

BLACK FEMALE BODIES ON (DIS)PLAY: COMMODIFICATION, REEMBODIMENT AND HEALING*

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ABSTRACT

The articles focuses on the search for alternative models for black female identities and bodies which challenge sexualized and racialized images historically imposed onto them. To counteract this historical denigrating and traumatic legacy, three novels are especially relevant: the classic *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* by Ntozake Shange (1982) and *Bailey's Café* by Gloria Naylor (1992), and a more recent publication *Home* by Toni Morrison (2012). These novels examine those bodies and identities as sites for self-representation, empowerment and healing, both physical and psychic. Dismantling racist and sexist ideologies, these works ultimately signal the way to reconstitute black female bodies in a newly devised politics of the black body that defies the exclusion and commodification to which they have been historically subjected, and facilitates the shaping of alternative non-hegemonic identities.

KEYWORDS: Black bodies, female identity, sexualization, racialization, alternative models, healing.

RESUMEN

El artículo se centra en la búsqueda de modelos alternativos para las identidades y cuerpos femeninos negros que desafían las imágenes sexualizadas y racializadas impuestas históricamente. Para contrarrestar ese legado denigratorio y traumático, tres novelas son especialmente relevantes: las clásicas *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* de Ntozake Shange (1982) y *Bailey's Café* de Gloria Naylor (1992), y una publicación más reciente *Home* de Toni Morrison (2012). Estas novelas examinan esos cuerpos e identidades como lugares para la auto-representación, el empoderamiento y la sanación, tanto física como psíquica. Deconstruyendo las ideologías racistas y sexistas, estos trabajos finalmente señalan el camino para reconstituir los cuerpos femeninos negros en una nueva política del cuerpo negro que reta a la exclusión y comodificación a la que han sido sometidos históricamente, y facilita la construcción de identidades alternativas no-hegemónicas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cuerpos negros, identidad femenina, sexualización, racialización, modelos alternativos, sanación.

It is the intelligence of the body that I have exploited

(*Josephine Baker*)



To explore issues of identity and body politics in connection with black bodies means to plunge into ongoing processes of commodification, fetishization and sexualization, indeed, but also to engage in the discursive practices that have historically attempted to reconstitute, reconnect and inhabit those black bodies as sites for empowerment and self-enunciation. Black bodies have defied their own “body-historiography” by deconstructing the powerful allure of the white body as the hegemonic norm through discursive constructedness and claims of ownership and self-representation. This article intends to focus, on the one hand, on revisiting that historical legacy and its lingering effects on contemporary renderings of the black female body and, on the other, on examining alternative models to reclaim black women’s identities and bodies in three ground-breaking novels: two pioneering efforts that paved the way for critical interrogations on the texture of those identities and bodies, Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982) and Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café* (1992), and one more recent endeavor by Toni Morrison in her 2012 novel *Home*.

These texts destabilize, if not altogether eliminate, the demeaning legacy of black and female bodies in contemporary times by disentangling them from outright monolithic representations to become a contested terrain for notions of race, gender, and sexuality. More importantly, these novels chronicle the development of an embodied subjectivity that articulates a thorough revision of the relationship between the mind and body more attuned to African-based critical discourses. My contention is that for more than four decades now these leading writers have been intent on enacting significant political and literary interventions that enable repossession and recovery of the violated black female body, helping to forge new forms of identity and agency.

1. BODY HISTORIOGRAPHY, TRAUMA AND RESISTANCE

In order to trace that “body-historiography” in Alexandra Ganser’s words (105),¹ and to account for the long-standing misinterpretation and mistreatment of black bodies, readers should be aware of the ideological tenets sustaining the modern Western world and its profoundly racist and exclusionary nature. As Meri Danquah aptly remarks,

The black body, whether whole or broken down to its parts, was “ized” in every single way something could be. It was racialized, fetishized, romanticized, demonized,

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¹ Ganser uses this idea to retell bodily inscriptions found in injured soldiers. Nonetheless, I deem this concept particularly relevant for the study of black bodies which were literally injured, ravished and traumatized during slavery and colonization.

infantilized, criminalized, dehumanized, sexualized, criticized, ostracized, ritualized, and, much more often than we think, it was also prized. (14; author's emphasis)

This incisive critique foregrounds some of the processes to which the black body has been historically subjected and their tremendous impact on notions of subjectivity and belongingness. Yet black people have been able to challenge those negative processes by reassembling and reembodying their bodies and identities. As Baker would put it in the quote that opens this essay, her strategic manipulation of the cultural fantasies attached to black female bodies reverses that spectatorial gaze by “receiving and returning ‘the look’” (Henderson “About Face” 137), thus placing herself as the empowered subject.

