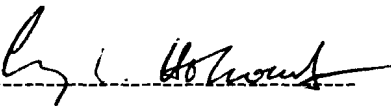


AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Agnieszka Tuszyńska for the Master of Arts in English, presented on 15 June, 2004.

Title: Putting Flesh on the Radicals: The Black Female Body in Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Margaret Walker

Abstract approved: 

(Thesis Advisor Signature)

Trapped in the exploitive system of objectifying definitions generated by the dominant society, the black female body has been the signifier of black women's identities as victims. In the writings of Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Margaret Walker, the body acquires agency through its radical acts of resistance to oppression and stereotypical representations. I present a discussion of the three authors' works with the focus on subversive bodily acts with respect to black women's sexual and gender identities, as well as their political situatedness in the class system. My analysis draws on feminist schools of thought, both French and American, as well as on Marxist criticism and critical theory. With the combination of these interpretive tools, I demonstrate how through the appropriation of the discourse of the body, the three Harlem Renaissance women writers empower and redefine *the black woman* by presenting her body as engaged in meaningful acts of self-assertion and rebellion.

PUTTING FLESH ON THE RADICALS: THE BLACK FEMALE BODY IN
ANGELINA WELD GRIMKÉ, GEORGIA DOUGLAS JOHNSON, AND
MARGARET WALKER

A Thesis

Presented to

The Department of English

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by Agnieszka Tuszyńska

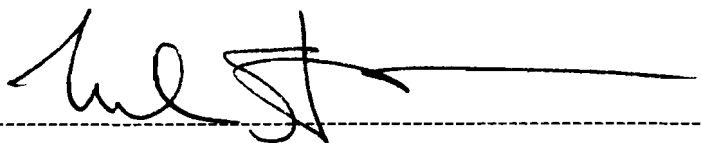
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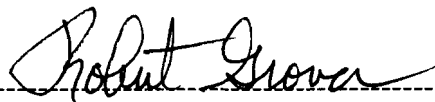
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Approved by the Department Chair

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Approved by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express special thanks to my thesis committee members, professors Susan Kendrick, Gary Holcomb, and Mel Storm. Their patience and insightful comments stood behind the entire process of this thesis coming to life.

For his unwavering support, intellectual guidance, integrity, and radicalism, I want to acknowledge my thesis director, professor Gary Holcomb. His instruction and example contributed to the genesis of this thesis and to my development as a student of literature who is not afraid to take risks. I am indebted to professor Holcomb both as a future scholar and as a person.

I want to direct my loving thanks to Jack whose help with the proofreading of this thesis and, even more important, love, support, and faith in me contributed to the completion of this work.

I dedicate this thesis to the three people in faraway Poland, whom I love, admire, and miss: my parents, Maria and Józef Tuszyńscy, and my brother, Michał. Kocham Was bardzo.

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Chapter I

True Colors: Introducing the Radicals

The writings of the three women who are the focus of this study: Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Margaret Walker, are grounded in the long and rich tradition of radicalism in black women's literature. Therefore, the history of black women's subversive literary expression, encompassing among others such nineteenth-century writers as Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, and Frances Harper, offers a wide range of fascinating subjects for study. Thus, the question arises: why should this discussion concern itself with the 1920s and 1930s? The reasons are multifold, for they encompass multiple cultural, social and political aspects of the reality in which Walker, Johnson, and Grimké lived and wrote. Therefore, before proceeding to an introduction of the three authors, I will briefly discuss the historical forces that shaped their world. After all, to use Margaret Walker's words,

It is necessary as always when approaching Afro-American literature in any form—poetry, prose, fiction, or drama—to give a background of the socioeconomic and political forces and the historical context before proceeding to a literary analysis or synthesis. Then we will have the necessary tools with which to examine the strange phenomena found in American and Afro-American literature. (qtd. in Tate, "Black Women" 40-41)

One of the most obvious elements of the reality in which Grimké's, Johnson's, and Walker's works originated was the blooming of black Americans' culture and literature experienced in the twenties and thirties. The explosion of creative activity

during the Black Renaissance was an unprecedented phenomenon and the proliferation of this activity into all areas of culture resulted in a movement that encompassed not only all major American cities in the North, but also other regions of the black Diaspora (Gates, *Norton* 929). “In poetry, fiction, drama, and the essay, as in music, dance, painting, and sculpture, African Americans worked not only with a new sense of confidence and purpose but also with a sense of achievement never before experienced by so many black artists in the long, troubled history of the peoples of African descent in North America” (929). Thus, the three central figures of this thesis were unfolding their literary skills in the atmosphere of intellectual motivation on a large scale. Even if, as women, they were deprived of the “manna” of support and recognition that fell on their male colleagues (Hull 10), they were still, to some degree, submerged in the aesthetically and intellectually stimulating environment of the thriving Harlem Renaissance. However, I claim that this cultural aspect is only one of several reasons why the radical works of women writers at this particular time deserves special attention. Following Fredrick Jameson’s urge to “[a]lways historicize” (Jameson 1937), I want to shed light on the social and political movements and institutions that shaped the world of Walker, Grimké, and Johnson and their writing.

One of the central themes of this analysis—the presence of class issues in the writings of the three women—is a result of a profoundly energetic historical process that the authors witnessed: the development and thriving of socialist and communist movements. The popularity of black participation in the Communist Party during the time of the Harlem Renaissance could not and did not pass undocumented in the literature of the era. As William Maxwell argues in *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (1999), “The history of African-American letters

cannot be unraveled from the history of American Communism without damage to both” (2), and the 1920s and 1930s exemplify this assertion. Moreover, the relation of the Communist Left to the “woman question” introduces one more historical axis which should not be ignored in the discussion of black female identity. The “woman question” is exactly what lay at the heart of another movement that extended its influence at the time: the women’s movement. The fact that Grimké, Walker, and Johnson were writing in an environment of an increasingly pronounced feminist struggle contributed to the radical stance that their works illustrate. Moreover, as *black* women, they introduce an interesting complication to this struggle as they generate their own means of identification, different from white feminists.

The historically and politically influential movements of feminists and Communists were accompanied by one of the most significant changes in the American social landscape in the first decades of the twentieth century: the process and the results of the Great Migration of African Americans from North to South. While my analysis will concern the texts produced in the times *following* the largest waves of the migration, it is vital to remember that the three writers were intimately familiar with the phenomenon and lived in the midst of its consequences. Grimké’s family’s abolitionist traditions and Walker’s and Johnson’s personal experiences of the journey to the North are just as significant here as the fact that they all spent the majority of their adult lives in the North and could observe the effects of the migration. Their socially conscious texts often reveal the consequences of the Great Migration that turned out to be a double-edged sword for many black Americans. While they left behind the Southern forms of persecution such as lynchings and “whitecapping,” or in other words being physically driven from their land (Grossman 16-17), they entered a world with its own, less obvious,

color lines. In the North, a new struggle began as the migrants from the South faced the competition for jobs, lodging problems and class hierarchy (Grossman 123-31). In Walker's, Johnson's, and Grimké's works one can detect the awareness of the hardships that poor African Americans had to confront in the North which failed to fulfill all its promises as a haven for blacks. Therefore, the effects of the Great Migration, along with the feminist movement, Communist leftism and, of course, the cultural atmosphere of the Black Renaissance, contributed to the overall special character of the three writers' works and the way in which they constructed black female identity.

As the complex historical context may suggest, the Harlem Renaissance women's radical writings constitute a fascinating body of literature grounded in some of the most significant events in the social history of America. Nevertheless, in many respects, literature by women of the Harlem Renaissance is one of the greatest challenges to American literary and cultural studies. In practical terms, this challenge has translated into a relatively modest amount of scholarship devoted to in-depth studies of Black Renaissance women writers or, on the other hand, discussions that compromise black female subjectivity present in these writings in favor of taxonomic treatment of their authors. Admittedly, in the last two decades interest in the women of the Negro Renaissance has escalated and resulted in some insightful studies, such as Gloria Hull's *Color, Sex, and Poetry* (1987), Maureen Honey's *Shadowed Dreams* (1989), Claudia Tate's introduction to *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson* (1997), and Honey and Venertia Patton's *Double-Take* (2001). Despite their indisputable contribution to the rediscovery and exploration of women writers of the Renaissance, however, these and other studies leave certain aspects of the subject unexamined. One of the major common characteristics of the scholarship in the field is that it approaches the women of

the Harlem Renaissance as just that, the women of the Harlem Renaissance. Such an approach, frequently focused primarily on the attempt to distinguish the women of the era from their male counterparts, erases many potential cross-currents that exist among various women writers. Usual classifications and groupings of their literature are often predictable and conventional; for instance, scholars point to various women as representing the folk tradition, sentimental love poetry, or the obvious anti-racist literary movement.

In my approach, I want to retain a certain degree of distance from these popular ways of analysis or, at least, not treat them as the sole or primary analytical tools. I want to focus on a reading of three Harlem Renaissance women, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Angelina Weld Grimké, and Margaret Walker, which will enhance what has often been overlooked by other analyses, that is, the interplay of the multiplicity of radical discourses in these women's literature. This emphasis will indicate the emergence of heterogeneous black female subjectivity in the radical writings of Walker, Grimké, and Johnson.

Thus, the connections among the three writers that I offer will often vary from the usual associations. I suggest that the taxonomies according to which Harlem Renaissance women, and these three writers in particular, are usually perceived, elide and thus silence the voices of resistance to the dominant order which are the most significant elements of their writing. Classification of their literature as, for example, merely love poetry, as in the case of many of Grimké's and Johnson's poems, or as Southern folk poetry, as in the case of Walker, has the dangerous potential of denying this literature its complex radical character. This, in turn, robs the black female identity of the non-simplistic, plural sources of its origin. I believe that to see and to problematize intentionally the subversive

message offered in these writers' works is to understand better the multithreaded fabric of black women's lives and thus more effectively to analyze their self-definitions. Hence, I will present a discussion of Walker, Grimké, and Johnson's texts that will emphasize themes other than those analyzed by many critics. Moreover, I hope to present the radicalism of these texts as not a homogeneous phenomenon, but rather as a result of resistance to multiple axes of marginalization ranging from racial and gender oppression to sexual and labor exploitation. Therefore, the subjectivity of the black woman as presented in the writings by these three writers is not a product of any single essence of that woman's identity, but rather a creation resulting from the negotiation of plural means of identification. The assumption—that there is no one primary agent in the process of self-definition of the black woman—was behind my choice of authors for the present study. Each of the three writers has her special and unique contribution to the project of radical definition of black female subjectivity.

The inclusion of Georgia Douglas Johnson in any study concerned with Harlem Renaissance women is often almost taken for granted. Johnson was an intriguing figure; the lack of any concrete information about her childhood and parents renders her a somewhat enigmatic persona. This air of mystery is even more thickened by the fact that both her appearance and "her lifelong preoccupation in life and art with the miscegenation theme" pointed to her mixed blood heritage (Hull 155). However, what really makes her "unique" in terms of literary studies is her exceptional status as a black woman writer of her time. While, as a general unwritten rule, the Negro Renaissance "was a time" when, in Hull's words, "men as usual were 'in vogue'" (10), Johnson enjoyed an unprecedented degree of recognition and appreciation as a black female writer. She "was called 'the foremost woman poet of the race'" (Hull 178), and was

“better known and more widely published than any of her black sisters” (178). She also occupies a special place on the map of the Renaissance intellectuals as the initiator and hostess of literary discussion meetings in her house in Washington, D.C. The meetings started in 1926, following Johnson’s husband’s death, and continued for a long time, becoming a Saturday night tradition for the elite of the Negro Renaissance. The status that Johnson gained as the best known black female poet and the central figure of the Saturday literary nights also today guarantees her appearance in most studies that undertake the subject of Black Renaissance women. Notably, her role as “a hostess”—a role traditionally ascribed to women—contributed to her prominence. This fact may trigger an interesting and profoundly problematic discussion of how Johnson was perceived and how this perception influenced the reading of her works. A close scrutiny of many of Johnson’s poems, plays, and short stories reveals that her “popularity” came from a particular and carefully manipulated paradigm of interpretation applied to her writings.

Two lines of discourse have been established with respect to Johnson’s works. The first one focuses on her as the author of “feminine” love poems, while the other is fixated on her “race drama.” I want to suggest that both these emphases impose a limiting framework of analysis on Johnson’s writings, one that does not consider the full range of radical meanings contained in this literature. Although much of Johnson’s poetry is about love, one needs to consider the possibility of irony in what at first sight appears to be sentimentality. Having had the experience of a “typically patriarchal” marriage to an older man (Hull 160) “who didn’t think much of his wife’s longing for a literary career” (159), Johnson did not write her love poems from a standpoint of naiveté about relationships with men, which is often implied by paternalistic analyses of her work.

