

Fast Tailed Girls: An Inquiry into Black Girlhood, Black Womanhood, and the Politics of Sexuality

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I hear you.

I see you.

I feel you.

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	3
II.	Black Female Sexuality: A Brief History	9
III.	Black Girls/Being Fast.....	29
IV.	Performative Literature as a Critical Lens, Part 1.....	38
V.	Performative Literature as a Critical Lens, Part 2.....	50
VI.	Conclusion	75

I. Introduction

In late November 2013, Mikki Kendall and Jamie Nesbitt Golden of @HoodFeminism (a black feminist Twitter handle and blog) began telling a story all too familiar to black women and girls with the hashtag #FastTailedGirls. “Fast (pronounced fass) tailed (or tail in some dialects) girl” is a term used mostly by Black women to describe young black girls who “intentionally demonstrate the carnal behaviors reserved for a woman beyond her years.”¹ According to theGiro writer Goldie Taylor, “fass” is nothing more than a politically correct, colloquial term for whore.² Through this Twitter hashtag, Kendall and Golden tweeted Black women from around the world and asked them shared their experiences with being deemed “fast tailed girls” in childhood and adolescence. This was an expression of misogynoir, or the systematic hatred and oppression of black girls and women, before they even knew what it was. One woman recounted hanging out with boys getting her called fast. Another recalled unwanted attention from adult men while only a preteen. Yet another said she had been mistaken for a prostitute while walking down the street as a teenager.³

Along with this premature sexualization, #FastTailedGrils also reveals the sexual abuse and objectification inflicted upon these girls who are treated as women. To echo this, Kendall and Golden tweeted statistics of sexual assault as they pertain to Black girls. Tragically, between 40% and 60% of black girls are estimated to experience sexual assault by the age of 18.⁴ The writing in this online project succeeded in revealing the power in storytelling and shared struggle. The oversexualization of and history of assault endured by black women and girls is

¹ Goldie Taylor, “#FastTailedGirls: Hashtag Has A Painful History Behind It,” *TheGrio* (blog), December 3, 2013, <http://thegrio.com/2013/12/03/fasttailedgirls-hashtag-has-a-painful-history-behind-it/>.

² Ibid.

³ “#FastTailedGirls: Examining The Stereotypes and Abuse That Black Girls Face (with Tweets),” Storify, accessed October 13, 2017, <https://storify.com/thetrudz/fasttailedgirls-examining-the-stereotypes-and-abu>.

⁴ Ibid.

often shrouded in silence. By explicitly writing out their experiences, the women who contributed to the #FastTailedGirls project not only made their struggles visible, but also made writing a means of therapeutic recovery. #FastTailedGirls uncovered the lack of sensibility in the rhetoric of the name and pointed towards how it influences other manifestations of oppression, such as slut shaming and victim blaming. This writing forced others to come to grips with experiences and behaviors they may not have been able to make sense of before.

Using this practice of naming black girls as a starting point, this thesis will examine the conditions of black girlhood and womanhood that reinforce the danger and immorality black girls and women have come to associate with their sexualities. To counter this belief, this thesis will also analyze the methods by which black women and girls participate in dissent and resistance—namely literature and spoken word poetry—to reconstruct existing notions about their sexualities. Engaging with the works current scholars in Black Feminist Thought and the archives of several black women writers and poets, I hope to shed light on the ways racism and sexism combine to marginalize the black female experience and the significant steps black women and girls are taking to reclaim their agency through performative literature and spoken word poetry.

“Fast Tailed Girls” will consist of four body chapters detailing the following: a condensed history of black female sexuality in the United States, black girlhood and the conception of the fast tailed girl, and two chapters focusing on literary devices that function as resistance to the fast tailed girl name. In the first chapter, I will be giving historical and cultural context to current images of black female sexuality. With attention to writing during the 19th Century such as Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), I will make clear the inception and solidification of the Jezebel stereotype and explain how Jezebel was the seed

planted during slavery that has allowed the fast tailed girl to exist. I will also draw on the works of some black woman historians in order to further contextualize the importance of this image to the formulation of ideals about black female sexuality. I will then discuss the inception of respectability politics and the culture of dissemblance that have had a significant impact on society's understanding of black female sexuality.

The second chapter will focus on black girlhood and the conception of the fast tailed girl. This second body chapter will introduce the notion of generational transmission, the main mechanism by which the fast tailed girl name has been allowed to proliferate. It will illustrate the conditions of black girls' lives determined by forces other than themselves—namely their mothers, other women in their lives, their fathers, and an environment plagued with racism and sexism. Through this analysis, I hope to make clear how the myth of the fast tailed girl is created, what sustains it, and the effect it has on the black girls who are given the name.

In the next chapter, I will open up my argument about the ways in which black women and girls use writing as a means of protest and resistance. Beginning through the lenses of the Blues and the Harlem Renaissance, I will construct a genealogy that informs the black feminist literature of the 1970s and modern day spoken word poetry I seek to examine in the final chapter. Engaging with the scholarship of Ann DuCille and Angela Davis, this section will study the impact of some female writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the Blues woman of the 20th Century. Here, the concept of the New Negro woman will be a noteworthy point of discussion. Much like the women and girls protesting fast rhetoric through methods that do not adhere to respectability politics, the New Negro women rejected many characteristics associated with womanhood at the time. I will argue that the structure and fluidity of their work as well as the

boldness of their subject matter set the most visible precedent for creative dissent seen in spoken word poetry.

In the final chapter of “Fast Tailed Girls” I will stress the significance of writing through my analysis of Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975), Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1975). These novels rely on black feminist and womanist discourse to reconstruct narratives of black womanhood/girlhood and create spaces for regaining agency and control over sexuality. These women forthrightly addressed the prevalence of sexism in the Black community and were met with a considerable amount of criticism for doing so. The expression of sexuality in their works rejected respectability and silencing set forth by the women around them. The performative literature present in these works will be a particularly important focus as a lead up to my discussion of modern day spoken word and slam poets. The use of language as a means of expression and communication is an effective way for anyone to understand the suffering of black female subjects.

Also in this chapter I will be connecting the Blues woman, the New Negro woman, and Black Feminist/Womanist writer to the contemporary black female spoken word/slam poet. In the boldest of ways, these women challenge respectability politics and focus their artistry and branding on denouncing the pigeonholes and oppressions that permeate throughout their lives. They manage to denounce any form of femininity that is not constructed *by* them and *for* them. These images of resistance and protest can make the words “fast tailed girl” become less significant and allow black girls to experience their sexualities without shame.

Black women—and to an even greater degree black girls—have been consistently silenced and/or erased from American history and the ideologies of anti-racism that do not

consider sexism and iterations of feminism that rely on colorblindness or do not take racism into account. When I decided to write this thesis, I felt it was important to utilize my intellectual capacities to expand on what stories have already been told and draw from the black feminist theory that already exists in order to create space for more stories to be told about black girlhood. This is to say that the realities explored in this thesis are very similar to my own: being a black woman raised by black women who grew up in a conservative household in the Bible Belt. Just as my mother was discouraged from and punished for being “fast,” I found these words ever-present in my own upbringing. I, too, was taught to be aware of my company and appearance at all times and to refrain from any kind of behavior that might “taint my good name.”

As I have come into young adulthood and have gained a greater grasp of the workings of the world, the unconscious reinforcement of sexism and racism has become one of my major areas of interest. Psychoanalysis, or the study of the interactions between the conscious and the unconscious, is a way to examine the often harsh conditions of the lives of black women and girls, as well as how trauma is passed down through generations. Black women and girls often live in terms of marginalizing forces existing far before them. Racism and sexism become intertwined in this and is nearly inescapable. What often results is an internalization of these forces, allowing a name like the fast tailed girl to even exist.

Sexuality is a phenomenon by which girls can discover themselves and create their own spaces of subjectivity. It is also incredibly tabooed and the constant threat of violence and stereotypes mapped onto black women and girls form systems of oppression that disallow their immersion in the self-discovery that sexuality can make possible. This lack of agency travels between generations and produces an intergenerational trauma that appears to be unbreakable—until a brave, non-respectable woman or girl dares to speak out and break the force of silence.

This action is often initiated by the black female writer through her language, the development of her characters, and her willingness to address racism, sexism, domestic abuse, sexual trauma, and sexual agency with words.

I am most interested in how trauma related to sexuality is perpetuated, the women writers and spoken word artists that process and make sense of it through writing, and the various and interrelated ways they do so. Through my own work as a spoken word poet, I have seen poetic spaces become sites of activism and healing. In a world that wants black women and girls to suffer in silence, spoken word and performance literature gives visibility to that suffering. In this way, writing and performance is not only activism by daring to use one's voice, also by reclaiming some of the very images meant to stifle black women and girls. For many of us, writing is an avenue through which girl becomes woman and gains the ability to bring parts of the unconscious forward. The next chapter will examine the historical origin of images of black female sexuality such as the Jezebel and her opposite the Mammy.

II. Black Female Sexuality: A Brief History

Chattel slavery in the United States, spanning from 1619 to 1865, is almost always thought of as the period in history where society's first conception of ideas about black female sexuality took place. However, as documented in the travel journals of many European explorers, black women were victims of assumption and myth regarding their sexuality long before traveling through the Middle Passage. Deborah Gray White states that English settlers regarded the nudity and widespread polygamy of African peoples as lewdness and untamed sexual prowess by both black men and women due to the lack of adjustment to weather on the African continent as well as a misunderstanding of African societies.⁵ These women were automatically assumed to be overtly sexual, having no control of their sexuality. By the time black women had been forced into slavery in the United States, Caribbean, and South America, two prominent, polarized stereotypes about their sexuality had been formed: Mammy and Jezebel. This "complicated set of myths about black womanhood," as articulated by White, would not only justify violence against slave women, but also create near-impossible expectations for black women to abide by in the future.⁶

While the subject matter of "Fast Tailed Girls" will mostly draw on the existence of the Jezebel stereotype, her antithesis, the Mammy, is vital in providing any context for the formulation of black womanhood to which the fast tailed girl points. In fact, Jezebel and Mammy are the poles through which the fast tailed girl appears. Mammy, a term derived from the word mother, was a caricature of an obedient, caretaking slave woman for the white family. She was typically portrayed as grandmother-like, dark-skinned, overweight, and almost always

⁵ Deborah G. White, "Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery," in *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Rev. ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 27–61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

desexualized. She was a servant to the slave master's family, responsible for keeping house and most often caring for white children. White states: "She was a woman completely dedicated to the white family, especially the children of that family. She was the house servant who was given complete charge of domestic management. She served also as friend and advisor. She was, in short, surrogate mistress and mother."⁷

The Mammy role, however, was just that—a role. She was a precursor to the culture of dissemblance. Articulated by Darlene Clark Hine in a 1989 essay published in *Signs*, the culture of dissemblance was a strategy that black women of the early 20th Century used a means to protect themselves from rape.⁸ The culture of dissemblance was a method by which black women appeared to be open and transparent, but hid the truth about themselves and the inner workings of their lives from those who oppressed them, particularly the presence of their sexuality.⁹ The Mammy was able to effectively protect the customs and traditions of the slave community, despite being in such close proximity to whiteness within the plantation house.

Mammy would enter a library of names given to black women by others as a means to fill the gaps in their own productivity, because, in the words of Black woman scholar Hortense Spillers, "My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented."¹⁰ She expounds upon this idea of naming in her 1987 article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." She uses *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 1965 (colloquially known as the Moynihan Report), as a means to discuss the impossible labels society places onto black women. These names often are the only

⁷ White, 49.

⁸ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912–20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 912.

¹⁰ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics; Ithaca, N.Y.* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 65–83.

grounds through which black women are allowed to appear. The list of names Spillers gives all of seek to call black women into subjectivity. Mammy, Jezebel, and their derivatives like the fast tailed girl all find themselves as part of this list. She writes: “The nicknames by which African-American women have been called, or regarded, or imagined on the New World scene—the opening lines of this essay provide examples—demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful prerogative.”¹¹ In other words, these names are often used as a means to minimize the complexities of black women and put them into boxes that serve the purpose of the symbolic order, white society in this case.

The Mammy is a representation of the necessity of the black women in the historical record. As White explains, “According to these [post-Civil War] accounts, Mammy was the woman who could do anything, and do it better than anyone else.”¹² Mammy was loved and cherished by white families, even considered “special” to some, but this was likely not because of her existence as black woman. Rather, their adoration for her was due to her position as a caretaker and the devotion to their care. Along with this “love” and declaration as a makeshift mother, Mammy was often an older woman and as a result of this was denied her right to express her sexuality.¹³ The making of this asexuality by white elites and slave holders not only contrasted with the Jezebel (while ironically allowing her to exist), but also confirmed a belief of black women’s inferiority.

When viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, it seems that the Mammy functions as part of the dominant symbolic order, where white society determines a hierarchical set of rules in which black women are allowed to appear. According to that symbolic order, Mammy is the

¹¹ Spillers, 69.

¹² White, “Jezebel and Mammy,” 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 60.

legible name for a black woman. This legibility is in turn internalized by black women and their production of subjectivities existing both within the conscious and unconscious. This position within both the conscious and unconscious is known as a split subject and is expressed in the Mammy's submissive, desexualized nature as part of the role and loyalty to that role. In the unconscious, the Mammy takes on the beliefs that she is inferior and only capable of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. In the conscious, she takes pride in her position and proximity to whiteness.¹⁴ Sometime later, black women would find that performative literature was an adequate means to undo these internalized ideas about whiteness.