To truly understand the depth of that history of defiance and resistance, it is necessary to return to the origins, as it were, to effect a journey back to the perverse encounter with black bodies through the European twin projects of slavery and colonization, especially at the height of the Age of Enlightenment. Every scholarly contribution on the black body feels the urge to revisit the traumatic legacy of the cruel and systematic abuse to which Africans were submitted for economic and imperialistic purposes. As Toni Morrison emphatically declares, there is a compelling need to revisit that past, to “rememory” it, appropriating her coinage, in order to make sense of the everlasting and excruciating pain and devastation derived from the Middle Passage and the plantation terrors that ensued. Black bodies were fragmented, disembodied, disowned, tortured, branded and silenced in so many ways depriving African slaves of their own sense of humanity and self-worth. As Patricia Hill Collins pointedly states:

Under chattel slavery, people of African descent occupied a particular place in class relations—their bodies and all that was contained in those bodies (labor, sexuality, and reproduction)—were objectified and turned into commodities that were traded in the marketplace. (55)

Notably, these non-hegemonic identities were drastically reduced to essential bodies. In consequence, black bodies came to occupy the place of the “excluded Other” (Shildrick and Price 2). They would be used and abused for mainstream consumption and disruption, epitomizing what Hortense Spillers graphically describes as “the theft of the body” (67).

In addition, black female bodies were also regarded as the embodiment of deviant sexuality, deprivation and sickness. Lisa Collins contends that the exploitative history of black female bodies is consistently tied to “slave, sexual, and service economies” in nineteenth century European and American ideologies (“Economies” 102). Sander Gilman argues that this perception was already in place by the eighteenth century, when “the sexuality of the black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality” (228). Black women were considered not only as a menace to Western civilization (as scientists, doctors and even historians insistently proclaimed), but also “as source of corruption and disease” (250). Unbridled, untamed depictions of black females abounded in literature and other artistic forms,



both in US and Europe. Part and parcel of the effort to substantiate culturally what was known as the “white man’s burden,” those depictions also encoded the need to restrain other sexualities, particularly black female sexuality.

Another aspect would understand the black body as monstrous and abject.² Closely following Judith Kristeva’s notion of the abject body, Judith Butler contends that “the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an ‘expulsion’ followed by a ‘repulsion’ that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation” (“Variations” 133). Thus, it is important to insist first on the body as a cultural construction and icon in order to invalidate the pretended neutrality and universality of the hegemonic white body. Arguing for the discursive construction of bodies, Butler’s notion of the performativity of bodies is especially illuminating for this analysis:³ bodies are always marked by difference, along racial, sexual, gender, class lines, etc. Revealing the prescription of a normative definition as a fabrication is the initial requirement for elaborating an alternative politics of the black body that engenders its own rules and codes, disavowing the exclusion to which it has been submitted on the grounds of repulsion and horror.

2. BLACK BODIES IN CONTEXT: PERFORMING SUBJECTIVITIES

There have been diverse proposals to articulate black gender politics, but from my point of view the most intriguing and sophisticated theoretical models have been provided by African American feminist critics over the last four decades. They substantiate their approaches through insights into the nature of both racial and gender discourses. On the whole, their reflections offer particularly illuminating critiques of the pervasiveness of damaging and oppressing stereotypes—both racist and sexist. Simultaneously, however, they allow a recovery of black bodies from oblivion in order to highlight alternative modes of representation that dispel crippling assumptions, and invest in their own multifarious forms of beauty.