Gloria Hull, in *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), points to the early signs of such condescending approaches to Johnson's "feminine" poetry. She comments on the introduction to her first book of poetry, *The Heart of a Woman* (1918) by William Stanley Braithwaite, Johnson's mentor. Despite his presumably good intentions, Braithwaite does not restrain himself from using rhetoric full of references to stereotypical perceptions of womanhood (Hull 157). Four years later, W.E.B. Du Bois's foreword to Johnson's second collections of poems, *Bronze* (1922), reflected an even more straightforwardly paternalistic attitude (Hull 163) when Du Bois made her writing sound like a compilation of scribbling of questionable worth. Today, critics have moved far from voicing such boldly insulting comments; however, they often adopt the idea that Johnson is a sentimental love poet and hence should be discussed almost exclusively as such. Apart from undermining Johnson's authority as a mature poet, the frequently reproduced claims about the fragile and sensitive femininity reflected in her poetry portray her as an icon of constructed, idealized black womanhood. They rarely refer to her struggle of reconciling single parenthood, work outside the house, and writing after her husband's death. Thus, the sensibility of her poetry is reduced to traditionally perceived *femininity* instead of subversive *feminism*. Such an approach does not take into account the complex identity reflected in this poetry, poetry that is full of irony, resentment, resistance, and agency.

Another label that has been assigned to Johnson is that of the "woman playwright of the Race." Her drama has been frequently discussed in relation to its anti-lynching themes and its "'plain folk' aesthetics" (Krasner 136). Admittedly, many of Johnson's plays are very much concerned with racial injustice; however, the most common analyses of these plays downplay the importance of the theme of female identity interwoven in the

discussion of racism. Such analyses often imply a sort of compromise on the part of Johnson in foregrounding only one aspect of the black woman's identity, while disregarding all other aspects. In *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (2002), David Krasner argues that Johnson, along with Willis Richardson, "aimed to universalize the black experience" through a number of "aesthetic activities" that she employed in her plays (135). Some of these "activities" listed by Krasner refer explicitly to Johnson's supposed literary support for the project of the enhancement of the Race promoted by such intellectuals as Du Bois and Alain Locke (136). In my study, I intend to prove that Johnson's plays and other writings should not be perceived solely through the constraining lenses of the black nation's objectives. Such a perception may easily erase the specificity of the female experience in the racial and class context. The "universalization" of the black experience that Krasner mentions is impossible; the self-definition of the black woman that Johnson's writings illustrate relies precisely on the rejection of universalizing labels and stereotypes, whether white or black. Hence, my goal is to broaden the readings of Johnson's works and thus point to the plural sources of subjectivity that emerges from them.

One of the "regulars" at Johnson's literary evenings was Angelina Weld Grimké, a writer whose works never received the praise Johnson enjoyed. Like Johnson's, Grimké's family history was written on her body; her complexion was very fair, almost white, and indicated her parents' interracial marriage. However, unlike Johnson's, Grimké's origins do not present a mystery to scholars; her family is known to have been a genteel clan of political and racial liberals including the famous abolitionist sisters, Sarah M. Grimké and Angelina Grimké Weld, Grimké's paternal great aunts. Being a daughter

of a white mother and mixed blood father, and living surrounded by middle-class, educated people was, as Hull states, “both advantageous and problematical” for Grimké (150). While these extraordinary circumstances protected her from the many hardships that most black Americans were coping with, they also imposed a number of limitations on her that complicated both her literary expression and her private life. Many of her frustrations came from the fact that she was a closeted lesbian who most probably “felt the psychological pressure of having to live up to family name and standards” (Hull 110). Hull argues that this social and political situatedness “encouraged” Grimké “to produce work that was correct, conservative, and highbrow, and poetry that was conventionally ‘poetic’” (110). I want to suggest that the surface “gentility” of Grimké’s writings conceals profoundly radical messages and that, as in Johnson’s case, her works are too often labeled as simply “feminine,” which dismisses their subversiveness.

Despite the two writers’ close friendship, Grimké and Johnson could be described as opposites, both in their private and public lives. While Johnson was known, even in the late years of her life, to be an energetic, robust woman who did not break under the burden of multiple responsibilities and never gave up her enthusiasm for writing, Grimké was an introvert whose literary career almost entirely stopped after the traumatic event of her father’s death dismantled her psychological balance completely. Her diary and letters to her friends reveal that she did not trust people (Hull 148-9). Moreover, her relationship with her father contributed to her limited ability to interact with other people. Raised without a mother, who left when Grimké was still a baby, and unable to develop close relationships with the women that she loved and desired, she invested all her emotions in her relationship with her father, despite the feelings of inadequacy that she nurtured

because of him. After his death in 1930, Grimké became neurotic and stopped writing, withdrawing into almost complete alienation from active life.

In my analysis of Grimké's works I will trace the loci of agency that many critics have identified as evidence of the author's personal weakness. In Grimké's case, perhaps more than in Johnson's or Walker's, her writing was virtually the only way to give vent to certain elements of her identity and the implicit manner in which she did it should not be seen as diminishing the value of the act. Similarly to Johnson's writing, if not more so, Grimké's works are often discussed as "typically" feminine, centering on the themes of longing for true love and the "nature" of victimized womanhood. However, my analysis finds as its focal point the productive anger which underlies many of Grimké's works, and her discomfort with the status quo with respect to black female identity.

While Johnson and Grimké have appeared in each other's company in numerous books and articles, some may perceive my inclusion of Margaret Walker in this analysis as puzzling. The frequent occurrence of Johnson's and Grimké's names together can be often credited to the categorization of their writings and the periodization; they are frequently discussed as Harlem Renaissance female dramatists or poets and their plays and poems are usually analyzed with respect to common themes. Moreover, their common date of birth of 1880,¹ and hence their simultaneous literary careers, position them in the most strictly understood "true time of the Harlem Renaissance," which frequently becomes "abbreviated" to the years 1919-1932² (qtd. in Musser 28). Born in 1915, Walker, whose first book of poetry was published in 1942, is typically not categorized as a Harlem Renaissance writer.³ Thus, to many, my inclusion of Walker next to Johnson and Grimké may seem inconsistent and awkward. However, I support my decision with several claims and assumptions. First, the cultural, political, and social

forces behind the Harlem Renaissance extended their influence far beyond 1932, and the time of the Great Depression does not mark the end of the black literary movement that developed in the preceding decade. Second, Walker began writing and publishing her work in various magazines well before the publication of *For My People* in 1942. Finally, Walker's involvement in the radical socialist movement of the time and its reflection in the writings that she was producing generate multiple connections between her and the other two women, indicating the ambivalence of clear-cut literary divisions based purely on periodization.

Born in the South to educated parents, Margaret Walker moved to Illinois at seventeen to enroll in Northwestern University. This journey north had great importance to Walker's work. Her intimate knowledge of both the rural South and the industrial North was a well of inspiration that became shaped into a politically oriented aesthetics under the influence of the proletarian literary and social movements in Chicago. Although she was probably never a member of the Communist Party of the USA, her life in Chicago during the thirties resulted in "the Marxist influence upon her work, and her infusion of working-class politics into African-American myth and ritual" (Berke 125). Later in life, Walker would become very evasive in her accounts of her Communist past, but while in Chicago during the years of her youth, she was an active supporter of and organizer for the proletarian cause. As Nancy Berke writes in *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker* (2001), Walker "attended classes and lectures at the worker's school on dialectical materialism, Marxism-Leninism, art and society, the proletarian novel, and proletarian poetry" (125). She also "promoted and enlisted subscriptions for the black radical literary journal, *Challenge*" (Berke 125). Her radical outlook affected her literary commitment to issues of race, class, and gender

which, again, proves her a great contributor to the discussion of radical constructions of black female identity. Equipped with discourses borrowed from the Communist left, she expressed certain types of resistance in a manner very different from that present in the works of Johnson and Grimké; I would argue that this is where the time difference between her career and theirs looms large. Walker grew up at the height of the proletarian tradition, at a time when, as Maxwell argues in *New Negro, Old Left*, “it was not always easy to distinguish Communist Party rolls from lists of prominent Harlem artists” (1). Thus, she learnt to combine the discourse of proletarian struggle with the question of resistance as a black woman. However, despite the difference in tools and emphases, in many respects Walker’s writing achieves the same goals as the other two writers’ as it negotiates a space for self-definition, and will be presented along with Johnson’s and Grimké’s works as the literary carrier of the ideas of black women’s resistance and agency.

The value of the above facts from the three writers’ lives for the present project might be called into question if one considers the postmodern status of the author’s biography as suspect. After all, critical theory of the second half of the twentieth century freed the text from its dependency on the author. In “The Death of the Author” (1968), Roland Barthes presents the abandonment of the idea of authorial intention as the beginning of the text’s true existence:

As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his [sic] own death, writing begins. (1466)

Thus, an attempt to relegate Johnson's, Grimké's, and Walker's texts to the meanings derived from various pieces of their biographies would be an act of restriction risking Barthes's ironic comment: "[W]hen the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic" (1469). However, while admittedly one should restrain from complete reliance on biographical data, certain aspects of the three authors' life experiences can be perceived as much more than just individual women's private spheres. These experiences often offer insight into the reality that is no longer readily available to today's readers; hence, they can be useful in the process of analyzing their works.

The use of the three writers' biographies in this thesis does not have for its aim a project of simplistic causation between their psychological framework and their writing. The faultiness of such an approach is rightly criticized by Barthes: "The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us" (1466). This study will consciously refrain from the implication that biographical information must indicate a simple relation between the text and the life of a single person: the author. My arrangement of the analysis of different texts by the three women emphasizes the collective aspect of their radical tone and message; I do not treat each author's writings as a separate subject for discussion, but rather I organize the analysis according to the themes in all three writers' works. This arrangement has another useful feature; it allows for a panoramic view of various forms of oppression and resistance to them across the literature produced by three different writers, and thus points to the historical significance of the personal experiences that might have influenced these writings. The persistent presence of some common radical themes in these works, and their potential relation to the authors' lives, renders the use of

biography as a necessary political act in the process of analyzing literature. As T. V. Reed states in his preface to *Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers: Literary Politics and the Poetics of American Social Movements* (1992), the work of literary critics “is unavoidably political” (xi). In the case of Johnson, Grimké, and Walker, the importance of politicizing their literature cannot be emphasized enough. Their works and traces of their lives in these works, mark a specific social and political situatedness, the knowledge of which is indispensable for the project of acknowledging the black female self-definition in their writings.

The author’s life then does not have to be erased from the consideration of her or his work. Even Barthes himself, in his later writings, reconciled what he had earlier seen as a contradiction between the freedom of the text and the biography of the writer. In these later works, Barthes allows the previously “disembodied, abstract author” to “become an embodied and particular author”; however, “the body and biography are both seen as historical, and both are structured like a text. . . . The body can be read like a text, just as the text can be read like a body” (Leitch 1460). The mention of the *body* here is pivotal to my thesis. One might ask why a study of the radical, subversive discourse in the writings of these three writers should be associated with an entity which has often been the focus of the exploitation of black women: the body. Does a thesis like this one, then, engage in a peculiar form of exploitation by “using” this so frequently (ab)used body? The importance of these questions weighs heavily with my choice of the black female body as the central idea, and thus my approach calls for some explanation.

Undeniably, the discussion of the black female body as such is not a novelty in either cultural or literary fields of study. The proliferation of discourse on the subject reaches back to remote times when the first African women were brought to America as

slaves, and the entrance of this discourse into the realm of writing is marked by the documents of proprietary rights held by the slave owners. Based on the racist assumption that blacks in general, and black women doubly, were intellectually and emotionally inferior, white masters relegated the identity of the black woman to her body; the body which now became *the* signifier for the complex variety of black female experiences. These initiations of the story of the black female body in America, distant as they may seem, established a dangerous precedent which has outlined the ramifications of this story ever since. As one of the most acknowledged references to black female identity, the body has been exploited by numerous perpetrators of the oppressive systems in which it was trapped. Having originated in the circumstances of the physically and sexually abusive system of slavery, the discourse of the black female body was later used and molded according to the needs and whims of abolitionists, the emerging black middle classes, white feminists, and the black nationhood movement, to name just a few. While the usual connotations with these groups are, obviously and rightly, much more positive than those with slavery, the fact remains that all these institutions imposed some kind of restrictions on the narrative of the black female body, denying the ownership of this narrative by black women themselves. The dangers of generating one more exploitive narrative are real and great, and should be realized by anyone taking up the subject of black womanhood. The goal of this study, however, is to position the usually objectified black woman's body as the *subject* through the analysis of black female writers' reappropriation of the discourse.

