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Sexual violence against women of color: Achieving agency through community voice, purposeful silence, and responsible literary representations

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**Sexual violence against women of color: Achieving agency through community
voice, purposeful silence, and responsible literary representations**

by

Trisha A. Henderson

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. The Role of Race and Place in Establishing a Communal or Solitary Voice of Agency in <i>Beloved</i> and “Circumstance”	8
Chapter 2. The Powerful Presence of the Unspoken: Silence and Alternative Discourses in <i>Beloved</i> and <i>Elsie’s Business</i>	39
Chapter 3. Opposing Navigations of the Spectator Gaze: Activism and Responsibility in <i>Tropic of Orange</i> and <i>Oryx and Crake</i>	70
Conclusion	94
Works Cited	101

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INTRODUCTION

I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when
her shackles are very different from my own.

— Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

I originally thought about opening this thesis with a narrative account of sexual violence. I wanted to immediately highlight the gravity of this work through a tale that would convey the trauma that women face when they are survivors of sexual abuse; however, I am going to refrain from using a story here. Not only am I wary of perpetuating the representational violence that I work against, but I also want to practice the purposeful silence that I analyze so heavily in this thesis, since there are no truly reliable words to tangibly convey trauma to a reader. While there are authors who can and do use craft to relay trauma to readers in an effective way, as I talk about further in Chapter 3, I am not one of those creative writers — I am a critical literary theorist. Not all representations of sexual violence are without merit; on the contrary, when handled responsibly and with complete awareness, representations of sexual violence can offer a voice to the voiceless in order to bring the problem to the forefront of people's consciousness. In fact, this thesis includes novels that are examples of productive representations of sexual violence, particularly regarding assaults of women of color.

The writing of this project took place before, during, and after the 2012 Election where several Republican politicians made outrageous comments and assumptions regarding the definitions of rape, pregnancies that are a result of sexual assault, and a woman's right to choose abortion in cases where rape results in pregnancy. Although these politicians did undergo some scrutiny, this rhetoric proves the disheartening ignorance of members of the American public, validating the importance of this research.

When examining statistics on sexual violence, one must keep in mind that the numbers only represent those who have actually reported the crime. According to the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN) web site, “Every 2 minutes, someone in the U.S. is sexually assaulted.” This number alone should be enough to highlight why it is crucial to initiate discussions on sexual violence. When looking at sexual violence perpetrated against women of color, the information is even more revealing. Research for the National Institute of Justice Centers for Disease Control and Prevention points out that while women of color are more likely to be victims of rape, women from several minority communities are less likely to report the assault (Tjaden and Thoennes 6). Although a number of cases involving sexual abuse are often left unreported, and thus, hidden, there are an abundant number of representations of these acts of violence, whether it is visually on screen or in a written text; however, very few of these representations are what I would consider “responsible.” While it is crucial to offer a voice to survivors of rape, molestation, and other forms of sexual abuse, both viewers and readers must take into account the ramifications of representations of these violent acts, particularly when women of color are involved. There has been academic scholarship on the problematic nature of conveying sexual violence against women in horror films, but even seemingly well-intentioned representations warrant scrutiny, no matter what the mode of text or the genre because representing sexual violence so there is an element of spectatorship presents the problem of reobjectification of the abused.

In creating this project, there have been problems worth noting. One issue was the discourse I would use in order to uphold the integrity of those who have faced sexual violence. I use the word “survivor” rather than “victim,” since “survivor” conveys an

element of strength and hope. Additionally, I make it a priority to use the terms that minority communities prefer, such as African American and Native American or Indigenous, but this preference is individualistic. I also keep my academic jargon to a minimum in order to maintain a more inclusive audience base. Since sexual violence affects all women, regardless of race, class, sexual orientation, education level, family background, and so on, it is crucial to write in a manner where anyone and everyone can enter the discussion. This thesis is an effort to recognize the diverse lives and stories of survivors of sexual violence, while also highlighting those experiences often marginalized. I placed an utmost importance on choosing excerpts and analyzing the representations with integrity, making sure that I do not (re)perpetuate violence against the multicultural survivors. I consider these women, though fictional, to be the *subjects* of my research, not the *objects*. Though they come from novels, these stories hold validity and importance because they represent somebody's "real-life" story, and how writers and readers handle that material is worth a deeper look.

A problem encountered during the research process was the emotional toll of reading and scrutinizing such materials. It is not easy to continually analyze sexually violent material, whether responsibly handled or not. This project is based upon a feminist and anti-racist framework, and I believe in the feminist mantra that the "personal is political;" so, for me, I am taking on this project both from a personal and political perspective. It has always bothered me watching movies and television shows with graphic portrayals of sexual violence, particularly if not represented responsibly. I felt the representation reobjectified and retraumatized the women on screen, and I felt like a victim of sorts as a recipient of these irresponsible portrayals. Not only was I always

personally sensitive to media representations of sexual violence, but, as one can tell from the statistics, navigating the world as a woman is fraught with threats, if not actual instances, of sexual violence. Society teaches women not to “get raped” rather than teach men “not to rape.” It is bad enough that women have to be in the position of constantly being on guard, but to exploit experiences of violence through representations positioned as erotic spectatorship further perpetuates the cycle of threat and abuse. Women of color are especially vulnerable to exploitation since they are multiply marginalized, “Othered,” and treated as mere objects in the media, and by American society in general. The disregard for women of color can be found in the seemingly simplest places, such as in the *Rolling Stones* song “Brown Sugar,” which contains the lyrics:

Old coast slave ship bound for cotton fields
Sold in a market down in New Orleans
Scarred old slaver knows he's doing alright
Hear him with the women just around midnight
Brown sugar, how come you taste so good?
Brown sugar, just like a young girl should.

The popular song’s musicality veils the seriousness and problematic nature of the lyrics about violence against enslaved women of color, and this is just one example of how an audience, particularly a normative audience, is conditioned to ignore objectifying and traumatizing representations. In this thesis, I analyze disturbing materials, particularly literary texts, in order to bring awareness to this issue, since movies, television, music, the Internet, and literature have a profound affect on our society.

Another problem that arose when writing this piece is my position as a white woman writing about sexual violence against women of color. This thesis is an arena where I attempt to establish myself as an ally to communities of color. I do not pretend to know everything about the experiences of women of color; however, I would like to take this opportunity to reach a greater understanding so I can assist minority communities in reaching their goals surrounding violence against women. I recognize that I often work through a white feminist paradigm in my own life; however, “Othered” communities require a separate, more-inclusive, and further-reaching paradigm. As a queer woman, I recognize the limitations that minority communities encountered in the early feminist agendas, but my experience is different from any other woman’s ways of knowing. I point out my awareness of differing experiences since it is crucial in my overall goal of understanding and promoting awareness and activism in others.

Finally, a significant problem was the difficulty in finding an abundant amount of theory and critical pieces that focus on representations of sexual violence, which further highlights the unspoken nature of the issue. As I mentioned, there are many primary sources of fictional texts that feature representations of sexual violence, but, if not handled responsibly, many of these do more harm than good. While the limited amount of critical pieces on literary representations of sexual violence provided some difficulties, it also allowed me to build on the little critical theory available. In addition to the spectator gaze, where I use Laura Mulvey’s theories, I also look at how voice and silence play a role in these representations. There is some theory available, but analyzing silence is problematic, since people read silence differently, and silence is often seen as a result of oppression, since survivors are urged to talk about their experiences; however,

regarding the women of color in the pieces I analyze, I argue that silence should also be seen as a possible purposeful withholding and a path to agency. Silence offers women of color an avenue from which to escape vulnerability, particularly when they do not have community support in order to gain a voice of agency. I break the silence in critically writing about representations of sexual violence while also legitimatizing silence as a valid form of discourse surrounding trauma in order to achieve agency.

This thesis consists of three chapters, each one centered on sexual violence against women of color in contemporary American fiction. I focus on American fiction, not only to offer a more narrow focus, but also to remain close to home for this initial project. When I say home, I mean both my geographical home and my academic home – the confluence of literature and women’s studies. I choose contemporary works in order to highlight what is going on today, since my aim is activism in the current political climate. Although men are also survivors of sexual violence, and I plan critical work on this in the future, I opt to focus on women here, particularly women of color, since those communities are the most ignored. In Chapter 1, I contrast the use of voice in Harriet Prescott Spofford’s “Circumstance” (1860) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), highlighting how women of color often rely on a community voice in order to achieve agency after trauma. This chapter also includes an ecofeminist lens, drawing a connection between women’s relationship to the natural environment in achieving a voice of agency. Spofford’s short story, the only noncontemporary text, features a white protagonist, so it offers an ideal contrast to Morrison’s novel featuring African American experiences, as the authors handle both voice and race in opposition to each other. In Chapter 2, I continue to analyze *Beloved*, but I look at it alongside Frances Washburn’s *Elsie’s*

Business (2006) in order to point out how silence can be a legitimate avenue from which to acquire agency. This chapter also focuses on the issue of sexual violence against Native women, which, as I will discuss, is a huge, and often unrecognized, problem in Indigenous communities. In Chapter 3, I analyze the spectator gaze and objectification versus nonobjectification of survivors of sexual violence in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003). I argue these two authors successfully represent sexual violence in order to provide a greater awareness and understanding among audience members. Yamashita and Atwood project a sense of activism in their writing, and although they approach the representations in opposing ways, they exhibit a deliberate craft and intention.

Overall, my goal in creating this project is to prompt awareness to the issue of sexual violence against women in general; however, I want to bring attention to assault in communities of color, in particular. As the late Audre Lorde says, I am not free until all women are free, even if we do not share the same experiences. I highlight Lorde's writing throughout this thesis because she represents a valuable unifying activism that recognizes intersections of identity. Women of color are devalued, and sexual violence against multicultural women is often underreported and not taken seriously enough. I hope to make others more aware of the precautions that need to be taken in representing sexual violence in any mode of text. We need people to take responsibility for both what we produce and consume if we ever expect to provide a place where women are able to be truly free.

CHAPTER 1

The Role of Race and Place in Establishing a Communal or Solitary Voice of Agency in Morrison's *Beloved* and Spofford's "Circumstance"

Without community, there is no liberation.

— Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

Readers of this thesis might make the argument that sexual violence is sexual violence regardless of the racial identity of the survivor, and there is legitimacy to this point. We cannot compare and place a value dictating that this woman's experience of sexual violence is "worse than" that woman's experience of sexual violence, particularly, since, as I previously mentioned, all of our experiences are personal, and trauma affects survivors differently. While one cannot "privilege" one sexual assault over the other, a pre-established inequity surrounding race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, muffles the voices of minorities who have survived sexual violence. The silencing of people of color has such longstanding roots that the dominant group primarily overlooks it, or even ignores it, but anybody who navigates the world through oppression intimately knows this silence to some degree. The voice of a woman of color suffers a significant amount of restriction because of the multiple oppressions she experiences, and this "voicelessness" can be found in literary fiction focusing on sexual violence against women of color. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) provides a clear example of how the dominant group silences individuals of color. *Beloved* offers people of color a blueprint from which to overcome vocal oppression and build a promising future — a communal voice of agency, particularly a voice enhanced by the natural environment. Through characters like Sethe, Baby Suggs, Ella, Denver, and Amy Denver, Morrison illustrates what Audre Lorde argues: community is the path to liberation.

Women of color and communal voices of agency

Sethe is the most *silenced* character in Morrison's novel. When I say *silenced*, I am not merely referring to spoken discourse, since Sethe does speak throughout the novel; however, Sethe conveys an internal silencing of women of color rooted in trauma and the historical oppression of African American slavery. Sethe's particular silence keeps her separated from the community and restricted to the oppressive domestic space in her home, referred to as 124. I discuss silence and intergenerational trauma more in Chapter 2, but I will provide some preliminary groundwork here. Morrison's *Beloved* highlights how the institution of slavery, and the rape of African American women that took place during that era, created a deep trauma that carries through to each subsequent generation. According to Ron Eyerman, "The notion of cultural trauma implied that direct experience of an event is not a necessary condition for its inclusion in the trauma process" (12). In *Beloved*, which takes place several years after the Civil War has ended, the cultural trauma of slavery and sexual violence haunts the past, present, and future, so even generations who did not have to experience the violence of slavery still hold the remnants of the trauma within them. As Pamela Barnett writes in the introduction to her book *Dangerous Desire*, novels like Morrison's "suggest, in myriad and inventive ways, that the past haunts the present," and "the effects of sexual trauma are intergenerational" (xix). Sethe not only experiences sexual violence herself — when two boys with "mossy teeth" hold her down and steal her milk as their white uncle called Schoolteacher, who runs the plantation they ironically call Sweet Home, watches and takes notes — but Sethe is also haunted by sexual abuse that took place in past generations of her family and other African Americans she knows (83).

While Sethe talks to those around her, silence is present, particularly when Sethe is prompted to speak about past traumatic experiences. A majority of slavery's horrors are too painful to talk about, and Sethe prefers to repress them, such as her memories of her mother being hanged. Sethe has the agency to speak about when her milk was stolen, but, overall, she refrains from talking too much about the traumas she experienced. As I cover in Chapter 2, Sethe is a part of a legacy of sexual violence from past generations and carries the burden of the future threat of sexual violence through her children. At one point, Sethe even challenges Paul D to "feel how it feels to be a coloredwoman roaming the roads with anything God made liable to jump on you" (80). The trauma of sexual violence becomes too much when, after escaping from her "owner" to reunite with her children and live with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in the North, Sethe is tracked down. Fearing for the future of her children if raised in slavery, and refusing to allow her oldest daughter to suffer from the sexual abuse that she herself faced, Sethe attempts to kill her children. The oldest daughter, referred to as Beloved, is killed, and, as I will discuss more in Chapter 2, continues to haunt Sethe and others who reside in 124. The reader understands intergenerational silences through Denver, Sethe's youngest child, who she gives birth to during her escape to the North. Denver replicates Sethe's silence until Denver finally reaches outside of the home to find her voice, yet community is a crucial component in other complex ways throughout the novel, particularly Beloved's death.

Before the slaveowners track Sethe down and she chooses to end her child's life so Beloved does not have to endure the sexual violence in slavery, Sethe, Baby Suggs, and the children experience happiness and freedom. The community becomes upset with

what they perceive as righteousness surrounding the family's good fortune and opts not to warn them that the slaveowners are approaching. Morrison writes, "it wasn't the exhaustion from a long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing — like, well, like meanness — that let them stand aside, or not pay attention" (185). This passage promotes the importance of community and voice in finding safety, and Morrison urges African American peoples to remain united rather than divided in order to build a voice of agency that is both individual and collective. Not only does Morrison implicate the community's silence in Beloved's death, but the community's silence following the death ostracizes Sethe further. Sethe ponders the difference between the community she experienced upon first moving to 124 and the solitary life she leads following the death of her daughter:

The twenty-eight days of having women friends, a mother-in-law, and all her children together; of being part of a neighborhood; of, in fact, having neighbors at all to call her own — all that was long gone and would never come back. No more dancing in the Clearing or happy feeds. Nor more discussions, stormy or quiet, about the true meaning of the Fugitive Bill, the Settlement Fee, God's Ways and Negro pews; anti-slavery, manumission, skin voting, Republicans, Dred Scott, book learning, Sojourner's high-wheeled buggy, the Colored Ladies of Delaware, Ohio, and the other weighty issues that held them in chairs, scraping the floorboards or pacing them in agony or exhilaration. (204)

Sethe mourns the loss of community here, missing the relationships she had with neighbors, and voices feelings of hopelessness in ever regaining that community. Sethe

also mentions the Clearing, a natural environment where Baby Suggs preached before Beloved's death. As I discuss in further detail later, the Clearing is a place of gathering for African Americans, offering them a communal voice of agency. Morrison argues in *Beloved* that community provides African Americans a place of understanding and connection when talking about both personal experiences and "weighty issues" that offer a positive sense of futurity. The reference to "stormy or quiet" discussions highlights the trauma discourse connected to slavery because there are "stormy" memories, or what Morrison terms "rememory," that the community can discuss openly, and there are those "quiet" memories that are just too painful, but are understood among those who share similar experiences. Highlighting this trauma discourse earlier in the text, Sethe remembers, "Years ago — when 124 was alive — she had women friends, men friends from all around to share grief with. Then there was no one, for they would not visit her while the baby ghost filled the house, and she returned their disapproval with the potent pride of the mistreated" (113). This and the previous passage convey the importance of talking about trauma, but there has to be a balance. There are memories that are repressed and too painful to talk about, and there are feelings that need to be shared among community members who understand. Touching upon importance of balance, Morrison writes, "Talk was low and to the point — for Baby Suggs, holy, didn't approve of extra. 'Everything depends on knowing how much,' she said, and 'Good is knowing when to stop'" (102). As Baby Suggs points out, there are times to stop talking in the community, but overall, for a community that has navigated a forced silence for so long, it is better to share experiences.

Sethe's disconnection from the rest of the community establishes the need for a communal voice in order for African American women in *Beloved* to find agency. Colleen Carpenter Cullinan writes in her essay, "Sethe changed her world through action (escape, murder) and remained silent for years about what she had done and why" (82). While community plays a role in ostracizing Sethe and encouraging her silence, her physical restriction to the haunted domestic space of 124 also drains Sethe of agency and the chance to establish a healing community relationship. *Beloved*'s constant presence in 124 and "the sadness that crouched in corners" makes Sethe's healing even more unlikely (24). As I talk about in further detail in Chapter 2, *Beloved* takes an already repressive domestic space to the extreme by making demands that feed off of Sethe's guilt, preventing her from moving on with her life. In 124, and separated from the community, Sethe's "brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (83). Sethe needs the healing of the Clearing, and people like Baby Suggs, before she can come to terms with the past and move towards the future.