Surely some Mammy figures had children of their own, but because her primary place was to care for the children of her master and mistress, their children often went unacknowledged. Women who aligned with the figure of Mammy were expected to put the needs of the white children before her own children's needs. This was due to the fact that slaves were considered property and not people. This belief even applied to black children. Despite being regarded as property, Mammy still managed to fall into Victorian and Southern ideals around womanhood—subservient, empathetic, and maternal.¹⁵ When white women elected Mammy to care for her children, they created the stereotype of the “right” kind of slave—a “safe, assimilated, subordinated Black [person].”¹⁶ White slave owners would use the Mammy stereotype to continually keep a hold on a middle aged slave women with maternal qualities in the Antebellum South. Internalized by black communities themselves, the Mammy would become an acceptable image for black femininity and play a pivotal role in the creation of the fast tailed girl.

¹⁴ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”

¹⁵ White, “Jezebel and Mammy,” 56.

¹⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Without the creation and sustaining of the Mammy figure, Jezebel could not exist. This polarization was required to retain control over black women's bodies. While the Mammy was desexualized, Jezebel was oversexualized. The archetype of a "good" slave woman allowed the "bad" slave woman to exist—immoral, lascivious, and seducing to the master. Notwithstanding the refusal to acknowledge or gain understanding of African cultures, the literal physical bodies of slave women were used as a tool to justify the conception of Jezebel.

Enter Sarah Baartman, also known as the Venus Hottentot. A woman from the Khoisan tribe in southern African, she was placed in freak show exhibits across Europe from about 1810 to her death in 1815 at 26 years old.¹⁷ The object on display? Her buttocks. During her time in the exhibits she was poked and prodded by on-lookers as they attempted to determine if her buttocks real and were perplexed by her mere existence.¹⁸ After her death, her remains (a brain, skeleton and sexual organs) were extracted and left on display in a Paris museum until 1974—all in the name of "science."¹⁹

Sarah Baartman speaks to the lack of humanity bestowed upon black women. The development of body parts typically associated with sexuality—lips, derrières, breasts, hips, and thighs, were used as a means to oversexualize black women. Their bodies were too drastically different from that of white women who valued petite, fragile appearances as images of beauty. Regarded as objects and outcasts, the obsession with the sexualized black female body is certainly one of the conditions that gave birth to the Jezebel.

Jezebel is perhaps the most recognizable stereotype in regards to black womanhood and sexuality. She is the adult version of the fast tailed girl, its historical justification, and a site at

¹⁷ Justin Parkinson, "The Significance of Sarah Baartman," *BBC News*, January 7, 2016, sec. Magazine, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987>.

¹⁸ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*.

¹⁹ Parkinson, "The Significance of Sarah Baartman."

which the intersections between racism and sexism intersect. Much like Mammy, Jezebel finds her conceptualization on the plantation. In bondage, the occurrences that led to the development of Jezebel were those forced onto slave women. Of these, the state of the slave trade was the most detrimental. White eloquently details this in the following formulation:

The view that black women were exceptionally libidinous was nourished by the conditions under which slave women lived and worked. The matter of reproduction provides an excellent example. American slavery was dependent on natural increase of the slave population, and through the use of innumerable incentives, planters made sure slave women were prolific. Since casual correlations have been drawn between sensuality and fecundity, the increase of slave populations seemed to be evidence of the slave woman's lust.²⁰

In this sense, black women's reproductive capacities were a tool for the economic advancement of slave holders. This need for reproduction on the plantation would be twisted to mark black women as promiscuous and morally loose. According to White, the slave auction block is the site where these beliefs and the image of the Jezebel began to take shape, justifying this exploitation. On the auction, slave women and girls were barely clothed as for potential buyers to examine them and determine their reproductive capabilities.²¹ In the hands of the slave master, the punishments of female slaves were sexually suggestive. Slave women were required to stripe naked before being whipped in front of an audience of other slaves on the plantation. In fact, some slave owners were documented to have received sexual pleasure from beating their female slaves.²² By White's articulation, "The conditions under which bonded women lived and worked helped imprint the Jezebel image on the white mind."²³

In these ways, the image of Jezebel in chattel slavery functioned to demonize black women and at the same time make them desirable, but not as a means to exercise their own

²⁰ White, "Jezebel and Mammy," 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

²³ *Ibid.*

sexual agency. Without the ability to read and write, most slave women could not use language as a means to fashion their own images. Some, Harriet Jacobs for example, would defy law and find ways to document their stories in secret—a move that could very well have cost Harriet her life. Her autobiography was one of the most radical actions of its time, not only for the mere decision to write, but because of the subject matter that talked back to the sexual subjugation of slavery for black women and girls.

Jezebel was the slave woman who had a sexual energy so strong it was capable of seducing her master. She was not a real woman, but rather a creation of the white imagination that was then used to justify rape and sexual violence against female slaves. While some female slaves willing became the concubines of their masters, most of these relationships were demanded by the slave master. Even the case of the slave women who agreed to enter these relationship, the truth and reality of their consent is regarded with suspicion.²⁴ With Jezebel in the way, would it have been possible for a woman in bondage to truly carry on a consensual sexual relationship with her master? One could argue this impossible and that any relationship a slave woman had with her master was automatically non-consensual. Slave women were never given the freedom to make their own sexual decisions, as previously noted with White's description of forced reproduction. Her master, however, would not have seen it this way because Jezebels could not be raped.

Incidents in the Life of the Slave Girl (1861), written by Harriet Jacobs, complicates our understanding of the agency slave women had in making their own sexual decisions. Published in 1861, the novel is an autobiography of Harriet Jacobs that details her experiences of gender and racial oppression on the plantation. Jacobs wrote the book to appeal the sympathies of white

²⁴ Ibid., 34-35.

women in the North by covering topics such as sexual abuse and the hardships of motherhood. Jacobs is bequeathed to a harsh owner by the name of Dr. Flint after the death of her mother's kind mistress. She denies his advances all throughout her teenage years, yet has children by Mr. Sands—a free white man—during this time. *Incidents* illustrates the sexual horrors the female slave experienced. Jacobs, nevertheless, would assume her own freedom in sexual choice. In the introduction of the slave narrative, Jacobs (using the pseudonym Linda Brent)²⁵ writes:

I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse.²⁶

Here, she is addressing her audience of white Northern women, beseeching them to see her experience and use to take action against the institution of slavery. Jacobs is using her own personal anecdotes to stress the importance of the abolition movement. While she does not want to tell this story, Jacobs is acknowledging the necessity of writing this narrative for the advocacy of all slave women and girls. *Incidents* is one of the most unique of its kind because of Jacobs' special attention to language and her own relationship to writing as a means of documenting her story. In her writing, Jacobs carefully and discretely represents sexuality and sexual abuse. She manages to appeal to the sentiments of white women by remaining obscure enough in her words, but it still able to etch out enough details to imply what actually happened to her. She assumes the position of a writer with the ability to craft her own narrative, well before it was legal for black women to even know how to read and write. Time and time again, Jacobs challenges her

²⁵ For clarification, Linda Brent will be referred to contexts inside of *Incidents*, Harriet Jacobs will be used for contexts outside of the narrative or to the writing itself.

²⁶ Harriet A. Jacobs and Jennifer Fleischner, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, Bedford Series in History and Culture (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2010), 26.

audience, her slave master, her family, and the norms associated with womanhood within bondage.

We see the first formulation of this resistance in Chapter IV of her text, where she vehemently expresses her disdain for the idea of submission when she says

When [Dr. Flint] told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before hand my puny arm felt half so strong.²⁷

At this time, Dr. Flint was obsessed with her submission to him by her own volition. However, by the time she was 15, Dr. Flint “began to whisper foul words in [her] ear.”²⁸ It is during this time, in the chapter titled “The Trials of Girlhood,” that Jacobs’ had begun to understand her existence as a sexual object and the laws regarding the sexuality of female slaves. Her attention to girlhood in this chapter and in the title of her book through the use of slave *girl* as opposed to slave *woman* is important for the development of my argument because it makes clear that black girls still have a concrete conceptualization of girlhood despite the world constantly trying to strip it from them.

Even as a girl, Jacobs was able to articulate the source of her mistress’ anger when she received attention (however unwanted) from Dr. Flint. She then realized that, despite being denied the status of human being, she was to blame for Dr. Flint’s sexual desire. Essentially, Jacobs was aware she was considered a Jezebel even in girlhood, without knowing such a name. She grows up enduring the constant sexual harassment by Dr. Flint, but, interestingly enough is never raped by him (that we know of) because of his desire to seduce Linda and for her to willingly become his concubine.

²⁷ Ibid., 42.

²⁸ Ibid., 52.

Linda continues to defy her master and her standing as a slave when she takes up a consensual relationship with Mr. Sands, a white man. She leaves out the specifics of their affair, perhaps to keep the narrative palatable to her audience, but she does state that it “[seemed] less degrading to give one’s self than to submit to compulsion.”²⁹ Mr. Sands is painted as an antithesis to her master—kind, concerned, and fair. Ultimately, Linda carried on the affair with Mr. Sands because it was more appealing than being sexually defiled by her master. She also did so in hopes she would be purchased by Mr. Sands from Dr. Flint.³⁰ When she becomes pregnant twice by Mr. Sands, it severely angers her master, causing him to attempt to subdue Linda even more and increase in violence. After the birth of her second child, Dr. Flint offers her children’s freedom if she becomes his mistress, but Linda denies as this is a corruption of her personal morals and will and is a contradiction of her decision to have an affair with Mr. Sands.³¹

The importance Linda placed on sexual autonomy existed in contrast to what the law said at that time. Female slave bodies were either seen as aimlessly oversexed or not sexed at all, seen in my explanation of the Jezebel and Mammy images. Harriet Jacobs, however, chose to portray herself as something other than the prescriptions that existed for slave women and girls at the time. Slave women, much less slave girls, were not supposed to have choice. They were not supposed to be able to use their bodies for their own benefit and certainly not against the wishes of their masters. For Harriet to be able to exert this sort of resistance to slavery and still have been able to live to tell her story is truly fascinating and provides an interesting instances of the journey from and through black girlhood to black womanhood and its relationship to writing.

²⁹ Jacobs and Fleischner, 79.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

³¹ Jacobs and Fleischner, 102.

During slavery, common law defined rape as “the forcible carnal knowledge of a female against her will and without consent.”³² Yet the assault of Black female slaves was not included in this definition. African-American history and literature scholar Saidiya Hartman contests that female slaves were excluded from common law definitions of rape not only because of their assumed lasciviousness, but also because their exclusion “was essential to the displacement of white culpability that characterized both the recognition of black humanity in slave law and the designation of the black subject as the original locus of transgression and offense.”³³

By this, Hartman is saying that the black slave women’s displacement from the common law definition of rape eliminated white guilt and logic. This lack of legal protection removed all responsibility for the violence on the black female body from white slave owners. If black women were not acknowledged by this law, there would be no wrongdoing on the behalf of white male slave owners. A slave woman’s concurrent existence as property and person made it difficult to solidify will and consent and nearly impossible to accept the idea they could be raped. Slave women could not give or rescind consent; therefore, they were always determined to be a willing participant in any sexual conquest. The figure of Jezebel is what made that perpetual willingness a possibility.³⁴ In a similar manner, a removal from childhood and action of being mapped onto adult sexuality would make the fast tailed girl a possibility—a modernized Jezebel-in-girlhood if you will.

Jezebel would continue to be used to commit violence against black women and the denigration associated with her would permeate through to the black community. While the rape of black women by white men is strongly present in history, the rape of black women by black

³² Saidiya V. Hartman, “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, 1st edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 79.

³³ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 81.

men is often not a topic of discussion, despite sharing the practice of labeling black women as promiscuous and not allowing them to revoke consent. In more colloquial terms, a “ho” cannot say no. Sexual violence is where Jezebel’s positions as both black and woman become evident. Because black women were already overtly sexual, they could not turn away sexual advances nor could being black and being woman exist independently from one another in the role of the Jezebel. It is the double oppression in the combination of black and woman that makes Jezebel even a possibility and also what makes her so effective. This, paired with the belief that black women are not worth of protection creates the perfect storm for this kind of violence to continue to regenerate in the lives of black girls.

But how do these images become implanted on and engraved in the white or black mind? As the writers of the dominant symbolic order, white society holds much power in dictating legibility and morale. Through the order, the white woman takes up the space of femininity. Difference, in this case the black woman, becomes illegible. This makes her an object representing loss, particularly the loss of acceptance or “fitting in” to dominant society. According to Anne Anlin Cheng, people of color become victims of the melancholia’s “endless self-improvement” of their oppressors. The oppressors feed on the lost object, as it were, to appease their own guilt. Images such as the Jezebel function as a means to solidify the relationship between the melancholic and the object.³⁵

The perpetual negativity of the Jezebel figure ingrained in white supremacist imaginations and the black mind called for some form of resistance for the advancement of the race. At the turn of the 19th Century, middle class black women would participate in a sort of self-fashioning that produced even more tension between the figures of Jezebel and Mammy,

³⁵ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, Race and American Culture (Oxford [England] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

making very clear that Mammy, particularly in her asexualization, was the more acceptable image to embody. Mammy, then, would become a faint symbol for black assimilation into white society and birth what we now know as the politics of respectability.