In her novel, *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison introduces the notion of "rememory." This concept, when applied to Johnson's, Grimké's, and Walker's works, becomes a metaphor for the black woman's reclamation of the black female body. "To

‘rememory,’” as Carolyn Jones explains in “Sula and Beloved: Images of Cain in the Novels of Toni Morrison” (1993), “is to make an act of the moral imagination and to shape the events of one’s life into story” (616). Moreover, this act also implies a filling of empty spaces in the history of a person or group, or substituting one’s own narratives of one’s history for other, distorted narratives generated by the group in power. In the process of “rememory,” one can see the demise of what Jean-Francois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), called the *grand narrative*, and what could be otherwise called “the imperialistic imposition of a rigid teleological scheme on a world which either is or should be a web of differential textual energies” (Argyros 660-61). In the writings of these three African American women, “rememory” of the black female body becomes the radical re-reading of various subversive bodily acts. The writers equip this body with an agency of which it was often deprived. The demands of the hegemonic order that the body be docile and ready to sacrifice denied the black woman her subjectivity. In these writers’ works, in this “web of differential textual energies” that their various writings produce, the act of identification of black womanhood is being returned to the proper hands; hence, it achieves the status of *self*-definition. A discussion of this radical process is needed to explore the subversion of and resistance to the status quo in the three writers’ works. Thus, I will analyze the meaningful situatedness of the body with respect to sexuality and labor. To better outline the intention behind this thesis, I will use Toni Morrison’s words: “My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers” (90). Therefore, my goal in the following chapters is not to reinforce the exploitive grand narrative, but rather to change the focus and acknowledge the black female body as the agent.

Notes to Chapter I:

¹ The year of Johnson's birth was established only after decades of biographers trying to clear up the confusion caused by her attempts, like Zora Hurston, to hide her true age.

² An example of such a periodization is Margaret Perry's 1976 *Silence to the Drums: A Survey of the Literature of the Harlem Renaissance* (qtd. in Musser 28).

³ Walker is not anthologized in such collections as *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (1994) edited by David Levering Lewis, nor for that matter in the already mentioned Patton and Honey's *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* and Honey's *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance*. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie McKay places Walker in the section *following* the one devoted to the Harlem Renaissance writers.

Chapter II

“I’ve Been Mistreated and I Don’t Like It”: ¹

Asserting the Black Woman’s Gender and Sexual Identities

An interesting departure point for the discussion of literary assertions of black female sexuality may be “The Task of Negro Womanhood” (1925), an essay written by a groundbreaking black feminist, Elise Johnson McDougald. In this text, McDougald writes: “On the whole the Negro woman’s feminist efforts are directed chiefly toward the realization of the equality of the races, the sex struggle assuming the subordinate place” (74). These words reflect on the process of identity formation by black women who, as McDougald notes, suppress the gender and sexual components of this identity in favor of the racial element. While she states that the black woman “is courageously standing erect, developing within herself the moral strength to rise above and conquer false attitudes” (75), her essay also encourages black women to take a more radical stance on gender emancipation. What she proposes, then, is a way for black women to treat their gender identities as equally important to their racial identities. The emphasis on the problematic question of black womanhood is also present in poetry, fiction, and drama written during the Harlem Renaissance. McDougald’s essay presents the reconciliation of gender and race as a path that has not yet been discovered by black women. However, authors such as Grimké and Johnson, writing around the same time as McDougald, used their creative forces to generate models of black female identities that refused to subordinate any one part of their identities to any other.

It becomes clear then that the discussion of black women’s meaningful acts of resistance to the status quo requires a special focus on the question of gender and sexual

identities and their intersections with race. These intersections are often points of origin of a struggle—a struggle to assert one’s selfhood against definitions generated by others. Moreover, in the process of *self*-definition, black women in the literary texts discussed below show opposition to compromising some aspects of their identities in favor of others. Instead, they accept the pluralized complexity of their subjectivities as members of the black race *and* as women. Race and gender inform each other constantly as defining constructs of these women’s lives, and hence they cannot be treated as two separate, subordinate kinds of identities. Thus, the analysis in this chapter will emphasize both the reconciliation of multiple axes of identification by the black woman, and the way in which she asserts her heterogeneous identity to resist the definitions of the hegemony. I use the phrase “the black woman” here as a problematic signifier which encompasses plural dimensions despite its implications of singularity. In this chapter, I will concentrate on texts by Angelina Weld Grimké and Georgia Douglas Johnson.²

The rendition of black female selfhood in the writings of Grimké and Johnson does justice to the complexity of this plural, non-homogenous identity. The construction and assertion of this identity in the works of the two authors can be analyzed with reference to the body. Being the site of fusion among various elements, including race, gender, and sexuality, the body becomes the center of this complicated identity-formation process. This body defies simplistic categorization. It is never *just* black, *just* female, *just* gay, *just* single, *just* of mixed-blood, or *just* reproductive. It is a number of these things at all times, and it is ever transforming. Thus, the identities that inhabit these complex bodies may be called “border identities.”

The border identities of black women in Grimké’s and Johnson’s works have their theoretical counterparts in the identities described by two twentieth-century critical

thinkers, Donna Haraway and Gloria Anzaldúa. Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985) and Anzaldúa's "La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness" (1987) offer alternatives to the means of perceiving one's own and others' identities based on exclusionary and essentialistic thinking. Despite some "essential" differences between the two theorists' ideas, Haraway's *cyborg* and Anzaldúa's *mestiza* are both examples of border identities that escape narrow definitions and engage in acts of self-construction as subjects. Moreover, though distant in time, the concepts of the cyborg and *la mestiza* can be useful in theorizing and understanding the motif of the black female body in the radical writings of Grimké and Johnson. These two theoretical constructs are especially applicable in the discussion of *gender* and *sexuality* with respect to black women. As "hybrid" identities, the cyborg and *la mestiza* provide a matrix for the analysis of these elements of the black woman's identity that are so often downplayed in favor of her racial identity. Haraway's and Anzaldúa's models of selfhood emphasize the importance of *all* elements of identity. Thus, the two are instrumental in discussing the assertion of the sexual and gender identities as vital factors of the black female subjecthood.

It is the heterogeneous and non-fixated character of Haraway's and Anzaldúa's constructs that is the source of their resemblance to the identities enclosed in the complex black female bodies. Haraway defines the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of a machine and organism," "creatures simultaneously animal and machine" (2269).

Anzaldúa's *mestiza* is a product of blending as well, a

mixture of races, [which] rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological

cross-pollonization, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making--a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands. (Anzaldúa 765)

Thus, both are clearly concerned with the obliteration of rigid boundaries and definitions. The multiple elements of the cyborg's and *la mestiza*'s identities are celebrated in their heterogeneity. Furthermore, like black women in Grimké's and Johnson's texts, the cyborg and *la mestiza* take the constant self-construction of their image as the central objective of their existence. As Anzaldúa states, they are characterized by “continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of the new paradigm” (767).

This embracing of the border identity and the movement towards self-definition resembles the radical project of self-expression taken up by women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Grimké's and Johnson's writings undermine various fixed ideas about black womanhood. Some of the most important themes in their literature are the social constructions of black femininity, sexuality, and motherhood. The authors illustrate the creation, or perhaps the re-creation, of complex female identities that finally break through the definitions imposed on them by, among others, both white and black men. Like the cyborg who faces the task of reconciling the machine, the human, and the animal in her, and like *la mestiza* who confronts her multiple, Spanish, Indian, and Anglo origins, the black woman in the writings of these two women comes to realize that no aspect of her identity is less valuable than any other. Above all, she acknowledges the fact that the task of constructing black female identity is *her own*.

Black Renaissance women's assertion of their gender as an important part of their overall identity and a vital component of their racial situatedness, to use Foucault's term, did not sprout without a reason. It was a result of the racist and sexist bias against black

women. The prejudice made itself known in the exploitation of the black female body by both white and black men. The violation of black women's sexual integrity by white men is perhaps the most deleterious form of this exploitation. The pattern of institutionalized rape, initiated by slave owners exercising their property rights to female slaves' bodies, survived the abolishment of slavery (Davis 175-76) and continued into the twentieth century. As it usually happens, the abuser had the privilege of defining the nature of that phenomenon and constructing a false and harmful narrative around it. Sanctioned by immunity from the judicial system, rapes committed by white men on black women became additionally "justified" by the development of the assumption about black people's promiscuity. Such a thesis resulted in the birth of the two mythical figures: the black rapist and the black whore (Davis 191). The consequence of these two images is best put by Angela Davis in *Women, Race, and Class* (1982):

The fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous. For once the notion is accepted that Black men harbor irresistible and animal-like sexual urges, the entire race is invested with bestiality. If Black men have their eyes on white women as sexual objects, then Black women must certainly welcome the sexual attractions of white men. Viewed as "loose women" and whores, Black women's cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy. (182)

The myth of black, and especially black female, promiscuity, combined with the patriarchal belief that the woman is responsible for the upbringing of children, and hence the morality of the entire race, resulted in the conclusion that black women's "laxity" was the explanation of the "immorality" of blacks. In her article, "Mothers of Tomorrow: The

New Negro Renaissance and the Politics of Maternal Representation” (1998), Anne Stavney cites a number of white men who, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, wrote about “black women’s frequent sexual transgressions” and their “dire consequences for the integrity of her race” (535). With biting irony, Stavney sums up the “central” position of the black woman in the racist discourse of the early 1900s: “[B]ecause of her, the Negro race was doomed” (535). This sarcasm is clearly directed at the white society, and white men in particular, who built an entire structure of false images of black women in order to control these images and benefit from this control. The distorted construction of black female sexuality generated by whites, however, was not the only obstacle in black women’s attempts to control the representation of their identities. Another harmful blow came from a much more familiar community: black men.

In his 1920 “Damnation of Women,” the famous black thinker W.E.B. Du Bois presents what he and many others believed to be a treatise praising black womanhood. Interestingly enough, the praise hardly focuses on the intellectual and rhetorical abilities of the many female contemporaries of Du Bois: women whose writing abilities equaled, if not exceeded, his own and those of other male writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Nevertheless, Du Bois quotes, as one of his sources, Anna Julia Cooper’s 1892 *A Voice from the South*, and in this way seemingly indicates his appreciation of a black woman’s contribution to the positive imagery of black womanhood. However, Cooper’s name does not appear anywhere in Du Bois’s text. Instead, the author refers to her as “one of our women” (745). Such treatment should be most surprising and outrageous if granted that Du Bois emphasizes the woman question as his topic. However, it becomes less paradoxical when one considers that “The Damnation of Women” presents a male-

oriented definition of black womanhood, and that “[i]t was Cooper who first analyzed the fallacy of referring to ‘the Black man’ when speaking of black people and who argued that just as white men cannot speak through the consciousness of black men, neither can black *men* ‘fully and adequately . . . reproduce the exact Voice of the Black Woman’” (Gates, Foreword xix). Du Bois—admittedly one of the greatest black intellectuals in history—manifests in his essay *masculinism* which was representative of the New Negro Renaissance. Both the definition of the “New Negro” and the goals behind it were geared towards men. Thus in “The Damnation of Women” whose argument overlooks the voice of women, assertive women’s names logically do not count for much.

Du Bois’s essay exemplifies then an interesting phenomenon; it elaborates on the subject of black women, while simultaneously denying black women the right to self-definition. He explains to black women who they are and who they should strive to be. He does it as an apparent spokesman for the black race, but in fact speaks from the viewpoint of patriarchal order. This gives evidence to the fact that the famous Harlem Renaissance, with its splendid goals of building black nationhood and improving the image of the race, did not really belong to all blacks. In this project, which was supposed to be common, black women were often merely necessary tools in achieving the goal of black liberation, and sometimes the scapegoats who took the blame for the failure to achieve this goal. Therefore, it is possible to argue that black women of 1920s and 1930s had their own emancipatory objectives and that the more general black nationalist movement was often counterproductive to their goals. In Grimké’s and Johnson’s works, black women refuse to strip the complex border identities of their plurality. Instead, they strive for subjectivity through the understanding of the combination of their racial and gender/sexual positionality. In this struggle, they have to cope with the omnipresent

threat of not only racism, but also patriarchy and sexism displayed in both white and black men's behavior.

The two models of patriarchy that affected black women, the one represented by white men and the one displayed by black men, are interconnected. After white men established the image of the black woman as "the whore," black men hurried to "redeem" this image, which appears to have done more harm than good. In their attempt at the redemption of the shattered image of the black race, black males concentrated on what they thought to be the determining factor in the way whites perceived their people; they focused on "improving" the image of the black woman. They made every effort to "celebrate the black woman's virtues and to praise her as a model of True Womanhood," which "served to counteract prevailing stereotypes of the immoral black woman" (Stavney 536). Thus, they created images of *the black virgin* and *the black mother/madonna*. These images, though posed against the myth of the black whore created by whites, were often just as limiting to real women. After all, women themselves were not active agents in the building of this imagery. Recognizing their own interest in the matter, men took the definition of the black woman in their own hands. As Stavney asserts, "By speaking up on her behalf, black men also undermined stereotypes of themselves as participants in [women's] degeneracy" (536). Therefore, the notion of black womanhood found itself remodeled and reinterpreted in complete separation from the people who were concerned the most, black women.