Ultimately, there are multiple reasons behind Sethe's feelings of hopelessness and her silence, such as trauma, oppression, and guilt, but race is an underlying factor in everything. Since women of color work through a framework that involves complex intersections of race and gender, they often navigate the world under a forced silence. Morrison builds her novel around the idea that silence is rooted in cultural trauma, and Sethe makes that oppressive silence truly evident. In her analysis, Michele Mock points out, "For Sethe, it is significantly a choke-cherry tree upon her back, a symbolic brand revealing the seed of revelation buried deep within herself which chokes her voice and

enforces her silence” (123). Although women in the community eventually attempt to help Sethe by ridding 124 of Beloved’s presence, Sethe fails to fully embrace them, solidifying her oppressive silence. However, just as Sethe conveys oppressive silence before Beloved’s death, Baby Suggs serves as a predominant figure of hope and a positive futurity throughout the African American community since she is instrumental in establishing a communal voice through her preachings in the Clearing.

Baby Suggs carries a similar burden as Sethe since Baby Suggs endured sexual violation and oppression at the hands of her white slaveowners, but Baby Suggs proves it is possible to be an African American woman with a strong voice. Despite multiple oppressions, Baby Suggs uses her voice to preach and prompt unification in the natural world, which, in the end, allows a woman named Ella, and the other women in the community, to gather outside of Sethe’s house and sing spiritual music in order “exorcise” 124’s demons. Roxanne R. Reed asserts, “The only means of restoration for Sethe, and the community, is the guidance of Baby Suggs’s spirit and her teachings as a preacher, particularly remembrances of her preaching in the Clearing, the space she claimed as her pulpit” (56). Baby Suggs gently guides the community, “Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it” (Morrison 102), and, thus refusing to exercise any type of dominance over others. Reed writes, “Baby Suggs is a figure responsible for aiding the community members in bridging sound and memory in order to achieve salvation” (66). The bridge between sound and memory that Reed notes takes place in a natural environment that Morrison describes as “a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place” (102). A place “nobody knew” allows the

African American community a retreat by themselves, free of domination, which is significant since the cleared aspect of the land hints at a patriarchal dominance that was once present.

Since land is considered fundamentally feminine with such terms as Mother Earth and Mother Nature, usually referred to using the pronouns “her” and “she,” violations of nature are often considered a “raping” or “deflowering” of the land (Kolodny 174). The fact that the Clearing was previously a place of degradation at the hands of white males, but later adopted by Baby Suggs for healing the African American community, is empowering. Reed writes, “Relegated to alternative spaces, such as the open, natural environment apart from the physical edifice of the church, women exercise more control and inevitably success in achieving the goals of community” (60). Baby Suggs exhibits agency, but she works as a helper of healing rather than a figure of religious domination, typical of white patriarchal religious institutions. According to Reed, “In the broader feminist sense of patriarchal resistance, women’s preaching suggests on practical means of challenging male-dominated space,” while “simultaneously serving the community as a whole” (59). The concept of guiding the community rather than controlling the community coincides with the natural environment from which Baby Suggs presents her sermons.

In writing about the gatherings at the Clearing, Morrison creates an empowering space where the natural environment is reclaimed, providing comfort rather than threat, moving toward peace and beyond white male domination. Responses of those who “stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees” in the Clearing convey the success and significance of these gatherings (103). The “ringing trees” offer a sense of

voice not only to the natural world, but also to the community gathering there, enhancing the agency produced in free expression:

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart (103).

The Clearing provides a safe space that makes this intense emotional release possible. In living under an oppressive silence, those who gather at the Clearing finally find a place of freedom and a sense of voice, even if the voice takes the form of laughing, crying, and dancing. When everything becomes silent, Baby Suggs offers the community the love it needs to unite and heal. She provides the community with the voice it needs after suffering the cultural trauma of slavery in order to build a more positive futurity. This Clearing community is where African Americans, particularly women, are able to find agency, and, considering that Sethe confines herself within the restrictive domestic space, away from people in much of the novel, it is no wonder that she is unable to gain a voice. While Sethe remembers the freedom of the Clearing and the empowerment of the communal voice there, she sees that agency as unattainable following the death of her daughter.

Baby Suggs is central to the community's ability to come together to build agency, but Beloved's death still impacts her, and thus everyone else, negatively. After Sethe kills Beloved, Baby Suggs says, "Those white things have taken all I had or

dreamed,” highlighting her hopelessness (104). Not only is Sethe ostracized by the community and alienates herself from the neighbors, but Baby Suggs grows isolated, as well. The gatherings in the Clearing stop, and silence becomes more pervasive.

Baby Suggs grew tired, went to bed and stayed there until her big old heart quit. Except for an occasional request for color she said practically nothing — until the afternoon of the last day of her life when she got out of bed, skipped slowly to the door of the keeping room and announced to Sethe and Denver the lesson she had learned from her sixty years as a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world but whitepeople (122).

At the end of her life, Baby Suggs resorts to silence when she is isolated, and the community and Sethe suffer the lack of Baby Suggs’s voice. Baby Suggs thus demonstrates the inescapability of trauma. In some regard, this passage contains Baby Suggs’s last “preaching,” but her legacy lives on through women like Ella and Denver. Although Baby Suggs dies in the throes of trauma and silence, she educated the community on the power of a communal voice and empowered them enough to promote the possibility of a positive futurity.

If Sethe’s silence symbolizes the cultural trauma surrounding African American women and Baby Suggs sends a message about communal voice being an avenue towards achieving agency, then Ella and Denver both endorse the possibility of a positive futurity found in that unifying voice. Like Sethe and Baby Suggs, Ella experienced sexual violence: “Her puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, who she called the ‘lowest yet.’ It was ‘the lowest yet’ who gave her a disgust for sex and

against whom she measured all atrocities” (301). Despite these traumas, Ella is able to maintain a strong community connection. After Sethe kills Beloved, however, Ella ostracizes her, saying, “I ain’t got no friends take a handsaw to their own children” (221). However, there is more to Ella’s reaction than the murder itself:

She understood Sethe’s rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected, and Sethe herself too complicated. When she got out of jail and made no gesture toward anybody, and lived as though she were alone, Ella junked her and wouldn’t give her the time of day. (301-302)

Ella understands the shared pain among members of the community, but there are certain expectations they must follow. In Sethe’s case, the neighbors found Sethe to be too “prideful,” which is one of the worst things a person can be in the community. Ella also had negative perceptions of Sethe’s behavior after getting out of jail. The fact that it was Sethe’s perceived attitude rather than her actions that turned the community against her highlights the importance of communication and understanding. Since the community was not speaking to Sethe, and Sethe was not speaking to them, an unmendable drift remained, making it impossible for Sethe to heal.

While Ella holds the power to break community bonds, later in the novel she is instrumental in gathering women and *creating* community bonds in order to help heal Sethe. A scene at the end of the novel illustrates the strength African Americans can find in a united voice:

When the women assembled outside 124, Sethe was breaking a lump of ice into chunks. She dropped the ice pick into her apron pocket to scoop

the pieces into a basin of water. When the music entered the window she was wringing a cool cloth to put on Beloved's forehead. Beloved, sweating profusely, was sprawled on the bed in the keeping room, salt rock in her hand. Both women heard it at the same time and both lifted their heads. As the voices grew louder, Beloved sat up, licked the salt and went into the bigger room. Sethe and she exchanged glances and started toward the window. They saw Denver sitting on the steps and beyond her, where the yard met the road, they saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the hot, cloudless sky. Sethe opened the door and reached for Beloved's hand. Together they stood in the doorway. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and shimmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (308)

This is a lengthy excerpt, but it is crucial to understanding how a communal voice frees Sethe from the draining presence of Beloved in 124. Sethe nurses Beloved, who, at this point, makes extreme demands on Sethe. Sethe puts all of her efforts and focus on Beloved in order to atone for the murder and ease her guilt. Sethe and Beloved are constantly together in this passage, highlighting that they are so tightly linked at this point that Beloved is inescapable, symbolizing Sethe's inescapability from trauma while

secluded in 124. The women, in unifying their voices and remaining in the freedom of the outdoors, bring the Clearing — and images of that serene natural environment and Baby Suggs's legacy — to Sethe so she is able to regain strength and be rescued from Beloved's tormenting presence. Although Ella initially takes part in Sethe's seclusion from the community, Ella makes up for it by bringing the women together and offering Sethe a sense of salvation and a chance at a positive futurity.

Denver, Sethe's youngest daughter, is a person responsible for prompting Ella to take action to help Sethe since Denver reaches out to the women in the neighborhood. During the novel, Denver suffers greatly as a result of Sethe's past and growing up in the solitude and silence surrounding 124. Only when Denver eventually reaches out to the community is she able to find her voice and some hope for the future. Denver symbolizes the intergenerational aspect of trauma, and her mother's past becomes her own trauma early in the novel. Except for her mother and her grandmother, Denver is alone in 124. Morrison writes, "Hot, shy, now Denver was lonely. All that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother — serious losses since there were no children willing to circle her in a game or hang by their knees from her porch railing" (14-15). Like Sethe, Denver has no sense of community although she craves it. Denver initially gets a chance to be around other children when she goes to school, but her mother's past quickly catches up and Denver also ostracizes herself, deciding "to stay in the cold house and let the dark swallow her like the minnows of light above" (145). The incident that has the most traumatic affect on Denver is the revelation from a schoolmate that her mother murdered her sister:

Murder, Nelson Lord had said. “Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?”

It was the second question that made it impossible for so long to ask Sethe about the first. The thing that leapt up had been coiled in just such a place: a darkness, a stone, and some other thing that moved by itself. (123)

The past takes hold of Denver. After finding out that her mother killed Beloved, not only does Denver become silent, but the world becomes silent as well. Morrison writes, “For two years she walked in a silence too solid for penetration but which gave her eyes a power even she found hard to believe” (121). After the incident, Denver loses her hearing, and silence envelops her. Eventually, she regains her senses, but the oppressive silence remains. In order to cope with inheriting her mother’s trauma and the loneliness of 124, Denver creates a sanctuary in the natural world.

Since the domestic space is a suffocating atmosphere for those who live at 124, Sethe’s daughter, Denver, first finds a sanctuary in the natural world to cope, but then later reaches out to the community to get help for her family and herself. Before she is able to reach out to the community, Denver finds her own place in the natural world — away from the loneliness and restrictions of the domestic sphere — where she can heal her soul. Morrison describes in detail this special “Emerald” place where Denver hides:

Back beyond 124 was a narrow field that stopped itself at a wood. On the yonder side of these woods, a stream. In these woods, between the field and the stream, hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to

form a round, empty room seven feet high, its wall fifty inches of murmuring leaving.

Bent low, Denver could crawl into this room, and once there she could stand all the way up in emerald light. (34-35).

Like the woods that provide Sethe with covering at night as she is escaping slavery and the Clearing that gives the African Americans a private gathering place as Baby Suggs preaches, the natural environment of the “Emerald” place offers Denver concealment. The circular way the people gather around Baby Suggs and the “trees that ringed the clearing” mirror the circular nature of the trees in the “Emerald” place, highlighting an interconnectedness and unity with nature, and a connection among those who experience the environment together in the African American community (117). Although Denver is alone, and the “Emerald” place is “Veiled and protected by the live green walls,” nature provides Denver with sanctuary when she needs it most since she is not able to obtain a community connection until the end of the novel (35).

When it is clear that Beloved is draining her mother of life, Denver takes on her fears of having to face the community, a place where her mother’s past surfaces, and seeks help. Morrison writes of the neighbors’ response, “In any case, the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course” (294). The women offer Denver food, and Denver begins to reply with a “soft ‘Thank You,’” slowly speaking more; however, “As Denver’s outside life improved, her home life deteriorated,” prompting Ella and the community to take further action (294). Not only is the community instrumental in ridding 124 of the haunting presence that keeps everyone in the house hostage, but the community also helps Denver begin to use her voice and

achieve some agency since she is finally able to interact comfortably with neighbors and start to work, providing some hope for future generations, and, in a sense, offering hope to Sethe since Denver's outreach prompted the intervention. Denver and Baby Suggs parallel since they are stripped of their voice when they are confined to the domestic space and flourish when they are around others outside of the home. Morrison conveys multiple ways of knowing in her diverse characters, highlighting both the similarities and differences among women like Sethe, Baby Suggs, Ella, and Denver, while also showing the value in unification in African American women's acquisition of voice.

Whiteness and solitary voices of agency

In her novel, Morrison encapsulates and offers a voice to communities of color, providing a solution in community and a connection to the natural environment, but Morrison also contrasts African American women's access to voice with white women's access to voice through the character of Amy Denver, who is able to use a solitary voice of agency. Amy is a white woman, but she is also marginalized and "Othered" in her status as an indentured servant. As a white woman myself, I rely on Morrison and her African American female characters to convey the oppressive silence that women of color face so I can more fully understand it and be an ally to the community. Morrison offers me an even more solid point of entry in this discussion of literary representations of sexual violence against women of color with the inclusion of Amy in the novel. Although Amy is only active in a few pages, she is a continuous presence. Sethe names her daughter after her, creating a legacy that recognizes the help Amy gave her, and also connecting Amy to the futurity of the African American community. She might be

outspoken at times, and she is naïve in some aspects, but Amy signifies my goal, and that of any other sympathetic white woman, to help women of color.

Like the African American characters Sethe, Baby Suggs, Ella, and Denver, Amy experiences the intergenerational trauma surrounding sexual violence. Morrison positions Amy as a white ally to Sethe, creating a sisterhood between the two characters that breaks racial boundaries. At the same time that Amy and Sethe share a sort of sisterhood, skin color is even more pronounced when they are together, since Amy highlights Sethe's blackness and Sethe highlights Amy's whiteness. This distinction of racial boundaries between two "sisters" conveys both their differences in experiences of oppression and opportunities of expression in connection with agency and futurity. Nicole M. Coonradt takes a deeper look at the role of Amy Denver, a character often relegated to the sidelines in critical analyses of the novel. Coonradt points out that "Sethe would not have a story to tell if not for Amy. As Amy reaches out to Sethe with love and compassion, Sethe survives" since it is Amy who is able to aid a pregnant and ailing Sethe during her escape to the North (171). Amy — an indentured servant who, since childhood, has had to work off her late mother's debt of making the passage to America — is also running away to the North, highlighting that both women experience oppressions they are trying to escape.

In addition to the marginalizations she faces as a woman of a lower social status, Amy is quite possibly a victim of sexual abuse, since there are references of her being locked up, and many of the women in *Beloved* who are locked up suffer from sexual abuse. Amy is definitely connected to sexual violence, though, since Amy's mother was most likely raped by Amy's "boss," Mr. Buddy. Amy tells Sethe, "Joe Nathan said Mr. Buddy is my daddy, but I don't believe that" (95). This hints that Amy's mother, who

was Mr. Buddy's indentured servant, was impregnated by Mr. Buddy, mirroring how slaveowners often raped their African American slaves. Coonradt notes, "Morrison establishes one of the most degrading aspects of human abuse: sexual enslavement of women at the hands of sadistic masters, the most extreme subjugation of women in a white patriarchal culture that historically touched women irrespective of their ethnicity" (172). While Morrison does show the similarities between experiences of women of the same class status regardless of color, she also highlights how women like Amy — white women — still have more agency. Amy's white privilege enables her to find a solitary voice through song and the comfort of the wilderness, challenging the patriarchal "fascination with the hostile and deadly aspects of the otherwise nurturing image of 'Mother Nature'" that Tom J. Hillard mentions, since Amy's connection with nature is positive and healing (688). Although of similar social status as Sethe, Amy's whiteness makes it easier for her to find a solitary agency, and Amy even offers Sethe a sort of communal voice while they are together in the natural world.

When not speaking frequently and bluntly, Amy sings songs, particularly songs connected to her mother. In the middle of one of her songs, Amy explains to Sethe, "That's my mama's song. She taught me it" (95). Amy uses her voice — namely song — as a source of comfort and agency. Coonradt argues, "Amy remembers the song her long-dead mother sang to her, she adopts that mother's love and offers it up to Sethe and her newborn baby in one of their darkest hours" (177). Despite the traumatic past that Amy faced, as a white woman, she uses her solitary voice and successfully navigates the natural world, which, in fact, offers her more agency, since it offers Amy more freedom, particularly in comparison to her oppressive experiences in the domestic sphere where

she worked as a servant. Morrison does not present the reader with an abundant amount of description of Amy's experiences in the domestic sphere, but it is clear her life as an indentured servant in the domestic space is oppressive. The wilderness is not a place of danger for Amy, but rather one where she can use her resourcefulness and move towards her simple dream of getting velvet in Boston. Coonradt cites the parallels between Amy and Sethe that transcend race, but, although Amy is oppressed in many of the same ways Sethe is, she is able to navigate more comfortably through the wilderness and express herself with solitary discourse and singing in the natural world as a result of her whiteness. The comfort of this environment allows Amy more freedom and agency because she not only uses her voice, but also her healing capabilities.

