic see in particular Bowers’ Introduction, 1-6 and ch. 2, 19-30.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of utopianism and in particular, its usage in contemporary feminist literature, see her Introduction, 1-5, and ch.1, 9-36.

<sup>5</sup> [See ch.1, 18-19].

<sup>6</sup> [See ch.1, 8-19].

<sup>7</sup> This interpretation is predicated on Freud’s explanation of the latent stage of the female Oedipus Complex in his later 1924 work “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex” in which the little girl shifts her desire for the mother to the father and thus “likes to regard herself as what her father loves above all else” (Gay 661). Freud explains that “her Oedipus complex culminates in a desire, which is long retained, to receive a baby from her father as a gift – to bear him a child” (Gay 665).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the problems surrounding the notion of consent see ch.2 of this thesis, p.55. These issues are particularly salient in light of Ruth’s age.

<sup>9</sup> My punctuation.

## CHAPTER 5

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the rape of Philomela, see *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. A.E. Watts 131.

<sup>2</sup> However, this reversal of male/female power, to Kang, rather than resulting in a purely feminist or masculinist text, “. . . is an open invitation to interpret . . .”: a text in which “. . . the notional categories of black masculinity and black femininity are similarly entwined” (837). Kang argues, “It is within this matrix of sexed positions that merge into, converge with, and diverge from one another that the possibility of sustained emotional and sexual partnership exists” (837).

<sup>3</sup> Deferred action is “a product of the excessive character of the first event which requires a second event to release its traumatic force (‘only the occurrence of the second scene can endow the first one with pathogenic force’)” (Nicholls 53-54). Nicholls further explains that “It is not simply a matter of recovering a lost memory, but rather of the restructuring which forms the past in retrospect as ‘the original site [...] comes to be reworked’” (54). It therefore “calls into question traditional notions of causality – the second event is presented now as the ‘cause’ of the first – . . .” (54).

<sup>4</sup> Fitzgerald explains that “Object relations theory proposes that the psyche is constructed within a wide system of relationships, offering a model of how social, cultural and political forces become internalised” (111).

<sup>5</sup> Kang points out that Paul D’s name “comes from the Latin for ‘little’ or ‘small’ (*paulus*)” (844).

## **CODA**

<sup>1</sup> The categorisation of Obama as “Black” is a reflection of the continued implementation of “the one drop rule” discussed in ch.1 of this thesis. Obama is of mixed race and ethnicity, the son of a Black Kenyan father and White American mother. His only sibling is half White and half Indonesian (Obama 231).

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