bell hooks’ pioneering book *Black Looks* enables an affirmation of black identity by pondering the historical struggle for control over representation. Calling for effective “revolutionary interventions” (2) in the area of racial representation, hooks bolsters a more radical stance on the ways blacks are still fundamentally underrepresented, mainly brutalized and sexualized, by the dominant ideology of our

² I have elsewhere applied Kristeva’s notion of the abject as “the inbetween, the ambiguous, the composite” (4) to Lina’s interstitial position in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (“Nobody Teaches”). In this case, my argument focuses on how black bodies not only occupy that interstitial position, but rather have profited from that position as a means of empowerment.

³ I am particularly indebted to Butler’s theory of the discursive constructedness of bodies and gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990), later complemented and expanded by *Bodies that Matter* (1993).



time. Concretely, the critic underlines the fact that contemporary representations of black female bodies “rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism” (62). Responding to that call, Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Sexual Politics* honestly evaluates the traumatic history and the harmful effects of the battle for representation and assertivity, and champions a redefinition of black gender ideology. She explicitly places the blame where it belongs: “Now as then, scientific discourse, mass media, and public policy all depict African Americans as either less able and/or willing to achieve dominant gender ideology” (183).⁴ Janell Hobson also adheres to what she designates as aesthetics of the black female body, which would comprise an articulation of a “black liberation discourse on the black body beautiful” (15). The contested notion of beauty is then one more aspect that needs to be investigated for the reconstruction of the politics/poetics of the black female body.

Many scholars and writers across the African diaspora have denounced the conflation of black women and physicality. That terrible dissociation has been effectively challenged by what Marlene NoubéSe Philip terms the intelligence of the body. For her the word “body” encapsulates also mind in a continuum: “within the ‘body’ ... resides an intelligence—including memory and knowledge—which is important to the whole existence of the person as the intelligence we have come to associate with the mind” (91). Thus, the body becomes a vehicle for the production of knowledge and is in itself a producer of knowledge and signification which generates strategies of resistance and survival in the face of constant surveillance. Furthermore, Manuela Coppola sees the black female body as “the repository of cultural memory, of ancestral knowledge and as catalyst for critical interrogations” (26). In that sense, Philip’s articulation of the African body as “bodymemory” becomes particularly useful to claim the validity of the black body as a signifier of memory. Baker’s notion of the intelligence of the body that inaugurated this chapter thus comes full circle, also a crucial part of the development of the novels’ protagonists, especially in those by Shange and Morrison.

Numerous contemporary contributions on the black female body concentrate on a holistic and integrating vision, as Carol Henderson ventures: “a vision of this body—mind, flesh, and spirit—that will ... restore the primary vision of black women—their courage, dignity, communal responsibility, and pride” (6). These interventions to set the record straight, as it were, and to pay due homage to black women’s bodies in their entirety signal a fundamental theoretical repositioning with respect to the traumatic body-historiography delineated above. Moreover, the reevaluation of that history of abjection, grotesqueness and even freakery facilitates an effective removal from (and renewal of) the very notions of Western categoriza-

⁴ These social institutions are complicit with a hostile ideological regime whose ultimate goal is to propound the subjugation of “a people who have been rendered disabled by history” in Alexander’s words (252). From their perspective, the problem seems to be located in a lack or unwillingness on the part of blacks to conform to the hegemonic gender criteria.



tions and social ordering. Hence, to envisage such innovative and subversive politics of the black body, the body cannot be approached or explained in isolation, since there are three interrelated aspects: soul/mind/body (Tally "Review" 197).⁵

Always respecting what Romero Ruiz rates as "the basic harmony of connectedness" (1), this tripartite compound implies that the black body may be restored to wholeness from a state of fragmentation and rupture thanks to its reconnection to the twin components mind and soul. Thus, Gay Wilenz devised the concept of healing narrative, a narrative which explores that process of resilience and empowerment of the black body through a project of reclaiming lost heritage and residual healing practices, as adequate cures for both the individual and the community.⁶ My contention is, then, that to be able to lay claim to the black physical body is to place it at the centre of the investigation of cultural and spiritual discourses that may lead to a reconstitution of individual and communal identities through its diverse "intelligent" languages. Therefore, it fosters a change of state and position: from object to subject, from marginal to central, from abject to healthy, and eventually from fragmented to whole.