In the mid-19th Century, a set of unwritten rules created to combat negative stereotypes of black people known as the politics of respectability, would arise. Meant to gain respect from white society, the politics of respectability first manifested in the Black church. In her 1993 book *Righteous Discontent*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explains, “The black Baptist women’s opposition to the social structures and symbolic representations of white supremacy may be characterized by the concept of the ‘politics of respectability.’”³⁶ The politics of respectability were a form of assimilation that sought to reject pigeonholes on black women’s identity by conforming to what was acceptable to dominant, white society. The women who identified with the politics of respectability and embodied visibility nevertheless, existed on a continuum of black resistance and became, in the second half of the 20th Century, the feminine faces of the Civil Rights Movement.

The politics of respectability dictated and policed expressions of sexuality for women. The ramifications of slavery kept false notions about black female sexuality prevalent in society. Through the politics of respectability, black women’s sexuality was repressed and sentenced to only exist under certain circumstances (i.e., marriage) and within the privacy of the home.³⁷ The church played the most important role in determining what who was a respectable woman and who was not. Most often, this image was a middle or upper-middle class woman who dressed in a clean, modest manner and likely had a lighter complexion—an image that was meant to give an

³⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “The Politics of Respectability,” in *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 186.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

illusion of greater proximity to whiteness. Class was quite significant because it, in essence, determined who actually had the means to be respectable.³⁸

More than anything, the politics of respectability became a performance in the everyday lives of black women. The culture of dissemblance, adopted by Black women as a method of protection, was a significant use of the politics of respectability and played a primary role in the policing of Black female sexuality. In an effort to create a positive portrayal of their sexuality, Black women chose to navigate the inner workings of their lives secretly, while still appearing palatable to a social and economic society strongly gripped by racism, sexism, and classism. The main focus of this culture of dissemblance was primarily to shield Black women from the threat of rape in the city, as they had attempted to escape sexual violence and oppression in the South by migrating to the North and Midwest for better economic opportunities.³⁹ The threat of rape existed because of Jezebel—“a person governed almost entirely by her libido”—who worked to justify the sexual abuse of black women.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, in “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West” Darlene Clark Hine suggests that the culture of dissemblance was not enacted on purpose. Rather, it served to combat beliefs of Black women as lascivious and was a coping mechanism meant to “collectively create alternative self-images and shield from scrutiny these private, empowering definitions of self.”⁴¹ Some women in the early 20th Century chose to reject outward sexual expression altogether as to avoid being associated with the negative stereotypes that plagued their histories.

³⁸ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 71.

³⁹ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” 913.

⁴⁰ White, “Jezebel and Mammy,” 29.

⁴¹ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” 916.

The culture of dissemblance represented a means of survival for black middle class women. In contrast, however, many working class women had to reject the politics of respectability and the practice of dissemblance. It was not a rarity for working class women to rely on sex work as a means of survival. Others had children out of wedlock. Still others frequented dancehalls and jazz clubs. All of this was much to the chagrin of women who ascribed to respectability politics. These “bad” black women, however, opened up many possibilities to protest the stereotypical extremes of the Mammy and the Jezebel. I am particularly interested in the performative literature that emerged out of this culture of “bad” black women as it establishes the ground for understanding what is at stake for black women and girls performing spoken work poetry in the present as a method of resistance.

In 1896, the National Association of Colored Women was formed, becoming a source of proliferation for the culture of dissemblance and the politics of respectability.⁴² This club, the Woman’s Convention auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention founded in 1900, and other like them, attempted to remediate behaviors of working class women that were deemed immoral. They did so by creating opportunities for economic advancement in the form of boarding house and domestic service training centers.⁴³ One of the most well-known, the National Training School for Women and Girls, was founded in 1909 with the motto “Work. Support Thyself. To Thine Own Powers Appeal.”⁴⁴

The many roles assumed by black women—mother, wife, daughter, and in this moment, worker—carried the responsibility of uplifting the race. Lack of productivity in black women thwarted the notion of racial uplift. The National Training School was known as the “School of

⁴² Ibid., 917.

⁴³ Ibid., 918.

⁴⁴ Higginbotham, “The Politics of Respectability,” 211.

the Three B's": Bible, bath, and broom for its emphasis of religion and cleanliness.⁴⁵ Along with this mantra, the National Training School for Girls and Women followed a nine-point program, adapted from the National Association of Wage Earners.⁴⁶ In this nine-point plan, it became evident that the labor force and the politics of respectability are intrinsically tied together for the purpose of racial uplift.

For many women, creating an image of purity, piousness, and productivity meant repressing sexuality. Consider Jane Edna Hunter, former president of the Phyllis Wheatley Association, another Black-owned system of boarding housing for migrant women. Hazel Carby explains Hunter's abuse of matriarchal power in order to construct the respectable working Black woman in her 1992 article "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context." She contests that Hunter considered herself the "matriarchal savior of young black women" against commercialized vice typically found in the form of immoral public entertainment such as nightclubs.⁴⁷ Evident even in the mission statement of the Phyllis Wheatley Association—"to discover, protect, cherish and perpetuate the beauty and power of Negro Womanhood"—was filled with the need to control the image of Black women and place it within the particularities of the bourgeois. Many within the Black middle class shared this same state of mind, which ultimately would trickle down into other sectors of the community.⁴⁸

In mild contrast to matriarchal policing described above, the culture of dissemblance did not seek to intentionally police the Black woman, but rather was an effort on the part of black women to shape their own sexualities. However, the women who abided by the culture of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 216.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 219–20.

⁴⁷ Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry: Chicago* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 745.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 747.

dissemblance were still invested in organizations such as the Phyllis Wheatley Houses. This was because by trading in their sexuality card, the community gave Black woman respect and a political voice in return.⁴⁹ This lack of sexual expression was seen as a form of bodily autonomy, but would have many consequences for women who did not or could not keep the inner workings of their lives secret and repress their sexuality. For women who chose to have children, this culture of dissemblance would find its way into the way they raised their daughters. They would focus on the importance of purity and learning the duties of a homemakers, both of which were meant to deter one from becoming a fast tailed girl.

If the non-respectable women did not attempt to reform herself, she was instead condemned. Hine illustrates this condemnation in her description of Sara Brooks, a domestic servant who had migrated to Ohio from Alabama. Brooks stated, “Some women woulda had a man to live in the house and had an outside boyfriend, too, in order to get the house paid for and for the bills... They meet a man and if he promises [them] four or five dollars to go to bed, they’s grab it. That’s called selling your body, and I wasn’t raised like that.”⁵⁰ Here, she is describing the act of prostitution. Brooks was by no means a middle class or upper class woman. Her contempt for sex work exhibited the ability of the politics of respectability to proliferate even in the homes of some poor women, creating divides in the community. Furthermore, this would create another lasting image that would do the most harm to poor black women and girls.

With this class divide set in motion, a new term to identify low-income black women and girls—ghetto—was invented. The Great Migration saw a large spike in the black demographic in the North, but with high population densities and expensive costs of living, black families were

⁴⁹ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” 919.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

forced into crowded housing conditions known as ghettos. The poverty associated with ghettos rose as a result of a lack of jobs for black people, unequal wages, and discrimination. The ghetto became a new means of racial segregation. Ghettos complicated the politics of respectability in almost every way. They were usually unclean and unsafe, rife with crime, and a frequent location for sex work and other “immoral” activities. The ghetto would further remove poor women from a faction of respectable women, demonizing the group as a whole. They would also serve as a predecessor to the modern day “hood” (simply a change of words).⁵¹

Women in the ghetto were seen as a threat to the black family as the social order at the time knew it. Society had three distinct concerns about black women at the rise of urbanization: uncontrollable sexuality, miscegenation, and unrestrained black female desire.⁵² The “ghetto” woman would ultimately undo much of the progress respectability politics and the culture of dissemblance had made and was also some semblance of failure for the middle class. This is why she was such an undesirable figure. This image, Patricia Hill Collins argues, lies on a complicated spectrum of “decent” to “street” and lends itself to black authenticity.⁵³

In the present day, the ghetto black woman is often an objectified image, ever-present and normalized in popular culture. Black popular culture in particular, which entered mainstream in the late 20th Century, has hypervisualized the black female body and black female sexuality—and not in the most positive of ways. The culture has been marked by scantily-clad video vixens moving seductively in video, lyrics loaded with “bitch” and “ho,” and men generally rapping about their sexual bravado and conquests.

⁵¹ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 69.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 81.

Despite being condemned for having and displaying sexuality, the truth is, sexuality only becomes visible for the ghetto black woman when it is for the benefit or pleasurable consumption of someone else. This lack of possession and autonomy paired with society's obsession with policing the black female body traps black women in a child-like state. This infantilization of black women, or placing in the position of a child and treating black women as such, concurrently adultifies black girls, making way for the existence of the fast tailed girl. The consumable, infantilized black woman and the fast tailed girl do not exist in opposition to one another. In fact, Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins suggests that the adultification of black girls and infantilization of black women occur simultaneous and work toward the same goal in her 2013 article "Pigtails, Ponytails, and Getting Tails."⁵⁴ This concurrent phenomena seeks to paint black women as girls and adultify black girls—all on the basis of sexuality. She uses the example of VH1 reality show *Flavor of Love*, and, while somewhat outdated (perhaps *Love & Hip-Hop* would be a more fitting example), it provides concrete evidence for her argument of an infantilizing/adultifying continuum.

The show was essentially a dating contest to see who could win the heart of Flavor Flav, a member of hip-hop group Public Enemy. In every episode, the women perform "ghetto." They are catty, shallow, and personify many stereotypes that plague black women, all while vying for the attention of Flav and being overly sexual.⁵⁵ Imagine women in gaudy, scantily attire getting in physical fights and attempting to prove who is the "realest" by throwing insults, drinks, or whatever else they can find. Dagbovie-Mullins compares Flav and other men like him to that of a

⁵⁴ Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins, "Pigtails, Ponytails, and Getting Tail: The Infantilization and Hyper-Sexualization of African American Females in Popular Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture; Oxford* 46, no. 4 (August 2013): 746, <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/10.1111/jpcu.12047>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 754.

pimp always needing to control his women.⁵⁶ Another interesting facet of the show is the removal of the contestants' real names and replaced with childlike nicknames that pay homage to fairytales, Dr. Seuss books, and playground aliases. This system of renaming not only removes autonomy from the women on the show but also is oddly similar to the fictitious names given to slaves and sex workers.⁵⁷

Reducing black women to this child-like demeanor displaces responsibility for their actions and leaves no room for independence. Reality television as a whole feeds this notion of infantilization, with catfights, a need for “guidance,” and overall exhibition of behavior one would expect from grade school girls. At the same time, these women are portrayed with sexualities that need to be tamed or cared for by some male figure. In this way, infantilization blurs the lines between reality and fantasy. Non-respectable black women are forced into a role that can only be fulfilled through performance. This performance subsequently removes the black woman's need for protection. Childlike characteristics juxtaposed to wanton sexuality only complicate an already complex set of expectations, informed by equally complex history that reverberates from enslavement. Thus, the black woman who is infantilized loses a part of her identity, but not through the grip of respectability politics.

The double sided coin of infantilization and adultification is where the sexual politics of black women and black girls intersect. It is a pivotal factor in the formation of both black womanhood and black girlhood. In fact, it makes clear that black women and black girls are trapped in the binds of stereotypes, societal expectation, and respectability politics in similar ways. But, more often than not, we only place women at the center of these narratives, while leaving black girls in the shadows, despite the fact that black girls someday grow up into women.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 752.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 756.

III. Black Girls/Being Fast

Black Girls: a vulnerable population that is often excluded from conversations on racism and sexism. While this is not far off from the experience of black women, black girls fall victim to the belief that children are seen and not heard and the assumption that the struggles of adults are attended to before the struggles of children. More specifically, Black girls are often considered insignificant and not needing protection due to the belief they are “strong.” This a quality often attributed to black women and yet another manner of adultification for black girls. However, it is extremely important to note that the black girls who are ignored and erased do become women and their upbringing influences their experience as women.

Briefly turning back to *Incidents*, this sort of upbringing was even instilled into slave girls. When Linda Brent became pregnant with her first child by Mr. Sands, she was met with extreme disappointment by her grandmother who exclaimed “O Linda! Has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you are now. You are a disgrace to your dead mother. Go away and never come to this house again!”⁵⁸ Linda, despite being pregnant at 15, still considered herself a girl, even if she was forced to take adult action. Surely, if she were alive today, Linda would have been called a fast tailed girl. However, her grandmother failed to realize the justification and legitimacy in her granddaughter’s actions, caught in the bind of white notions of womanhood in an attempt to reclaim her humanity.