The paradoxically cooperative efforts of white and black men to repress the black female body often resulted in black women's adjustment to the requirements of the patriarchal hegemony. In other words, women frequently made a conscious choice to curtail their freedom and self-expression just to avoid the accusations of promiscuity and,

consequently, rape and alienation. Moreover, sometimes they actually developed, to apply Marx's term, a "false consciousness." Hence, they accepted and even supported the institutions and ideas of the dominant order that worked against their own interest and well-being. In order to juxtapose this false consciousness with the black female identity that is self-aware and subversive, it may be useful to investigate Georgia Douglas Johnson's short story, "Blue Blood" (1926). The image of the black female body present in this text poses a stark contrast to the representations in the writings analyzed later in this study. This contrast—between the passive body in "Blue Blood" and the body as an agent in other texts—will facilitate the illustration of the radical acts of resistance of which the black female body is capable.

In Johnson's story, the protagonists struggle with the consequences of both white society's false construction of black sexuality and black society's internalization of this falsehood. May Bush and John Temple's marital plans are shattered just before the wedding ceremony. The young couple's mothers, Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Temple, both black women, discover the terrible connection between both their children's light skin tones—the common white father. In the past, both women, forced by their economic situation, yielded to the sexual advances of "Cap'n WINFIELD McCALLISTER, the biggest banker in this town" (20), and gave birth to his children, May and John. Now they realize the extent to which their bodies have been involved in their own, as well as their children's, destruction. They sacrificed their sexual integrity, but did not gain anything through this act, and now they watch their sacrifice backfire. One could theorize Mrs. Bush's and Mrs. Temple's experience in terms of the commodification of their bodies and the dangerous consequences of this commodification. The labor of their bodies, which in this case translates into sexual service to the white man, may be analyzed with

reference to the Marxist notion of the alienation of the laborer. The two women experience the disillusionment similar to that of the worker in Marx's writings: the worker "becomes all the poorer the more wealth he [sic] produces," and "becomes an even cheaper commodity the more commodities he [sic] creates" (Marx, *Economic* 765). Hence, the quality of fetish which has marked the two women's bodies spreads now to contaminate their children as well. Upon finding out the truth, May cries, "Oh, God—I've kept out of their clutches myself, but now it's through you, Ma, that they've got me anyway. Oh, what's the use" (24). In this dramatic statement, she recognizes the indirect violation of her body through the rape committed on her mother.

It is the false consciousness that Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Temple have developed and harbored for years that makes them keep the white man's abuse of their vulnerability a secret until the last moments before the wedding. They are both, and Mrs. Temple in particular, concerned with their "good names"; thus, they suppress the traumatic memories in order to avoid the common charge of promiscuity. They are literary counterparts of the many real black women, especially middle-class ones, who devoted much of their time and energy to reconstructing the image of their sexuality in the eyes of whites. In response to the portrayal of black women as oversexed, they appeared as "super moral" (Higginbotham 266). However, as "Blue Blood" indicates, the attempts to erase the stigma generated by whites turned out to be just another level of entrapment in the structures of racism and patriarchy.

Interestingly and sadly enough, male Harlem Renaissance authors tried to reshape white men's harmful stereotypes of black women by producing writing in which they proposed their own. Du Bois may be among the best examples of such re-defining attempts. In "Prospects of AMERICA: Nation as Woman in the Poetry of Du Bois,

Johnson, and McKay” (2000), Felipe Smith presents an overview and analysis of some of Du Bois’s poems. Smith emphasizes the writer’s concern with black nationalism rather than black womanhood, though it is the latter that is instrumental in achieving the former (28-34). The most evident instances cited by Smith of Du Bois’s active engagement in passivizing women’s participation in defining themselves include his stress on black women’s purity and his condemnation of the “army of black prostitutes” (27-28), his ideas about “women’s roles, their primary obligation being homemaking” (28), and the emphasis on “sacrificial black motherhood” (29). The desire to control the black female body is obvious in these examples. This obsession with black women’s sexual bodily acts was related to the goal that black men set for the entire race. Following Claudia Tate, Stavney points out that the aim of Du Bois and other male activists was to create “the ideal of the ‘true black woman’” (537). The real women were absent from this construction. Thus, having removed women from the process of reconstructing the image of their sexuality, the male authors of this project “constructed the black female subject as nonsexual, devoted, demure” (Stavney 537). Ironically, they did away with the myth of “the black whore” by equipping her with the purity of an angel.

The works of Grimké and Johnson exemplify the realization that black women are on their own both in the struggle against the racially-determined sexism of white men and the instrumental treatment by black men who overlook their needs. In their writings, the two authors give voice to the awareness that black women’s liberation cannot be achieved as a “side product” of black nationalism’s goals. They oppose Du Bois’s call for women to display an “unselfish devotion of purpose” to be “unswervingly loyal [to their men]” (Du Bois 752). In fact, they often undermine the foundations of traditionally understood relationships between men and women. Their revolutionary ideas about

womanhood may be discussed in terms of their foreshadowing of the feminist movement of the second half of the twentieth century. Hence, the progressive works of the black women of 1920s and 1930s lend themselves easily to an analysis through the lens of the feminist theories that were formulated long after the Harlem Renaissance passed into history. One of such theories is Adrienne Rich's concept of *compulsory heterosexuality*.

In her influential essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), Rich outlines compulsory heterosexuality as nearly all-encompassing. While she does not suggest that every woman, if given a choice, would turn to another woman for sexual and other forms of companionship, she emphasizes that patriarchal society has generated a "cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives" (Rich 1767). Rich presents a list of various forms of patriarchal control over women:

The chastity belt; child marriage; erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art, literature, film; idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage—these are some obvious forms of compulsion, the first two exemplifying physical force, the second two control of consciousness. (1767)

Most of these forms of repression resemble strikingly the forms of control of the black female body that writers like Grimké and Johnson opposed. While Johnson has an undeniable contribution to the literary subject of feminism, the most appropriate direct continuation of Rich's compulsory heterosexuality suggests the discussion of some works by Angelina Weld Grimké.

Much of Grimké's writing, and especially her poetry, defies the entire myth of black female "purity" so laboriously produced by the men of the Harlem Renaissance. One of the reasons for this subversion lies in the fact that the addressees of Grimké's love poetry are not men, but women. As Carolivia Herron states in her introduction to *The Selected Works of Angelina Weld Grimké* (1991), "[m]ost of the poems were too lesbian . . . for audiences during and after the Harlem Renaissance" (21). In fact, poems such as "A Mona Lisa" (1927) and "El Beso" (1923) present Grimké as a true gadfly in the eye of patriarchy. They stand as an antithesis of both the black virgin and the black Madonna ideals, since they implicitly criticize the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. Considering Grimké's father's advice to her "to be good, . . . be a lady, [and thus] make him proud of her" (Hull 110), Grimké proves in these poems that she is capable of radical statements on both the private and the public forums.

The title "A Mona Lisa" may already suggest that the addressee of the poem is a woman. Although the speaker in the poem could be interpreted as a man, the consistent appearance of female love subjects in Grimké's poetry and many entries in her diaries point to her woman oriented sexuality. Hence, "A Mona Lisa" is more than probably a poem about a lesbian relationship. The radicalism of this alternative representation of black female sexuality is more sophisticated than a simple inclusion of lesbian experience may suggest. The truly subversive move, both aesthetically and politically speaking, is Grimké's employment of highly charged romantic imagery combined with a subject of a radical bodily act of lesbian love. The poem uses traditionally "feminine" language and images; the speaker sees her beloved's lashes and eyes through the metaphors of, respectively, "long brown grasses" (line 2) and "leaf-brown pools" (6). However, the nature of the relationship described disrupts the essentialist construct of "sweet

femininity” that Du Bois ascribed to black women (Du Bois 752). The fact that the speaker expresses her desire for another woman, and not for a man, poses a challenge to the patriarchal notion of femininity which presupposes women’s heterosexuality and their subservience to men. According to this traditional model, a woman’s delicate and sensitive “nature” is accompanied by her acceptance of a strong, dominating male figure in her life. Thus, the speaker’s confession of her love for another woman is a blow against the patriarchy that labels relationships like this as “deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived” (Rich 1777).

Grimké’s “El Beso” is even more provocative than “A Mona Lisa.” Here, the language is highly sensual and erotic, and thus the speaker defines herself as a sexual being, with human passions and desires. The construction of the “true black woman” generated by men presupposed the exclusion of lesbians from this definition. Thus, Grimké’s speaker’s “yearning” (7) for her female lover in “El Beso” suggests an alternative notion of femininity. The electric atmosphere created by the poem’s vocabulary such as “provocative laughter” (4), “lure of you, eye and lip” (6), and “tremulous, breathless, flaming” (11) breaks down the structure of nonsexual black womanhood established by men for the purpose of “uplifting” the race. The message of poems like “El Beso,” contradictory to the message voiced by men like Du Bois, resulted in much of Grimké’s works remaining unpublished and inaccessible to readers for years. As Cary Nelson notes, “Sexism, racism, and homophobia, . . . were quite sufficient” to “prevent Angelina Weld Grimké’s last poems from being published” (76). However, after years of unacknowledged existence in manuscripts, some of these poems saw the daylight thanks to scholars such as Gloria Hull. Among the more openly lesbian poems discovered by Hull is this melancholic invocation:

Thou are to me a lone white star,
That I may gaze on from afar;
But I may never never press
My lips on thine in mute caress,
E'en touch the hem of thy pure dress,
Thou art so far, so far. . . . (qtd. in Hull 140)

The history of another poem, “My Shrine,”³ is a perfect example of the resistance to the alternative sexuality presented by Grimké. As Hull states, “My Shrine” is a poem about the speaker’s love for her “maiden” (141). However, “This poem was carried to the typescript stage and, having reached this point, Grimké substituted ‘he’ for ‘she’ where it was *unavoidable* [my emphasis]” (Hull 141). The word “unavoidable” is the key here. After all, as Rich argues, “One of many means of enforcement [of heterosexuality for women] is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentarily into view from time to time only to become submerged again” (1773-74). Fortunately, against the controlling dominant hegemony, this “continent” is emerging as Grimké’s rebellion against the control over the black woman’s body.

Poems such as those discussed above exemplify a for-its-time revolutionary understanding of the social construction of identities. Grimké’s version of female sexuality makes a radical statement about the illusion of a “natural” connection between sex and gender. The speaker in these poems abandons the clear-cut taxonomies of identities imposed by the dominant system and in doing so she proves her hybrid identity. When Haraway defines the traditional system of values based on boundaries and oppositions, she speaks not only of the world in which the half-machine, half-human

cyborg has to live, but also of the reality surrounding Anzaldúa's *mestiza*, and of the circumstances in which the female writers of the Harlem Renaissance happened to live and write:

[C]ertain dualisms have been persistent in western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals--in short, domination of all constituted as *others*, whose task is to mirror the self. . . . To be One is to be autonomous, to be powerful, to be God; . . . to be other is to be multiple, without clear boundary, frayed, insubstantial. One is too few, but two are too many. (2296)

Yet, the cyborg, *la mestiza*, and the black woman of the Negro Renaissance know that "[r]igidity means death" (Anzaldúa 766), and thus they move toward "divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals" (766). Grimké's love poetry illustrates this rebellious, counterhegemonic movement.

Poems like "El Beso" and others of Grimké's love lyrics then not only transgress norms, but they also prove the fallacy concealed in the concept of "nature." They reveal that identities are not "natural" but, like the cyborg, constructed. The body gains much more significance with this concept of social construction, because it becomes equipped with the power to describe truly and to perform identity. The female speaker of these poems clearly proves that her biological sex does not go hand in hand with the dominant society's idea of femininity. This awareness of gender as a social construction foresees some elaborate theoretical works that would be written many years after Grimké's poems were published. The intricacies of gender are the subject of Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). In it, the author elaborates on

the distinction between sex and gender and the implications of this distinction for a person's identity:

Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex. (6)

Butler further argues that

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (6)

Grimké's identity as a lesbian and its reflection in her poetry effectively distort the myth about the causation of sex and gender. This radical act of performing her gender, to use Butler's term again, by writing it into the body of her poetry, is a subversion of the artifice of "the true black woman" and the ideal of femininity at large.

The feminism present in Grimké's works is also a feature of Georgia Douglas Johnson's writings. The speaker of such poems as "The Heart of a Woman" (1918),

“The Octoroon” (1922), and “Your World” (1922) refuses to subordinate her identity as a woman to racial loyalties. In fact, she often foregrounds her womanhood as an important factor influencing her existence as a member of the race and humanity at large. Many of Johnson’s poems seem to take up the task of stirring up a rebellious spirit in women, and particularly black women. Although much of this poetry has been labeled as sentimental and “feminine,” its often radical message could be more appropriately called feminist. The poem “Your World” is perhaps one of the best examples of Johnson’s radicalism. It is an artistic expression of the entrapment of the black female body in the oppressive patriarchal system and a suggestion of possible means of resistance to this oppression.