3. AFFIRMING THE BLACK FEMALE BODY: SHANGE, NAYLOR AND MORRISON

Two pioneering novels opened new ground for the reconfiguration of the black female body. *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* by Ntozake Shange (1982) centers on the lives of three sisters who not only resist racist and sexist attempts to limit the possibilities for their bodies and identities, but who are also able to delineate a markedly different way to inhabit both. *Bailey's Cafe* by Gloria Naylor, published a decade later (1992), presents a rather more complex and nuanced scenario whereby it is possible to enact alternative codes to fashion both body politics and gender performativity. In addition to these two texts, I have included a third and more recent novel by Toni Morrison *Home* (2012), in which there is a rather illuminating analysis of the terrible abuses of black women's bodies for scientific purposes. This is represented by the case of the female protagonist, Cee, deeply traumatized by a doctor's horrid experimentation on her body in the name of eugenics, and who is eventually restored back to self and life by a community of women.

In Shange's novel the black female body figures prominently throughout the text, celebrated and honored in its doubly creative function: begetting life and

⁵ In her excellent review, Tally tackles the notion of African spiritual healing in her praise of Denise Martin's essay, stressing the balance among the three aspects: "from the Bakongo, mwéla/môyo (soul/life), ngîndu (mind), and nitu (body)" (197).

⁶ In her classic study published in 2000 *Healing Narratives*. For an enlightening discussion of this concept in relation to wholeness, see *The Search for Wholeness and Diaspora Literacy in Contemporary African American Literature* edited by Silvia Pilar Castro Borrego (2011).



art⁷: three sisters, three stories about their creativity and their zeal to repossess their bodies as a source of pride and self-identity. Especially interesting is the story of the dancer Cypress, who initially fights against her own body in ballet classes that suffocate and stifle her.⁸ The turning point comes when she finally finds the courage to rebel against the white canon: “Cypress clung to her body, the body of a dancer; the chart of her recklessness, her last weapon, her perimeters: blood, muscle, and the will to simply change the world” (208). Her body appropriately becomes an effective instrument to express herself and channel her frustrations, dreams and the terrible nightmares that plague her in the form of her parents’ suffering at the hands of white savagery and inhumanity. For Cypress her body represents the way to reconcile with the past and its traumas, while regaining the indispensable strength to reconnect to her rich cultural heritage.⁹

But to get to that phase she has to undergo a painful journey to pride and pleasure. Firstly, she begins to claim her corporeality through growing “deep into her difference”: “Her ass and her legs she used like a colored girl” (136). Her dancing expresses a renewed sense of the self after years of self-denial and frustration in shallow ballet dances where her body is repeatedly condemned as inappropriate, objected to because of not being normative: “your ass is too big and your legs are too short” (134). Far from despairing over this mistreatment, she is encouraged to join Azure Bosom, an all-women company in which the female body is exalted by means of a series of choreographies that stage a rite of cleansing the body of pain and disappointment finally leading to an awareness of “pure pleasure of flesh and spirit combined” (144), clearly in line with Shohat and Stam’s aesthetics of resistance. In this case, it can be further argued that the holistic view in Shange’s novel sets a precedent for later fictional development of the compound body/mind/spirit that many critics propound.

However, there is a counterpoint to this celebratory positioning of the female black body in the text when Cypress notices how Azure Bosom’s parties remind her of an auction where women sell themselves to the highest bidder. The fact that those bidders are other women complicates the reading, as Cypress is not ready to be taken in. As a result of her disgust, she finds in Idrina a companion, a lover who teaches her how to let herself be loved and be close to another person, and she awakens the tender part of her sexuality that has lain dormant after many affairs with different

⁷ I first approached this issue in “La mujer negra como conservadora y creadora de cultura en *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*” (1994).