Amy's role as a healer further roots her to the natural environment. Amy nurses Sethe back to health, often using elements from nature, such as, when after massaging Sethe's feet so she can walk again, Amy "tore two pieces from Sethe's shawl, filled them with leaves and tied them over her feet" (97-98). Amy also heals Sethe's back with spiderwebs, "humming away in the bushes as she hunted" them (94). All the while Amy talks, hums, and sings, Sethe is virtually silent, especially when they first meet; it is not until later when Sethe begins to talk more. Although it is still primarily to answer Amy's questions, the fact that Sethe starts to use her voice in Amy's presence further highlights how Amy has more agency than Sethe. Amy also has the power to *build* Sethe's agency, both in bodily health and voice, while Sethe is with Amy. Amy's agency and companionship with Sethe provides Sethe with the strength to go on. When the two women have to part ways, Morrison writes, "Amy was gone. Sethe was alone and weak, but alive, and so was her baby. She walked a ways downriver and then stood gazing at

the glimmering water” (105-106). Here, Morrison conveys the importance in community in Sethe being “alone and weak” after Amy leaves, but the fact that Sethe is “alive, and so was her baby” is a result of Amy’s assistance. Amy’s physical healing qualities compare with those of Baby Suggs’s emotional healing powers, but Amy’s whiteness distinguishes her as being able to find agency alone.

While *Beloved* is worth analysis in and of itself, and the novel conveys many of my central arguments so well that I include it in two chapters of this thesis, it is valuable to offer an additional example of how white women and African American women navigate voice differently. Since one person cannot be a representative of an entire community, Morrison provides us with diverse African American female characters, such as Sethe, Baby Suggs, Ella, and Denver, to convey different ways of knowing among minority women. At the same time, Amy Denver cannot be a lone representative of all white women’s access to voice, particularly since Amy experiences marginalizations that disempower her more than white women who have additional privilege. In order to offer a more inclusive analysis of voice and agency, I will now look at Harriet Prescott Spofford’s short story “Circumstance” (1860), which revolves around an incident of sexual violence where a white frontier woman is attacked by a racially “Othered” predator and uses her voice in order to prevent escalation of the assault. In “Circumstance,” a woman walks home at night after taking care of a sick neighbor. In order to get home, she has to traverse the woods alone. It is upon embarking into this “wilderness” that the protagonist is attacked. For the duration of the tale, the focus is on her voice, since she sings to keep the predator calm until her husband arrives with her baby to rescue her. When the family gets back home, they discover the village has been

raided and their residence is destroyed. Spofford does not name the woman in “Circumstance,” creating an invisibility since it positions her as faceless, and initially “voiceless,” but the woman’s voice increases the longer she is in the natural world. Spofford describes the protagonist in a manner that establishes her as a strong frontier woman who is “not of the screaming kind” (2589). Like Morrison’s Amy Denver, the woman in Spofford’s tale is white, and, like Amy, this whiteness allows the protagonist to use a solitary voice of agency; however, we need to remember that Spofford’s protagonist is more privileged than Amy Denver as far as social status is concerned.

The differentiation, yet commonality, between Amy and Spofford’s protagonist helps solidify the primary focus of this chapter as the pivotal role of race in women’s use of voice. We also need to note the race of the attackers in both pieces. Since the sexual violence in *Beloved* mainly involves abuse of African American women at the hands of white men, there are multiple layers of oppression present, and the novel starkly contrasts to Spofford’s piece on several levels. In her article, Lisa M. Logan notes, “just as Morrison’s reading of canonical American romanticism makes visible the absent presence of the racialized Other, so Spofford’s story makes palpable (in admittedly troubling ways) that which romantic discourse usually silences: the figure of the gendered and racialized Other” (37). This silencing of the “gendered and racialized Other” is made clearer by comparing it with *Beloved*. The “Othering” of the attacker in “Circumstance” contrasts with the experiences of the women of color in *Beloved*, highlighting the magnification of oppression when the attacker is from the dominant group and holds complete power. It is more difficult to find one’s voice when marginalized, overpowered, and silenced in every facet of life.

While Spofford's story is primarily about the oppression of women, it is important to note intersections of race and gender. Not only is the protagonist white, allowing her a sense a privilege and power that the African American women in Morrison's *Beloved* do not have, but the race of the attackers in both novels is an important factor in understanding how sexual violence against women of color centers on power and oppression. On the surface, "Circumstance" reads as a story about an unnamed woman attacked by an "Indian Devil," the term for a panther; however, through the heightened sexual imagery Spofford uses, it is clear that the story actually represents the perceived sexual threat of Native American men on white women. Theresa Strouth Gaul makes the assertion that "Perhaps the most striking to a modern reader is the imagery of sexual violation that pervades the story. The panther seems quite obviously to be a predator of the sexual variety familiar to late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century parlance" (35).¹ Matthew Wynn Sivils takes this point a step further in arguing that "Spofford's connection between panthers and American Indians is so overt that by the end of the tale it appears that both the 'Indian Devil' and the American Indian raiding party that destroys the heroine's village work in league with each other to systematically terrorize the area" (24). While thinking of the attack as sexual sends a message regarding gender oppression, the problematic use of the panther as a metaphor for a Native man is significant in highlighting the whiteness of the protagonist.

Just as the sisterhood between Sethe and Amy Denver highlights the differences in their skin color, situating Spofford's protagonist against the panther makes both the

¹ Gaul also cites similar theories by Judith Fetterley in *Provisions: A Reader from Nineteenth-Century Women* (1985) and Alfred Bendixen in the introduction of *The Amber Gods and Other Stories* (1989) that the panther attack in "Circumstance" can be read as sexual violence.

woman's whiteness and his darkness — or “Otherness” — more apparent. The focus on racial difference in Morrison's work is productive in conveying that white women and women of color have some similar gender experiences as far as sexual violence is concerned, but Morrison also sends the message that white women should work as allies with women of color. On the other hand, in “Circumstance,” it is problematic to place a significant focus on the “Otherness” of the sexual predator throughout the story and the Native American raid of the village at the end of the tale, since it sends an underlying message (whether intentional or unintentional) that “Othered” men are dangerous, particularly to white women. There are critics of Spofford's apparently racist portrayals of Natives, and rightfully so, but it is important to note how the color of the panther contrasts with the color of the protagonist. In establishing the predator as Native, Spofford ultimately presents an oppressed attacker overpowering a white woman, which creates a complex power dynamic where the woman already has some sense of agency that a woman of color would not have. In this particular scenario, despite a few descriptions of the protagonist's body, the focus is more on how the woman thwarts an attack by this “animal,” and how she uses a solitary voice, particularly song, to do so.

The problematic animalistic portrayal of the attacker versus the descriptions of the gender and race of the survivor in “Circumstance” are evident from the beginning of the sexual attack. Spofford writes that the predator “commenced licking her bare white arm with his rasping tongue and pouring over her the wide streams of this hot, fetid breath” (2589). The sexual undertones remain clear in this passage, while also highlighting the woman's whiteness. R.J. Ellis points out that “skin color in the mid-nineteenth century mattered very much, intercalated terms of gender, class and race, and ethnic identity.

White skin, untanned skin, was a mark of gender, in that the woman's sphere was out of the sun, indoors, sheltered" (265). While the woman's whiteness is important in linking her to the domestic sphere and challenging dominant ideologies regarding the woman's agency in the natural world, Ellis fails to note how the darkness of the attacker's "skin" plays a role in the story. While it might have been more acceptable for men to have darker skin than women during this period, the attacker in this story is so dark that he is portrayed as a panther – one of the darkest, aberrant, and most dangerous animals. In the initial passage, the animalistic traits of the attacker, such as his "rasping tongue" and "hot, fetid breath," further establish him as an "Other," particularly a "racialized Other." These animal-like descriptions continue with such details as his "dagged tooth," "bristling and foaming" back, not to mention the references to him being a "wild beast" (2590-2591). Throughout much of the tale, the predator remains *seen* physically in Spofford's bodily descriptions, whereas the woman is mostly *heard* through her voice — particularly her singing.

In several passages, Spofford focuses on the predator's tongue, such as when Spofford writes, "Immediately the long red tongue was thrust forth again. Before it touched, a song sprang from her lips" (2590). This shift from focusing on the attacker's body to focusing on the woman's voice carries on throughout the tale. Although the predator's eyes are mentioned often, the reader's gaze remains on the attacker, such as when Spofford writes, "The monster raised his head and flared the fiery eyeballs upon her, then fretted the imprisoned claws a moment and was quiet" (2590). While the attacker fixes his gaze upon the woman, readers focus on his "Othered" body. Not only does the woman have the power to subdue her attacker with her voice, making him

“quiet,” but she is veiled from the reader’s gaze, thus the focus is on the predator, further empowering her. Since the predator remains more *seen* than the protagonist with Spofford’s questionable use of animalistic imagery, the woman is protected from an oppressive spectator gaze that I discuss more in Chapter 3, allowing her both the agency of her voice and an agency-building physical invisibility, which the natural environment further heightens.

Agency and song in the natural world

“Circumstance” presents contrasting accounts of the wilderness and the protagonist’s relationship to it, since Spofford paints a complex picture of the natural world in her piece. When Spofford’s protagonist begins her initial descent home, the natural environment is beautiful and welcoming, such as when she writes, “the sunset filtered in purple through the mist of woven spray and twig, the companionship of growth not sufficiently dense to band against her the sweet home-feeling of a young and tender wintry wood” (2588). Here, there is a sense of “companionship” and it carries a “sweet home-feeling,” which Ian Marshall refers to as “an innocent sort of communion with nature” (50). However, it is clear that the wilderness is expected to be a place of fear when Spofford writes, “If she had been imaginative, she would have hesitated at her first step into a region whose dangers were not visionary” (2589). The true danger in this story is not Native men, although Spofford appears to make a case that it is, but rather white men who rape the land. Colonizers create an impression that women and the wilderness are dangerous when, in fact, the colonizers themselves are the threat. Just as Baby Suggs challenges patriarchy in preaching in the Clearing, a location that has been deflowered by

colonizers, Spofford's protagonist defies gender rules in finding agency in the natural world, particularly considering the patriarchal domination and degradation of the land in "Circumstance."

In discussing American colonization and the environment, Annette Kolodny points out "those who had initially responded to the promise inherent in a feminine landscape were now faced with the consequences of that promise: either they recoiled in horror from the meaning of their manipulation of a naturally generous world ... or they succumbed to a life of easeful regression" (174). The anxiety in colonizers' relationships to the land and the opposition Kolodny notes are present in Spofford's piece, particularly in the conflicting accounts of the natural world. In including images of "a dozen loghouses lying a few furlongs apart from each other, with their half-cleared demesnes separating them at the rear of a wilderness untrodden save by stealthy native or deadly panther tribes," Spofford presents an environment similar to Morrison's *Clearing* where there is evidence that men have degraded it (2589). Spofford goes on to write, "now and then she came to a gap where the trees had been partially felled" (2589). Sivils points out that "it is in this human made edge, this site of violence against the wilderness, that she finds herself in the vicious embrace of the panther-like 'Indian Devil'" (30). This violation of the land parallels the subsequent violation of the protagonist, and Spofford's picture of environment transitions as the tale moves forward; this transition coincides with her achieving agency through voice.

The first space the woman turns to in the early stages of the attack is that connected to her domestic life. The protagonist first thinks about "the baby sleeping rosily on the long settee before the fire" while the baby's father is "cleaning his gun, with

one foot on the green wooden rundle,” but in pondering the domestic space, “she ceased,” becoming silent and vulnerable (2590). As the story moves along, the protagonist shifts from focusing on the domestic space and her family to more scrutiny of the environment around her, realizing that she has potential outside of the domestic sphere. Spofford writes, “And here she was singing it alone, in the forest, at midnight, to a wild beast! As she sent her voice trilling up and down its quick oscillations between joy and pain” (2590). Despite the horrors of the attack, the woman becomes excited at her newfound agency, one where she is alone and has to rely on powers within herself. In recounting how the woman learns to use her own voice as a source of agency and protection, Spofford begins, “a shriek, that rang in every forest hollow, that startled every winter-housed thing, that stirred and woke the least needle of the tasseled pines, tore through her lips” (2589). In his essay, Christopher Manes points out, “In addition to human language, there is also the language of birds, the wind, earthworms, wolves, and waterfalls – a world of autonomous speakers whose intents (especially for the hunter-gatherer peoples) one ignores at one’s peril” (15). The language of nature, like women’s discourse, is often ignored, but there is a discourse out there for those who know how to listen, and the protagonist is able to awaken the voice of the natural world through her voice and an echo. Spofford continues:

and again the cry, loud, clear, prolonged, echoed through the woods. It was not the shriek that disturbed the creature at his relish; he was not born in the woods to be scared of an owl, you know; what then? It must have been the echo, most musical, most resonant, repeated and yet repeated,

dying with long sighs of sweet sound, vibrated from rock to river and back again from depth to depth of cave and cliff. (2589)

At this moment, the woman realizes her potential for agency with the help of her voice, particularly its continued use through the echo and her controlled singing. Throughout the attack, only her voice and song ensure her survival, and the woman shows the strength to continue singing as long as possible. The language of nature that Maines mentions — the rocks, river, cave, and cliff — help heighten the woman’s voice in order to enhance her power; and, in fact, the echo of the woman’s voice produces a new language within nature. As Manes points out, ignoring the voice of the natural world puts one in peril, and the fact that the woman is able to communicate with nature in some sense is what saves her life. In Spofford’s story, the woman and nature combine, and the focus on the dangers in the natural world subsides.

Similar to the way Amy Denver’s use of song in the natural environment highlights her agency in *Beloved*, Spofford’s protagonist sings several different types of songs in the wilderness in order to maintain a sense of power during the attack. Nature offers the woman agency in welcoming and enhancing her voice, which is described as something “sweet” and “musical.” One song the protagonist sings is a “cradle-song with which she rocked her baby” (2590). The woman’s choice to sing a song connected to her baby mirrors Amy’s singing of a song connected to her mother. These songs provide a sense of comfort, connecting nature with a sense of home. Spofford’s protagonist later moves on to “a lighter, livelier thing, an Irish jig” (2590), “sailor-songs” (2592), and, finally, psalms. It is when the woman sings hymns that she is able to reach her full potential through self-realization. The spiritual aspect of the songs in “Circumstance” has

been critically recognized, and many present the theory that the woman is able to commune with God during the attack through her use of hymns. Carol Holly asserts, “It is not only the language of the hymns but also their music that moves the heroine to her exalted state and ultimately a newly constituted, strengthened self” (156). In “Circumstance,” the woman is not only able to use her voice to keep the panther from reaching a heightened state of agitation and issuing further violence, but she is able to use her voice *alone*, through her connection with God, to find comfort and agency. Morrison’s *Baby Suggs*, on the other hand, must use her spiritual powers to bring the community *together* in the Clearing in order to find comfort and agency.

During spiritual gatherings in the Clearing, the natural environment frees African Americans to use many different forms of vocal expression in order to convey their emotions, both positive and negative. Holly focuses on the spiritual aspect of the protagonist’s singing, writing that Spofford “reveals the ecstatic spiritual experience that results from the singing of hymns has prepared her heroine for the future that ... is as limitless as the uncharted wilderness” (153). Holly connects Spofford’s singing of psalms to a connection with God, which allows the woman to then connect with the nature that God created. Like Spofford’s protagonist, the women in *Beloved* who do find a voice of agency do so using spiritual rhetoric, and natural spaces like the Clearing serve as a place of healing and restoration for African Americans that they can then take with them to other spaces. Unlike “Circumstance,” however, the African American women in *Beloved* rely on a communal spiritual connection to achieve self-realization rather than a one-on-one connection with God.

It is clear in the characters like Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Ella that the institution of slavery and sexual violence are strongly connected, and the intersections of race and gender create multiple oppressions that the women either successfully or unsuccessfully navigate. Unlike the attack in Spofford's story where the woman and the predator both experience different levels of oppression, the African American women in *Beloved* do not carry any power over their attackers, the dominant white males who are in charge of their entire lives and from whom they have learned to distrust those whose skin is white. Not only does this comparison highlight how white women and African American women navigate voice and silence differently, but both authors also provide some environmental discourse about a violated land that is unable to speak for itself. In Spofford's piece, a white woman lends an actual voice to the environment — her own — since her voice echoes through the wilderness. In *Beloved*, the environment more closely mirrors the silence behind the cultural trauma of slavery in order to help conceal and protect the African American community, yet the natural world also offers the characters a sense of freedom that the domestic space in the novel does not.

In analyzing the use of voice to gain agency in "Circumstance" and *Beloved*, the natural world plays a key role. As white women, Spofford's protagonist and Amy Denver are both able to find a solitary voice in the natural world despite the trauma and threat of sexual violence. *Beloved's* Sethe, Baby Suggs, Ella, and Denver rely on a communal voice of support to achieve agency, since the trauma of slavery and the pain of remembering the past often render the African American women silent. In both stories, no matter whether it is a solitary and communal, the natural environment heightens the women's voice of agency, whereas the voice of agency lessens in the domestic space.

The similarities in the women's relationship with the natural world show the link between gender and feeling welcomed by the environment, while the differences between a solitary versus a communal voice among characters highlights how race is an additional oppression that must be navigated differently in order to achieve agency when surviving sexual violence.