This type of scorn was even more evident over a century later during the time of Jim Crow. Jim Crow, marked by times of racial violence and economic disparity, was particularly trying for black girls because society did not place an emphasis on their safety, much like there was no regard for the slave girl’s safety. Black liberation efforts were centered around anti-

⁵⁸ Jacobs and Fleischner, *Incidents*, 82.

lynching legislation and not the assault of black women and girls. While the rape of black women finds itself well documented in the historical record, the same cannot be posited for black girls. Very few instances are serious lines of investigation.⁵⁹ The culture of dissemblance forced upon black girls is a major reason why information on their coming-of-age is not easily accessible.⁶⁰

Black girls who grew up during the Jim Crow era experienced what Lakisha Simmons calls a double bind in her book *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans* (2015). Racial hostility subjected black girls to the ills of white supremacy; on the other hand, black girls had to obey the politics of respectability and the sexism it expressed.⁶¹ Unlike black women, black girls were given little to no choice in the matter and would not be allowed any level of autonomy until they became adults. What is different, however, is the state of childhood for black girls as opposed to white ones. In regards to sexuality, black girls were no different than black women in that their bodies were demonized by white society.⁶² White girls, on the other hand were protected by notions of white female purity and fragility. In her book *Racial Innocence*, which is focused on childhood from slavery to the Civil Rights Movement, Robin Bernstein writes, “White children became constructed as tender angels, while black children were libeled as unfeeling, noninnocent, nonchildren.”⁶³ Simmons argues that, while both white girls and black girls had certain requirements as to what a “good” girl was, the strictness of the politics of respectability was raced in a way that was

⁵⁹ Lakisha Michelle Simmons, *Crescent City Girls: The Lives of Young Black Women in Segregated New Orleans*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2015), 2.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶³ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, America and the Long 19th Century (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 33.

unfamiliar to white girls. The politics of respectability required a consideration of upward social mobility not required by white girls.⁶⁴

The use of the politics of respectability in raising black girls was meant to solidify a sense of racial purity and raise girls that could eventually become good mothers, useful workers, and suitable public figures in a time where it was vital to their progress and survival. A major cite of this was the Civil Rights Movement, where young black girls were often groomed to be the forerunners. Their alignment to respectability determined how valuable they would be in the struggle for black liberation. Those that did not fit the right image would automatically be pushed aside. This was evident in the Claudette Colvin, a pregnant teenager who had refused to give up her seat on the bus ahead of Rosa Parks but was not allowed to lead the movement because the leaders of the movement did not believe she was respectable.⁶⁵

In this double bind of white supremacy and the politics of respectability, black girls were expected to suffer in silence. When sexually assaulted by white men or upon experiencing other forms of racism, black girls were told to keep quiet, for fear that speaking out may threaten the safety of their communities. In addition, the lasciviousness also mapped on them made it nearly impossible for black girls to gain anyone's sympathy or allyship. If they experienced trauma at the hands of black men or boys, silencing was necessary to uphold an appearance of purity required by the politics of respectability. This was also a means to combat stereotypes related to the masculinities of black boys and men.

The politics of respectability, as they applied to black girls, were not concerned with rape or other forms of unwanted sexual contact, but rather the idea of sexuality as a whole,

⁶⁴ L. Simmons., 16.

⁶⁵ Christina Simmons, "'I HAD TO PROMISE . . . NOT TO ASK 'NASTY' QUESTIONS AGAIN': African American Women and Sex and Marriage Education in the 1940s," *Journal of Women's History; Baltimore* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 111.

particularly as black girls embodied it. It was a contradiction of its very purpose and seemed that, under the politics of respectability, black girls were inherently Jezebels and thus could not experience unwanted sexual contact. On top of this, black girls were denied the innocence and simplicity of childhood as they were made responsible for maintaining their own respectability.⁶⁶ This denial is part of the protection they do not receive.

Silencing plays a significant role in the double bind black girls experience. As Simmons explains, “Silence, as I seek to define it, perform discursive work and has a life of its own. Silence is absence; it is half-told, knowing glances, and narrative and lives ignored.”⁶⁷ This was often the case for black girls who had been raped. They carried their silence with them while still being expected to contribute to both a nuclear, patriarchal family dynamic and black liberation movements. For many girls, this labor started well before their teenage years. For some, it happened as young as seven or eight years old. Ferdie Walker, a Black woman who grew up in Atlanta, GA, recounted her memories of sexual assault at eleven years old, a tragedy she stated “was bad for *all black girls*.”⁶⁸ Simmons contends that, by stating the universal identification black girls had with sexual assault, Walker made apparent the community of black girls become a part as a result of racial and sexual violence.⁶⁹ This type of community is also evident in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

This silence and prohibition of sexuality translated over into the Black home and the upbringing of Black girls. As a result of the politics of respectability, teenager Black girls were conditioned against premarital sexual activity. They were also conditioned against speaking or asking about sexual matters, leading to a repression of knowledge about their own bodies.

⁶⁶ L. Simmons, *Crescent City Girls*, 100.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

According to the account of one girl, who Christina Simmons gives the pseudonym Joyce in her 2015 essay on Black women and sex education in the 1940s, she was not even informed of menstruation before her first cycle.⁷⁰

While both Black and white girls lacked basic sexual health knowledge, Black girls were silenced the most within the home as a result of the underlying stigma regarding sexuality.⁷¹ A class taught by Gladys Groves, a white woman, at a segregated North Carolina college, documented these experiences. She took an approach that, as Simmons describes, “offered a modern middle way between ladylike respectability and the blues women’s raucous sexual expressiveness.”⁷² Because many of the students were being conditioned to be teachers and homemakers—respectable professions within the Black community—they, too, subscribed to the politics of respectability without necessarily being aware of its true origins in white assimilation.

This focus on purity is what allowed “fast” girls to come to be and prevail as a means to police young black girls. I recall the first time I heard the term “fast tailed girl.” I was about eight years old with neither a clear understanding of what the phrase meant nor a conceptualization of my own sexuality; it just knew it was something negative and to be avoided. Like many other black girls, I had heard the term well before I knew what it meant to be fast. Years later, the term would be applied to me for the first time for something as simple as wearing jeans that hugged my barely pubescent hips a little too tight. Even then, I still had no clear idea of what it meant to be fast and even less, why my jeans made me a fast tailed girl.

While #FastTailedGirls has only recently appeared on social media, the term, as I have been trying to show, has a much longer history and was fundamental to how I saw myself a s

⁷⁰ C. Simmons, “I HAD TO PROMISE . . . NOT TO ASK ‘NASTY’ QUESTIONS AGAIN,” 110.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 113.

black girl. For years after the very first time I was labeled a fast tailed girl, I was hypersensitive to my own actions, the company I kept, and the clothes I wore. I wanted to distance myself as far away from the label as possible, despite the fact that I did not truly know what it meant.

As soon as black girls gain as knowledge of self, they are often hampered with expectations about a sexuality of which they are unaware. How can black girls threaten society with something they do not yet understand themselves? Surely it must be more than close fitting jeans, clear lip gloss, hoop earrings, or a twist of the hips. So, what exactly is a fast tailed girl? I suggest it is more than a simple set of words with fire behind them, but rather an entire characterization and set of behaviors. The fast tailed girl is one who rejects the politics of respectability and dives into sexual exploration well before it is deemed appropriate by dominant society. Her appearance is immoral and immodest. She is too “grown” and enjoys the pleasures only adults capable of managing its possible consequences. She is confident, perhaps too confident and “smelling herself,” or being so self-absorbed it comes off as feisty and arrogant. She is immature, hotheaded, and even hotter in the pants. It does not take much, however, to invoke or even remind a mother or elderly woman of this image. From starting puberty at a young age to play dressing in your mother’s high heels, the pejorative of fast was and still is never too far off for a black girl.

This policing of black girls through the accusation of fast takes place without providing protection. While black boys are often the coddled in the family, black girls are expected to live up to expectations not required of male children. While black girls are expected to be quiet, obedient and servient and punished when they do not abide by this behavior, black boys are able to live under the statement “boys will be boys.” This is because of perceptions about how racism affects black men. Even within the black family, it is evident that racism is not seen as an issue

that important enough to acknowledge in the lives of black girls. This also implies black girls are inherently independent and able to combat the ills and sexism and racism on their own. An aphorism well known in the black community, “black girls are raised while black boys are loved” comes to mind as evidence of this. Black men and boys are seen as defenseless and overpowered by racism and thus placed at the forefront of antiracist activism. Something like performative literature seeks to center black women and girls in efforts to combat racism and sexism.⁷³

Several factors explain why the term fast is projected onto young black girls. Patricia Collins advances one of the main reasons for discouraging fast behavior is not necessarily to censor black girls, “but rather to question rather [black girls] can ‘handle it’ [in the words of *Destiny’s Child*] if they are so woefully uninformed about the legacy of Sarah Baartman.”⁷⁴ In other words, how can a girl wield a sexuality she does not understand the history and implications of? However harsh, the warning to not be a fast tailed girl or the occasional receiving of the label suggests a convoluted means of protection. When a mother calls her daughter fast, she does not do so in malice, but because (1) she wants to protect her daughters from the complexities of sexuality and from the figure of Jezebel and (2) because she was a fast tailed girl at some point in her life.

The infantilization-adultification continuum Dagbovie-Mullins explains is essential to the formation of the fast tailed girl. Popular culture and dominant society suggests that black girls are actually adult women and should be treated as such. Dagbovie-Mullins argues that it is the infantilization of the black woman that allows the black girl to be pictured as an adult.⁷⁵ This

⁷³ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 83.

⁷⁴ Collins, 50.

⁷⁵ Dagbovie-Mullins, “Pigtails, Ponytails, and Getting Tail,” 747.

simultaneous infantilization and adultification, in conjunction with the ubiquitous Jezebel image, make negative perceptions about black female sexuality nearly inescapable. Nevertheless, the most shocking and intricate issue here is mapping of an adult sexuality onto children. This is apparent in Dagbovie-Mullins' example of the R. Kelly case. In this case, much of the blame was placed on the victim, a fourteen year old girl. For much of the public, the development of her body seemed to assume full autonomy and consent when it comes to sexual interactions. This adultification does not portray the victim as a child and thus removes responsibility from the perpetrator.⁷⁶

Black girls internalize the myth of the fast tailed girl, as well as project it onto their peers. I recall the first time I heard another girl call someone fast. I could not have been any older than ten years old. The word sounded peculiar coming from the mouth of someone other than authoritative figure. Looking back, it only makes sense that girls would spew a phrase they had heard in their community. As children, all that was known to us is that a fast tailed girl is something you did not want to be. She was someone you wanted to draw as much distance from as possible, so it was not far-fetched to hear the name used as an insult on a fifth grade playground. This would come well before our white classmates knew what a slut or whore was—their equivalent to “fast.”

The linguistic difference that “fast” represents is important here. It is a phrase unique to the black community and holds the most important weight there. It is a secret code that, on the surface level appeared harmless but continues to harm generations of black girls who ever had the experience of hearing it. Fast... meaning racy... meaning at high speed... is a word only legible to a minority society, a faction of black girls and women if you will.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

It was not until I began my journey at Duke that I learned the bitter histories that informed the name of the fast tailed girl. I was sixteen years old before I understood what it meant. Up until that point, I had spent years with low self-esteem and self-repression. I rejected my own body. I did not know what consent was and was not equipped with the tools to say no once the time arose. Even as an adult, the echoes of my mother or my grandmother discussing who exactly was fast in the neighborhood or at church (when I did go) and warning me not to keep their company still echo in my head sometimes.

Gaining self-confidence and control over this name attached to many black girls is not an easy feat. It requires an incredible amount of bravery and self-reflection. For me, the most significant element of this journey of understanding is writing. Literary methods like journaling and poetry writing are substantial ways to track personal development over time. Through poetry, whether spoken or written, I was able to articulate what it mean to be a fast tailed girl, my own frustrations with the deprecating term, and my disassociation from it and maturity in a healthy, empowering sexuality. This experience is not unique to me, and, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, is in fact quite common among black women in American history. In the next chapter, I will trace the importance of writing in opening up resistive discourse around names like the fast tailed and analyze some of the pioneers of this type of resistance.

IV. Performative Literature as a Critical Lens, Part 1

Why would the writing found in performative literature be a suitable critical lens for inquiry on black female sexuality? One form of what I call performative literature is a piece of writing that is physically performed for an audience. This would include plays, choreopoems such as *for colored girls*, and broader forms of spoken word poetry, including slam (spoken word in its competitive form). Another form would be a piece of writing that performs or attempts to explain an identity and, for the purpose of my project, how gender, sexuality and race are constructed to reinforce one another. This can include theoretical works, non-fiction pieces like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, novels like *The Bluest Eye* and *Corregidora*, and short stories. At times these two forms of performative literature converge. The objects I examine in the chapter that follows will be operating at the site of convergence. Two important attributes appear when these types of performative literature come together.

Firstly, performative literature has the ability to give visibility to the invisible and voice to silence. This is particularly important for black women and girls, whose experiences are often erased from dominant culture and not recorded in the historical archive. As a result, of unmuting this silence, performative literature by black women and girls both documents experience and retells their history. Most current historical notations leave out the stories told by individuals in these identity categories. Writing creates an accurate record. The writer is allowed full autonomy and space to document her experience without fear of censorship. Images that danger and demoralize the black female body are reconstructed through this performative literature.

Secondly, performative literature functions as a method of resistance. As a primary means of communication, language is a most effective manner for simultaneous therapy and protest. The performative aspect of language has the power to invoke sympathy among its

audience, or, at the very least educate the unfamiliar on the historical intricacies of black women and girls. This very action of speaking protests the respectability politics that brought the notion of silencing detailed in the previous two sections to the forefront.

Language can be a form of protest in two ways: subversively and explicitly, where subversive protest is something “under the radar.” Examples of this include metaphor, analogy, and allusion. These literary devices are subversive because they often use abstract and descriptive writing to address a concrete problem. This sort of language is situated in relation to community, which determines what will and will not be legible to a particular group of people. Through my analysis of each object of black feminist performance, I hope to reveal how the writing of black women and girls reclaims autonomy and functions as a mode of empowerment and dissent from deleterious constructions of black girl sexuality, such as the fast tailed girl.