⁸ There is some intimation that the character Cypress may be partly based on the actual experiences of a well-known dancer Debbie Allen, who was turned down by the Houston Foundation for Ballet when she was eight because of a presumed policy of racial segregation. Even later Allen was also refused at the North Carolina School of the Arts, allegedly because “she was built wrong” according to the school director (Haskins 193). She later became a successful dancer and performer in the 70s and 80s.

⁹ As Melissa Walker points out, Cypress “learns to use her body to create an art that is at once beautiful and political” based on African Americans’ survival strategies (155).



men who invariably “holding her [would leave] her wet and lonely” (137). Sexual connotations notwithstanding, Cypress learns to confide in Idrina totally, which is the reason why she feels truly betrayed when Idrina goes back to her former love Laura. The sense of betrayal is so overwhelming that Cypress decides not to dance anymore, once again denying her true self.

Another encounter with her old friend Leroy sets her off: “Cypress was a dance of a new thing, her own spirit loose, fecund, and deep” (156). His music and their lovemaking full of contortions and pleasant surprises eventually free Cypress from the last barriers she alone was imposing on her bodily movements, enabling her to unearth the true source of inspiration for her dancing and her life. Thus, sexual release is also concomitant with bodily and spiritual release.¹⁰ Afterwards, Cypress can definitively proclaim her role as a dancer, or as Thompson-Cager further states, “Cypress can through dance comprehend the power of spirits” (39). The language of the body is therefore considered central to any reconsideration of an innovative politics centered on the black female body that unleashes the magic any woman is entitled to in the book: “where there is a woman there is magic” (3), a magic that is predicated on a reaffirmation of that spiritual realm.

A much more troubled and nuanced interpretation of the black female body is formulated a decade later in Gloria Naylor’s *Bailey’s Café*. Through a colorful canvas of characters, Naylor reveals the difficulties inherent in coming to terms with diverse forms of sexuality that deviate from socially sanctioned models. Most of the characters that populate this novel struggle to shape satisfactory ways of claiming their bodies and their sexualities postulating their complex and multi-layered identities. In this case, the reading of corporeality is complicated by a mixing of genders and ethnicities congruent with Naylor’s exploration of border-crossing possibilities in her haunting characters and their ordeals.

The stories embedded in this poliphonic novel deal with extremely traumatized women who have been severely abused before arriving at Bailey’s Café. All of these stories certainly confirm Thompson-Cager’s view that “[a] black woman is always in danger of having her sexuality used against her” (38). Naylor further contends that “[t]he core of the work is indeed the way in which the word ‘whore’ has been used against women or to manipulate female sexual identity” (cited in Pirklwass and Ross 2). From the alcoholic widow to the virginal mother, the self-mutilated wino or the deceived concubine, their stories intermingle and converge in a tapestry conveying isolation, horror and abjection of all kinds. In sum, each of the characters unmask a very conflictive relationship with her own body and her sexuality. Conversely, each story adds a new layer of significance to the previous one, insinuating a collective voice that contests the multiple discriminatory practices directed against black women’s bodies and psyches.

¹⁰ As Geta LeSeur observes, “it is because she has developed her own individual sense of self through her dancing that she is able to have a good relationship with a man” (172). Ultimately Cypress defines herself on her own terms, not according to others’ needs or opinions.



These conflicting tendencies are particularly well exemplified by Mary's (Peaches) story. Regarded as a beauty and overprotected by her father, Mary suffers tremendously and literally doubles up into two selves: the pure Mary and the promiscuous and tempting Peaches. Her schizophrenic, tormented sense of self forces her to engage in affair after affair in order to placate her intensifying sexual urge: "Any race, any age, any size—any son of any man—had the power to drive away that demon from the mirror... they became my saviours from *her*" (105; author's emphasis). The demon is her own sexuality from which she needs to distance herself by means of others' desire for her body, codified as an outlet purely for sexual pleasure. Because of her inability to prevent the constant cheating on her boyfriend, she ends up hating herself which results in self-mutilation, disfiguring her face and her own body in an attempt to drive men away from her. Eventually reaching Eve's refuge for damaged and neglected women, Peaches unleashes her repressed sexuality even further. But as the number of callers dwindles week after week, there seems to be a lingering hope for some kind of redemption one promising day in which there will be only one man left: "A man special enough to understand what the woman upstairs is truly worth" (114). So Eve's promise to Mary's father—to return his daughter whole—is built on that process of selection in which only one chosen man would do for her. From untamed promiscuity to a certain sense of emotional stability, Mary will have to navigate dangerous waters by enacting a ritual transition, clearly hinting at a renewed balance in the end between body and mind. Thus, Naylor transmutes psychological and psychical displacement and self-alienation into a potential tool for healing and wholeness.