The first stanza of “Your World” introduces the speaker as someone with the experience of alienation and fear:

Your world is as big as you make it.

I know, for I used to abide

In the narrowest nest in a corner,

My wings pressing close to my side. (1-4)

However, despite the metaphor for the withdrawal from active life written into these lines, there is a suggestion that the subject of the poem has moved on in her life and, perhaps, currently occupies a position of agency. Indeed, the rest of the poem describes the speaker’s self-liberation. Thus, “Your World” is a text about subversion of oppressive power. It can be read as a manifestation of the black woman’s resistance to the system of rules and codes that imprison her. Interestingly enough, the language of the poem allows for a reading of the confinement and liberation of the black woman in which the mind and the body are not subject to privileging one over another, as in the traditional system of binaries. This unity of the body and the mind can be theorized through the lens of the

French feminist thought. For a French feminist, Hélène Cixous, the body—the medium of pleasure—plays a central role in the formation of identity. Thus, I will draw on Cixous’s ideas in my discussion of black female subjectivity in “Your World.” First, however, I will present the positionality of the speaker with respect to the concept of the Symbolic developed by Jacques Lacan whose theory Cixous reviews.

Although “Your World” focuses on the imagery of a physical, and thus bodily, act of freeing oneself from imprisonment, the poem obviously functions on more than just this literally understood level. The freedom experienced by the body signifies here also the psychological liberation of the speaker. Thus, the “narrowest corner” (3) that she “used to” (2) occupy has a double meaning as well. It can be understood as both brutal physical limitation imposed by another person, and as a position of being silenced, ignored, and treated as a passive object. In fact, the poem might be analyzed as a confession of, presumably, a black woman, who has experienced silencing by the dominant, male- and white-oriented culture. This culture is reflected in the means of expression—the language—to which the muted, marginalized minorities do not have access. This inaccessibility of the primary means of communication to some people can be theorized using the notion of the subject’s existence in the domain of language formulated by Jacques Lacan. Lacan introduces the concept of the *mirror stage*, or “a drama” which “projects the formation of the individual into history” (Lacan 1288). The mirror stage opens the gates to the domain of language. This entrance into what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order introduces interesting questions about those who never enter it fully. Since the dominant discourse is male- and white-oriented, black women find themselves at odds with the Symbolic, and thus with the reality which is comprehended by means of language. Hence, the black woman’s “formation into history,” to use

Lacan's phrase, is marked by her essential exclusion from the grand historical narrative. The speaker of "Your World" lives in the margins of the Symbolic. In the poem, Johnson shows through a metaphor of a bodily act the black woman's stepping out of these margins.

The Symbolic is occupied by predominantly masculine and Anglo-American discourse and as such it is a manifestation of hegemony "which the dominant group exercises throughout society" (Gramsci 1142). The speaker of "Your World" recalls the time when, as a black woman, she was divorced from this realm of expression reserved for the privileged. This position of being silenced or, as Julia Kristeva calls it, "syntactical passivation," is challenged by the speaker of the poem. She simultaneously engages her body in the revolutionary act of liberation and finds a way of self-expression different from the dominant discourse. Her act can be discussed in relation to Hélène Cixous's concept of *l'écriture féminine*, or women's writing. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975) Cixous writes: "It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language" (351). Commenting on women's silenced position in society she urges them to challenge this oppression:

It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be coned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem. (351)

Cixous also acknowledges that "women's pleasure is something that has been controlled, denied, and repressed in patriarchal structures," and thus she "attempts to develop

systems of thinking and ways of writing women's pleasure outside the restraints of the phallogocentric [sic] order" (Fuery 131). In her search for a woman's alternative way of self-expression, then, Cixous concentrates on the notion of pleasure and the body. For her, the body "speaks and has its own language; it is a political site where knowledge, power, presence, and subjectivity are formulated and negotiated" (Fuery 132). Therefore, referring to the bodily experience of the woman, Cixous proposes a different kind of discourse which, by abandoning the rigid rules governing the masculine discourse, gives women a voice.

In "Your World" the title itself sketches the limits of the reality that has been imposed upon Johnson's speaker, the reality in which she feels neglected and alienated. "Your World" is a signifier of the white and masculinist hegemonic order. However, already in the first stanza, the speaker announces that she has escaped from the "narrowest corner" of this phallogocentric and phallogocentric order. She achieves this goal by resisting the imposition of the male-centered rules. She realizes that those who occupy the center of the Symbolic want her to conform to their needs, desires, and whims. However, she chooses freedom on her own:

But I sighted the distant horizon
Where the skyline encircled the sea
And I throbbed with a burning desire
To travel this immensity. (5-8)

By rejecting the imprisonment in "your world," the speaker rejects many constraints imposed on the black female body. Among other limitations, she refuses to conform to the expectations with which both white and black men approached her sexuality. Her rebellion against the labels attached to her identity acquires a form of flight-like, fluid

experience that one could call, after Lacan and Cixous, *jouissance*. It is a pleasure that escapes explanation by means available within the realm of the Symbolic; it transcends language as it exists in its hegemonic form. In order to approximate that new order that the speaker of the poem enters, Johnson uses the metaphor of flight, noticeably the same metaphor as that used by Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

I battered the cordons around me
And cradled my wings on the breeze,
Then soared to the uttermost reaches
With rapture, with power, with ease! (9-12)

Thus, formerly compelled to perceive herself as “the Dark Continent,” unexplored, dangerous, and provoking no interest (Cixous 349), the speaker of the poem regains her agency by breaking the institutionalized silence of the Other.

Two other of Johnson’s poems deserve special attention for their feminist assertion of the gender element of the black woman’s identity. Both “The Heart of a Woman” and “The Octoroon” are poems about a woman’s relation to the male world. Although the images of imprisonment and restlessness may suggest that the woman is shown as a victim of overwhelming love, the poems are much more feminist than they may seem at first. Both texts are actually expressions of criticism against the patriarchal oppression of women. They also present the strength and persistence, rather than weakness, of women who try to overthrow patriarchy against all odds. In “The Heart of a Woman,” the eponymous heart, despite its bird-like character, is not fragile and fearful. Therefore, I have to disagree with Winona Fletcher’s comment, in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, that “The heart of a woman . . . is presented as a pathetic creature unable to secure for itself a place in the world” (155). While the first stanza of the poem

admittedly establishes the representation of the woman's heart as the site of loneliness, it also points to the heart's "restlessness" (2) and movement "forth" (1), which symbolizes its determination to achieve its goal of independency. Imprisoned in "some alien cage" (6), or a traditional relationship of submission to a man, it struggles for freedom. It "breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars" (8). It commits a bodily act that reflects on the woman's psychological struggle to break down the structures of patriarchy. Thus, although hostile forces oppose the woman's agency, the poem from the beginning includes the image of active attempts to change this state of confinement. Fletcher's disempowering statement strips the already oppressed subject of the poem of the subjectivity that she displays by her persistent struggle. Words such as "pathetic" and "unable" point to the weakness rather than strength of the woman's body and spirit. However, the powerful imagery of the poem suggests the woman's *resistance* to being passivized, not *the state* of passivity.

The poem "The Octoroon" also pictures a woman in the state of imprisonment. Like "The Heart of a Woman," it is an illustration of striving for emancipation, rather than of passive submission to the imposed patriarchal rules. Again, the physically confined body reflects upon the more complex system of oppression that, in the words of Adrienne Rich, includes denying women their sexuality, forcing male sexuality upon them through rape and violence, exploiting their labor, controlling their rights to parenthood, confining them physically, using them "as objects of male transactions," and preventing them from participating in "large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments" (Rich 1765-67). When the speaker of "The Octoroon" describes the woman's blood beating "like a mighty sea / Against the man-wrought iron bars of her captivity" (5-6) she speaks against an entire institution of patriarchy. The imagery of the

poem, which may be interpreted as reinforcing some stereotypes of femininity, should not be misleading. In her excellent introduction to *The Selected Works of Georgia Douglas Johnson* (1997), Claudia Tate argues for the radicalism behind Johnson's "feminine" voice in what is called her "love poetry":

I contend that Johnson's feminized voice was not a retreat from but a radical engagement with the politicized aesthetic of the Renaissance. She used that voice to create a space to enact her own literary ambitions and to formalize an erotic agency that on the one hand, white culture had denied to women and black people in general and on the other hand, black culture had denied to women of the race. Because the Renaissance (and modernism as well) called into question prior social and literary meanings, it offered Johnson an opportunity to mask her appropriation of the masculine prerogative to critique her culture and express sexual agency.

(xxii)

Indeed, Johnson's "feminine" poetic language conceals a profoundly feminist message. Perhaps the act of disguising her radical statements in the form of traditional love poems is an ironic comment on the expectations that society has of women. By combining traditionally feminine images with rebellious content, Johnson points to the absurdity of gender conventions that render women, and black women especially, as captives.

As I previously indicated, the subject of gender conventions present in Johnson's works, is also a feature of Grimké's writing. As I argued earlier, Grimké, too, exposed in her writings the problematic assumptions about women's "natural" qualities and goals. Grimké's involvement with this question turns out to have been not exclusively literary, but it bears some traces of activism as well. According to Hull, Grimké wrote two

speeches concerning the woman question. While the first speech, entitled “Woman in the Home,” seems to conform to many preconceptions about “woman’s proper sphere,” the second, “The Social Emancipation,” is much closer to the content of many of Grimké’s feminist writings (146). The second essay foregrounds a position “seeing woman as man’s equal and pressing for social reforms that would allow woman to vote, participate actively in worldly affairs, escape the drudgery and subservience of traditional marriages, and not be penalized any more severely than men for ‘social sins’ such as gambling, drinking, and personal indiscretions” (Hull 146). Clearly, Grimké takes a radical stance on the issue of gender inequality. Her belief that society restricts women based on the arbitrarily generated ideas about gender manifests her discomfort with socially ascribed gender roles. The speech illustrates Grimké’s understanding of the dire consequences that these roles have for women.

The conviction that the biological sex does not carry with it any innate gender qualities underlies Grimké’s essay. She presents the notion of gender as a social construction in a parable that begins the speech:

Now it happened one morning in the early spring, he [a gardener] came forth with two seeds in his hand, and *not seeing that they were of the same kind* [my emphasis] (for he was a narrow, short-sighted, old, man) he planted one in the middle of the garden in the fertile soil, where the sun shone, and the rains and the dews fell; but the other, supposing it to need a different treatment and too delicate to stand the rough rains and winds, he planted in a far corner in the gloom and shelter of the walls. (qtd. in Hull 146)

Hull relates the rest of the parable in her book. As one may expect, the plant that grows out of the first seed flourishes, while the other's growth is stunted. However, everything changes after a storm comes. The second plant, exposed to rain and sun, starts to blossom and amazes the gardener who now sees his mistake (Hull 146). The conclusions drawn from this extended metaphor for the artifice of differences between genders is that society, which in the parable is represented as the gardener, creates boundaries between sexes. Above all, with its fixated notions of femininity, society puts constraints on women. It may be useful, again, to recall Judith Butler's ideas in order to emphasize the implications for the female body that lie at the core of Grimké's speech. As Butler argues, the "recourse to an original or genuine femininity is a nostalgic and parochial ideal that refuses the contemporary demand to formulate an account of gender as a complex cultural construction" (36). This construction of the "original femininity," as Grimké's speech illustrates, marks women's bodies with signifiers that have no reference in actual identities, but instead refer to purely biological facts. Thus, Grimké exposes the constraining system of binaries in which bodies exist. Moreover, she suggests the dire need of change, which in the story presents itself disguised as cleansing rain.

The injustices and limitations imposed on women by gender constructions are thus recurrent motifs in the works of Grimké and Johnson. The two authors' exploration of the subject encompasses many different areas of the black woman's life, which reflects the wide range of implications that these social constructions have for black women. Some of the most important aspects of the racialized concept of womanhood relate to the idea of motherhood. For black women, who must struggle with multidimensional prejudice, the question of bearing and raising children has perhaps more problematic implications than for white women. Thus, the discussion of the black woman's gender

and sexuality would be incomplete without acknowledging radical bodily acts related to motherhood. Johnson and Grimké devote special attention to this theme in their writings. However, before exploring the two authors' texts about motherhood, it will be useful to look closer once more at the constraints of black female sexuality by the forces of the early twentieth-century black nationhood. Apart from creating exclusionary space in which only virgins and mothers are perceived as "true women," black male activists' ideas about motherhood are also evidence of their ignoring the implications of being, specifically, a *black* mother. When Du Bois writes about "human sympathy and sacrifice as characteristic of Negro womanhood" (748), apart from being exceedingly essentialistic, he engages in the process of relegating black women to the position of passive objects, victims, persons with no life of their own. The "domestic madonna" (Smith 28) that he glorifies is worthy of her race's acceptance because she has no ambition, no goal other than her children, and no function other than to counter the negative stereotypes of her people. She is docile and entirely devoted to her domestic sphere. However, while men were occupying themselves with "prescriptive" black womanhood and motherhood, actual black women *lived* their womanhood, which often clashed with the expectations of their environment. In her poem, "Motherhood" (1922), Johnson defines the much-glorified phenomenon from a black woman's perspective. Her poem is yet one more call for black women's right to the ownership of their identities and bodies.