The Harlem Renaissance of the early 20th Century might be the inauguration of the black feminist literature that would foresee spoken word/slam poetry. It was an era of political change as well as a redefinition of womanhood through a franker display of sexuality and sensuality. What arose was the concept of the New Negro woman, a particularly classed image of womanhood that resisted to both the traditions of poor, Southern black people and fought against the grips of racism and sexism as it existed in an urban United States.

The New Negro woman may have relied on the politics of respectability and culture of dissemblance as a means to maintain her image, but her contribution to a genealogy of black womanhood in her attempt to work against these same politics cannot go without acknowledgment in the context of this project. This image, nevertheless, was also characterized by a proximity to whiteness and understanding of black identity that had not before been possible on a grand scale. To root this in literature, I will briefly be drawing on the work of Nella Larsen

and Zora Neal Hurston—two prominent female writers of the Harlem Renaissance, whose work represented the performance elements necessary for the sustainability of the New Negro Woman. The New Negro woman herself is a performance of black femininity that is often discussed alongside the Blues woman.

The Blues woman is a significant figure for understanding performance and its connection to the representation of the New Negro woman in the texts of Larsen and Hurston. In her 1928 novel *Quicksand*, Larsen demonstrates the influence of the Blues and the New Negro Woman in the work of women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. This novel tells the story of Helga Crane: a young, mixed race woman attempting to define herself aside from the pressure to be a respectable black woman that would uplift the race and the constant objectification she experiences. At various moments in the novel, Crane is forced to come to terms with what it means to be black and woman in a society that heavily enforces respectability politics and seeks to restrict her to the role of Jezebel if she does not conform to the respectable work of reproducing and uplifting the race.

Helga is a constantly resistant figure in *Quicksand* and this resistance is most evident in her dress. Helga Crane in particular was a “studied and deliberate dresser,” Ann DuCille writes in her 1993 article “Blues Notes on Black Sexuality.”⁷⁷ In a society where she was expected to follow mundane, colorless fashion standards, Helga Crane opted for bright colors and attire that was considered ostentatious. These clothes “signal both her sexuality and her tenuous relationship to the moral and behavioral codes of the two disparate societies she stands among but not of.”⁷⁸ This adornment was a means of reclaiming her body and was a physical

⁷⁷ Ann Ducille, “Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (1993): 430.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

representation of her sexuality, however subtle. This type of self-fashioning and performance can be seen with the contemporary slam poet through the concept of the “boutfit”—a particularly glamorous outfit that represents one’s personality and is worn during a round of slam competition (called a bout).

One scene towards the end of *Quicksand* illustrates a distraught Helga walking into a church storefront in a revealing red dress. At this point in the novel, she is desperate and depressed due to rejection everywhere she has travelled as a result of racism and sexism, including multiple failed romances. After removing her rain-soaked coat, she is immediately denigrated by those in the church, who call her “a scarlet ‘omen and a ‘pore los’ Jezebel.”⁷⁹ Describing this scene, DuCille writes: “Helga need not *sing* the blues to be claimed as a red-hot mama; even just a glimpse of her bare flesh and red dress are enough to earn her the label of Jezebel” (emphasis is my own).⁸⁰ In other words, the mere presence of revealing clothing was enough to map derogatory ideas of sexuality onto her body, even if this was not expressed through her language like the Blues woman. DuCille is arguing that Helga indeed is a blues woman, too.

DuCille argues that novelists such as Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, another prominent woman writer of the Harlem Renaissance, are often excluded from the narrative of what she calls a “blues matrix” because of their location in an urbanized North as opposed to a rural south.⁸¹ This is also because of their characters’ positions as middle class black women—a “historical

⁷⁹ Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (New York: A.A Knopf, 1928), 112.

⁸⁰ DuCille, “Blues Notes on Black Sexuality,” 431.

⁸¹ Ann DuCille, “Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and the Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (1993): 420.

conservatism” as she calls it—they actually do have many blues inscriptions and share sentiment and subject matter with Blues women.⁸²

DuCille refers to a character like Helga Crane to be adhering to a bourgeois blues. Much like Helga, the Blues woman was known to don extravagant attire. The Blues, whether sung or enacted through clothing, did the work of creating an image of black womanhood that was liberating, and resisted the binds of respectability politics. According to DuCille, “Unlike her blues-singing contemporaries, [Helga] does not have the luxury of donning a woman-proud persona and acting out the days of her life as a performer on a stage. Yet, Helga too has sung the blues. It is just that no one has listened.”⁸³

The work of women Harlem Renaissance writers like Nella Larsen are often criticized because of characters like Helga, who is depicted as a mixed race woman of the bourgeois class. These criticisms argue that these authors often relied on monolithic notions of black womanhood that decentered sexuality in favor of, as DuCille explains, “presenting a class of black women as prim, as proper, and as bourgeois middle class white ladies.”⁸⁴ These scripts were seen as disingenuous, where the lyrics of the Blues woman were seen as an honest depiction of Black female sexuality.

The politics surrounding what it means to woman, black, and possess a sexuality also play out in the work of Zora Neal Hurston, who is considered to be the most prolific woman writer of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston writing on black womanhood is particularly authentic due to her focus on the true realities of race and sexuality for black women. “How It Feels To Be Colored Me” (1928) examines Hurston’s perceptions as a “colored” woman, where colored is not

⁸² Ibid., 420–21.

⁸³ Ibid, 432.

⁸⁴ DuCille, 422.

necessarily coded as Black. This lively essay is a commentary on how experience shapes itself based on location and the societies in which one is immersed. It is marked by a playful, performative language for which Hurston is well-known. I have chosen to include her in this project not only due to her contributions to literature during the Harlem Renaissance, but also because I see her as an early example of the literary and performative devices used by black feminist writers of the 1970s and 21st Century spoken word poets.

In the title of the essay, her use of “Colored” comes before a time where Black was used. But why not Negro or, more politically correct, African-American? Colored was a term that helped to justify segregation in contrast to “Whites Only” water fountains, lunch counters, and schoolhouses. Despite the naming of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of COLORED People), Colored was a word people of African descent in the United States could not escape linguistically or through a racialized experience. Hurston’s use of the term is a reclamation and rebranding of something read as derogatory. Colored becomes a celebration of Blackness and how multi-faceted being a Black woman is through her title. The presence of “Me” seeks to personalize the experience—to say that every colored experience is not the same. It is again a celebration. Me implies ownership of the Coloredness Hurston describes throughout the essay. The use this word, along with a less formal Colored, sets up her tone—humorous, unbothered, feisty, and self-assured. The title and the text personify a playful, colorful, and carefree character most black girls are not privileged enough to assume because of the burdens of racism and sexism around them.

Hurston’s self-assured tone carries throughout the essay and solidifies her presence as a writer, beginning with the opening paragraph. It also sets forth her audience with a little humor that would only resonate with the Black community. The statement “I am the only Negro in the

United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was *not* an Indian chief" affirms her Blackness and denies a fictionalized heritage that downplays blackness, while making fun of members of the Black community who ascribe to this doctored narrative of ancestry.⁸⁵ Oftentimes, Black people attempt to distance themselves from their Blackness by claiming they have some Native American or other non-black lineage. Along with her humor, the piece has a carefree and bold-spirited feel. She declares she is "not tragically colored" and despite her race she does not "weep at the world" and is "too busy sharpening [her] oyster knife," meaning that she celebrates her race and has no concern to be worried. Hurston turns up her nose at the idea of being reduced to being the ancestor of slaves. In fact, she is proud of her existence and the struggles of slavery in her bloodline and finds glory in it.⁸⁶ The pride in her writing highlights her personal connection to the subject matter and is strikingly similar to the subjective, woman proud Blues performer.

Location perhaps plays the biggest role in when Hurston feels colored. Reflecting on her childhood, Hurston writes, "I remember the very day I became colored" at the very beginning of the essay. Raised in Eatonville, Florida, a predominantly Black town, Hurston's experience with anything other than Black bodies had been limited, other than the ones that passed through her town.⁸⁷ This statement is significant in that it implies that racial difference and consciousness about what race means do not register until one is placed out of the communal space of one's own community. This is affirmed upon Hurston's move to Jacksonville, FL for school where she recalls, "I was not Zora of Orange County anymore, I was now a little colored girl."⁸⁸ Here,

⁸⁵ Zora Neale Hurston, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing ... and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, ed. Alice Walker, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Feminist Press, 1979), 153.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

Hurston is acknowledging that she became cognizant of her race in girlhood and that girlhood is the site of the making of identity for most, if not all, black women. My project is examining the cognizance of sexuality within girlhood how this affects the formation of identity for black women. Hurston exemplifies how black women writers have resisted limited notions about their identities and the performative dimension of her writing suggests what is possible when black girls are not shamed for who they are.

As Hurston explains, the displacement from the people of the Black town of Eatonville to a town with bodies absent of melanin caused her to “become” colored. In other words, had she stayed in that community, she would have never discovered herself as racially different, for she would not have had an adequate comparison for difference. In the company of white people (“against a sharp white background”) her Coloredness, coded as Black, is ubiquitous; on the other hand, her Coloredness is something much more vibrant and multi-faceted.⁸⁹ Sexuality is as well when black women and girls are allowed the autonomy to shape it however they see fit. Sexuality is not an invariable attribute and is capable of fluid representations depending on the individual owning it.

However, Coloredness does not always mean Black for Hurston. It is also a sharp contrast with Whiteness that is not its opposite, but rather an expression of the parts that make up the opposite (Whiteness as an absence of color; Blackness as an absorption of all colors). Coloredness is a metonym for the multiple, complicated aspects of the experience of the Black woman. She explicates this through her emotions during a performance at the New World Cabaret. The music performed in the space, Jazz in this case, had a close connection to both Hurston as a New Negro Woman of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black community as a

⁸⁹ Ibid., 154.

whole, and drew a strong reaction out of her that was unfamiliar to her white counterpart in the same audience. “I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know.” she writes.⁹⁰ The juxtaposition of color and violence in this scene represent different emotions that blend together as she listens to the music. In this section of the essay, the acting out of savagery is at the forefront. The white man has only “heard what she has felt,” proving that he not only lacks the emotional connection to the music but also the color that comes along with it.⁹¹ This is a celebration of sexuality and not the Jezebel role or respectability politics.

The celebration of rather than the rejection of a primitive spirit of the Black body is also displayed through this part of the essay. Primitiveness, usually seen as a derogatory for the Black body, particularly for women, is described by Hurston as she listens to the music. She goes back to the jungle in her mind, she dances wildly with a spear above her head and to drums, and she paints her face in bright colors.⁹² The embracing of the primitive is not a problem for Hurston. It does not lead to the shame associated with the Jezebel. It is actually an expression of the raw emotion that overcomes her from what she hears. This raw emotion is part of what creates the stark contrast between whiteness and colored and makes her description of primitive behavior acceptable. It is a playful, entertaining interaction and an expression of a sexuality without it being shameful.

At the end of the essay, Hurston’s extended metaphor of the “brown bag of miscellany” is analogous to differences that make up the condition of one’s life. The random items in the each

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Hurston, 154.

⁹² Ibid.

bag, many of which do not appear to be of much value and have actually been through their share of wear and tear, are actually the imperfections and experiences that create individuality. As Hurston explains, "...like the jumbles in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly."⁹³ Here, she may be hinting that despite the different things that make us up, including race, gender, and sexuality, we are not significantly different as human being.

For black women, girlhood and the adultified sexuality associated with it are in the bag. Surely, fast tailed girl might show up as well. Hurston's final paragraph closes in on the overall theme of self-assurance that she seems to be expressing. Regardless of her realization of racial difference, it is not the end-all, be-all that defines her. "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" can mostly be understood as a memoir of self-actualization, self-love, and celebration in a world that sees black women and girls as other.

Much like the Larsen, Hurston, and other women writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Blues women were able to find agency and assert their sexuality through their music. The male-dominated Blues had several Black female artists who revitalized the content of the genre in the 1920s. These women sang about love—sometimes sexual love—desire, and abuse aside from the rather blue subjects indicative of the genre. Throughout the early 20th Century, Billie Holiday, as well as other female Blues singers could "sing out" their demons, so to speak, while reclaiming ownership of themselves. Along with singing out their demons, female Blues singers laced their lyrics with sultry, tantalizing lines that alluded to sex in an era where sex was not openly discussed, especially not by Black women. An example of this is popular Blues song "I Need A Little Sugar in My Bowl," sung by the likes of Bessie Coleman and Nina Simone.

⁹³ Ibid., 155.

These were perhaps the first Black women to visibly defy respectability politics within popular culture. Angela Davis detailed the cultural significance of the Blues woman in her 1998 book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. As Davis shows, The Blues woman's discussions of sex, desire and domestic violence sought to give autonomy to black women and reject the passivity forced upon them. Davis writes: "There is a core of meaning in the texts of the classic blues women that, although prefeminist in a historical sense, reveals that black women of that era were acknowledging and addressing issues central to contemporary feminist discourse."⁹⁴ Preceding the academic language and theory that relates to sexuality and race today, the Blues woman was able to articulate their knowledge in a way that was accessible and consumable to the general public. The texts of Blues women are indeed black feminist texts and should be read and considered as such, though do not show up as often as they should. This observation is an example of the failure to acknowledge black women cultural production in much of the Academy. Nevertheless, it is here we see a predecessor to the performative black feminist literature that is so central to this project.