Nevertheless, the most heart-rending character is undoubtedly Sadie, who has been so neglected and deserted that she ends up selling her body for the exact change of the liquor bottles she lives on. An unwanted child, her despicable mother imparts self-loathing to her, while she unfailingly tries to be good to deserve her mother's love. Moreover, her mother sells her daughter's virginity to make her atone for having ruined her own life. Eventually coercing her into sterilization, the mother reinforces that view of maternity as a curse: "your life woulda been pure hell ever having to take care of a child" (45). After her mother's passing, she marries a man thirty years her senior, again working hard to convince him she was worth loving, but receiving exactly the same response after twenty-five years of marriage: "*nothing* around her was good enough" (54; author's emphasis). When he also dies and she loses the only thing that really mattered to her, the house, her last dream, Sadie becomes immersed in a cycle of despair, depression, loneliness, alcohol and prostitution, the "black hole" that swallows her up. Tellingly described as a "wino, a twenty-five-cent whore" (40), she is so shattered that she cannot accept another opportunity with the iceman who gives her her first real kiss and wants to share his life with her. The final sentence in the chapter renders the tale ironic: "She knew this dear sweet man was offering her the moon, but she could give him the stars" (78). All her life evolves around the stars that the bottles offer her, so her annulment as a person and her gradual deterioration will slowly but surely proceed.

The last character Eve is also victimized by the way in which in "all these lives erotic desire is repressed, by outsider 'agents' of the established religion or by



inner conflicts originating in outward pressures” (Chavanelle 68). Her “godfather” is one of those agents who plays an ambiguous role as a preacher who chastises her when she initiates sensual games with a boy. The awakening of her sexual desire is chronicled in those “innocent” games, in which she discovers “what my body was for” by pressing close to the earth while the boy stomped (87). Her need to be touched intensifies with her progress toward womanhood and when caught by her godfather, she is subjected to severe mistreatment and evicted from home naked and hungry. Overcoming great difficulties on the way, Eve resurrects herself from the utter abandonment and loss she encounters till she finally reaches her destination, her garden, which is codified as a haven, very distinctly a feminine refuge where battered women can expect solace and comfort. As Kathleen Puhr suggests, Eve—the first woman—clearly personifies “the mother of all healers” (525), who is willing to subject all these women to a ritual of pain and rediscovery in order to restore them back to life and wholeness. Sadie’s unfortunate fate is closely tied up to her inability to reach out for help, as she is the only woman who does not take refuge in Eve’s place. Clearly, Naylor seems to be promoting collective rituals of healing as the most effective path to redemption.

Toni Morrison’s investment in the importance of the community and female bonding is likewise noteworthy in most of her novels. In *Home* another type of ritual enacted by an all-female community reverberates with meaning. Again readers are presented with an exploited and afflicted woman who has been subjected to an infamous treatment at the hands of a sadistic doctor, ironically called Dr. Beau. Prior to that experience, Cee’s life has not been easy either, first mistreated by her own grandmother whose constant verbal abuse drives her away from home on to a husband who takes advantage of her and then leaves her to her own devices: “She learned that Principal had married her for an automobile” (49). As if she were just another piece in a commercial transaction, he sets his heart on the car and runs off. This process of dehumanization reaches its peak when she starts working for the doctor to make a living, a job that literally brings her to the brink of death. Her body is used and abused in the name of science. Interestingly enough, the person who acts as a spokesperson for Dr. Beau is his wife who instructs Cee how to behave: “Just do what he says the way he wants and you’ll be fine” (60). She even mentions that he is “no Dr. Frankenstein” (60), although the reference is lost on Cee. Basically, then, Cee’s exploitation escalates till she reaches the most profound annulment as a person who has lost control over her own body and mind.