CHAPTER 2

**The Powerful Presence of the Unspoken:
Silence and Alternative Discourses in *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business***

To that piece of each of us which refuses to be silent.

— Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light*

More often than not, Americans perceive silence as negative. We are taught that in order to be strong individuals, we need to speak up and speak out. People fail to recognize the intrinsic value in silences that are contemplative, instead prioritizing talk and action. Chapter 1 focuses on that oppressive silence that people of color, like *Beloved's* Sethe, navigate. As I point out in the previous chapter, intersections of gender, race, sexual violence, and even the environment, play a role in whether women use a solitary or communal voice to gain power, but if a lone woman of color is silent, does that automatically mean she lacks agency? In both *Beloved* and Frances Washburn's *Elsie's Business* (2006), a silent woman of color is not necessarily a woman without agency; in fact, two characters in these novels — Beloved and Elsie — highlight how silence and withholding, and other alternative discourses, such as incoherent sounds, short and choppy sentences, physical actions, and body language, are empowering when used *purposefully*. *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business* are literary representations of the intergenerational trauma born from events such as African American slavery or Native American genocide, and they also place trauma surrounding sexual violence as the core to understanding the broader spectrum of historical trauma, particularly the multiply oppressive violence against women of color. Awareness that sexual violence against women of color and the trauma of rape has deep historical roots is crucial, particularly since recognizing trauma's intergenerational impact helps break the cycle and establish a

more promising future — and, as these two novels demonstrate, connections with multicultural communities are a key to healing. Both *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business* approach literary representations of sexual violence against women of color in a way that takes into account the silence that has been forced upon these women throughout history, recasting it so the title characters achieve some sense of agency through the use of a purposeful silence and other alternative discourses, while also questioning the possibility of a positive futurity amid the intergenerational impact of cultural trauma.

Since *Beloved* is so well-read, it, and other popular slave and neo-slave narratives, and works of fiction by African American women², have helped shed light on the multidimensional nature of African American women's experiences surrounding sexual violence. Scholars, however, have not devoted attention to the same issue for Native American women, and the complexities of the intersections of race, gender, and power that surround these violating acts is primarily ignored. I recently attended a social justice summit, and what I learned there further validated this reality. Although the presenter and attendees were pretty well-versed in issues of privilege, oppression, and intersections of race, class, and gender, when the topic of race came up, there was no mention of Native peoples until I initiated the conversation. It is disheartening when even individuals interested in social justice and promoting equality “forget” about an already marginalized community. While sexual violence against women is present in many Native American literary works, the authors often position sexual violence in the periphery of the story, making it relatively easy to overlook amongst the other complex issues of Native identity

² Some well-known works by African American women that convey sexual violence include Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

being explored³. Although there has not been any published critical discussion about the novel, Washburn's *Elsie's Business* highlights how intersections of race, gender, and power play a dominant role in the raping of Native American women, thus providing an avenue where the issue of sexual violence against Indigenous women is more of a central focus, rather than hidden in the margins. In this chapter, I will first discuss the intergenerational trauma connected to African American slavery and Native American genocide. My goal is to expand the conversation of the previous chapter to include the experiences of Indigenous women, provide further context for understanding the multiple oppressions all women of color face, and show how sexual violence links to historical trauma. I will then go on to connect historical trauma and intersections of race and gender to the oppressive silence that women of color navigate, highlighting how marginalized women can use a purposeful withholding and alternative discourses to gain agency. Finally, I will look at the question of futurity connected to intergenerational trauma, drawing on my previous chapter where I discuss the role of community in promoting healing among African Americans in *Beloved* in order to compare Morrison's message with Elsie's relationship to community in Washburn's work.

Beloved is an ideal book to pair with an analysis of *Elsie's Business* since both novels have similar themes regarding race, gender, intergenerational trauma, sexual violence, and the use of discourse. Comparisons with *Beloved* strengthen new critical analyses of *Elsie's Business* since there has yet to be a published scholarly piece on

³ A few examples of Native American works that contain representations of violence against women are James Welch's *Fools Crow* (1986), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer* (1994), Louis Owens's *The Sharpest Sight* (1995), Devon A. Mihesuah's *The Roads of My Relations* (2000), and Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012).

Washburn's novel. There are several aspects of Washburn's novel that warrant a close read, but one of the most resonating themes in *Elsie's Business* is the use of alternative discourses and the silence surrounding trauma when a multicultural woman survives sexual violence at the hands of white perpetrators. What makes *Elsie's Business* unique, however, is that the Native protagonist, Elsie, employs a *purposeful* silence as a form of *agency*. The use of alternative discourses is also present in Morrison's novel, especially through the character Beloved, a representation of slavery's violent and haunting past. Elsie and Beloved use alternative discourses of withholding and protest — particularly the language of silence — to achieve some degree of agency in attempting to counter the disempowerment they inherited through cultural and sexual traumas and multiple oppressions; however, a question of futurity haunts both novels, highlighting the inescapability of intergenerational trauma, particularly trauma embedded in sexual violence.

Intergenerational trauma: Slavery, genocide, and sexual violence

In the previous chapter, I begin discussing cultural trauma surrounding African American slavery and *Beloved*. Washburn's *Elsie's Business* illustrates a similar intergenerational link between Native American genocide and trauma, particularly with its representation of sexual violence. Ron Eyerman notes:

It is through time-delayed and negotiated recollection that cultural trauma is experienced, a process which places representation in a key role. How an event is remembered is intimately entwined with how it is represented.

Here the means and media of representation is crucial, for they bridge the gap between individuals and between occurrence and its recollection. (12)

Like Morrison, Washburn represents trauma and is thus where occurrence and recollection connect. Both novels represent the cyclical nature of intergenerational “time-delayed” traumas that haunt characters and their children several years after the event, while also representing the multiple oppressions related to the intersections of race, gender, and sexual violence. In creating these fictional representations of real traumas, Morrison and Washburn establish a place where readers are able to find a common ground “between occurrence and its recollection,” which will also be discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to reader participation and the navigation of the spectator gaze in Yamashita and Atwood’s novels. One of the ways *Beloved* and *Elsie’s Business* convey trauma is through silence and alternative discourses.

While I highlight in Chapter 1 how African American women in particular are multiply oppressed, it is important to further note the multiple marginalizations and oppressions present in *Beloved* in connection with *Elsie’s Business* before analyzing the language of silence and alternative discourses present in both. Chapter 1 focuses on the abilities of the characters of Sethe, Baby Suggs, Ella, Denver, and Amy Denver to use either lone or communal voices to gain power in relation to race; however, the character of Beloved is even more complex since, unlike the other characters, she uses purposeful silence and alternative discourses in order to achieve a sense of agency. In order to draw a connection between Beloved’s use of silence and alternative discourses and Elsie’s purposeful withholding, it is helpful to first analyze the historical past in relation to Beloved. According to Pamela E. Barnett, *Beloved* is “haunted by history, memory, and a

specter that embodies both; yet it would be accurate to say that *Beloved* is haunted by the history and memory of rape specifically” (“Figurations” 418). In other words, the character Beloved symbolizes both history and memory. On the surface, Beloved is a ghostly figure who represents the dead child of Sethe, a woman who, as I note in Chapter 1, suffered sexual abuse as a slave and is haunted by sexual abuse that took place in past generations of her family and other African Americans she knows. Barnett asserts that Beloved is a “figuration of sexual trauma’s intergeneration effects; she recalls, repeats, and reenacts the rapes in slavery suffered by her mother Sethe, her mother’s mother, and so many other enslaved people, including Paul D, Ella, and countless unnamed ancestors forced to make the Middle Passage” (*Dangerous Desire* xix). In the novel, Sethe and her children escape to the north, but the man who “owns” them finds her. Propelled by her past sexual trauma and the intergenerational and cultural trauma of slavery, “Sethe kills her child so that no white man will ever ‘dirty’ her, so that no young man with ‘mossy teeth’ will ever hold the child down and suck her breasts” (Barnett, “Figurations” 418). Sethe’s motive for killing her child is significant because it highlights the connection between African American slavery and sexual abuse, particularly the depth of the trauma for survivors and how it affects future generations.

Beloved represents Sethe’s slain baby, but she is also a symbol for African American intergenerational trauma and sexual violence, specifically Sethe’s memory of sexual abuse and her refusal to allow her daughter to suffer from the same experiences. Barnett argues that Beloved can be considered a succubus in that “she reenacts sexual violation and thus figures the persistent nightmares common to survivors of trauma” (“Figurations” 418). Beloved is powerful; those living in the house cannot easily escape

her, just as they cannot escape the trauma of slavery. In Morrison's novel, there are two characterizations of Beloved. At the beginning of the novel, she is an unseen baby who haunts the house through her unpredictable, demanding, and destructive spiritual presence. Later, Beloved takes a more physical presence as a young adult girl who shows up on their doorstep and ends up living with them, ultimately physically haunting them, which brings even more destruction to the household. Barnett points out, "Her insistent manifestation constitutes a challenge for the characters who have survived rapes inflicted while they were enslaved; directly and finally communally, to confront a past they cannot forget" ("Figurations" 418-419). In this way, Beloved is a representation of the permanence of traumatic memory. In addition, Beloved and Sethe are strongly linked, since Beloved brings up memories and feelings that Sethe would rather forget, and these two characters are so connected that Beloved slowly drains Sethe of life. Beloved turns into a gnawing presence that leads Sethe to slowly disintegrate, symbolizing how trauma and sexual abuse are inescapable and constantly eat away at survivors, affecting their children and future. In Chapter 1, I highlighted Sethe's lack of agency and voice, since she is alienated from the community, but in this chapter, I focus on Beloved's power and agency despite her use of silence and other forms of discourse. The distinction is that Sethe is *silenced*, while Beloved is *purposefully silent*. Ultimately, Beloved is a manifestation of Sethe's haunting past traumas and sexual abuse, but Beloved is able to rise above Sethe's lack of agency, becoming one of the most powerful figures in the novel.

Morrison's *Beloved* deals with the intergenerational trauma and the haunting historical memory surrounding sexual violence rooted in African American slavery, but

Washburn's *Elsie's Business* highlights violence specific to Native American genocide and cultural trauma that Indigenous peoples face, particularly sexual violence directed at Native women. Elsie Roberts is a woman of color, half Native American, and unbeknown to those around her, half African American, but the primary focus is on her Native culture. Elsie is also of a lower class in her predominately white community of Mobridge, South Dakota, where she and her mother work as housekeepers, and where Elsie discontinues school after her mother becomes ill. The intersections of gender, race, and class that Elsie navigates are the ammunition that Paul Johnson, and his friends, Bobby and Billy Mason, use to justify an act of sexual violence against her. In the scene where the narrator describes the attack on Elsie, it is clear that the perpetrators target Elsie because she is a woman of color. Elsie's Native identity makes her especially vulnerable to sexual violence since, according to the U.S. Department of Justice's 2005-06 statistics cited by Amnesty International, 34.1 percent of Native American and Alaska Native women are raped sometime in their lifetime (2), and 86 percent of the perpetrators are reported as non-Native men (4). Washburn's novel not only offers a face for this staggering statistic in Elsie, but the book also infers that violence against Native women by white perpetrators takes place because Native women are not allowed bodily integrity and are considered sexually perverse in the eyes of colonizers. Because of this, Andrea Smith notes, Indian bodies "are 'dirty,' they are considered sexually violable and 'rapable,' and the rape of the bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty simply does not count" (10). Washburn reveals this in the perpetrators' hatred and devaluing of the Native woman in their dialogue, such as when Paul calls Elsie a "God DAMN dirty bitch!" and a "squaw" (12). The word "bitch" targets Elsie's gender, but the use of

“squaw” is particularly significant, since it references Elsie’s Native identity. When three privileged white males rape Elsie, Washburn specifically targets violence against Native peoples, particularly Native women, since “When a Native woman suffers abuse, this abuse is an attack on her identity as a woman and an attack on her identity as Native” (Smith 8). Not only are race and gender central to the sexual attack on Elsie, but Washburn, like Morrison, goes a step further to make a connection between cultural trauma, rape, and the oppressive silence that is forced upon women of color. While some might read Elsie as *silenced* after the rape, Elsie’s choices regarding when to speak and when not to speak highlight that she is using silence *purposefully*. Elsie — like *Beloved* — uses a purposeful withholding in order to gain back some agency stripped from her when the white men rape her, but also as she navigates through multiple oppressions and traumas.

Oppressive silence versus alternative discourses of agency

Limitations with language make conveying cultural trauma, sexual violence, and the intergenerational effects that relate to violent acts and pain difficult to write about. Elaine Scarry discusses the challenges in attempting to convey trauma through discourse saying, “Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). There is no reliable discourse in relation to trauma, torture, or pain since “pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed” (Scarry 4). This concept of trauma being “unsharable” makes writing about it especially difficult. If trauma is “unsharable,” and, thus unrepresentable, how can one put the experience into

words? One possibility is visual replication, but this avenue is fraught with complications. Reliable trauma discourse is complicated even further when one takes into account the multiple oppressions that women of color experience and the restrictions placed upon them as a result of those oppressions. Morrison and Washburn approach these problems from multicultural perspectives; Chapter 3 will expound on these issues of “unsharability” and navigating multiple oppressions further by analyzing visual and textual representations of sexual violence in *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake*. For this chapter, it is important to keep in mind that since women of color work through an oppressive framework that involves complex intersections of race and gender, they often navigate the world under a forced silence, or they are not *heard* if they do speak; however, Morrison and Washburn take that forced silence and argue it can also be empowering when used intentionally.

Beloved conveys a forced silence among peoples in the African American community when Morrison writes, “Silent, except for social courtesies, when they met one another they neither described nor asked about the sorrow that drove them from one place to another. They whites didn’t bear speaking on. Everybody knew” (63). *Beloved* highlights how oppressive silence connects with cultural trauma: slaves were expected to remain silent, former slaves are expected to remain silent, and future generations are expected to remain silent — everybody knows about this silence, and the expectation is even silent. In Chapter 1, I argue that African American characters in *Beloved* are able to move away from silence, achieve agency, and allow for a more promising future by combining their voices as a community, but the characters have to be able to navigate the underlying forced silence first. In *Elsie’s Business* there is also a community-wide,

silence since the racially divided “white” and Native communities do not connect with Elsie, leaving her isolated — much like Morrison’s Sethe. Like the African American women in *Beloved*, since Elsie is alone, and she is a woman of color, it is more difficult for her to find that solitary voice of agency. This oppressive silence asks how people of color can find a voice without risking violent backlash, especially women of color, who carry the burden of multidimensional vulnerability. In order to help bring attention to this problem, both Morrison and Washburn offer Beloved and Elsie purposeful silence and alternative discourses in order to help them gain agency without making the characters vulnerable to additional violence.

Alternative discourse is a broader term to describe the craft techniques that Morrison utilizes in *Beloved*; more specifically, Morrison includes an underlying silence, an overt silence, incoherent sounds, short and choppy sentences, song, body language, and an overall destructive haunting and physical presence in her novel to navigate the effects of trauma in order to achieve agency. Washburn also uses silences and short responses, in addition to a sense of mystery, as forms of discourse so her protagonist achieves power. In her essay, Roxanne R. Reed writes, “Sound serves as a kind of discourse in the novel, even though it is unarticulated, uniformed, and undefined” (57). The “unarticulated, uniformed, and undefined” nature of Morrison and Washburn’s novels is what makes them more difficult to theorize, since these types of discourses are unknowable unless the sound conveys an emotion in readers. Reed continues, “The sound is void of word and void of melody; it is demonstrated in a wordless cry, holler, moan, or wail” (57). When a character cries, hollers, moans, or wails, these could be negative or positive sounds, or possibly both, so adequate context is needed to reveal what the

author's intent is. In order to determine the intent of sound — including silence — one must consider several things, such as the agency, or lack of agency, of the characters.

In analyzing the silence in *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business*, it is crucial to note the legitimacy of silence as a method of discourse conveyed without sound. The use of silence as a form of communication, particularly a discourse to acquire agency, is relatively under-theorized in academia⁴. Muriel Saville-Troike notes:

The tradition has been to define (silence) negatively – as merely the absence of speech. From a different perspective, however, that of a total theory of communication, we can view silence as itself a valid object of investigation, bounded by the stretches of verbal material which provide boundary marking for its identification. (3-4)

As Saville-Troike point out, silence is a legitimate form of discourse that requires analysis, especially in literary works where the verbal word dominates. Reed notes that sound is “void of word,” but silence is not just merely a void or something negative, and its potential to offer agency to those who choose it needs attention. Silence is such a resonating theme in *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business* that it warrants a closer critical look. According to Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson, “Silence is a language like any other, and ... silence is a particularly relevant topic to rape narratives” (14). What is unique in *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business*, though, is that Morrison and Washburn use this discourse of silence to offer Beloved and Elsie a sense of agency rather than solely highlight their oppression. Ernestine S. Schlant also finds legitimacy in silence, arguing, “Silence is not a semantic void; like any language, it is infused with narrative strategies

⁴ While there have been critical analyses of silence in relation to trauma, those analyses focus on an oppressed silence.

that carry ideologies and reveal unstated assumptions. Silence is constituted by the absence of words, but is therefore and simultaneously the presence of their absence” (6). Like Saville-Troike, Schlant acknowledges the legitimacy and power of silence in that it is not just a “void” since there is often a purpose behind it, such as a *purposeful withholding*. Although Schlant mostly writes about German literature surrounding the Holocaust, her theories on silence can be carried over to other traumas, including slavery, the Indigenous Holocaust, or sexual violation of bodies of color, such as African American and Native women.