The Blues woman also challenged the idea of the cult of true womanhood designed by upper-middle class, Christian white women and eventually perpetuated by Black women to avoid an idea of lasciviousness, present in the Jezebel stereotype.⁹⁵ The cult of true womanhood centered piousness, sexual purity, domesticity and submissiveness. The Blues women defended the antithesis of each of these categories. First, there was a refusal of piousness by displacing non-secular, religious music and thus performing "Devil's music," that was part of a new black

⁹⁴ Angela Yvonne Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 24.

⁹⁵ Davis, 11.

consciousness.⁹⁶ Secondly, the Blues woman was most notorious for frank sexual discussion—heterosexual and homosexual—even so much that some songs were deemed “quasi-pornography.”⁹⁷ Thirdly, the image of the working woman and her lack of submissiveness all produced a unique identity of the Black woman post bondage that did not adhere to traditional definitions of gender.

They also brought to light the dangers in attempting to map the ideals of the Cult of True Womanhood on to the behaviors and lifestyles of black women, particularly without being conscious of how sexuality manifests itself in black communities as a result of the sexual abuse of black women during slavery. White women were not haunted by the image of the Jezebel and the continued use of these respectability politics by many women of the early 20th Century appeared to do more harm than good. It is as if the Blues woman knew that black bodies would certainly be excluded from this narrative, much like the fast tailed girl. As the black women’s literature would become more visible and prevalent towards the 1970s, its writers would borrow from the literacy and lyrical tactics of the women that preceded them in the Harlem Renaissance and the Blues and pay homage to them in their work.

⁹⁶ Davis, 6.

⁹⁷ Davis, 14.

V. Performative Literature as a Critical Lens, Part 2

The literary and lyrical tactics used by the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the Blues woman described in the preceding chapter are particularly strong in Gayl Jones' 1975 novel *Corregidora*, set in 1940s Kentucky. The novel is a literary manifestation of the Blues woman—a literal paying of homage to her. It tells the story of Ursa Corregidora, a blues singer who carries on the name of her grandmother's and great grandmother's slave owner—a Brazilian man that sexually abused and impregnated them both. As a result of this, Ursa is tasked with the responsibility of “making generations,” or carrying on the brutal truths of slavery through childbearing and childrearing. Her obsession with this task is illustrated through flashbacks about Ursa's younger years, filled with sexual exploration and questions about her identity as well as her monologues and dreams in the present. In one of her flashbacks, Ursa recalls this in an interaction with her grandmother where she says:

They didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it comes time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up.⁹⁸

Ursa's grandmother is describing the horrors of sexual abuse and incest slave masters like Corregidora committed and the determination of the Corregidora women to assure the stories of those horrors never disappear. Ursa remembers she was five years old at the time of this interaction, which demonstrates the lack of childhood allotted to black girls.⁹⁹ However, her task comes to a tragic end when she has to have an emergency hysterectomy after being pushed down the stairs by her abusive husband during a dispute about her being a Blues singer and putting her sexuality on display in her performances.

⁹⁸ Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*, Black Women Writers Series (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 14.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Throughout the novel, Ursa attempts to find an identity disassociated from the ability to make generations. She must redefine her womanhood without relation to reproduction, while still finding a way to carry on the generational trauma of her matrilineal ancestors as to assure the ills of slavery and sexual abuse will be remembered. Much of this work of instilling memory is done through her immersion in the Blues. Through Blues music, Ursa was able to process her own trauma as well as the trauma of the women preceding her. In fact, Blues music is the way in which Ursa processes things she cannot understand and becomes her means of reproduction when she can no longer do so biologically. As a blues singer, she was able to find her voice through performing her own kind of poetry. Jones was able to script a new image for black women through the character of Ursa Corregidora. She uses her music to represent and process her intergenerational trauma. To this, Ursa said,

I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father, the master. Her daughter's father. The father of her daughter's daughter. How many generations?¹⁰⁰

Ursa wanted to write the trauma of her ancestors into her music and create a new understanding of these traumas through Blues music. It, in part, did some of the work of creating evidence in the way Ursa's grandmother had spoken of previously. Also through the genre of the Blues, Ursa was able to make vital decisions about love, men, sex, and relationships, akin to female Blues singers in the real world.

The trauma made concrete through the Blues unfortunately reduced the Corregidora women to the use of their bodies to make generations. As a result, Black female bodies are reduced to objects and their sexual organs, manipulated, and abused by male characters, both black and white. The Corregidora women come to only associate sex with violence due to their

¹⁰⁰ 59.

ever-present slave past, thus never having true agency over their sexuality. In turn, these men became the mechanisms by which the Corregidora women met their goal of making generations. Despite encountering constant abuse from these men, they were nothing more than a means to an end.

Ursa's inability to maintain a healthy relationship with the opposite sex reduces her to something only to be desired and objectified, especially by black men. Ursa's ever-volatile relationships with her male suitors are evidence of this objectification. From Mutt's abuse to Tad's jealousy and infidelity, Ursa does not own herself, but rather is considered property by her husbands. This objectification appears to be inescapable and is not far removed from the experiences of the mothers before her. This echoes the Jezebel stereotype that informs the use of the fast tailed girl name as means of describing and punishing young girls for their sexuality. It is a cycle that began with Ursa's Great Gram and ended with Ursa, as she reclaims her sexuality and her power in the final scene and reunion with her ex-husband Mutt Thomas. In the final passage of the novel she says,

It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return...?¹⁰¹

It is here where Ursa finally breaks free from the grasps of making generations. She realizes that her own abuse was not at all isolated and was a consequence of the trauma before her. Thus, she was able to rename her life's purpose and forgive the man who had taken away her ability to carry on the trauma of her ancestors.

¹⁰¹ Jones, 184.

The idea of “making generations” ruled Ursa’s entire identity. It consumed her, and the novel takes us through the inheritance of black women’s burden in reproduction. Earlier in the novel, she proclaims: “I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk. Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their temples. I will pluck out their eyes.”¹⁰² In this monologue, Ursa is acknowledging the pain associated with her trauma and the fact is it not at all new, but rather passed down through her mother’s body. However, she has found some peace through the Blues.

It seems that Ursa believes she was made for the sheer purpose of ensuring the ills of slavery are never erased, but upon losing her womb, she uses Blues music as an alternative means of storytelling, similar to the work the modern spoken word poet does. The music becomes her generation, marked by a safety she would violently protect. Through the music and a reevaluation of relationships, Ursa develops a clear sense of self by ending of the book. The reunion scene between her and Mutt represents a renewal among herself and her sexuality and a closure of her identity as a generation maker. Though this closure, she creates a new definition of womanhood. The novel ends with Ursa stating “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither,” before Mutt holds her tight and for the first time, Ursa was allowed to live for herself, free from the traumatic burdens of her ancestors.¹⁰³

What does it mean for trauma to be intergenerational? Mother-daughter transmission of trauma is particularly evident in *Corregidora*. This intergenerational trauma is characterized by ill treatment based on the painful experiences of the matriarchal line: in this case, slavery. For Ursa, she falls victim to the high responsibility of carrying on the stories of the women who came before her and her world is shattered when she can no longer fulfill her duty. This,

¹⁰² Jones, 77.

¹⁰³ Jones, 184.

however, also means Ursa did not have to live out the trauma of her body and reproductive capacities being exploited. Nevertheless, exempt from this responsibility, Ursa was able to reevaluate her relationships with men and find pleasure in sex—a purpose other than reproduction.

As evident in *Corregidora*, intergenerational trauma most often arises between mothers and daughters when addressing sexuality. When thinking about the fast tailed girl, mothers are the primary mechanism by which this name proliferates throughout generations. Mothers give this name familiarity. Just as Ursa became familiar with the Corregidora story and the concept of making generations, Black girls come to know fast tailed girl by hearing it from their mothers. Black mothers often use this name as a means to keep their own sexual experiences secret. This adherence to secrecy is done not only as a result of guilt and the belief that they too could have been fast tailed girls, but also as a means of protecting their daughters from the repercussions of a sexuality associated with shame. What is different, however, is how Jones make intergenerational trauma conscious and seems to embrace it. In reality, intergenerational trauma exists because of the refusal to address trauma at its site of abusive sexual experiences, causing it to manifest in the unconscious and automatic treatment of black girls.

Shifting to a literary representation of Black girls that exemplifies the ill treatment resulting from intergenerational trauma that has been sustained through racism and sexism, Toni Morrison's tragic coming-of-age novel *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove in a post-Great Depression Midwest. In the novel, Pecola is on a constant pursuit of blue eyes. She is a poor, dark skinned, "ugly" (as often stated in the novel) girl who comes from broken home riddled with constant domestic violence and a brother who continually runs away, which makes it clear she has to stay at home. Pecola's longing for blue eyes comes as a result of

the ongoing abuse she experiences from nearly every character in the book because of how her race and gender are perceived. The blue eyes also function as a means to escape her own painful reality.

Pecola is taken in by the family of Claudia and Frieda MacTeer and lives with them after her father burns their house down. She finds a support system in Claudia and Frieda as she navigates the world and processes the abuses she experiences. When Pecola is bullied by some of her classmates, Claudia and Frieda step up in her defense, slamming a stack of books on a teasing boy's head, making them leave her alone.¹⁰⁴ While the community demonizes and blames Pecola when she is raped and impregnated by her father, Claudia and Frieda see the beauty in her unborn child and want it to live, yet still grieve for Pecola. Reflecting on the news of Pecola's rape and pregnancy Claudia says:

Our astonishment was short-lived, for it gave way to a curious kind of defensive shame; we were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally we just felt sorry for her... And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story.¹⁰⁵

The MacTeer sisters were able to sympathize with Pecola in a way the adults in her life did not. In this way, *The Bluest Eye* sheds light on the importance of community for the survival of black girls in the most vulnerable times of their lives, where society often oversexualizes and shames them.

The friendship forged between the MacTeer sisters and Pecola represents a commonality that exists among Black girls. Their friendship and solidarity makes space for protection in a world where black girls are otherwise vulnerable. While Pecola came from a broken home rife with abuse and instability resulting from racism experienced by her parents, Claudia and Frieda

¹⁰⁴ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye: A Novel*, 1st Vintage International ed. (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 66–67.

¹⁰⁵ Morrison, 190.

live in one that would be considered loving and supportive. The sisters were fond of hearing their mother sing on Saturday mornings with a voice so sweet and “singing-eyes so melty,” despite her frequent fussing. Their mother’s voice was warm and made the hard times a little easier.¹⁰⁶ When Frieda is fondled by Henry Washington, another boarder in the MacTeer house, and tells her parents, her father “threw [her] old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch.”¹⁰⁷ Unlike Pecola’s parents, Frieda’s parents acknowledge the danger and trauma associated with sexual abuse and try their best to protect their daughter. These polarized experiences of abuse and love, nevertheless, do not truly hold up in that all the girls were affected by the circumstances of their existence as Black girls in post-Great Depression America. They are all faced with the possibility of being a fast tailed girl when Pecola begins to menstruate, a site of sexual maturity and crossing over into womanhood.

In the scene where Pecola starts menstruation, the sisters choose to shroud it in secrecy and attempt to assist her on their own out of fear of Mama hearing them. They are eventually caught by a white girl who is a neighbor of the MacTeers. The racial identity of this neighbor hints at the racial oppression the girls also experience. Her age also illustrates how girls reinforce negative beliefs about sexuality among themselves. The neighbor accuses them of “playing nasty” and they are nearly punished by their mother who proclaimed she would “rather raise pigs than some nasty girls” because “least [she] can slaughter *them!*” (emphasis is Morrison’s).¹⁰⁸ Mrs. MacTeer then quietly deescalates the situation and escorts the girls inside, only vaguely apologizing for her actions. Demonized for becoming a “woman” and confined to a perpetual girlhood filled with assumptions about what she will and will not do sexually, Pecola is caught in

¹⁰⁶ Morrison, 25.

¹⁰⁷ Morrison, 100.

¹⁰⁸ Morrison, 30.

an inescapable bind very similar to the double bind defined by LaKisha Simmons. Because of this, Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda are named first by their white neighbor Rosemary and Mrs. MacTeer before they even have a concrete understanding of what sex is.

As evident by this scene and many others in the novel, Claudia, Frieda, Pecola, and the other black girls like them are given little room to explain themselves to adults. This erasure they experience cause them to have to be their own advocates and witnesses. Claudia is the narrator, advocate, and witness for the majority of this story. Towards the end of the novel Claudia says, “Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. Our limitations were not known to us—not then.”¹⁰⁹ This quote attests to the isolation of this group of black girls and the fact they became each other’s advocates. In challenging economic circumstances exacerbated by racism, children were meant to be seen and not heard and as a result of this, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola were forced to form their own community and make their own space. An example of the space is the planting of the marigold seeds when they find out that Pecola is pregnant, though these seeds do not sprout. However, Claudia also realizes that her lack of power as an oppressed person, both Black and female, was unbeknownst to her then because at the time, the community she formed with Pecola and her sister made her feel invincible.