"Motherhood" explores the problem of black mothers-to-be and their dilemmas concerning the cruelty of a world into which they have to bring their children. The poem is a monologue of a woman who explains to her unborn, or maybe even not-yet-conceived child, why she cannot give birth to it. The speaker's reasoning reveals the sad

awareness of the constraints which racism, sexism, and classism impose upon her body as a woman and a potential mother. The poem brings to mind the powerless slave mothers, whose children were often sold after birth, leaving the women with no right to their motherhood. However, apart from this possible association with white men's oppression of black women, the poem can be read as an expression of the black woman's exploitation by patriarchy at large. The speaker understands that, seemingly in control of her body as the creator, bearer, and deliverer of her child, she has to consider the "cruelty and sin" (4) and, most importantly, "the monster men / Inhabiting the earth" (13-14). The word "men" allows two different interpretations; it could simply be used generically to signify "people," or more specifically "white people," or it could signify "males." The second interpretation should not be dismissed without consideration, since mothering a *female* child had its own implications for a black woman. Thus, either reading is viable. Regardless of the interpretation of the word "men," however, the poem states the dangers of being a black mother entangled in the system of restrictions that apply even to her body's reproductive functions.

However, the black mother's body in "Motherhood" does not stay docile and victimized; it has the power of rebellion. Its capability of *refusal to reproduce* is a revolutionary act. Admittedly, it is the external power that forces the woman to make her decision: "The world is cruel, cruel, child, / I cannot let you through" (7-8). However, because she *can* consciously restrain from creating life, she possesses a weapon against the system. By "turning deaf ears" to her unborn child's "call" (11), the speaker stages a strike against the racist and sexist society which awaits her child's birth with systems of oppression ready to affect both the newborn and the mother. The speaker also refuses to perform the reproductive activities against the expectations of the black nation's ideal of

the black woman. Her body opposes the ideals of devotion and sacrifice in favor of reasonable choices. Thus, by saying “I cannot give you birth” (16), the speaker, whose body has been denied to her, regains the right to it and its “means of production.”

The juxtaposition of male black leaders’ expectations and black women’s attitude toward parenthood, one of which is illustrated in Johnson’s poem, points to the men’s refusal to try to understand the women’s experience. It shows that women were often alienated in their attempts to adopt a more sound and realistic approach to the question of black motherhood. As the speaker of “Motherhood” proves, the black woman was reluctant to accept the idealized notion of “rewarding” motherhood, because to her all the consequences of this frequently traumatic experience were inseparable from her being, written into the experience of her body. On the one hand, she felt that the “cult of domesticity” (hooks 135), of which the romanticized idea of motherhood was a part, limited her in terms of her life choices. It “suggest[ed] that women are inherently life-affirming nurturers” (135), and thus “desire” to be mothers. On the other hand, the same idealized image of motherhood was a construction designed with white, middle-class women in mind, and did not take the racial element into account. Thus, the demands that black women be child-bearers and nurturers were formed without acknowledging the interplay of gender and race in the experience of motherhood. Those socially, politically, and economically uninformed expectations were harmful not only to those women who did not *want* to be mothers, but also to those who chose childlessness out of fear of prejudice. The latter problem underlies the central theme of Angelina Weld Grimké’s short story, “The Closing Door” (1919). The story illustrates a black woman’s attempt to control her right to her child, the product of her body.

The controversial and subversive subject and tone of Grimké's short story can be confirmed with the fact that in 1919 the text appeared in two parts in *The Birth Control* magazine (Hull 128). Thus, the author effectively clarified her intentions behind the story: it was supposed to discourage black women from becoming mothers. In the story, the narrator, Lucy, recalls her memories of a couple in whose house she used to live for several years, after she had been "passed along from one of her relatives to another" (Grimké, "Closing" 252). She describes Agnes and Jim Milton as hospitable, loving, and good-natured people: "Have you ever, I wonder, known a happy person? I mean a really happy one? He is as rare as a white black bird in this sombre-faced world of ours. I have known two and only two. They were Agnes Milton and her husband Jim" (253). Notably, Lucy uses Agnes's name first, and only then mentions Jim, referring to him by his relation to Agnes. In this way, Lucy begins to reflect her own close relationship with Agnes, and the important role that the woman played in her life. Later in the story, the narrator reveals the tragedy that changed her own and the other two characters' lives.

After years of wanting to become a mother, Agnes Milton finally gets pregnant. It is the way in which she announces it to Lucy, before anyone else, that is the first sign of her agency as a black mother-to-be. Agnes refuses to speak out the words of her happiness; she lets Lucy know about her pregnancy in a very implicit, indirect way. Thus, the reader's first impression may be that she represents the opposite of agency, that she experiences her new role in a passive, incomplete way. However, closer scrutiny of Agnes's behavior suggests that she is actually trying to maintain control over what she considers to be the possession of her body. Therefore, not only does she not express her excitement about the baby, but she also demands that her pregnancy remain a secret that only she, Lucy, and Jim possess. She explains to Lucy that "there's—such—a thing—as

being—*too* happy,—*too* happy” (260), and thus reveals her fear of losing the source of her happiness. The “conspiracy” of silence that she imposes on the household is accompanied by her physical withdrawal into her room where, behind the closed door, she alienates herself from anyone but the child in her womb.

The traces of agency detectable in Agnes’s unusual behavior lie in the uncompromising insistence with which she tries to separate the cruel, prejudiced world from her unborn child. Alarmed by racist attacks on black people taking place in the city, she decides that her own body, which secures her baby, is not enough to save it ultimately; hence, she builds more “walls” between the oppressors and her happiness. Her project entails jeopardizing the healthy relationships she has with her husband and Lucy, and she is ready to do it. She realizes that in this battle, as a black mother, she must ultimately fight alone. Agnes’s obsession with protecting her child becomes fully justified when, a few months into her pregnancy, the whole family finds out that her brother had been lynched in the South. Now, she becomes convinced that her body is doomed to give life to a future victim of racism. She tells Jim and Lucy:

“I’m an instrument.”

No one answered her.

“That’s all—an instrument.”

We merely watched her.

“One of the many.” (274)

Agnes’s bitter words illustrate her realization that, in the racist world, her body’s reproductive functions have become nothing less than the tools of her own and her potential children’s oppression. She begins to see her future motherhood as the process of feeding her own and her child’s bodies to the blood-thirsty system:

“Yes!—I!—I!—An instrument!—another one of the many! A colored woman—doomed!—cursed!—put here!—willing or unwilling! For what?—to bring children here—men children—for the sport—the lust—of possible orderly mobs—who go about things—in an orderly manner—on Sunday mornings!” (274-75)

After her worst nightmare comes true, and she gives birth to a male child, she first falls into a deep depression and then, one night, kills the baby.

While the implications of the story are pessimistic, I want to suggest that Agnes Milton’s despair bears traces of conscious, active resistance to her oppression as a black woman. Again, I want to argue that her refusal to *talk* about her pregnancy is an act of subversion of the usual order of things in which happiness of the parents is announced to the world, and then, in the case of black parents, the source of happiness often becomes smothered by the racist society. This act of containment on Agnes’s part is as much practical as it is symbolic. She keeps the happy message to herself, or within herself, just as she keeps the baby in her womb. She is reluctant to release either. Her silence is not a passive one; she makes a well-informed decision to remain silent, for this is the only means of resistance available to her at the time. This categorization of silence as subversively active, rather than passive, agrees with the philosophical studies of silence discussed in David Hedrich Hirsch’s article, “Speaking Silences in Angelina Weld Grimké’s ‘The Closing Door’ and ‘Blackness’” (1992). Hirsch writes:

[R]ecent studies recognize that the multiplicity of types of silence throws into question a definition of silence as merely the absence of speech.

“Persons, in fact, can be silent and keep their thought to themselves, and

that is quite different from simply saying nothing. It is an active attitude,” writes Max Scheler. (460).

Agnes’s silence is a manifestation of her determination, not her weakness.

The second form of resistance displayed by the black mother in “The Closing Door” is her final act of taking her child’s life. In making her female hero resort to this, Grimké, like other female authors of both her own and later eras, portrayed black motherhood as suffering in ways that only death can help. Georgia Douglas Johnson’s play *Safe* (1929) and Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) both belong to this tradition. The acts of mothers killing their children become in these texts signifiers of black motherhood’s bitter taste. For a black mother, “nurture” and “murder” often necessarily merge, as they are both means of protecting their black children. Thus, when Agnes kills her newborn, she commits the only possible act which could guarantee her child’s liberation from the claws of racism. Like other literary female characters discussed in this chapter, she looks for the means of expressing her rebellion against the system of oppression. Agnes Milton’s performance is admittedly more shocking than any of the other women’s analyzed earlier. However, her extremist act may serve as representative of the persistence and radicalism with which the black woman opposes the hegemony in the Harlem Renaissance women’s writings.

Notes to Chapter II:

¹ I am indebted for the first part of this chapter's title to Bessie Smith's song, "I've Been Mistreated and I Don't Like It."

² While works of Margaret Walker are not lacking in sensitivity to women's struggle, her special, socialist approach to feminism may be a more appropriate subject for the next chapter's discussion.

³ I was not able to find the date of this poem's original date of publication. The task of tracing back publication dates of Grimké's poems is difficult. Most sources do not provide dates for individual poems, and offer a general statement that Grimké's poetry was published in *Opportunity* and *Crisis*, and most major anthologies of her day, such as Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927).

Chapter III

Revolutionary Spirit Incarnated:

Staging a Strike Against Class Oppression

The engagement of the black, and especially black *female* body in labor and its subversive implications are significant aspects of the radical literature by the three Harlem Renaissance women. The manifestation of class difference in Negro Renaissance writings experienced a long period of silence from scholars, and has only been given deserved attention relatively recently. Still, some critics, though acknowledging the proletarian voice in the history and literature of black women writers of the Renaissance, often muffle it in favor of an emphasis on racial and feminist themes. This approach ignores the “cyborg” character of the black female body in which the gender, racial, *and* class identities merge to create an identity that constantly opposes multiple axes of marginalization. The writing of the Black Renaissance women sprouted and came into bloom at the intersection of three, not just two, historical projects: racial, gender, and class struggles.

Thus, it is important to acknowledge the involvement of African American women in the leftist politics of the 1920s and 1930s, and the degree to which blacks’ participation was pivotal for the shaping of the Left. To understand the scope of this active participation fully, one needs to interrogate the image assembled by some mid-twentieth century scholarship in which the black Marxist appeared as an intellectually impotent, politically challenged individual who passively accepted the lure of Communism brought to her or him by cunning white “Reds.”¹ Fortunately, some recent scholars’ studies furnish a plentitude of evidence in favor of the antipodal view.² As

Robin D. G. Kelley writes in *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (1990), in the South, where many expected to see “rebellious white [Communist] youth leading the hitherto sleeping black masses in the march to self-determination,” the opposite happened: “the prevalence of blacks in the CP earned it the epithet ‘nigger party’” (92). Therefore, black women writers’ commitment to the socialist cause should not be surprising.

While this chapter’s discussion will include the analysis of all three women’s writings, Margaret Walker will receive more attention than the other two. Although Johnson and Grimké interwove the theme of labor into their works, Walker’s close connections to the radical Left of the thirties are reflected in her poetry and essays, and hence they present more transparently the socialist thought behind them. Also, because of her radical past, Walker is an interesting example of a writer who poses a problem to critics and readers alike. Her conscious decision to expose the black female body’s exploitation by racism, sexism, *and* capitalism, and her Communist leanings caused an intriguing pattern of denial to emerge among scholars. This problematic approach to Walker’s radicalism can be perceived as yet another attempt to strip the black woman’s identity of one of its layers, an attempt to simplify what is indeed exceedingly complex.

Much of the scholarship concerning Walker makes little or no reference to the echoes of the radical politics in her writings and her sympathy for the Communist Left. The writer became fascinated with and adopted the Marxist views during her years in Chicago in the thirties, and held them throughout her entire life which encompassed most of the twentieth century. Whether or not Walker carried a Communist Party membership card—and many, including Nancy Berke, claim that she did not (Berke 13)—is not of primary importance here. What is alarming, however, is that purposeful erasure, or

willful neglect of the facts that had an enormous impact on Walker's life and writing, lead to some distortions of the interpretive process when reading her works. In this case, such erasure may result in the dismissal of the importance of labor exploitation in Walker's writings to which black women were subjected, and the denial of their subversive resistance to this exploitation. Walker's writings have been examined from the point of view of their uncompromising call for racial equality and their persistent concern with women's situation. However, while the struggle against both racism and patriarchy are central themes in Walker's writing, the author herself never separated them from a larger political context of the fight against the oppression of the capitalist system. This fusion of the feminist, black, and the socialist is well illustrated in Walker's poem "My Truth and My Flame" (1989). Although the poem was published long after the time of the Harlem Renaissance, the expression of the complex identity in the first stanza should be acknowledged as a definition of Walker's work:

I am a Black woman
and I hold my head up high,
for I rise with the masses of mankind. . . .
with the people of the earth;
I rise with the tides of revolution
against the systems of oppression
that hammer me down. (1-7)

Thus, the speaker's positionality, written on her body by virtue of race and gender, also involves her alliance with the working people, the poor. She perceives her goals as common with the goals of a socialist revolution, because the "systems of oppression" that

constrain her body are a part of the capitalist machine. As one of the cogs, she looks for support from “the masses of mankind.”