Different ways of speaking

In the case of *Beloved*, there are multiple traumas related to silence, including African American slavery and sexual violence. Morrison exercises alternative discourses that battle oppressive silence with the powerful character of Beloved, who often speaks in short, choppy sentences, in an incoherent manner, through her body language and physical features, and through preternatural occurrences and actions that virtually hold those in the house, called 124, hostage. As mentioned in Chapter 1, at the beginning of the *Beloved*, the house that Sethe and her youngest daughter, Denver, live in is a symbol of trauma that is haunted by Beloved, who Denver refers to as “the baby ghost” (15), and Morrison begins the novel with “124 was spiteful. Full of baby’s venom” (3). Since Sethe isolates herself in the home, allowing Beloved to slowly drain her of life, Sethe is literally trapped and paralyzed by trauma. Colleen Carpenter Cullinan writes, “It is here, through the voice of 124, that we discover the power of Beloved’s voice, and the anger it holds” (88). In addition to hints at Beloved’s traumatic death, there are many references to

Sethe's past, her experiences at the place where she was a slave (ironically named "Sweet Home"), and incidents of sexual abuse as a slave, such as having her milk for nursing her baby "stolen" by white men (21). The beginning of Morrison's novel establishes multiple traumas, with Beloved as the "voice" of them. While Beloved offers a "voice" to the gendered- and racial- traumas surrounding slavery and sexual abuse, she initially does so through her haunting "presence" in the home, which is a form of alternative discourse. When Paul D, a man Sethe knows from Sweet Home visits her, he immediately remarks upon entering the door of the house, "Good God. What kind of evil you got in here?" (10). Sethe replies, "It's not evil, just sad" (10). Denver clarifies the ghost is "not evil. But not sad either," pointing out that the ghost is "Rebuked. Lonely and rebuked" (16). These differing accounts of the temperament of the "baby ghost," convey the power of Beloved and her silence. Beloved is a mystery, which prevents others from completely controlling or taming her. The varying perceptions of Beloved's temperament highlight that Beloved is unknowable in a way that establishes her power over the occupants of the house. Without words, Beloved has a strong presence in 124 and has enough agency to control the two female inhabitants — Sethe and Denver — and, later, the male inhabitant, Paul D.

Not long after Paul D's arrival, the spiritual presence of the house makes itself even more noticeable when the house starts "pitching" (21). Paul D reacts by yelling, "God damn it! Hush up! Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!" (22). Following his outburst, "a table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he based it about, wrecking everything" (22). Beloved not only has a controlling psychological power over the

women in 124, but also causes destruction when challenged by a man, highlighting Beloved's agency without her having to use any words at all. Later, she is able to exert psychological power over Paul D, as well. At first, it appears that Paul D wins, since the house eventually becomes still, but the danger becomes more heightened when a physical manifestation of an older Beloved arrives at the house to live. After "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water" and into Sethe's house, historical memory, trauma, violence, and sexual abuse become wrapped up in Beloved's language and physical actions (60). Ultimately, Paul D fails to silence Beloved, since she instead takes on a bodily presence to remain in control of the home, eventually controlling Paul D's body sexually.

Upon Beloved's initial arrival at the home in physical form, while she is still considered a stranger, most of Beloved's actions are described from a physical standpoint, yet she is seemingly mild as she "gazed at Sethe with sleepy eyes" and "shook her head no" when asked, "You from around here?" (62). When she does finally speak, she responds in short, choppy phrases:

"What might your name be?" asked Paul D.

"Beloved," she said, and her voice was so low and rough each one looked at the other two. They heard the voice first – later the name.

"Beloved. You use a last name, Beloved?" Paul D asked her.

"Last?" She seemed puzzled. Then "No," and she spelled it for them,

slowly as though the letters were being formed as she spoke them. (62)

In Morrison's writing of Beloved's dialogue, not only are Beloved's abrupt and "puzzled" responses important to how her silence should be read later in the novel, the

sound of her voice, and the reaction to it, are pivotal to how Sethe, Denver, and Paul D *receive* Beloved's voice. Beloved's "low and rough" voice is disturbing, uncomfortable, and challenging to those around her, and it establishes her as even more of an "Other." Characters are forced to navigate through the discomfort of Beloved's voice, and, in establishing Beloved as multiply "Othered," the novel makes her purposeful use of silence even more powerful, since she is able to gain agency despite it. Elsie's voice carries a similar trait, which I discuss later. Just as Morrison's novel explores Beloved's connection to sexual trauma through a purposeful silence and alternative discourses, Washburn's novel also connects silence and alternative discourses to the multidimensional oppressive silence that women of color face after sexual violence.

In *Elsie's Business*, rape is the most evident source of her trauma, but Elsie also has to navigate multiple gender- and race-based oppressions that can result in a forced silence. The rape scene in Washburn's novel is a moment where Elsie — like Beloved — eventually strikes back by employing a purposeful silence and alternative discourses. Within the violence against Elsie and the attack on her identity as a Native woman is a moment where the white perpetrators attempt to permanently silence her. Washburn writes:

Paul kicks again at Elsie's crumpled body, the blow catching her in mid-throat with a mushy crunch, and she is gone off into herself. Somewhere in a tiny space in her head, she walks along the creek bank in spring, touching gently the celery green tree leaves of the willows, while a million miles away she hears the barking of cowardly dogs. (12)

Later in the scene, the doctor mentions that Elsie's crushed larynx will hinder her from speaking, and it is crucial that this prediction proves false when Elsie willfully speaks; however, Elsie's dissociation from the trauma is also important. After the blow to Elsie's throat by the perpetrators, which renders her speechless, she creates a space where she can survive the rest of the attack through physical detachment. In fact, Elsie's detachment not only serves as a coping mechanism, but it also provides her with a place that is in direct opposition to the violence, where she is free to "gently" touch the serene environment around her and where "cowardly dogs" are a "million miles away" (12). The use of "cowardly dogs" to refer to the three male perpetrators conveys that, despite an attack of sexual violence, Elsie has not internalized the complex intersections of racism and sexism that she faces as a woman of color, since she reverses the trend of comparing people of color to animals. Elsie's detachment "space" is a place of agency in which she is at home with nature and protected by the environment, and where dominating and abusive patriarchy is too far away to reach her. For the remainder of the novel, it is clear that Elsie's silence, and her choice whether to speak or not, also act as a type of dissociation space in that her purposeful withholding provides a sense of agency and place to be within herself without being dominated. Just as *Beloved* is able to control the space in 124, Elsie is able to control her dissociation space.

In order to convey that Elsie's silence truly is an act of agency and choice rather than a reaction to oppression, Washburn uses Elsie's initial opposition to silence — her overall refusal to be silent despite the doctor's predictions — to contrast with Elsie's decisions not to speak, or to speak very little, throughout the remainder of the novel. Gunne and Thompson argue, "silence can be both restrictive and liberating" (14). This

“restrictive and liberating” aspect of silence that Gunne and Thompson highlight is illustrated in *Elsie’s Business* where Elsie’s silence can be perceived as oppressive in that it appears to restrict her to the will and expectations of white, male-dominated power structures. Upon further inspection, however, it is clear that Elsie’s silence offers her a freedom to express herself in a way that is comfortable for her, such as her dissociation space, or, following the loss of that space, in her interactions with other characters in the novel. In determining Elsie’s use of silence in acquiring agency, equally notable is Elsie *choice* when to communicate verbally. Like *Beloved*, Elsie holds a power in both her spoken word and her unspoken word.

Elsie purposefully uses both the power of spoken word and body language in a few scenes in the novel, particularly the hospital scene following the attack. In his grim predictions, the doctor tells Elsie, “I don’t think you’re going to talk again, but you’ll be able to make some sound. I don’t know, you could fool me there, but I wouldn’t count on it” (26). When the sheriff seeks to speak to Elsie, the doctor becomes angry, telling the sheriff, “I TOLD you. I told you, she can’t talk, can’t say a damned word, her larynx is crushed” (27). However, Elsie does “fool” the doctor, proving him wrong, and in doing so challenges white patriarchal privilege and power. In an attempt to communicate to the doctor, sheriff, and nurse at the hospital, Elsie first uses body language, moving her foot until she gets everyone’s attention. She then goes on to open and shut her eyes to confirm that she wants to communicate something and to answer questions. This scene prefigures a particular form of silent discourse in the remainder of the novel — Elsie’s use of body language to communicate before speaking when she interacts with the citizens of Jackson, where she moves following the attack. The scene in the hospital also solidifies

Elsie's inner strength in that she endures a significant amount of pain in order to speak those first words. Washburn writes:

Elsie is back in the creek, clutching a skirt full of turtles, but she's drowning this time, and she's calling for her mother, but it isn't her mother's name she's trying to say. She's not calling, Ina, Ina. She's pulling her breath into her lungs, she's pulling the water into her lungs and it hurts, and she's forming a sound with her smashed mouth beneath the swollen nose. (28)

Despite the bodily abuse she endured and the physical pain of speaking as a result of a crushed larynx, in addition to the morphine and the loss of her dissociation space, Elsie shows a fearless determination and strength to name the perpetrators, eventually saying, "MMMMmaason," implicating the Mason boys and their friend (29). In showing that she is able to talk, despite an almost literal silencing following a brutal attack and being forcibly silenced as a Native woman, Elsie defies powerlessness and the limits of silence and fear created by male domination. Declaring the name of her attackers proves that Elsie has a piece of her that refuses to be silent, which Audre Lorde celebrates in her writing. Elsie uses her voice of agency in naming her attackers, highlighting that she is strong and she is able to use her voice when she *chooses* to do so. At the same time, Elsie conveys the liberating aspects of silence for much of the remainder of the novel in that she *chooses* when to use her words and when not to, enacting a *purposeful withholding*. Ultimately, in Elsie's refusal to stay silent when others might have been too afraid to name their attackers, particularly affluent white attackers in a small town, she shows that she has the power to talk, further highlighting her freedom to choose silence as an avenue

for agency later in the novel. Thus, both Elsie and Beloved use their voices to challenge those around them, but they are equally challenging when they purposefully withhold spoken discourse.

Purposeful silence

Beloved and Elsie opt for silence and alternative discourses to gain agency, and there are multiple reasons behind this. Silence serves several functions, and many of those functions can promote agency. Saville-Troike writes, “Silence may be used to question, promise, deny, warn, threaten, insult, request, or command, as well as to carry out various kinds of ritual interaction” (6). These uses of silence can all provide agency to those who use them. She also adds, “Silence further can have similar truth value to speech, and thus can intentionally be used to deceive and to mislead” (7). Silence as intentional deception is present in both *Beloved* and *Elsie’s Business*. In writing about Beloved’s silence and alternative discourses, Cullinan points out:

The strangest thing about Beloved is that, while she is central to almost everything that happens in the novel, she is nearly always silent. The reader retains the impression of silence even when she speaks, for her end of a conversation is usually summarized instead of quoted, even when we have the exact words of other speakers. The few sentences she does speak are short and broken. Finally, her stream-of-consciousness narrative is not that of a twenty-year-old woman but of a child who cannot find the right words to voice her fantasies, memories and desires; there are silences and unanswered questions even here (perhaps especially here). (88)

Cullinan's recognition of Beloved's silence even when speaking is impressive, but she fails to fully see Beloved as a person of power — and, thus as having agency — instead focusing on her child-like qualities. This focus on Beloved's child-like discourse is problematic since it overlooks the reason behind the child-like utterances. Instead, I suggest that Beloved's unique way of speaking through alternative discourses engages in purposeful withholding to gain agency. Beloved also displays agency in who she chooses to communicate with. For example, Beloved speaks to Sethe and Denver more than Paul D; however, Beloved reveals more of herself to Denver, whereas she requests stories and remembering from Sethe, forcing Sethe to relive past traumas. In describing Denver's talks with Beloved when they are alone, Morrison writes, "They could have their talks easier there at night when Sethe and Paul D were asleep; or in the day time before either came home. Sweet, crazy conversations full of half sentences, daydreams, and misunderstandings more thrilling than understanding could ever be" (80). Morrison's narration reveals Denver's point of view and highlights the "crazy conversations" and "misunderstandings" that are central to Beloved's discourse. In using a discourse that promotes misinterpretation, Beloved's unique way of speaking through alternative discourses is a way to engage in a powerful purposeful withholding that restricts other characters from dominating her, and which in fact, challenges and dominates them in part.

This misinterpretation of Beloved's child-like language is also similar to how the characters in *Elsie's Business* perceive Elsie. Community perceptions of Elsie's harmlessness and lack of intelligence is important to note since they basically lead to her being perceived as child-like. Washburn writes,

They saw Elsie as harmless, a simpleminded woman whose intellect was not much higher than the children's, but the woman who worked at the county library suspected there was more to Elsie than what seemed obvious. ... The librarian only suspected that Elsie wasn't as simple as she seemed, but John Caulfield knew it because Elsie talked to him. (68-69)

This passage confirms that unless Elsie speaks to a member of the community in a truly revealing way, or unless a person is able to interpret Elsie's silence correctly, Elsie is ultimately a mystery just as Beloved is a mystery and has the agency to choose who she reveals herself to and what she reveals. The scene also shows that Elsie is an intelligent woman and not the simple and childlike girl that others perceive her to be. Theoretically, if the acquisition of knowledge equates to some sense of power, then, by not allowing the other citizens of Jackson to fully "know" or "master" her, Elsie's silence and purposeful withholding is a way to prevent them from being able to fully achieve that mastery. While Elsie is not dominating in the way Beloved is, Elsie does retain a sense of control over others in preventing them from fully accessing her.

While it is obvious to Morrison's readers that there is more to Beloved than a simplicity and a child-like demeanor since Beloved acts in outwardly destructive ways, Elsie has to be read more closely, since she is not out to intentionally harm anyone. Although most of those around her view her as simple and childlike, Elsie demonstrates a high-level of intelligence in several sections of the novel. In one scene, Elsie explains to Nancy about the biology of turtles and Nancy questions her knowledge. Washburn writes, "Elsie, how did you know that?" Nancy was surprised. She had been thinking that Elsie was pretty simple, childlike, and wondering if she had always been that way, or if maybe

the ordeal she had been through had damaged her mentally, and now, she wondered if Elsie might have guessed what she was thinking” (45). Washburn then continues that Nancy “wondered what other knowledge Elsie had stored in her head, and what might come out of her mouth” (46). The citizens of Jackson are never privileged enough to know Elsie or Elsie’s knowledge. Instead, the citizens live under *illusions* of who Elsie is. Ultimately, Elsie constantly uses silence as a way to “deny” and “mislead” most of the citizens of Jackson. In many ways, Elsie’s refusal to allow others to truly know her disempowers them, because their control over her is restricted, which is a critical point of agency for a marginalized woman of color. Despite interacting with Elsie more than a majority of the other characters in the book, even Nancy’s knowledge of Elsie is restricted. Washburn writes, “Elsie seemed to enjoy Nancy’s visits, although she didn’t talk much” (68). Without a real concrete knowledge of Elsie, which is difficult to obtain, citizens of Jackson can only speculate about her. Elsie “seems” to be one way, but in the end, they find out this is not necessarily all there is to the picture.

In her text, Washburn signals to readers that citizens of Jackson do not have the full story regarding Elsie. The repeated phrases “or so the locals seemed to think” or “so he thought” in the third-person narratives in the novel alludes to the fact that nobody has enough information about Elsie to take her story away from her (121). A majority of citizens in Jackson automatically accept unfounded facts regarding Elsie, making it a resounding theme in the book. This misinterpretation benefits Elsie in that she can determine the people she should shield herself from and to whom she can open up. The primary person allowed knowledge of Elsie on a deeper level is John Caulfield, who is an

outsider himself in the community. John, who understands Elsie's intelligence, gives her a nickname that implies a nonjudgmental acceptance of her. Washburn writes:

Elsie the Turtle Woman Philosopher, a term that made her laugh in that odd way, the sound bubbling up and down the scale in a way that most people found discomfoting, even creepy, but John thought endearing and uniquely Elsie. People stared at them but didn't talk to them, perhaps, as John said, they weren't noticeable, but only present like the sky and the trees. (69)

This selection shows the distance that Elsie has from the rest of the community, while also highlighting the unique harmony she feels with John, who obviously understands and respects Elsie's level of intelligence by labeling her a "philosopher." This passage also brings up the sound of Elsie's voice, which, like *Beloved*, multiply "Others" her while also highlighting her agency, since she successfully negotiates it. Like *Beloved*'s discussions with Denver and her requests of stories and memories from Sethe, Elsie's relationship with John shows she has the agency to choose to whom she speaks and whom she will allow to know her on a deeper level; in other words, she is not entirely closed off to other people. John is an ideal partner, refusing to reveal Elsie to the rest of the community, and, thus allowing her retain agency. Like *Beloved*, only those who can correctly interpret Elsie's challenging silence, or those who are recipients of *willful* information, begin to understand and know her, which is a level that not many characters, even the reader, reach in either of the novels.