The narration does not provide a precise description of the doctor’s practices other than stating that he is a convinced and unrepentant Confederate, but there are certain hints as the novel progresses. On the one hand, the doctor’s own daughters suffer from encephalitis, a painfully ironic twist given the racist ideology illustrated in his books entitled *The Passing of the Great Race*, and *Heredity, Race and Society*.¹¹

¹¹ This is indeed a very revealing choice by Morrison. The former is a classic instance of treatises popularized by scientific racism. Published in 1916 by another eugenics convert named



Cee is awed by his knowledge and promises to read more about “eugenics.” On her first day at work the doctor rather ominously warns her, “Be prepared for the reality of medicine: sometimes blood, sometimes pain” (64), which is exactly the kind of mistreatment she will be bound to in due course. But there is an especially poignant scene foreshadowing what is going to happen to Cee. Cee and Sarah, the cook in the house, select a melon to eat and they casually express the view that female melons are sweeter and juicier. Then Sarah “cut the girl in two” with a knife (66), anticipating the severe dismemberment and racial/gender violence that Cee herself will be forced to undergo.

It is also worth mentioning that the character of Sarah directly recalls the terrible case of Sarah Baartman’s story, but with an additional twist. Thanks to Sarah’s timely intervention Cee is rescued by her brother Frank. Morrison is very possibly intertextually citing the figure of Baartman when the woman who helps Cee to survive is Sarah. Moreover, Sarah’s actions are also significant due to her awareness of the doctor’s illegal practices, mainly comprising medicines of his own creation, performing abortions, etc., but Sarah also reveals that the main reason for Cee’s decline is the doctor’s interest in her vagina for increasing gynecological knowledge of black women’s bodies.¹²

Morrison draws attention to the medical experimentation on African Americans that had been fittingly rendered invisible in the official chronicle of the 50s. Especially well-known cases that Morrison refers to were “LSD experiments on soldiers... [and] experimentation with syphilis that was going on with black men at Tuskegee who thought they were receiving health care” (cited in Bollen 4). Rewriting the narrative of the country, particularly the myth of the contented 50s in this novel, Morrison is intent on exposing the darker, more sinister aspects of that medical industry that would dispose of black bodies as guinea pigs for their unsafe experiments with impunity, inflicting upon them abomination after abomination. The fact that Morrison makes Cee—the sister of a veteran hero—the victim of the cruel medical abuse constitutes another strategic device in the story that adds to the shameful past of the nation. Cee’s resulting infertility and the danger to her life could also be read as a cautionary tale about the traumas of the buried past and racial violence, an indictment for the entire, profoundly unjust, racial history of the United States.

Madison Grant, it rested on a radical program of racial cleansing to diminish the invasion of the “superior” Nordic race by the inferior ones. The second tome was published much later, in 1946, by two biologists Dunn and Dobzhansky, who aimed to probe into the employment of eugenics theories for political and racial purposes. According to Girling, the authors “express their opinion, with which most geneticists, but very few members of the public, in America, would agree, that the mixing of races is not biologically dangerous, and may even, in certain cases, lead to increased vigour” (216). I cannot help but mention an ironic undertone as these comments appeared in a publication titled *The Eugenics Review*, purposely trying to approach genetics “upon reason, and not upon prejudice” (Penrose 253).

¹² In line with the eugenics program to sterilize black women, for instance.