Although the canon of Walker’s writing is full of straightforward references to Marxism, and her life was an example of active commitment to leftist politics, many books and articles devoted to her work and biography either ignore her radicalism, or treat it in a marginal manner.³ Of course, following Cary Nelson in *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (2001), one might comment on the radical, profoundly political writings of authors such as Walker saying that “[a]t times the strongest testimony to their continuing power is the intensity with which some deny it” (83). However, such reluctance to explore the proletarian aspects of Walker’s literature would have been much easier to comprehend during the Red Scare of the McCarthy era when many intellectuals rushed to repudiate even the loosest bonds that tied them to the CPUSA. Therefore, the shadow that usually falls on the socialist elements of Walker’s, and other writers’, works seems to be more than just the stigma of Communism. I want to suggest that this silence is determined by the general resistance in the Western society, and American society in particular, to the idea of *the communal*, as opposed to the notion of *the individual*. In *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center* (1984), bell hooks writes:

The ethics of Western society informed by imperialism and capitalism are personal rather than social. They teach us that the individual good is more important than the collective good, and consequently that individual change is of greater significance than collective change. (30)

Thus, the project of Walker, as well as Grimké and Johnson, is in many respects antithetical to the dominant ideology that focuses on the Self rather than the community. The collective, communal element of their radical literature with its goal looking outward

rather than inward, toward the Self, manifests a completely different mode of asserting one's identity than the modes used by the dominant society.

Black women of the twenties and thirties, alienated from the dominant society by various forms of prejudice, had multiple reasons for seeking strength in the socialist, rather than individualistic, modes of thinking. Like Donna Haraway's cyborg, they put much trust in the power of networks of communication. Haraway in her essay emphasizes that communication technologies "embody and enforce new social relations for women worldwide" (2284), which reflects the communal character of forming the cyborg identity. During the Harlem Renaissance, the writings of black women were a peculiar form of such "communication technologies." Often, the most important goals of these writings were achieved not on the level of each individual woman's works, but in the collective body of writing produced by multiple writers: the "network" of voices that gave their message the resonating power. Nelson uses the Bakhtinian concept of *dialogism* to articulate how radical literature of 1920s and 1930s forms a choral effect which is nevertheless composed of strong individual voices. Clearly using Deleuzian and Barthean language, Nelson contends that

This intertextual social conversation obviously cannot confine itself to poems in their entirety, though it certainly operates at that level as well. The pattern of verbal echoes, reinforcements, extensions, and disputes actually permeates poems at the level of individual stanzas, lines, images, and narrative units. To shut one's ears to that conversation is to silence the material condition of poetry in that time. To hear that conversation is to witness poems in a constant state of disassemblage and reassemblage,

as pieces of other poems are woven into any given text and pieces of every text are disseminated into related texts and discourses as we read. (158)

Thus, attempts to dismiss Walker's, or other writers', participation in the radical socialist dialogue are counterproductive to the historical struggle in which those authors engaged.

Although Grimké's and Johnson's works are not as overtly proletarian as Walker's, the patterns of resistance described by Nelson as a feature of the choral literary voice are present in their writings as well. Their participation in this vibrant intertextual play proves that even though they were further away from the direct Communist bonds than Walker, the concern with the laboring poor was to them a "natural" extension of their overall engagement in the struggle against all marginalization. Like Walker, they too perceived the forces of capitalism as instrumental in generating both racism and sexism. Their works show the awareness that sexual, physical, and psychological abuse of the black woman was reinforced and facilitated, if not made possible, by the black female body's entrapment in the class hierarchy, in the particular set of socio-economic conditions. The interconnectedness of race, gender, and class which can be found in Grimké's, Johnson's, and especially Walker's works can be summed up in the words of bell hooks, whose criticism of white, middle-class feminism is much-telling:

Feminist analyses of women's lot tend to focus exclusively on gender and do not provide a solid foundation on which to construct feminist theory. They reflect the dominant tendency in Western patriarchal minds to mystify woman's reality by insisting that gender is the sole determinant of woman's fate. Certainly it has been easier for women who do not experience race or class oppression to focus exclusively on gender. Although socialist feminists focus on class and gender, they tend to

dismiss race, or they make a point of acknowledging that race is important and then proceed to offer an analysis in which race is not considered. (15-16)

The three writers who are the focus of this work do not fall into the trap of omissions criticized by hooks. They present an image of the black woman's life that has all the variables necessary for the discussion of struggle and resistance.

A mother, a wife, a servant, a sex worker, a Southern field hand, or a Northern factory laborer—a black women's life in the twenties and thirties was usually marked by the common determinant of her existence: toil. Despite the six decades theoretically distancing her from the times of human bondage, her drudgery was that of a slave. Marx's notion that labor "produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*" (*Economic* 765) was the more dramatic in her case, for she was black and female, and hence more economically vulnerable. Such corporeal commodification had deprecatory implications for the black female body as an abusable entity entangled in the net of capitalist economy. Marxist *objectification* applies here not only to the labor, but also to the entity which produces the labor, the body. Thus, the black female body in the process of its labor becomes devalued and subject to the manipulation of the dominant system. However, in the writings of the Harlem Renaissance women, the body, although oppressed, is not pathetic. Instead, it is a site of strength, as in Walker's poem, "Lineage" (1942).

"Lineage," like many of Walker's poems, is grounded in a very specific historical background. Walker recalls in it the scenes of the rural South of the past, the place from which she came. Already in the nineteenth century, it became an unwritten rule that black women and their white working-class "sisters," instead of being housebound like white

middle-class women, joined the men in the field or factories, and performed an equal amount and quality of labor as men did. In the nineteenth century then, a “housewife” becomes a symbol of womanhood, a definition by which those women who worked for wages were “alien visitors” in the male world (Davis 229). Such categorization had significant implications for black women then and in the years to come; unlike white middle-class housewives, most black women could not afford the life by which womanhood was identified. Such women “carried the double burden of wage labor and housework—a double burden which always demands that working women possess the persevering power of Sisyphus” (Davis 231). In fact, “black families who attempted to remove their wives and mothers from the work force to attend to their own households” met with white people’s “ridicule and hostility,” as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham exposes in “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race” (260).

In contrast to the domestic ideal for white women of all classes, the larger society deemed it “unnatural,” in fact an “evil,” for black married women “to play the lady” while their husbands supported them. In the immediate postwar South, the role of menial worker outside their homes was demanded of black women, even at the cost of physical coercion.

(Higginbotham 260)

In “Lineage,” Walker manages to create a version of womanhood that encompasses her “grandmothers” working in the fields of the nineteenth-century South. She does this by presenting an image of sturdy black women, somewhat mythically strong in body and spirit. Still, her paean does not perpetuate the kind of white-generated images that bell hooks criticizes when she writes: “Racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore

the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society” (15).

Walker’s “grandmothers” are not superwomen. They are laborers who have learned how to maintain their dignity against all odds.

Walker’s “strong grandmothers” and the physicality of their experience have two immediate functions in terms of power structure. First, they are subject to the system which forces them to perform slave-like, exhausting labor, the product of which will probably not be theirs to enjoy. Hence, the use to which they put their bodies suggests the process of commodity fetishizing; they are alienated from their own bodies that perform the labor for the “other.” Second, through the very same act of physical exhaustion they prove themselves as strong enough not only to endure the hardships, but also to maintain the goodness of heart in the face of the dehumanizing exploitation. The speaker presents them as good-natured and full of warmth:

They were full of sturdiness and signing.

My grandmothers were strong.

My grandmothers are full of memories

Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay

.....

They have many clean words to say. (5-10)

Thus, there is a peculiar connection drawn between the women’s toil and their qualities as human beings. The labor, the instrument that the system uses to oppress them, becomes an entity that, in the eyes of the speaker, adds to the image of her grandmothers’ humanity, rather than relegating them to their animal functions.

The correlation between the women's physical act of labor and their function as spiritual role models that emerges in the poem brings to mind the relationship between *base* and *superstructure* described by Karl Marx:

In the social production of their life, men [sic] enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation [base], on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. *It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness* [my emphasis]. (Preface 775)

While the economic determinism described by Marx is present in the lives of the women in Walker's poem, they have not become spiritually contaminated by its ruthless forces. Despite the limitations imposed on them by the alienated labor, they have been able to secure for themselves and their predecessors, like Walker's speaker, something that has no exchange value: their "sturdiness and singing" (5). In these two images, Walker contains the only ways in which these black women could oppose the hegemony: with their "sturdiness," they redefined the weak and nondescript notion of "womanhood" according to their experience, and with their "singing" they passed on the narrative of their lives to the next generation of black women. Thus, the prevalent image in the poem is that of strength, rather than victimization. The speaker, whose last words in the poem

are “My grandmothers were strong. / Why am I not as they?” (11-12), perceives in her exploited female ancestors qualities that she would like to see in herself.

As “Lineage” illustrates, the weapons of resistance against the economic determinism of life in the capitalist system can lie in asserting one’s identity despite the dehumanizing mechanisms of the hegemonic order. Walker’s protagonists’ “singing” is one of their means of resistance. In “The Popular Front, the Rural Folk, and Neomodernism” (1999), James Smethurst contends that, following the Communist position, Walker “draws on New Negro notions of folk culture, especially music, as the ore that needs to be refined into a new high culture.” Smethurst further explains that this process can be seen “as an analogue to the process of developing a new militant African-American self-consciousness.” The voicedness of this act is highly significant. While the women in “Lineage” *sing* in order to secure for themselves some part of their identities so violently invaded by the exploitive system, the speaker of one of Angelina Weld Grimké’s untitled poems also uses her voice, though in a different way. Having discussed Grimké’s usage of silence as an instrument of subversion, it is interesting to scrutinize her turning toward the black woman’s voiced, rather than silent, response to oppression.

Although the poem is undated, it was most probably written around 1930 (Nelson 47). This speculative date is important when thought of from the perspective of Grimké’s usage of *voice*, rather than *silence*, as she did to illustrate resistance in “The Closing Door,” which was written over a decade earlier. One might further speculate that perhaps during those years of living as a silenced minority herself, Grimké grew tired of implicit forms of resistance. Thus, the woman in the poem responds to the dominant order’s (ab)use of her body with *laughter*:

I am the woman with the black black skin

I am the laughing woman with the black black face
I am living in the cellars and in every crowded place

I am toiling just to eat

In the cold and in the heat

And I laugh

I am the laughing woman who's forgotten how to weep

I am the laughing woman who's afraid to go to sleep. (qtd. in Nelson 47)

The woman's laughter in the face of hegemony is a fascinating image, especially when one considers the juxtaposition of her obviously underprivileged position in society and the message that her laughter communicates. If interpreted as subversive, her laughter allows her to enter the sphere of Bakhtinian *carnavalesque* in which she does not fear to ridicule the rules by which the dominant society has come to define her. Through this ridicule, she elevates her body, exhausted from "toil" and lack of sleep, to the place from which she can see the workings of the system. The laughter then is bitter, but it is also meaningful because it signifies the speaker's awareness of her situatedness and its social injustice. Her response to the experience of being an exploited black female worker with the explosion of laughter shows that she has not lost her own notion of her worth. Society's concept of her identity, as a producer of commodities and a commodity in itself, is a counter image of who she really is, and so she laughs.

The speaker's laughter resonates with the power similar to the mythical "laugh of the Medusa" rediscovered for the critical audiences by Hélène Cixous's essay. Referring to the silenced position in which women have been placed in the patriarchal society, Cixous writes: "They [men] riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss" (354). Further, drawing on the myth of the Medusa as a character

whose image has been distorted and rendered as negative, she encourages women to strip the harmful, men-generated ideas of themselves, and look into their true identities: “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (355). In Grimké’s poem, the speaker, although physically entrapped in her socio-economic situation, manifests her discovery of *her* Medusa. In the poem, this image refers to more than just the speaker’s identity as a woman; she is a *black* woman, and she is a poor laborer. Because of this complex identity, the myths surrounding it are all the more numerous, and the Medusa’s true face has been covered with more distorting veils. However, the speaker’s laughter illustrates that she has seen through the mechanisms of the racist, sexist, and classist system. She thus represents the kind of power that bell hooks discusses, paraphrasing Elizabeth Janeway: “One of the most significant forms of power held by the weak is ‘the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful’” (92). Although the “toil” of the speaker’s “black black” body belongs to the capitalist state, she has not lost her sense of identity.