In Morrison's work, *Beloved*'s communication often includes an intentional absence of words in order to prompt misinterpretation or invisibility. This silence-filled

communication is most evident during first meeting Beloved in both ghostly and physical form, but it continues for much of the novel; or, when Beloved does speak, it is incoherent and alluding with quick requests of Sethe such as, “Tell me your diamonds” (69). Beloved seeks stories from the other characters, namely Sethe, but she offers very little information herself, even to Denver. Often, when asked a question by Denver, the reply will simply be a facial cue such as a smile, *signaling* her answer (77). Although Beloved does talk about how her origins connect to “dark” places, her replies are difficult to decipher:

“What’s it like over there, where you were before? Can you tell me?”

“Dark,” said Beloved. “I’m small in that place. I’m like this here.” She raised her head off the bed, lay down on her side and curled up.

Denver covered her lips with her fingers. “Were you cold?”

Beloved curled tighter and shook her head. “Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in.”

“You see anybody?”

“Heaps. A lot of people is down there. Some is dead.” (88)

Beloved goes on to say that she returned “To see her face,” meaning Sethe’s (88). This section is the most Beloved speaks, and, while she uses fragmentary language, it is significant that the discourse relates to trauma with Beloved’s reference to the darkness and restrictiveness of the place in addition to the “heaps” of people, many who are dead. Like Elsie’s determination to name her attackers, Beloved willingly discusses the past and the unpleasant “dark” trauma connected to it, displaying a purposeful withholding and agency when she does opt for silence.

Beloved's silence is even more noticeable at the end of the novel when she becomes more hostile in the home and, like the beginning of the novel, her physical domination once again takes precedence. Morrison writes, "When once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself — be the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best — Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane" (285). It is clear here that Beloved does not have to speak to hold power over Sethe, who has no voice of agency. Cullinan mentions Beloved's silence as "incomprehensible" (88), and while that is true on the surface, ultimately Beloved's silence voices trauma and is comprehensible to those who have the ability to *listen*. Beloved dominates 124, but others in the community do not even know she is in the house until near the end of the novel. This invisibility retains Beloved's power since it is only after others discover Beloved's existence that the community is able to come together to rid Sethe of Beloved's tormenting presence. It is difficult to fully interpret Beloved for both other characters and readers, since she is more than a mere vessel used to symbolize Sethe's past traumas in addition to the intergenerational trauma that the African American community faces, overall.

Like *Beloved*, there is a significant and intentional loss of words throughout *Elsie's Business* that prompts further misinterpretation, particularly after Elsie leaves Mobridge. Washburn conveys to the reader when Elsie is present in a scene in the novel and when she is not speaking; however, the other characters of the novel, and possibly many readers, do not truly understand the reasons for Elsie's silence, prompting assumptions and misinterpretations. The silence in this novel serves as a way to convey others' expectations of and assumptions about Elsie as a Native woman and a survivor of

sexual violence, such as those held by the characters Nancy, Sheriff Ed Parker, and Father Horst. Despite the fact that Nancy, Ed, and Father Horst have more contact with Elsie than many of the other citizens of Jackson, they cannot move past their assumptions and misinterpretations of her.

The assumptions surrounding Elsie's silence are particularly evident in the scene where Ed questions Nancy after he gets inquiries about Elsie from authorities in Mobridge. It is clear that the white, male powers want Elsie to remain quiet. Ed remarks, "But you just make sure that Elsie does keep quiet" (82). Nancy, in her attempt to serve as ally to Elsie and translate Elsie's silence to Ed, says, "Goddamn you! I TOLD you she isn't saying a word, and why would she? I wish to hell she would talk about it! This isn't just about an Indian girl being assaulted by white boys, it's about an ugly crime that men have been committing against women since time began" (82). While well-meaning, Nancy actually does something similar to the white, male characters in that she projects her own white feminist agenda and assumptions onto Elsie, who does not fall neatly into Nancy's paradigm. Nancy wants Elsie to toss away her silence in solidarity to all of womankind. However, what Nancy fails to notice is that Elsie navigates a complex intersection of race and gender that does not closely align with Nancy's white, feminist values. In this scene, it is evident how two characters both attempt to explain and control Elsie's silence, which allows for a productive comparison between misinterpretation based on cultural differences and Elsie's purposeful silence and withholding as a method to gain from others' misinterpretations.

In addition to her ignorance surrounding Elsie's individual experiences as a woman of color, Nancy makes assumptions in thinking that Elsie's silence is merely a

result of oppression rather than a choice to achieve agency as a Native woman. As Saville-Troike points out, “Stereotyping and misunderstanding occur when the patterned use of sounds and silence by members of one speech community are interpreted according to the norms and rules held by members of another” (14). This misunderstanding is prevalent throughout the novel in both Nancy’s and other community members’ interpretations of Elsie’s silence. After Nancy’s outburst, Ed later adds, “Hell, far as I can see, Elsie is harmless. She just keeps in the background and minds her own business” (82). Once again, Elsie’s silence conveys others’ assumptions about her, particularly her identity as a Native woman. Ed automatically assumes that Elsie’s silence and virtual lack of interaction with the rest of the community equate to Elsie being “harmless.” Ed also makes the assumption that Elsie does not pay attention to those around her because she appears to abide by the dominate power structure’s expectations that women of color remain in the background, serving as a mere “housekeeper,” as many minority women are expected to do for those of white privilege.

Similar assumptions regarding Elsie’s true nature and “harmlessness” can also be found throughout the community since “The white people of Jackson thought Elsie was strange, always carrying those turtles around with her, but she was industrious and never caused trouble” (68). While Elsie’s difference is a central theme, the focus remains on Elsie not instigating trouble in the community. What is important to note, however, is that the expectations and assumptions that the other characters have about Elsie are a result of purposeful silence she uses to be misinterpreted on her own terms, in turn using that misinterpretation to her advantage. Overall, Ed’s request for Elsie’s silence, Nancy’s quest for Elsie’s voice, and both Ed and Nancy’s assumptions regarding Elsie’s silence

and Elsie as a person, show that Elsie's silence serves as a powerful shield. As is the case with *Beloved*, since Elsie is the protagonist, and the title character, it is crucial to understand why they often talk the least. Just as *Beloved* escapes town scrutiny through her invisibility, Elsie maintains an agency-inducing invisibility that often allows her to escape town scrutiny, which is difficult in a small town such as Jackson. In fact, those around Elsie are more visible by their discourse just as Sethe is made more visible when *Beloved* prompts Sethe to share her stories. Washburn writes, "Elsie threaded her way through the summer in Jackson, working, always working, minding her own business and ignoring the events and the stories, both true and false, that concerned those events" (66). This shows that Elsie not only values privacy, but that she also is fully aware of how gossip can spread through a town. Washburn continues, "When she first came to town, the white people speculated about her origins and why she had come, but Elsie refused to be drawn into talking about it" (68). Here, Elsie's refusal to speak is once again evidence that she is able to use silence when she deems it necessary.

Trauma and the question of futurity

Elsie and *Beloved*'s purposeful silence and use of alternative discourses tie in with the novels' overall question of futurity and make a resonating statement regarding the intergenerational effects of trauma. Regarding *Beloved*, Barnett points out that "It is not incidental that this figure is pregnant at novel's end, suggesting the way traumatic experience might infiltrate the lives of future generations" (xx). Looking at the character of *Beloved* as a symbol of the haunting remnants of trauma and a place from which to raise the question of futurity is useful when contrasted with Elsie. After Elsie's death, the

“mummified remains of a baby, from the size, just a newborn or maybe a fetus of eight months or so,” are found wrapped in leather in a box underneath her bed (173). The death of Elsie, and what is likely her baby, symbolize not only the haunting and intergenerational effects of trauma, but also a lack of futurity and hope for survivors of historical trauma such as genocide and slavery. Both novels point to community as a factor that could bring some promise of a positive futurity.

In Morrison’s novel, *Beloved* is a mystery to those around her, even her family, creating a divide between her and everyone else. Similar to *Beloved*, Elsie carries a separation from both the mainstream society and the Native community in Washburn’s novel. As Cullinan notes, “In a narrative often characterized by the struggle of its speakers to speak to one another of their own painful experiences, *Beloved* becomes a story of the suffering of an entire community of people” (82). Overall, community in *Beloved* can be either a blessing or a curse. On one hand, community is a place to heal from a shared historical trauma; on the other hand, the community can also betray as they did to Sethe when they failed to tell her that people were looking for her. As I discussed in Chapter 1, just as community is central to Sethe and Baby Suggs finding agency, Denver also needs a sense of community in order to build a better future. It is only after they are out from *Beloved*’s control in 124 and the solitary life of that space that Sethe and Denver can find any hope. Elsie also has a strained relationship with community, since she is in a liminal space between the mainstream white community and communities of color. Since Elsie is isolated and alone, not to mention her poignant and mysterious death at the end of the novel, the reader is left without much hope. After Elsie’s death, however, her father connects with those in her community to find out her

story, and ultimately tell it. Although Denver and Elsie's father do bring some degree of hope, both works ultimately offer a rather bleak forecast for intergenerational trauma survivors, promoting the importance of community in the healing process.

In the end, not only do *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business* highlight purposeful withholding as method of protest and agency, they establish silence as a valid form of discourse. These novels convey that silence and other alternative discourses are powerful in dealing with cultural trauma and sexual violence for women of color forcibly silenced in the past. While *silencing* is often a tool oppressors use to maintain power, Elsie and Beloved retain a purposeful silence that makes those times that they *choose* to speak even more powerful. Finally, *Elsie's Business* also prompts more attention to the issue of sexual violence against Native American women, and the complex intersections between race, gender, and power at the root of that violence, which deserves critical attention. Although the novels make a powerful statement surrounding the validity of silent discourse, silence needs further scholarly exploration, and the final question about futurity in both works requires additional attention. How can a woman of color find hope in the future after being multiply oppressed, and having survived sexual violence and cultural trauma? In *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business*, futurity resides in community support and the ability to share stories with people who have the ability to understand trauma. The novels themselves also offer a sense of hope, since readers who reside outside of communities of color gain deeper insight and, hopefully, help in the healing.

CHAPTER 3

**Opposing Navigations of the Spectator Gaze:
Activism and Responsibility in *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake***

And that visibility which makes us most vulnerable
is that which also is the source of our greatest strength.

— Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

In narratives that rely on silence as a form of discourse, there is even more focus on visual representations. When portraying forms of sexual abuse in literature, particularly violence against multicultural characters, writers have the responsibility of navigating a liminal space where the trauma is effectively portrayed in a way that *conveys* it to the reader, yet does not allow the reader to participate in a scopophilic (pleasure in looking) gaze. In addition to the analyses regarding survivors' acquisition of agency through voice or silence and alternative discourses, the previous two chapters also begin to look at how authors navigate the spectator gaze. In "Circumstance," Spofford protects her white protagonist by focusing on the body of the "Othered" attacker. In *Beloved*, Morrison often offers little description of the body. In *Elsie's Business*, Washburn has a similar technique as Morrison in only describing Elsie's body in fuller detail only when Elsie takes control of her sexuality. However, there are ways that authors navigate the spectator gaze during an attack that allows for more description, and, thus prompts readers to identify more personally with the attack. Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* demonstrate two different approaches to handling the erotic spectator gaze, and the retraumatization and reobjectification of characters as a result of that gaze; however, one commonality between them is the activism and social commentary behind their novels, or what Deborah M. Horvitz terms

their “fusion of the personal and the political” (2). These authors increase the visibility of sexual violence, navigating the vulnerability Audre Lorde mentions; however, since that visibility is handled responsibly, it is a source of strength in activism surrounding sexual violence against women of color.

Not only do both Yamashita and Atwood draw from their experiences as women, but Yamashita also pulls from her multicultural experiences as a Japanese American when creating her narratives. In fact, Yamashita’s novel successfully communicates the trauma of rape and navigating the complexities of multicultural trauma discourse, which conveys trauma that is often personal to one’s multicultural experiences and ways of knowing. This allows the reader to understand the horrors of rape without retraumatizing and reobjectifying Yamashita’s character, Rafaela. On the other hand, Atwood manipulates trauma discourse in a drastically different way from Yamashita, particularly when it comes to multicultural trauma. On the surface, Atwood’s handling of the erotic spectator gaze surrounding child pornography and sexual abuse is problematic, since her character, Oryx, subtly placed as a multicultural “Other,” is described in a way that repeatedly retraumatizes and reobjectifies her; however, by making the erotic scopophilic gaze apparent, Atwood forces her reader to experience the discomfort that accompanies being a participant in something so horrific, particularly when multicultural characters are involved. The discourse of multicultural sexual trauma in *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake*, although conveyed using varied manipulations of reobjectification and retraumatization as a result of the scopophilic gaze, are both successful because they battle indifference by moving from the imaginary to a more tangible understanding of trauma; in this way, that the horrors of rape and sexual abuse are more fully realized.

Multicultural identities and activism

Behind the trauma discourse and the spectator gaze in *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake* is a crucial multicultural factor that must be recognized. It is important to note how both Yamashita and Atwood approach writing about Rafaela's and Oryx's multicultural identities when analyzing scenes where trauma is present. Rafaela is a Mexican-American woman and Oryx was born in an unspecified area in Asia. Yamashita portrays Rafaela as a strong, independent multicultural woman, while Atwood highlights the dominant views of Oryx as exotic, silent, and indifferent. As I have noted in the previous two chapters, writing about sexual trauma to multicultural characters can be especially difficult, since there are more than one level of "Otherness," and the authors have to navigate the characters' multiple oppressions. Not only are Rafaela and Oryx women, but they are women who are viewed as the "Other" by the privileged members of society. In *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet*, Elizabeth Ammons takes an in-depth look at multiculturalism, particularly in relation to literature. In the book, Ammons details something she calls the "multicultural imperative." She asserts, "The multicultural imperative is about diversity that includes a clear power analysis of the system of racism that functions to create and maintain advantage and disadvantage. For that reason, knowledge coming from members of subordinated groups counts particularly heavily because their social locations, structurally, allow for strong insight into how power operates in the world" (91-92). While Morrison and Washburn also highlight this "multicultural imperative" and end their novels with a question of futurity and community responsibility, Yamashita's and Atwood's novels take that politicization to a new level since both authors take a more activist approach with an additional critique

of how authors write about sexual trauma. Although more evident in Yamashita's novel, both *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake*, like *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business*, make statements about how power differentials operate in multicultural lives of the "Other;" however, Yamashita and Atwood convey sexual violence in alternative ways to the reader in order to prompt change through the reader's more personal experience with the text.

Alternatives to navigating the scopophilic gaze

The spectator gaze is powerful anytime it is used, but when the gaze is placed upon a multicultural character, the "Otherness" of the character being gazed upon is multiply-exploitative. This is the case in both *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake*. Gunne and Thompson point out that "graphic representation of sexual violence constitutes what some feminists see as a second violation" (2). This threat of a second violation, or reobjectification and retraumatization, is a serious concern when sexual abuse is portrayed on screen or in writing, and it becomes even more of a threat when multicultural characters are involved. The theories surrounding the gaze and scopophilia detailed in Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" also apply to literature. One of the main "forms of looking" that Mulvey details is one that "arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (1175). According to Mulvey, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator ..." (1176). Mulvey also points out that cinema is "indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic

fantasy” (1174). Although novels are not “indifferent to the presence of the audience,” any narrative format, such as literature, can produce this same effect, since the reader separates from the traumatic events, and readers can even get a sense of pleasure from the descriptions in the text. Yamashita’s and Atwood’s novels are examples of this effect in action since both Rafaela and Oryx are at risk of being placed as the “erotic object for the spectator.” However, Yamashita and Atwood navigate this gaze in different ways, and these methods have strong ties to the characters’ multicultural identity and a quest for activism.

In general, narrating sexual abuse in literature is complex. In navigating the scopophilic gaze one author opts to shield her character from erotic spectatorship and the other chooses to place her character in the direct line of the gaze, but both illuminate the horror of violence against women. In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita makes the conscious decision to thwart the erotic scopophilic gaze in order to protect Rafaela and her multicultural identity from being reobjectified and retraumatized, but she uses craft techniques that differentiate her work from *Beloved* and *Elsie’s Business*. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood does not protect her character or Oryx’s multicultural identity in the same way as Yamashita does. In fact, Atwood places Oryx in direct line of the reader’s gaze so the character becomes not only an erotic object for the other characters, but also for the spectator, or reader, as well, resulting in revictimization. Both approaches are successful in navigating reader indifference to trauma; however, in her keen awareness of the dynamics of multicultural identity, Yamashita shields Rafaela from the objectifying erotic gaze. In her book, Saidiya V. Hartman addresses the complexities of reader

participation as a result of the spectator gaze in traumatic scenes, particularly in literary works that involve multicultural characters:

What interests me are the ways we are called upon to participate in such scenes. Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance? What does exposure to the violated body yield?

(3)

In order to highlight “capacities of pain” and attempt to represent something that is beyond words, authors run into the problem of navigating voyeurism. When looking at the scenes conveying sexual trauma in *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake*, questions must be asked surrounding the dynamic of reader participation and what “exposure to the violated body” allows. While Yamashita shields Rafaela from the voyeuristic erotic gaze in order to protect her, while also providing a fuller representation of a terror that is difficult to represent, Atwood manipulates her voyeurs in order to practically accuse the reader of being an active participant of the abuse, prompting discomfort and self-reflection. Both Yamashita and Atwood display an awareness of the complexities of the gaze, which Hartman refers to as “the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator” (4). While Yamashita and Atwood show an awareness of the liminal space between witness and spectator, their methods of navigating that space are in opposition with each other.