To counteract those traumas, Cee's recovery can only be achieved thanks to a community of black women living in their hometown, Lotus, who believe that Frank's "maleness would worsen her condition" (119), so he is expelled from the surroundings.¹³ The novel thus highlights the stark contrast between traditional, nature-based healing practices and those of the aggressive and self-serving medical industry. To nurse Cee back to health, these practical and wise women perform a ritualistic healing session structured in certain phases, from the body to the soul and then back, as it were. First they take care of the physical symptoms—bleeding, infection, repair—, rounded off by a sun-smacking ending that reveals the extent to which these women's strategies are indebted to natural practices. By offering herself to the sun, Cee learns to feel comfortable with her own body laying claim to it for good. This scene bears the imprint of the erotic too, as there is a pleasant communion between nature and the body. As Tally rightly states, "this author's representation of the erotic, as opposed to the gratuitously sexual, make up a significant proportion of what she clearly defines as 'wholeness'" ("Nature" 60). The traumatized and discarded body can enjoy some degree of pleasure once again by doing away with shame and abjection, and also by feeling as one with other female bodies like her own. Consequently, bodily harmony is accomplished thanks to her acceptance within the community. Yagüe González points out that this acceptance "can help the individual defeat her demons" (122). What I would like to add to his appreciation is precisely the importance of the caring affection for the body, as well as for the mind, that this acceptance is actually committed to.¹⁴

The next stage is attention to the psychological damage inflicted by the doctor and the gallery of horrors she has been witness to: "Who told you you was trash?" (122). Little by little Cee is forced to regard these affectionate women as the nurturing models of love and female bonding she has never experienced before. Her grandmother Lenore's example is promptly dismissed, as they insist on a healthy definition of identity away from demeaning or castrating images. This alternative identity model is encapsulated in a telling passage: "You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you are a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are" (125). Soon enough Cee stands once more on her two feet and for the first time she is empowered to speak for herself. Having learnt to value and respect herself, she is even sure enough to declare that she is not in need of rescue anymore. The final step of the long healing process goes back to the physical realm: the final acceptance of what really happened to her body at the hands of the malignant doctor, which led to her permanent infertility. Facing that final truth is extremely difficult for Cee, but also

¹³ Understandingly from their position as traditional healers, Frank's male energy "might hinder the healing process" (*Litlovers* 6-7).

¹⁴ Bringing readers back to *Beloved* and Baby Suggs' insistence on loving the body, each part of it, in her poetic and deeply moving message in the Clearing: "We flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. ... Flesh that needs to be loved" (*Beloved* 88).



confirms her newly-found strength and her psychic integrity. Cee is definitively not haunted anymore, and is restored to life through a conjunction or integration of both body and mind.¹⁵

The three authors selected take up the issue of body-historiography and the historical processes of commodification, exploitation and sexualization, in an attempt to redeem the mistreated and violated black female body and to discard the traumatic legacy associated with it. Invalidating the universality of the hegemonic white body as the norm, their discourse of defiance and resistance denounces the inhumanity, hypersexuality and underrepresentation usually inflicted on black female bodies by the dominant gender ideology and its multiple discriminatory practices. Claiming black women's bodies and sexualities in their entirety, they also reject the hegemonic constant control and surveillance over them, together with the pervasive ways to box and display them for mainstream consumption and abuse.

The three novelists insist on communal healing as the only way to ensure survival and wholeness for black women. First the body, then the soul to regain self-knowledge. As Philip Page insightfully points out, "individuals are tormented but communities gain temporary relief by performing rituals" (12). Individual bodies can be harmed, brandished and tortured, but the collective body needs to be reassembled, healed and preserved. By means of a holistic vision that incorporates body and mind in an integrated whole, it is possible for black women to revisit their traumatic body-historiography and their emotionally damaged identities in order to transform them into adequate instruments for corporeal healing and psychic well-being. Dismantling racist and sexist ideologies, these novels ultimately chronicle the acquisition of a full-fledged persona that is contingent upon the survival of the collective body and soul. In consequence, they signal new ways to reconstitute black female bodies as sites and means for enunciation in a newly devised politics of the black body that resists the exclusion to which it has been historically submitted, and facilitates agency and the fashioning of alternative non-hegemonic identities.

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¹⁵ For Morrison scholars, this ending would recall *Paradise*, especially the moment in the "Consolata" chapter after the ritual of the circle in which the Convent women are said to be "no longer haunted. Or hunted either" (266), in spite of the fact that it constitutes a premonition of their murders. However, in Cee's case her recovery promises to be more lasting.



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