The oppression experienced by the speaker of Grimké’s poem is opposed in the act of laughter, a physical and mental release of frustration harbored in the body and mind of an abused black worker. However, this kind of resistance manifests defense only on the least globally influential level. The speaker’s laughter has limited ramifications as a tool of subversion; it permeates the system, but does not dismantle it. It does not go far enough in its revolutionary implications to implement a change in the condition of other poor, black female laborers, or even to bring tangible results to the speaker herself. The speaker’s solitary voice needs to join the dialogical chorus of other voices in order to be truly heard. Other texts of Grimké, as well as Johnson and Walker, offer an alternative to this single-handedly performed attack on hegemony. In these works, the authors call for

organized opposition to injustice under the banner of internationalism. The dialogic character of their appeal is mirrored in the polyphony of counterhegemonic voices that they call for. In poems such as Walker's "For My People" (1942), Johnson's "Sonnet to the Mantled" (1922), and Grimké's "Street Echoes" (1894) the exploited body of a black female worker leaves its alienation and joins the revolutionary masses. The common goal of rebellion gives these masses of vulnerable bodies the strength to step out of the system. This opportunity to find refuge from exploitation in the unity of rebels can be juxtaposed with the hopelessness of solitary struggle, or alienation in a group of other victims of the system. Therefore, before proceeding to the analysis of the texts whose pluralist, communal tone conveys the hope of the revolution, it may be useful to precede this discussion with a contrasting message of Walker's poem "Whores" (1942).

The subject of the poem "Whores" echoes the focus of the previous chapter. However, perceived from the perspective of the sex workers to whom it is devoted, it seems more appropriate for the racialized, gendered discussion of labor, than sexuality as such. In the poem, the speaker recalls the "armies" (3) of "painted whores" (2) that she used to see in the streets of the city where she worked as a young woman. In her description, she reveals perhaps the most tragic "use" to which a female black body is put in the process of capitalist exploitation. Here, the oppression gets a grasp of women in the most ultimate way. The body—no longer metaphorically—becomes a commodity in the act by which the sex workers try "to make their bread in ways as best they can" (7). Their independence is an illusion, for no amount of money offered by those who take advantage of their situation can even distantly equal the personal sacrifice the women make.

Walker's speaker describes the women in a sympathetic tone, rendering a picture of tired, used up and, as a consequence, unsexual zombies. Her understanding of their tiredness suggests that on some level she feels solidarity with them as workers. She presents them as lacking any strength to resist their oppression. As members of lumpenproletariat, the criminal sub-class, in the past they might have had the potential to subvert the order and carry out a revolution; however, their "service" to capitalism has deprived them of any revolutionary predispositions. Moreover, though they form an "army," they are not united against their common enemy. They are alienated laborers, "[o]ld women working by an age-old plan" (6). They are objectified by the system and those who perpetuate the system's oppression by obtaining the "product" which no longer belongs to the women. Their "sullen eyes" (4) bring to mind Marx's words when he states that "the better formed his [the worker's] product, the more deformed becomes the worker" (*Economic* 766), and that "[h]is labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced, it is *forced labor*" (767). The sex workers' bodies and labor are the possession of those who have the capital and who draw profit or satisfaction from the women's bondage to the underclass.

To the pessimistic images of oppression, the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance responded with the radical representation of organized, unified resistance. The images of interracial, intergendered revolution present in all three writers' works suggests that the model of subversion offered by the leftist movements of their time appealed to them as an effective method of resistance. The boundary-breaking solidarity promoted by the CPUSA and other leftist organizations was in many ways similar to the inner reconciliation of various elements of the Self that black women were facing within themselves. It spoke to "the tradition of syncretism that has characterized the Afro-

American experience” (Higginbotham 253). The variety of identities encompassed by the Communist movement and goals then seems to embody the complexity of the black woman’s identity. In their revolutionary poems, the three women propose a model of resistance based on the unified strength of differing subjects. In these texts, the power of the body is revealed in its cooperation with other bodies. The weaknesses of these individual bodies become strengths once the differences among various people are reconciled, and common objectives established. In *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde implies that an ability to accept human differences and use them productively works directly against the forces of a capitalist state. She explains how, under capitalism, people are taught to use the difference against others, and in consequence, against themselves:

Institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such an economy, we have *all* been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion. (115)

In their internationalist, revolutionary poems, Johnson, Grimké, and Walker offer a model of utilizing human differences as efficient means of resistance. Their poems are addressed to all the oppressed, regardless of racial or gender divisions between them.

Johnson’s concern with the lot of the poor should not be surprising when one considers her own life, in which she had a taste of hard work as a single black mother.

Among the many jobs she had was one in the Department of Labor where she investigated living conditions among laborers (Hull 164). Thus, she had an understanding of the hardships of the working-class people that encompassed both others' and her own experience. Her comment on the fact that the burden of trying to make ends meet did not leave her any time for writing is telling: "If I might ask of some fairy godmother special favors, one would sure be for a clearing space, elbow room in which to think and write and live beyond the reach of the Wolf's fingers" (qtd. in Hull 165). Therefore, her "Sonnet to the Mantled" (1922), with its call for the exploited to revolt, outlines Johnson's project of escaping "the Wolf's fingers": poverty and prejudice. The poem is composed of the images of the oppressed masses being freed and celebrating their freedom. The lines "And they shall rise and cast their mantles by, / Erect and strong and visioned" (1-2) resemble the language and imagery used by the Communist Left in depicting the proletarian revolution.

One of the aspects connecting Johnson's text and proletarian literature and art is the physicality of the experience of resistance. The body here possesses the power to break through the hegemonic imprisonment. Although the bodies of the people in the poem have experienced oppression, in the face of challenge they are "erect and strong" (2) and "swift" (9), and their feet are "eager" (10) to carry them to equality. The question of the identity of these people is interesting in the poem. Although some may assume that Johnson speaks of black people, recalling the images of emancipation of slaves, nothing in the poem would clearly indicate who "the mantled" are. Johnson's emphasis, in her writing and life, on obscuring the boundaries between different kinds of oppressed peoples speaks in favor of a more inclusive interpretation of the poem. Thus, the

“victory” (14) that the last line of the poem describes can be seen as a shared achievement of all those who rose against all kinds of oppression.

Like Johnson, Grimké also expressed her feelings about social inequalities of the capitalist system in poetry. Although in her own life she was spared the hardships of poverty and violent manifestations of racism, she did not stay indifferent to the prejudices that others had to face. Also, one may speculate that Grimké’s great concern with the situation of women might have intensified her criticism of the capitalist system in which women, and especially women of color, are exploited the most. While Grimké’s radical stance on social injustice is admirable, the truly amazing fact lies in the unusually early age at which she gave expression to her egalitarian thinking. In 1894, the *Boston Sunday Globe* published a short social protest poem by Angelina Weld Grimké who was merely fourteen years old at the time. Simple in form, the poem conveys a startlingly straightforward criticism of capitalism:

And I say can this be right,
The poor in darkness, the rich in light?
Health and joy, the rich man’s pride,
Mis’ry e’er on poverty’s side. (qtd. in Hull 111)

In the poem, the young Grimké points to the fact that the producers and providers of “the rich man’s” “health and joy” are left with no resources to produce the same product for themselves. By asking the rhetorical question “can this be right?,” the speaker of the poem acts as an agitator. Her depiction of the exploitation of the blatant cruelty of the system serves as an encouragement for the poor to take action. Her verbal act is performative, what she implies in words needs to be carried out in a bodily manner. Her use of spatial imagery: “Mis’ry e’er on poverty’s *side* [my emphasis],” aims at depicting

the socially constructed line between those who *produce* and those who *have*. Moreover, the implication of this line exposes the Marxist alienation of the poor; they are removed from the riches that they have most probably produced with the labor of their own hands. Thus, the speaker implicitly suggests the necessity of change, which in more radical terms could be conceived as revolution.

While some socialist poems of Johnson and Grimké use implicit rather than explicit images to convey their message, the radical poetry of Margaret Walker does not rely on understatement. Walker's education in and fascination with Communism gave her the language to convey her social concerns in an overt manner. As Eugenia Collier states in "Fields Watered with Blood: Myth and Ritual in the Poetry of Margaret Walker" (2001), "She [Walker] became interested in Marxism and, like many of her contemporaries, saw it as the key to the accomplishment of the dream" (101). Some of the most expressive examples of Walker's outlook on the menace of the capitalist system are found in the book of poetry that she published in 1942, and equipped with an unambiguous title: *For My People*. The word "people," after all, is a central term in Marxist discourses. The poems collected in the volume had been written over several years preceding the actual publication of the book. The most well known poem in the book, "For My People," vividly gives voice to the ideas of internationalism, the need for revolution, and the common fight against the oppression of the capitalist system:

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a
Bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second
generation full of courage issue forth; let a people
loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of
healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing

in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be
written, let the dirges disappear. Let the race of men now
rise and take control. (51-58)

The images of rising, blood, and hope in the poem are typical symbols of proletarian revolution. Here, they are used to talk about all the oppressed. The stress on the “race of men,” despite the author’s usage of the generic “men,” creates the image of the community of people united against the common enemy. Thus, when the speaker refers to “her people,” it can be interpreted as not limited to black people only, but rather encompassing the “small,” and the “poor,” and the “different” (21) as Walker writes earlier in the poem. The speaker steps out of the exclusionary categories to which people’s politically marked bodies are ascribed. She includes in her hope for “a new earth” everyone who would benefit from a revolutionary society.

Walker’s call for revolution is a call for social justice manifested, among other things, in the equal distribution of wealth. She pays tribute to the laboring masses of the poor whose bodies produce the luxury of the rich:

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the gone
years and the now years and the maybe years,
washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending
hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching
dragging along never gaining never reaping . . . (6-11))

She draws a promising prospect of the change of the laboring body’s situatedness with her vision of the revolution. The poem suggests then that the productiveness of the body can be transformed from being fetishized into being self-beneficial to the laborer. The significance of this change, which would also mean a transformation from being an

object into being a subject, is articulated in Michel Foucault's discussion of the body in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1979):

the body is . . . directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labor power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); *the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body* [my emphasis]. (25-26)

In her vision of "bloody peace," Walker conveys a promise of displacing the body from the position of subjection, and thus making it an agent of its profit and happiness instead of its demise. Her poem communicates the message of hope for the future.

The acts of the formation and assertion of the black female identity discussed in the previous chapters are performed through the refusal of the body to be submissive or, to use Foucault once more, docile. In their writings, Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Margaret Walker expose the plurality of possible subversive acts, revealing the revolutionary potential of the black woman. Thus, almost paradoxically the concept of "the black woman," as revealed in their works, possesses a character of inherent multiplicity. Its openness exposes the body to the possibility of plural definitions, this time generated by black female subjects themselves, not by the dominant

society's prejudice. This process of unbinding and unfolding the many layers of the black woman's identity leads to her self-affirmation, reflected in the assertion of gender and sexual identity, and to the rejection of alienation to which she has been subjected, reflected in the revolutionary labor movement. Therefore, agency and self-awareness underlie the fabric of the Black Renaissance women's literature of subversion: agency that transforms the vulnerable body into a rebel, and self-awareness that makes the rebel feel at ease with her complex self.

Not wholly this or that,
But wrought
Of alien bloods am I,
A product of the interplay
Of traveled hearts.
Estranged, yet not estranged, I stand
All comprehending;
From my estate
I view earth's frail dilemma;
Scion of fused strength am I,
All understanding,
Nor this nor that
Contains me. (Johnson, "Cosmopolite" 1-13)

Notes to Chapter III:

¹ Among such scholarship were two books that established an unfortunate vector for the followers, Wilson Record's *The American Negro and the Communist Party* (1951), and Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967).

² Works such as Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* (1983), Robin D. G. Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe* (1990), William Maxwell's *New Negro, Old Left* (1999) and others fill in the empty space created by the silence of others and achieve their aims in ways that are consistent with the historical records.

³ The biographical note in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* barely mentions that she worked for the WPA Federal Writers' Project (1937), and completely ignores the wide spectrum of her involvement with the Left. The list of sources which present a similar or worse level of incompleteness in this area includes, among others, *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers 1900-1945* (1990), which utterly ignores Walker's radicalism, the Foreword to *For My People* (1942), the most leftist of Walker's books of poetry and, outrageously enough, *Black Protest Poetry* (2001) by Margaret Ann Reid who manages to talk about Walker's social protest without acknowledging her adherence to the Communist Left.

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Putting Flesh on the Radicals: The Black
Female Body in Angelina Weld Grimké,
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Walker

Title of Thesis

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