Putting trauma into textual perspective

In addition to their differing methods surrounding the erotic spectator gaze in scenes where rape and sexual abuse are centralized, *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake* also use trauma discourse techniques in a way more relatable to the audience in order to promote self-awareness, since readers are forced to dig deeper into the text in order to fully grasp the trauma described. Trauma discourse is difficult because one attempts to put words to something there are no tangible words for. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Elaine Scarry discusses the difficulties one encounters in attempting to convey trauma through discourse, saying, “Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). Basically, there is no reliable discourse in relation to trauma, torture, or pain. The fact that trauma is “unsharable” makes conveying it to readers a daunting task since trauma is something that is often beyond expression. *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake* offer two different solutions to this problem. Yamashita opts for a strategic use of visual imagery to replace words for something unspeakable. Atwood, on the other hand, forces her reader to be a voyeur to the trauma, and, like Washburn, places a power in silence. These techniques are effective and thought-provoking, prompting readers to embark upon a deeper reflection while knowing that could not be achieved if an author were to take a broader, more traditional approach in describing trauma. While Morrison and Washburn discuss multiple traumas, Yamashita and Atwood push their readers to new levels in order to build a greater awareness of the problem and promote change on a broader context of writing about sexual violence since this awareness helps prevent one from participating unknowingly or replicating the violence in the future.

In order to effectively discuss Yamashita's techniques in trauma discourse and navigating the erotic spectator gaze in the rape scene in the chapter "Nightfall — Aztlán," it is helpful to view it from the theories presented in the essay "Audre Lorde: Trauma Theory and Liberal Multiculturalism" by Megan Obourn. In her piece, Obourn basically looks at how poet Audre Lorde conveys the connection between trauma and multiculturalism in her works. The essay starts by acknowledging AnaLouise Keatings view that Lorde "creates a new discourse enabling her to invent a world in which those truths can materialize" (qtd. in Obourn 219), which is something Yamashita should also be given credit for in *Tropic of Orange*. Obourn points out that writers like Lorde (and, Yamashita could be included here), allow "readers to become aware of the limitations of dominant liberal multicultural discourse and its ways of representing identity and subjecthood" (220). Since the traumas experienced on a daily basis by those forced to navigate the world as the "Other," and traumas such as rape and war, are difficult to verbalize, Lorde and Yamashita utilize their craft in order to give a voice to those without one; they offer a form of discourse for experiences beyond words. According to Obourn, Lorde creates "different ways of representing minoritarian selfhood and identities" (221). This can also be said of Yamashita, particularly in regard to characterization in her novel. Although the novel incorporates alternating narrations, in this case, Yamashita's representations of female minorities, particularly Rafaela, will be the primary focus. In *Brave New Words*, Ammons notes in her analysis in *Tropic of Orange*, "Racism divides one person from another and even one from oneself ..." (151). Overall, Rafaela is not as divided from herself as the book's other female character, Emi, is; however, as a result of

Yamashita's narrative techniques, one can see Rafaela's disassociation from herself during the rape scene.

Although Obourn's theories analyze Lorde's work, many of Obourn's points are applicable to Yamashita's treatment of the rape scene. Obourn asserts that "though Lorde deals with cultural and identity-based traumatic material and traumatic historical memory, her use of what I am calling traumatic form is not a traumatized reaction to such events, it is a controlled, nonpathological, and brilliant use of language to capture the experience of living in a 'traumatic' subject position" (Obourn 225-226). Yamashita also exhibits this "controlled, nonpathological, and brilliant use of language" in order to not only convey the trauma of rape, but to also relay the multifaceted trauma experienced by women of color like her character, Rafaela, who experiences the world as a woman of Mexican descent, a minority woman when living in the U.S., a wife in a multiracial marriage, and the mother of a child who can claim a mixed heritage between the already complex Asian heritage of his father and the Latina culture of his mother.

The beginning of the chapter that features the rape scene delves right into the action of the trauma, highlighting the fragmentation and compartmentalization of the assault:

The villain pressed Rafaela's elbow into the small of her back and jerked her head back by the hair. The sound of her screams traveled south but not north. He jammed her into the leather cavern of the black Jaguar — suddenly a great yawning universe in the night. Springing upon her writhing body, he clawed her throat and pawed her breasts, tearing her soft skin. Her writhing twisted her body into a muscular serpent — sinuous

and suddenly powerful. She thrashed at him with vicious fangs — ripping his ears, gouging his neck, drawing blood. He screamed but returned snarling, pounced, eyes bloody with terror, claws and teeth, flashing knives, ripped into the armored scales of her tensile body. Her mouth gaped a torch of fire, scorching his black fur. (Yamashita 220)

Much in the way that Obourn describes selections of Lorde’s poetry as presenting “neither the self nor the word as singular and integrated but as split and unable to assimilate all the parts of itself” (235), Yamashita also uses this technique to convey Rafaela’s internal disassociation during the trauma through a narration that is “split” externally. When reading the “Nightfall — Aztlán” chapter, it feels disjointed with such phrases as “south but not north,” and the compartmentalizing of body parts as Rafaela and her victimizer battle (Yamashita 220). According to Suzette A. Henke, “There seems to be little doubt that trauma precipitates a violent fragmentation of the (perhaps fantasized) image of the integrated subject” (xvi). The disjointed discourse in Yamashita’s writing not only connects to the general fragmentary nature of traumatic memory, but it also conveys the disassociation of self that Rafaela experiences during the rape. Obourn quotes Judith Lewis Herman’s analysis of Lorde’s writing, saying “this ‘intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context, gives the traumatic memory a heightened reality’” (qtd. in Obourn 236), which bridges the gap between text and reader so they cannot be so, as Hartman terms, “fascinated” or “repelled” by the scene that a true understanding is impossible. Yamashita’s references to body parts in the scene and her use of animalistic qualities are crucial in creating a deeper understanding

among readers without risking reobjectifying Rafaela or creating a narrative that lacks reader participation.

In Obourn's essay, she talks about Lorde's technique of conveying the "multiply minoritized subjects" through a "conglomeration of representative parts" (237).

Yamashita does this in that she focuses on when the attacker, "clawed her throat and pawed her breasts," and when Rafaela was "ripping his ears" and "gouging his neck" (220). Though Yamashita does compartmentalize body parts, she does this in a way that represents Rafaela as a "multiply minoritized subject," but does not objectify her to the reader. Not only are the references to body parts subtle and mixed with references to animals in battle, but the reader is not allowed to hold a voyeuristic gaze for long enough for the scene to become disturbingly erotic since these body parts are never described in full reality. At the same time, the descriptions are visually compelling enough where the reader understands what is going on in a more personal and concrete way than words will allow.

Yamashita's decision to substitute animal characteristics for Rafaela and her attacker is a strategic move as far as crafting trauma discourse and navigating the erotic gaze are both concerned. The use of animal imagery places the gaze in a nonobjectifying position since it does not focus on the violation of Rafaela herself, and the decision is one that provides Rafaela with agency despite the horrific attack she has just endured. While animals are often victims of objectification themselves, Yamashita uses the descriptions of powerful animals to take the spectatorship off the body and onto the violence. In Spofford's piece, there is a problematic nature to the animalistic qualities given to the attacker, but Yamashita portrays Rafaela and her attacker with equally deadly animal

characteristics, and without racial undertones, thus preventing one from being more “Othered” as far as race is concerned. Gunne and Thompson provide another example of a portrayal of rape as “animalistic savageness” in their discussion of Mahasweta Devi’s short story “Draupadi” (1981, translated into English by Gayatri Spivak) (9). According to Gunne and Thompson, in “Draupadi,” the protagonist Dopdi is “stalked and hunted through the woods” before being gang raped (Gunne and Thompson 9). Dopdi wonders to herself “if her body will be left ‘For the foxes to devour’” (qtd. in Gunne and Thompson 9). In analyzing this story, Gunne and Thompson assert that Devi makes strategic choices in the short story to protect Dopdi’s agency despite the trauma:

The animalistic savageness underscores the hideous nature of the rape, where Dopdi’s body is treated like a carcass, like raw meat. Devi refuses to eroticize the rape or to grant narrative power to the rapists. By speaking from Dopdi’s narrative point of view, her brutalized body is invested with agency even while the violence of the attack is foregrounded (9)

Narrative techniques in *Tropic of Orange* that deny the rapist many of the powers centered around the attack, such as the “narrative point of view” can be found further along in the novel’s rape scene, as well:

Two tremendous beasts wailed and groaned, momentarily stunned by their transformations, yet poised for war. Battles passed as memories: massacred men and women, their bloated and twisted bodies black with blood, stacked in ruined buildings and floating in canals; one million more decaying with smallpox; kings and revolutionaries betrayed, hacked to pieces in a Plaza of Tears, ambushed and shot on lonesome roads,

executed in stadiums, in presidential palaces, discarded in ditches, tossed into the sea. (Yamashita 220)

This passage continues with historical scenarios where colonizers take advantage and violate other cultures, connecting colonization to rape. In addition to the animalistic references, Yamashita uses battle, and historical references to battles, to convey the brutality of rape and the role power and dominance plays in sexual violence, particularly when attackers target women of color. At the same time, in calling the rape a battle, Yamashita gives Rafaela some sense of agency since she is not being overpowered, but rather fighting back, thus taking some of the power away from her attacker.

As the battle closes, Yamashita once again prevents portraying the attacker as more powerful than Rafaela, or Rafaela being defeated by her attacker. Yamashita writes, “As night fell, they began their horrific dance with death, gutting and searing the tissue of their existence, copulating in rage, destroying and creating at once – the apocalyptic fulfillment of a prophecy — blood and semen commingling among shredded serpent and feline remains” (221). Here, Yamashita highlights a togetherness and unity that might appear strange on the surface, but she is quite perceptive in how she uses her craft. In saying “they,” “their,” and placing “blood and semen” and “shredded serpent and feline remains” together, Yamashita creates a situation where we can differentiate the attacker from the person attacked. She also prevents the erotic spectator gaze from objectifying Rafaela, since there is not a focus on Rafaela’s body during the attack itself, yet readers are able to understand the *magnitude* of the trauma.

At the end of the attack, Yamashita encounters the task of conveying the repercussions that women have to face after rape. Yamashita writes, “When Rafaela

awoke, the sky above was a shroud of black feathered creatures, a million pairs of eyes staring down. She focused dimly, through the narrow slit that remained of one eye, on the pebbles embedded in the dirt near her face and the flashing tail of a snake disappearing into the undergrowth” (221). The strategic use of “a million pairs of eyes staring down” in relation to the “black feathered creatures” and Rafaela’s “narrow slit that remained of one eye” is notable. Here, Yamashita manipulates the gaze so the reader is not able to be an erotic spectator. With the focus on the creatures’ gazes, the reader is prompted to gaze at *their gaze* rather than *gazing at Rafaela’s violated body*. When Yamashita highlights Rafaela’s virtual lack of a gaze as a result of her injury, the reader is prompted to focus on what Rafaela might or might not be seeing, rather than looking at Rafaela herself.

In the next passage, Yamashita continues to explore the trauma’s toll on Rafaela’s body:

She pushed out a chunk of something fibrous between her teeth with her tongue and was horrified to see a wad of black fur emerge and shift along the dirt like the scattering feathers. Retching and gagging, the remaining fur and pieces of skin spilled into a small pool of blood. More blood dripped from her forehead along with handfuls of her own hair, falling into her vomit. (221)

Here, Yamashita combines specific words and broad imagery in order to highlight the ravages of the attack. The reader mostly sees the “blood,” “fur,” “hair,” “vomit,” and “skin.” These are words that evoke horror and disgust, not eroticism, yet they are not enough to completely repel the reader. Also, parts of Rafaela are compartmentalized, and the reader is not offered the whole, so maintaining an erotic gaze is difficult. It is not until

the next passage that the reader is given a more comprehensive view of Rafaela when Yamashita writes, “The pain of her convulsing body reached from her head to her feet — every part seemed bruised and torn. Despite the heat, she hugged her nakedness, tugging at the few shreds of clothing left covering her battered body” (221). Even though Yamashita references Rafaela’s “convulsing body” and her “nakedness,” the descriptions of her body are not specific enough to prompt the erotic spectator gaze, using a technique similar to Morrison.

In order to further transfer agency to Rafaela, Yamashita makes it a point to metaphorically castrate the attacker. Yamashita writes, “The villain and his Jaguar had disappeared. Rafaela crawled around in the dirt exploring. A shattered piece of what seemed to be the steering wheel, still encased in its leather cover, and the gold figurine snapped from the hood, were all that remained” (221). The removal of the gold figurine symbolizes the attacker’s castration, since he is intrinsically linked to the car. The car, and, thus predator’s disfigurement, are likely a result of Rafaela ripping the ornament from the car, so the attacker now has retained no power or threat, and, in turn, Rafaela has the power. Yamashita demonstrates that heightened agency when she writes, “A sharp sting of new pain ran along her arms to her hands, and suddenly she was aware of her fingers clutched in two hard fists. Carefully bending her fingers backward, she stared in horror at the pocketknife in one hand — its inlaid handle thick with blood — and the crumpled leaf of a human ear in the palm of the other” (221-222). This description and imagery surrounding Rafaela’s hands is significant in that it is symbolic of the power Rafaela has found within herself following the attack. Her hands are “clutched in two hard fists,” signifying that Rafaela is prepared for the battle. She also holds a pocketknife,

with what must be the attacker's blood on it, which in itself carries strong connections to metaphorical castration, stripping the agency from the attacker.

There is a sense of opposition between the textual terms Yamashita uses signaling the end of the ordeal. Yamashita writes, "Suddenly the sky was a chorus of heavenly chanting, a terrible blessing, and a great fluttering of millions of wings withdrawing nightfall, away. Rafaela crouched on her hands and knees in the dirt and bore her nakedness under the malign scrutiny of the now blue sunlight" (222). There are the opposing phrases "terrible blessing" and the "malign scrutiny" of the "blue sunlight," sending the message that there is a combination of good and evil, and Rafaela can come out of such a traumatic attack strong. This mirrors Devi's story in that when she "bore her nakedness" Rafaela is at a point where she strips power from her attacker, thus gaining agency. Rafaela conveys the ability to take a traumatic event and turn it around to the opposition so she achieves agency.

When taking into account both her navigation of the gaze and the technique of using imagery as a form of trauma discourse, Yamashita's treatment of the narration of Rafaela's rape offers discourse for something difficult to convey with words. The reader can better understand the reality of the attack through Yamashita's crafty technique than it could ever be conveyed with a more "traditional" approach to narration — meaning narration where the author merely runs through the events of the trauma rather than crafting their work to convey the trauma in a way where the reader is required to reflect on it. What takes Yamashita's craft to the next level, however, is her ability to write about rape in a way that does not revictimize Rafaela. Both the victim and victimizer take on a metaphorical animal form, showcasing Rafaela's emotional disassociation from the

trauma, and both the victim and the victimizer are compartmentalized and suffer injuries. Unlike other rape stories, Yamashita offers a narrative where the woman being sexually assaulted actually fights back. Thanks to Yamashita's careful craft, Rafaela is not subjected to the gaze of the reader in a way that opens her up to revictimized every time the chapter is read. While this is not the case with *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood proves that there is more than one way to use trauma discourse and the erotic spectator gaze to make a statement about conveying sexual abuse in literature.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood details the scopophilia of a young boy, Jimmy, and his friend, Crake, as they view pornographic videos. The video that stands out the most to Jimmy is one featuring a young Oryx. In describing Oryx in the pornographic videos, particularly with a focus on Jimmy's and Crake's perspective, Atwood creates a situation where Oryx is reobjectified and retraumatized each time the passages describing her appearance on the web site is gazed upon by the reader. In the novel, Atwood offers such detailed descriptions of a young Oryx in a child pornography video ensuring that the reader becomes a spectator of the video, along with Jimmy and Crake; however, since the reader is often separate from the action in the novel, the result is an *uncomfortable*, not erotic, form of voyeurism.

In first introducing the reader to Oryx's appearance, Atwood writes, "She was small-boned and exquisite, and naked like the rest of them, with nothing on her but a garland of flowers and a pink hair ribbon, frequent props on the sex-kiddie sites" (90). In this passage, Atwood sets the reader up for what will become an extremely voyeuristic description of Oryx. Describing Oryx as "small-boned" and "naked" objectifies and traumatizes as a result of the scopophilia that Jimmy and Crake experience in looking at

her image, but also in the reader's voyeuristic experience. Whether the reader is willing or not to view this scene from a scopophilic lens, "pleasurable" looking is encouraged by the use of "exquisite," the "garland of flowers" and the "pink hair ribbon," since these are words that usually have positive connotations. The word "exquisite" draws readers in to experience something pleasurable. The "garland of flowers" and the "pink hair ribbon" convey an initial seemingly harmless innocence. Although Atwood comments that the flowers and ribbon are "props" on the child pornography site, introducing the negative connotation of the words, she only does this following the voyeuristic descriptions of Oryx's body, immediately establishing Oryx as an "erotic" object to both Jimmy and Crake, and the spectating reader.