It is evident that at the core the relationship between Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda is not only their femininity, but also their race. It is the state of being *black* girls that makes their connection so important. While Pecola desires to have blue eyes and greater proximity to being white, Claudia vehemently rejects these notions, ever-present in her destruction of white baby dolls. To this she says:

I could not love [the white baby doll]. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, and the thing made one sound—a sound they said was the sweet

¹⁰⁹ Morrison, 191.

and plaintive cry “Mama,” but which sounded to me like the bleat of a dying lamb, or, more precisely, our icebox door opening on rusty hinges in July.¹¹⁰

Here, Claudia’s hatred of these dolls becomes evident through her descriptive language. She is a character that is self-aware enough to participate in verbal protest, akin to a prototype of a black feminist orator like a spoken word poet. While Morrison is not a poet, she crafts Claudia and her plaintive language in a way that places agency at the center of black girlhood through its lyricism and realism. This clear development of selfhood and outspokenness is not common in most portrayals of black girls. Children are allowed no opinions and black girls are erased even within the confines of the household due to the adultification of their bodies and perceived strength and consequence as a result of that adultification. Nevertheless, through Claudia, Morrison’s writing creates a space of self-advocacy and resistance that adults in the novel fail to foster.

The Bluest Eye shows us that the experiences of black girls, however, cannot be disassociated from that of their relationships with their mothers and fathers. The notion of intergenerational transmission of trauma also finds itself in this text through Pecola’s relationship with her mother Pauline as well as the abusive interactions with her father Cholly. The lives of Pauline and Cholly are largely constructed by the effects of racism, consequences that are passed down to Pecola. For Pecola, having blue eyes represented beauty and proximity to whiteness, a status that her literal appearance denied, but also through her interactions with the people around her. This shows up in a scene where Pecola is accused of killing a cat owned by a woman named Geraldine, the mother of a boy named Junior who had teased Pecola, and is called a “nasty little black bitch” by Geraldine.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Morrison, 21.

¹¹¹ Morrison, 92.

The portrayal of Cholly and Pauline's lives is significant in that it gives the reader a much greater understanding of Pecola. Cholly had a turbulent upbringing in an early 20th Century Jim Crow era where he was sexually humiliated by white men, which, as Morrison implies, causes him to take his rage out on the women in his life, including his daughter. Cholly repeats the abuse he endured by beating his wife and when he raped his daughter Pecola.

We learn that Pauline disassociates from the misery of her life and identifies strongly with her work in the white home. She does not seem to push against the sentiments of racism she finds herself within. Pauline also holds the same sentiments about white beauty standards as her daughter. In a monologue Pauline gives about Pecola's birth, Morrison writes, "A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly."¹¹² Pauline even considered her own child to be ugly due in part to the beauty standards linked to whiteness. Pauline and Pecola's relationship was doomed from infancy.

The belief that whiteness is beauty is not only socialized through Pecola's interactions, but can also be considered to be passed down through her mother. This becomes clear in a scene where the girls come to the house where Pauline works. Pauline instructs them to "stand stock still and don't mess up nothing," but Pecola's inquisitiveness makes her wind up dropping a blueberry cobbler on the floor of the white family's home.¹¹³ This incites much anger and visible abuse by Pauline, as Pecola is beaten. In this scene, she has no regard for Pecola and is only concerned with cleaning up the mess Pecola made and tending to the ruined dress of a white child in the home. Pauline shows no love or nurturing to her daughter, who appears to only be a

¹¹² Morrison, 126.

¹¹³ Morrison, 108.

reminder of her own pain. Interestingly enough, these interactions are told through the voice of Claudia.

Claudia's position as a narrator of most of the novel, particularly in contrast to how little Pecola actually communicates, makes her a witness for Pecola. Pecola's withdrawal from her experiences creates a mysticism that in part reflects the silence, erasure, and real-life mystery around the experiences of black girls. This is what makes Claudia as a witness so important. Claudia's witnessing makes it clear that voice and language are expressions of resistance for Morrison. Most of the novel is constructed in a way where the reader sees Pecola's world through the eyes of Claudia or, at other times, an omnipresent narrator. In other words, what we know about black girls is often articulated through the lens of someone else, but *The Bluest Eye* highlights the importance of black girls being given the space to tell their stories. Thus, in some way, Pecola finds her voice through the friend she finds in Claudia.

The acts of witnessing and the community created by Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda are comparable to that of those in poetic spaces. Poets stand as witness to each other's painful experiences. They respond to each other's words through snaps, claps, scores, and verbal reaction. The poetry community, a chorus if you will, is a site of resistance. This chorus of black women and girls bearing witness to their experiences may be most visible in Ntozake Shange's renowned work *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*.

for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, originally published in 1975, finds itself in conversation with the themes of abuse, trauma, femininity, and blackness present in *Corregidora* and *The Bluest Eye*. As a choreopoem, a genre created by Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls* marries theatrical performance and spoken word poetry to communicate personal experiences related to black female identity. *for colored girls* reveals

personal experiences—such as losing one’s virginity, rape, abortion, and domestic abuse—that would be silenced in the community due to the pressures of fighting against racism.

According to Shange, the title came from an experience she had in her mid-20s. By that time, she had already attempted suicide four times. She writes: “I was driving the No. 1 highway in Northern California and I was overcome by the appearance of two parallel rainbows. I had a feeling of near death or near catastrophe. Then I drove through the rainbow and I went away. Then I put that together to form the title.”¹¹⁴ She also recalls inspiration from her grandmother who used to call her “a pretty little colored girl.”¹¹⁵ In her grandmother’s girlhood, “colored” was the term used to mean “black.” Must like Hurston, Shange’s use of “colored” in her title acknowledges the lasting effects of racism and the role language plays in the existence of intergenerational trauma. The legibility of colored in her title is significant because it took into account how language and experience evolves but can still be familiar among black women and girls.

for colored girls is a work without a static setting. Each character is “outside of” a particular city, but when translated to stage, these locations are not very apparent or significant to the story. What is important, however, is the community formed among these women is based on the notion of shared struggle with racism and sexism. *for colored girls* is performed through a series of individual monologues and, most important to this project, several chorus poems. The chorus poems share attributes with the spoken word/slam space and are significant to my project, in that they are sites of truth and confession necessary for the work of resistance. The women evoke self-actualization in the poems “dark phrases,” “now i love somebody more than,” “i’m a

¹¹⁴ Jill Cox-Cordova, “Shange’s ‘For Colored Girls’ Has Lasting Power,” News, CNN Entertainment, July 21, 2009, http://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/books/07/21/for.colored.girls.shange/index.html?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ#cnSTCText.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

poet who,” and “my love is too,” anger in the poems “sorry,” “positive,” (a new addition not included in the original 1975 work) and “latent rapists” and even forgiveness in the poem “laying on of hands.” Speaking to significance of the chorus poem, Shange writes:

The poems introduce the girls to other kinds of people of color, other worlds. To adventure, and kindness, and cruelty. Cruelty that we usually think we face alone, but we don't. We discover that by sharing with each other we find the strength to go on. The poems are the play's first hint of the global misogyny we women face.¹¹⁶

In this quote, Shange is stressing her belief that possibilities for affirmation in a misogynistic world are the strongest through the community within the chorus poem. This is similar to group pieces in slam poetry, which often elicit stronger emotional responses from the audience than individual pieces. The collective aspect of the chorus is essential to performative literature as a method of protest. Much like Morrison's portrayal of Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, the chorus of women in *for colored girls* creates a platform for many black women to articulate a multitude of emotions and experiences.

The chorus also reveals the power of visibility, as visibility is necessary for protest to be meaningful. If shared struggle and resistance to that struggle is not culturally visible, it is not effective in restructuring oppressive terms such as the fast tailed girl and its internalization. Which is to say, if no one knows protest is occurring, that protest is futile. The identities of “colored” and “girl” are sites at which this shared struggle comes to light. As Shange writes in “Beginnings, Middles, and New Beginnings: A Mandala for Colored Girls” a foreword to the 2010 publication of the book, “*for colored girls* was and is for colored girls.”¹¹⁷ The designation of the project being *for colored girls* does the work of acknowledging the troubles of black

¹¹⁶ Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem* (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2010), 3.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

girlhood and how women speak back to their innocence being taken away and the process of the beginning to make sense of abuse.

Naming the piece *for colored girls*, while referring to each character as lady in what color associated with her garments, says that black women can assume these identities simultaneously for self-empowerment and for the rejection of names like Jezebel and fast tailed girl. In a 2009 interview Shange articulated the purpose of this work, “My intent was to free the female body and to unearth unspeakable secrets as well as to have nostalgia about wonderful things.”¹¹⁸ Though it is melancholy in many moments, *for colored girls* also talks about love, dancing, singing, becoming comfortable with one’s sexuality. This speaks to the black female joy found at the finish line of reclaiming one’s strength and sexuality.

Evidence of this homage to girlhood is in not only the characters’ interactions with one another, but also in the ways they use language. *for colored girls* utilizes a black female vernacular. Shange has stated that she used this sort of language to echo realistic interactions between black women and the raw and honest relationships forged between them.¹¹⁹ The use of short, somewhat fragmented sentences and African-American Vernacular English does the work of creating a setting and mood. There are no capital letters in the piece. This is likely done for emphasis on Shange’s words and to stress the lack of importance associated with the stories of black women and girls.

for colored girls opens “dark phrases of womanhood / of never havin been a girl” in the poem “dark phrases.”¹²⁰ Early on, we see a juxtaposition between womanhood and girlhood. “dark phrases” is a positing the question what does it means to never have been a girl? It is clear

¹¹⁸ Cox-Cordova.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Shange, *For Colored Girls*, 17.

that these women believe they were forced to grow up too fast and were not given the opportunity to flourish in girlhood. As a result of this, they place themselves in the position of “girl” throughout the entirety of the choreopoem and this piece in particular. The Lady in Brown continues further down in “dark phrases,”

sing a black girl’s song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin/ struggle/ hard times
sing her song of life
she’s been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn’t know the sound of her own voice¹²¹

This passage speaks to the self-awareness that is typically revoked from black women but it regained when others hear her story. “she’s been dead so long / closed in silence so long” refers to the death black girls experience when they are forced to assume the social responsibilities that come with womanhood while they are still children and the subsequent silence around this adultification. Which is to say, the black girl dies the first time her actions are mapped onto that of a fast tailed girl. She is no longer allowed innocence and the development of self associated with growing up because at this point, she is already a grown woman.

for colored girls seems to represent the internalization of this association of sexuality and the death of girlhood in the poem “graduation nite.” In this poem, the Lady in Yellow tells the story of losing her virginity.

he started looking at me real strange
like i waz a woman or somethin/
started talkin real soft
in the backseat of that ol buick
WOW
by daybreak

¹²¹ Ibid., 18.

i just cdnt stop grinnin.¹²²

The Lady in Yellow expresses joy when detailing this experience, but it is clear from the way he looks at her (“real strange”) that sexuality is a right reserved for women, an activity in which women only could participate. She took pride in being looked at as a woman, implying that she now had the qualities required to have a full grasp of her sexuality and do what women do. For the Lady in Yellow, virginity is the site at which she crosses over from girlhood to womanhood. Even though post-graduation most individuals are considered adults, the Lady in Yellow could have still been considered a fast tailed girl for her lack of maturity and the matter in which she lost her virginity—in the backseat of a car with someone she was not in a relationship with, much less married to. However, the sexual pleasure in this moment is empowering for her and divulging these details of the inner workings of her life reject silence around black female sexuality, especially for girls and young, unwed women.

The poem “latent rapists” also tackles the notion of silence, but through the lens of trauma. In this chorus poem, the women detail the difficulty of pressing charges for rape when the perpetrator is not a stranger. In the beginning of the piece, each of the women personify common attempts to place the blame back on the survivor. The Lady in Red states “if you know him / you must have wanted it,” while the Lady in Purple calls it “a misunderstanding,” the Lady in Blue asks “are you sure / you didn’t suggest” and the Lady in Purple follows up with “had you been drinkin.”¹²³ Oftentimes, similar questions arise when addressing the sexual trauma of black girls. Automatically placed in the position of being fast, it is an assumption that any sort of sexual experience is of the black girl’s own volition. Much like the Jezebel, there is no real consideration that black girls can be raped. This belief is reinforced by older female figures in

¹²² Ibid., 24.

¹²³ Ibid., 31.

the lives of black girls, which make something like being raped by a friend even more difficult to believe. The piece illustrates the real-life inescapable burdens of being labeled a fast tailed girl.

“laying on of hands” is the final manifesto in *for colored girls*. Each woman explains what she feels has been missing in her completion of self, much of which has to do with freedom, self-love and sexual expression. Halfway through the fairly short piece, The Lady in Blue confesses:

i know bout/ layin on bodies/ layin outta man
 bringin him alla my fleshy self and some of my pleasure
 bein taken full eager wet like I get sometimes
 I waz missin something

Lady in Purple: a laying on of hands

Lady in Blue: not a man¹²⁴

Here, the Lady in Blue is stating that while she has sexual autonomy, she is not reducible to that action and there is more to her as a woman than her sexuality. This complexity is erased when the focus of her womanhood is her sexuality. In this case of the Lady in Blue and the case of the fast tailed girl, a focus on sexuality paints a picture that is not a true representation of black girls and, subsequently black women. “laying on of hands” is significant because, while the Lady in Blue clearly acknowledges and takes pride in her sexuality, she also protests the fast-tailed-girl-turned-Jezebel that could be associated with it.