As the section moves forward, Oryx continues to be described in a way that sets her up as an erotic object to be gazed upon. Atwood writes, "She was on her knees, with another little girl on either side of her, positioned in front of the standard gargantuan Gulliver-in-Lilliput male torso — a life-sized man shipwrecked on an island of delicious midgets, or stolen away and entranced, forced to experience agonizing pleasures by a trio of soulless pixies" (90). This passage becomes even more sexual than the initial physical description, since spectators can now see the position of Oryx's body, particularly in relation to the male body, and even the other little girls. Oryx and the other two "soulless pixies" are directly set up as objects to view in a sexual manner with the words "delicious," "entranced," and "pleasures" — all positive words, despite being placed alongside phrases with negative connotations, which bring out the erotic side of the spectator gaze.

These heightened sexual descriptions are even more pronounced as Jimmy's viewing experience is further enacted for the reader. Atwood writes:

The act involved whipped cream and a lot of licking. The effect was both innocent and obscene: the three of them were going over the guy with their kittenish tongues and their tiny fingers, giving him a thorough workout to the sounds of moans and giggles. The giggles must have been recorded, because they weren't coming from the three girls: they all looked frightened, and one of them was crying. (90)

This passage can be disturbingly titillating to some readers until the final sentence. In the final line, even unwilling spectators objectify and traumatize Oryx. "Licking," "innocent," "obscene," kittenish tongues" "moans" and "giggles" are all words that encourage the erotic voyeuristic gaze. The only releases from the erotic gaze are the areas where the girls are "frightened" and "crying." Once again, the end of the passage offers the only opposition from the disturbingly "pleasurable" aspects of the scene, after the reader has already revictimized and reobjectified Oryx. Because of this literary voyeurism, Atwood repeatedly places Oryx in the sexually objectifying position she was in as a child in the pornography video, and, thus retraumatizing Oryx with each reading. For some readers, what might follow is a sense of shame if they experienced any pleasure in reading this description of Oryx. This is the point where Atwood takes a risk and intentionally forces the reader to interact with uncomfortable portions of the text in order to promote a deeper understanding of the trauma and violence at hand. While Yamashita, because of her personal multicultural approach, makes it a point to avoid reobjectification and retraumatization of Rafaela, in Atwood's manipulation of the scopophilic gaze, she

chooses to reobjectify and retraumatize Oryx in an effort to invoke discomfort in her readers and transcend reader indifference. Laura E. Tanner argues, “The force of the narrative impulsion that aligns the reader with victim, violator, or observer and the reader’s reaction to that force create an interactive power dynamic, an intimate and sometimes unsettling play of readerly response and resistance in which the reader’s own sense of embodied subjectivity comes to be at risk” (3). This “readerly response and resistance” is the basis for Atwood’s approach in subjecting Oryx to the erotic spectator gaze. In her novel, Atwood places the reader in a position where he or she has no choice but to respond and resist instead of mindlessly consuming the text. Atwood’s technique is similar to those in some narratives on the horrors of slavery. Hartman points out that “The grotesqueries enumerated in documenting the injustice of slavery are intended to shock and to disrupt the comfortable remove of the reader/spectator” (17-18). Hartman uses the writings of abolitionist John Rankin as an example, saying, “By providing the minutest detail of macabre acts of violence, embellished by his own fantasy of slavery’s bloodstained gate, Rankin hoped to rouse the sensibility of those indifferent to slavery by exhibiting the suffering of the enslaved and facilitating an identification between those free and those enslaved” (18). Atwood does this in her graphic descriptions of the sexual abuses that Oryx endures since Atwood effectively disrupts the “comfortable remove of the reader/spectator,” initiating some form of identification.

Although Atwood does reobjectify and retraumatize Oryx in the scenes where the reader is a participant in an uncomfortable erotic spectator gaze, it is important to note that Oryx, like Washburn’s Elsie, does reach for her own unique form of agency in her

trauma discourse through silence. The end of the pornographic video highlights the power in silence when Jimmy describes Oryx's return of the gaze:

Oryx paused in her activities. She smiled a hard little smile that made her appear much older, and wiped the whipped cream from her mouth. Then she looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer – right into Jimmy's eyes, into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said. *I see you watching. I know you. I know what you what.* (90-91)

Not only does Oryx gain some agency in reflecting his gaze back onto Jimmy, but her silent stare is also a discourse that offers her power as she challenges Jimmy. As I discuss in Chapter 2, Ernestine S. Schlant sheds light on the different kinds of silence, asserting that “Silence is not a semantic void” and “Silence is constituted by the absence of words but is therefore and simultaneously the presence of their absence” (6). It is easy to overlook the discourse of silence in *Oryx and Crake* since it is so subtle, especially in comparison to *Elsie's Business*, but to ignore Oryx's silence would be ignoring the one form of agency that she acquires.

Overlooking the silent discourse in Atwood's novel neglects to recognize that Oryx uses silence in order to highlight her agency, and overlooking her *purposeful withholding* also fails to point out Jimmy's attempt to suppress Oryx's agency, which is possibly as a result of her challenging him with her silent gaze as a child. In the novel, Jimmy shows an obsession with getting Oryx to talk about her past and gets frustrated at Oryx's apparent indifference to the traumas she faced as a child. In urging Oryx to talk about her traumas, Jimmy attempts to disempower Oryx. In her book, Horvitz explores the sexual trauma presented in another one of Atwood's works, *Alias Grace*. In

discussing the behavior of Simon Jordan, the primary male character in that novel, Horvitz says, “His fantasies of helpless, tormented women evoke his sexual excitement and, conversely, that sexual excitement evokes his wish to disempower the ‘other’” (131). This analysis of Simon Jordan could also be applied to Jimmy. Not only does Jimmy develop an obsession with a young Oryx after viewing her in the middle of a traumatic sexual abuse situation, but Jimmy constantly urges Oryx to talk about those objectifying experiences and questions her if she does not have the reaction to her past that he expects. Jimmy talks about his anger at the men who abused Oryx, but he himself was a participant of that abuse through his gaze. Overall, similar to the white male community members in *Elsie's Business*, Jimmy's desire to get Oryx to talk about her past is a form of male dominance that seeks to take away the power Oryx claims in her choice to remain silent. While there are times that Oryx will elaborate on her past and answer Jimmy's questions, there are also many times when she does not or moves around the issue.

In addition to his failure to completely break Oryx's silence, Jimmy also misunderstands what type of silence she has. Schlant says, “It has been suggested that there are two kinds of silence” (7), going on to cite Hamida Bosmajian's theory. Bosmajian explains, “The first comes from too much knowledge, while the second is a refusal to become aware. This second silence is the escape into which memory and guilt are repressed” (17). At first glance, it appears that Oryx has the second type of silence, but upon further inspection, it is more evident that Oryx likely has the first kind. Like Elsie, Oryx is more knowledgeable than many give her credit for, but Jimmy constantly devalues much of her particular knowledge. In one instance, Atwood even writes, “He's

making her sad because he's taking away some of her knowledge, her power" (113-114). Based on what Oryx *does* say, it is clearer what is behind what she *does not* say. Readers who are not looking for it do not see Oryx's agency; however, the agency is there — it is just unspoken. By the end of the text, Oryx's silence builds upon the significance of the novel's visual representations, adding depth to her character so she is not a mere object.

Using opposing techniques, Atwood and Yamashita are able to convey their multicultural characters' agency in ways that engage readers and challenge them to establish a personal investment in the texts. In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita subtly approaches the representation of trauma; while in *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood confronts her reader. Yamashita entangles her messages within a complex web of imagery as a form of trauma discourse and her navigation of the reader's gaze, highlighting Rafaela's agency. Atwood's manipulation of the gaze challenges readers, and Oryx's agency is often in question because the scopophilic gaze reobjectifies and retraumatizes her, but also because she uses silence as a form of trauma discourse. Despite their different approaches, Yamashita and Atwood both accomplish the overall goal of battling reader indifference, especially when looking at the works through a multicultural lens. After reading the horrific scenes in both of these novels, readers are better equipped to move from indifference to a more tangible understanding of trauma, particularly trauma rooted in sexual violence against women of color. As Ammons points out in *Brave New Words*, "The struggle of justice against oppression, hope against despair, is hard. But it has long been the work of humanists, and of literature in particular, to put before the world both terms in each of those dyads — justice as well as oppression, hope as well as despair — to help people commit to the first in each case" (172). Although they take different

narrative approaches, *Tropic of Orange* and *Oryx and Crake* are both examples of literature that highlight these dyads, and, in so doing, serve as a form of activism that calls for change in a way that makes maintaining indifference very difficult. Ultimately, these two authors highlight the possibilities in representing sexual violence in order to push readers to new ways of knowing when the representations are responsible and done with intention.

CONCLUSION

And where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out, to read them and share them and examine them in their pertinence to our lives.

— Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

When I embarked upon this project, I knew that I wanted to analyze literary representations of sexual violence against women in order to think about issues surrounding visual depictions of sexual assault in fiction. While I was confident in my passion in this topic, I did not expect the transformations that occurred as this thesis slowly came together. This project has been with me since my first semester in my master's program, starting with analyses of the gaze, moving on to a focus on silence, and, in the process, realizing my interest in writing about experiences of women of color and promoting activism. I am drawn to feminist theory; it is a central part of all the literary criticism that I do, so combining my interest in the gaze, silence, multicultural literature, and social justice has been exciting.

It can be difficult as a white woman to write about issues surrounding communities of color, since I have not had to face oppression based upon my race. I have not been *forcibly silenced* because of the color of my skin. Other marginalized aspects of my identity and my past experiences provide me with a basic understanding of being silenced, but it is only through dialogue and learning about everyone's individual ways of knowing, and attempting to bridge these differences, that I will continue to grow as a person and an activist. Novels like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Frances Washburn's *Elsie's Business*, Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* highlight the personal experiences of women of color who are survivors of sexual

violence in order to prompt all readers to reach a deeper level of understanding of the multiple oppressions that haunt multicultural lives. These novels also elicit readers to really *listen* and take action through the building of communities, particularly among people of color, in order to begin healing and uncover a positive futurity. It is through a strong community connection that people of color and allies can find a unifying voice of agency, and these voices are pivotal in addressing sexual violence and stopping irresponsible representations of it.

This thesis is not only important in further recognizing the oppressive silence that women of color navigate, but it also prompts a differentiation between *oppressive silence* and a *purposeful silence*, particularly surrounding experiences of sexual violence against women of color. Those who use a purposeful silence can do so in order to listen and reflect, yet still have the ability to speak about trauma and maintain agency. A purposeful silence allows one to listen and see things from a different perspective, and in order to maintain the ability to speak out, one must afford oneself with some element of self-preservation and protection from those intent on maintaining domination. This thesis legitimizes silence as a valid form of discourse that does not automatically equate with oppression; at the same time, this work analyzes visual representation, since silence often leads to an increased focus on the visual rather than the verbal. In this heightened focus on the visual, an awareness of the problems inherent in representing sexual violence is crucial, especially sexual violence against women of color, so that the representations are responsible and productive.

It is pivotal to note that this thesis does not speak for every woman's experiences surrounding sexual violence or navigating the world as a person of color. The

intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are so complex that it is nearly impossible to lend a voice to everyone's individual experiences in a project of a smaller scope. Looking forward, there are several ways I can approach these complexities in order to make this project more inclusive of alternative ways of knowing. For one, I will analyze more diverse literary works to lend additional voices to the varied experiences of women of color who survive both sexual violence and cultural trauma. In this thesis, I primarily focus on African American and Native American characters, with some mention of Asian and Latina women. While I am not comfortable with this inequity, a master's thesis provides a limited space and time to account for every written work featuring sexual violence against women of color. I want to continue to learn more about the diverse experiences in African American and Native communities because my goal is to be an ally. It is also my priority to expand my knowledge of literature by Asian American and Latina women so these experiences are not on the periphery of my analyses in the future, and I hope to work with these communities as well. However, transcending these strict racial categories is a pivotal step in recognizing complex identity intersections, although this will prove difficult at times, since systematic racism in America feeds on these distinct divisions. Ultimately, the more I expand my understanding of others' unique experiences, the more inclusive I will be, because recognizing intersectionality is key in avoiding homogenizing communities of women and in acknowledging the effects of the systematic nature of racism.

Not only is it crucial to read novels by multicultural women and speak with women of color in the community in order to reach a greater level of understanding personally and professionally, but critical theory is also an important component in what I

do. The more theory I immerse myself in, the more prepared I will be when I expand on this research. My work is interdisciplinary, and I always include feminist theory in my analyses, but I can do more. Adding feminist theory that specifically touches upon the uniqueness of multicultural experiences would benefit this project. For example, African American theorists bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins can enlighten my analyses on silence in African American communities. Not all African American women can relate to the female characters in *Beloved*, just as Elsie is not the “model” for all Native American women. The novels analyzed in this thesis are individual texts that offer individual voices, so reading theories written by women who identify as members of these communities is a starting point. Additionally, I want to expand my interdisciplinary work to include media, such as film and music, and the theories that surround these works, since the inclusion of these texts offers an even more well-rounded perspective. I believe that literature, feminism, cultural texts, and social justice education all work together to present a more complete picture in appreciating diversity.

There are elements in each of my three chapters that I would like to build upon and improve in future research. The first chapter contains ecofeminist theory, which is a field I am just becoming more familiar with, and thus am least comfortable with, so I would like to continue to shape that work by building upon my knowledge of environmental theory. I feel it is important to advance my knowledge of ecofeminist theory, in particular, because the degradation of women and the degradation of land strongly link together. In becoming more comfortable with ecofeminist theory, I have the opportunity to establish a solid thread between all of the literary works in my thesis, connecting sexual violence against women with the rape of the land. In this project, I

contain my environmental theory to the first chapter, but it is applicable to chapters 2 and 3 as well. Unfamiliarity is one reason why I restrict ecocriticism to Chapter 1, but, as I said before, this project provided a limited scope for me to achieve all of my goals. I chose to focus on different themes in the remaining chapters in order to expand my familiarity of silence and the gaze because I plan to integrate them into my future critical work more often. While I do not anticipate a huge focus on environmental theory in the broader scope of my writing, it proves valuable in analyzing violence in connection with patriarchal domination. In addition to analyzing connections to the environment, the first chapter also speaks about the need for community in building a voice of agency among African Americans. I need to reiterate that I am not saying that all African American women share these experiences. The importance of community as a source of coping and healing is a common thread I discovered in both *Beloved* and *Elsie's Business*, so I found it worth further exploration.

As far as the second chapter is concerned, I am interested in sharpening my analysis on silence so I can use it in my dissertation. As I mentioned, silence is extremely difficult to theorize due to its complexity, but that challenge intrigues me. Silence in novels has always fascinated me, so I am thankful that this project allowed me to enter into this complicated conversation. I mentioned in Chapter 2 that there are multiple reasons for silence, and fear and shame should be included in this list; however, while I want to recognize oppressive silence, I seek to legitimize silence as an avenue to empowerment as well. I will continue to explore this fine line between a silence imposed upon a person and a purposeful silence used to withhold. Sometimes, time plays a role in the ability to speak out. It might take a while before sexual assault survivors even want to

speaking out, but we should not discredit their initial choice not to speak should it be their choice. Silence provides many opportunities for critical analysis, since it is predominant in multicultural works, and I am particularly interested in expanding this research to include postcolonial literature and novels about human trafficking. However, before I move in that direction, I need to become more educated and aware of issues surrounding particular postcolonial countries in order to mute my Western lens as much as possible. In regards to human trafficking and sexual slavery, I begin to talk about Oryx's silence in Chapter 3, and I would like to develop that more as I take this project to the next level.

Although I do analyze silence some in my third chapter, I primarily focus on the gaze. One of my primary goals is to improve my knowledge of theory on this subject in order to anticipate arguments regarding the active versus passive nature of the reader's gaze in literature. I also need to question the risk that Atwood, a white woman, takes in positioning a multicultural character under the erotic gaze, particularly in thinking about this novel as a form of activism. I would have liked the opportunity to incorporate more analysis of the gaze in my other two chapters because silence heightens the gaze in many instances, but the smaller scope of this project once again played a role in my decision to primarily restrict this theory to the third chapter. In expanding Chapter 2, I will definitely analyze where Washburn initiates the gaze and where she refuses the gaze in *Elsie's Business* in order to make that selection more well-rounded. As I said, I plan to include not only contemporary American literature, but also postcolonial works to my future studies, so that will allow me to analyze the gaze differently in relation to colonial bodies. I also aim to create more inclusivity in analyzing representations of sexual violence against men, which complicates the gaze in interesting ways.

For this and future projects, I want to make it clear that men are included in this discussion, since they are instrumental in creating change. Everybody has a stake in violence against women, and, in order to achieve change, everyone must be involved. While my primary goal is to help others, looking back, I realize this project has helped me, too. In constantly thinking about this material, I had to conquer many of my own demons in order to regain a sense of hope and futurity that I had lost. In writing about silence, I also ironically regained my own voice. Rediscovering my own voice was in writing this project because, if my overall goal is to be an ally to communities of color and strengthen their voices, I need a strong voice first. This thesis helped me to acquire confidence and regain my voice, and it provided me with time to reflect on how I want to use that voice in order to promote activism both academically and personally. Just as I started this thesis with Audre Lorde's pervasive words, I would like to end with her call for action that we must realize we have a responsibility to read, share, and examine words in order to discover how they relate to our lives in order to promote positive change.

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