Past the 1970s, however, resistance and expression through performative literature continues through contemporary forms of poetry like spoken word and slam and, I argue, are much less subversive. *for colored girls* is indeed a predecessor to the center of this project—spoken word and slam poetry in the 21st Century—because of the way it does the work of identity making for black women and girls and how it pulls out the skeletons of sexuality and

¹²⁴ Ibid., 86.

abuse that would otherwise be silenced, but does so in a manner is less explicit than contemporary spoken word and slam. Spoken word and slam poetry as a type of performative literature tackles the many plights many black women and girls experience unapologetically.

Slam poetry, the competitive form of spoken word, is said to have originated in Chicago in the summer of 1986 through the impromptu experimentation of a white construction worker by the name of Marc Smith. As the story goes, he ran out of poems to perform at a Green Mill bar and then opened the floor for an amateur poetry competition.¹²⁵ Thus, slam was born...or was it? This is a controversy in slam poetry communities today, particularly after the 2017 College Union Poetry Slam Invitational (at which I competed) where Smith incited a protest when he performed poems with racist, sexist, and homophobic subject matter.¹²⁶

Many believe that Smith erased the true origins of spoken word. He made an art form that has strong links to black cultural production legible to white people through competition. As evident in *Corregidora*, *The Bluest Eye*, and most obviously, *for colored girls* some black female literary figures already had the workings of slam poetry without its formal politics. It follows that the majority of people who participate in slam poetry come from some type of marginalized background: black or otherwise of color, woman, LGBTQ+, low income, undocumented, etc. This is no surprise because of the very distinct work slam poetry does to make and unmake identity. By making and un-making identity, I mean the ability to flow through identities behind the mic and reject or subscribe to popular beliefs about that identity. On stage, the slam poet is able to create any character she wishes for the purposes of performance as well as deny any characterization that does not fit her identity. For instance, sexuality finds itself in the poetry of

¹²⁵ Susan B. A. Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 4.

¹²⁶ Nate Olison, "College Poets Protest Marc Smith on the CUPSI Finals Stage," *The Chicago Defender* (blog), May 5, 2017, <https://chicagodefender.com/2017/05/04/college-poets-protest-marc-smith-on-the-cupsi-finals-stage/>.

many black female slam poets and these expressions of sexuality may deconstruct the notion of the fast tailed girl.

In fact, at poetry slams on the national stage, identity poems are the most common. These are poems by which the poet outlines a particular facet of her identity (or combination thereof) and centers an entire poem around it.¹²⁷ Identity poems explore the stratifications of identity within hierarchies of power. They simultaneously affirm an identity, while challenging the oppressions that come with it. An example of this would be a poem about the struggles of being a queer, black woman. Susan Somers-Willett, a slam veteran and scholar of American Literature and Creative Writing attributes this common practice to the need for authenticity when performing poetry that will ultimately be scored by the audience. The ability to make a strong connection within the time the poet is behind the mic is essential.¹²⁸ While poems about racial identity are among the most popular in the category, it is not uncommon to hear poems about sexuality, especially when a black woman is behind the mic. Not only might these poems address literal erotic experiences, they also might tackle incidents of sexual trauma, particularly in adolescence. These spaces of performative literature also make room to testify to the lines of intergenerational transmission that allow this sublimation of abuse to exist. It is here where images of the fast tailed girl are broken down and reshaped in ways that empower black women and girls.

To show how images of the fast tailed girl are deconstructed in the space of spoken word/slam poetry, I will be examining some selected poems from Alysia Harris, a well-known poet in current spoken word and slam communities. Harris first became affiliated with spoken word and slam as a member of the University of Pennsylvania's poetry collective and as a

¹²⁷ Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry*, 69.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

member of the winning College Union Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI) team in 2007. She has since received a Master's of Fine Art in Poetry from NYU and is a doctoral candidate of Linguistics at Yale University. Perhaps Harris is most known for her performance on the documentary *Brave New Voices* presented by Russell Simmons, which has now garnered over two million views on YouTube.¹²⁹

I first became acquainted with Harris' work when Spoken Verb, Duke's spoken word collective, brought her to campus as a featured poet and founder of Striver's Row—a collective of performance artists located in Harlem, NY. Ironically enough, this event defined my own reunion with poetry. I had stopped writing poetry, a love of mine from a young age. Through her performance, I vividly saw how she was able to construct (and reconstruct) her own identity, particularly in regard to sexuality. Two of her pieces that specifically deal with this topic are "That Girl," performed on *Brave New Voices*, and "This Woman."

"That Girl" begins, "We got that waiting in the clinic silence / That shhh don't tell nobody what we did silence."¹³⁰ Harris is speaking back to her relationship with a sexual partner who only appears to use her for her body and not her worth. Her use of the word "girl" in the title is particularly interesting and strategic. It is reclaiming what is lost through her sexual maturity, but is reinforced through her relationships with men. It seeks to keep her in the realm of girlhood, acknowledging a sort of naivety and innocence not usually mapped onto the bodies of black girls, while still maintaining sexual autonomy and respect, doing the same kind of work Harriet Jacobs did in *Incidents*. She uses a particularly sheepish, girl-like tone throughout "That Girl." The girlish, anguish-filled tone of "That Girl" and Harris' powerful performance of the

¹²⁹ "Alysia Harris Bio," Alysia Nicole Harris, accessed February 7, 2018, <http://alysiaharris.com/bio/>.

¹³⁰ Alysia Harris, "That Girl Lyrics," Genius, accessed February 7, 2018, <https://genius.com/Alysia-harris-that-girl-annotated>.

piece only intensifies the urgency in her words and works against the idea that girlhood inherently is a denial of sexual identity. Later on she says:

You like keeping it quiet.
 But my vagina is not your walk in closet.
 You wanna stuff your unmentionables through me,
 Want a place to hang up your insecurities,
 Want me to keep check of your hand me downs and Prada,
 Waiting for every occasion to put me back behind closed doors and lock me in the
 darkness.¹³¹

Here, she is expressing her discontent with being a secret despite sharing her body with this person. She uses the closet as a metaphor for her sexuality, wherein her sexuality is something people take pleasure in for their needs but otherwise ignore and deny. Maternal figures also create this same sort of silencing around sexuality, but for starkly different reasons. Many maternal figures refuse to accept the existence of their daughters' sexuality to avoid confronting their own pasts. I argue that this secrecy is also part of the objectification of black women and girls. Harris shows that there is no regard for the humanity of black girls.

“That Girl” is one of my favorite pieces by Harris’ because of its transparency, authenticity and relatability. It is a piece that receives mass approval from the audience in the form of snaps (a conventional practice in slam poetry) because of the way in which she is able to address a transgression and state what titles she will accept and what names she will not. The snaps signify a sort of black feminist affinity that Harris accomplishes in the closing lines of the poem:

I’m not fighting for joint custody.
 I’m fighting for RESPECT
 Because I will never be content with being your back door ho.
 Your something on the side,
 Your something to do on during those lonely nights,
 Your closet freak.
 You will never reduce me to be a skank and a whore

¹³¹ Ibid.

And though I love you,
I'd rather spend every night crying alone on my bedroom floor than to ever be "that girl"!¹³²

In this poem, "that girl" is a stand in for the fast tailed girl. Harris obviously rejects the name, stating that despite her love for this person in question, she will never be reduced to the name and is much more than a sexual object. She processes the rejection from her paramour through the empowerment of writing and performing this poem.

"This Woman," a sequel to "That Girl" utilizes a less sheepish tone and expresses a much harsher criticism of those who would reduce her to an object or a fast tailed girl. She opens the poem by stating "This is an elegy to all the things that we become before we're done becoming women," and lays out several different odes that represent stages girls go through, in which the first two are 1. "the freshman girlfriend whose optimism was buttermilk at the breakfast table turned sour by a boy" and 2. "the slut who doesn't f*** but still a slut for not letting him hit."¹³³ In her first ode she talks about the same lover described in "That Girl," comparing herself to a pie that he could "take a slice of what he liked." But by the end of this ode, she proclaims "'that girl' she's been dead for years now / She's been dead for years now but y'all keep asking me to conjure up a ghost." It is here where Harris stresses her refusal to adhere to the expectation of others to remain "that girl." In the performance of this piece, Harris is expressing her journey to overcoming being a fast tailed girl and the frustrations with the label of "that girl" society cannot seem to forget.

In her second ode, Harris realizes her carnal power, but is also particularly cognizant of its drawbacks and resists the limitations of black female sexuality. She writes:

Remember there are always two ways of looking at a condom in a wrapper

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Alysia Harris, "This Woman Lyrics," Genius, accessed March 19, 2018, <https://genius.com/Alysia-harris-this-woman-annotated>.

Open your p**** and you won't find freedom
 Close your legs and you won't find purity
 Purity is just contraception
 Freedom is knowing your hip is a hinge
 Use your body at your own discretion and seek your own pleasure¹³⁴

Harris knows the ramifications of being a sexual being and the impossible standards black women and girls are expected to live by. Nevertheless, she rejects them and pleads her audience to exercise their sexuality however they see fit.

“Close your legs and you won’t find purity” relates another double bind that black girls who have yet to become women are caught in. Refusal to give into their carnality does not prevent them from being labelled a fast tailed girl. This is also similar to the failures of the politics of respectability. Nevertheless, they are demonized by “giving in” to this sexuality, even if done under the guise of freedom. Towards the end of the ode, Harris speaks on the struggle of black girls who are stripped of their innocence due to how their sexuality is mapped. To this she writes, “To all the girls who’ve been propped open, pried open, and jada posed / I’m sorry there was no funeral for the going out of your smile and the coming in of strangers.”¹³⁵ This a commentary on the lack of protection for black girls when they reach sexual maturity or otherwise become fast. For black girls, becoming a woman is seen as insignificant and unworthy of celebration because many of these girls are already seen as women their entire lives.

Alysia Harris is one of my greatest inspirations. Her performance at Blue Muse in 2014 reignited my love for poetry and sparked my love for performance. Because of this, I have been able to use poetry as catharsis, as resistance, and as a tool of self-definition. Through spoken word/slam, I have articulated what I know to be a fast tailed girl and tell my own experiences in

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

a way that otherwise would not have been listened to or understood. One of my poems, titled “On Mother/s,” deals intimately with this topic.

“On Mother/s” addresses my sometimes capricious relationship with my mother. It touches on the concept of intergenerational trauma through the metaphor of “bitter lemons and kerosene. It documents my experience growing up in a house with a mother that could be somewhat overbearing, but also loving and attempted to repress my sexuality, even when it was exercised appropriately, out of fear I could not handle it or it may be exploited by others. This repression of my sexuality and suspicion of it even materialized in her disbelief of my experience with sexual trauma. I wrote:

I remembered she didn't believe me
 I was just a fast tailed girl who gave it up for the first time in her house
 I tell you she did not believe me
 Did not want me to hurt the same way I somehow know she did
 I know she swallowed bitter lemons
 She was doused in kerosene and did not know it

Based on conversations I have had with my mother, I have inferred that my mother has likely experienced some sort of trauma or repression related to her sexuality and I am certain that this lineage did not begin with her. However, our differences in the definition of “proper” womanhood and expression of sexuality frequently puts a strain on our relationship.

Nevertheless, our shared lineage and experiences make us have much more common than our tension. In this poem, I contest that these kind of relationships are not unfamiliar to black girls at all:

When black mothers birth black daughters, they also birth mirrors
 Douse themselves in kerosene and pick from the ripest bitter lemon trees
 They see pain
 And promise
 And ask a God that does not always answer they if could be whole

If love brands ever heal
If someone would protect their daughters from the hurt they felt
If they'd never have to know what bitter lemons or kerosene tastes like

Sometimes, names like the fast tailed girl come out of love and protection, but are still informed by the internalization of racism and sexism. This internalization is represented through the extended metaphor of lemons and kerosene, or the bitterness and burning as a result of it. Despite that pain that has comes with this occasionally tumultuous relationship, I still love my mother and give the listener hope at the end of piece by ending it with “yet I love her / no / less.”

VI. Conclusion

“Fast Tailed Girls” is an examination of the conditions of the lives of black girls, who eventually turn into women, the histories that inform these conditions, and the different forms of writing in the history of black women’s cultural productions that have resisted these conditions. It expresses my passion for spoken word poetry and determination to be an activist for the black girls who are silenced and defenseless, similar to Claudia’s position in *The Bluest Eye*. The ways in which black women writers and poets have reconstructed these narratives of sexual abuse have often flown under the radar. My mission was to reveal this form of resistance and solidify its importance within a black feminist context. Black girls and young women *do* have the power to create their own identities and escape the histories that continually attempt to oppress them.

#FastTailedGirls provided a visibility that united a multitude of black women, allowing them to become conscious of how historical conceptions of black girlhood have not only influenced their personal behaviors, but also the ways in which they raise their daughters and address other girls around them. Much like the #MeToo movement, #FastTailedGirls refused silence and forced even those who were removed from the topic to see it, even if they did not engage with it. A name that I had known as soon as I became aware of my body had become known to the greater public. For once, the experiences of black girls were being told and the world and people were listening from Twitter timeline to the slam stage. An entire community of women and girls were affirmed in their experiences and made to know that the painful name was not unique to them.

The fast tailed girl name is still present and reinforced within black female relationships. However, this thesis has sought to prove that resistance *is* happening and is found in the most common, accessible places. Theory is not necessarily a requirement to do this work because it is

happening in practice all around us. Whether it be through an explicit denial of the term, a refusal to stifle one's sexuality, or mere dialogue of the term, the tides are indeed changing and fast tailed girl is much closer to becoming valued and visible instead of a source of shame than we realize.

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